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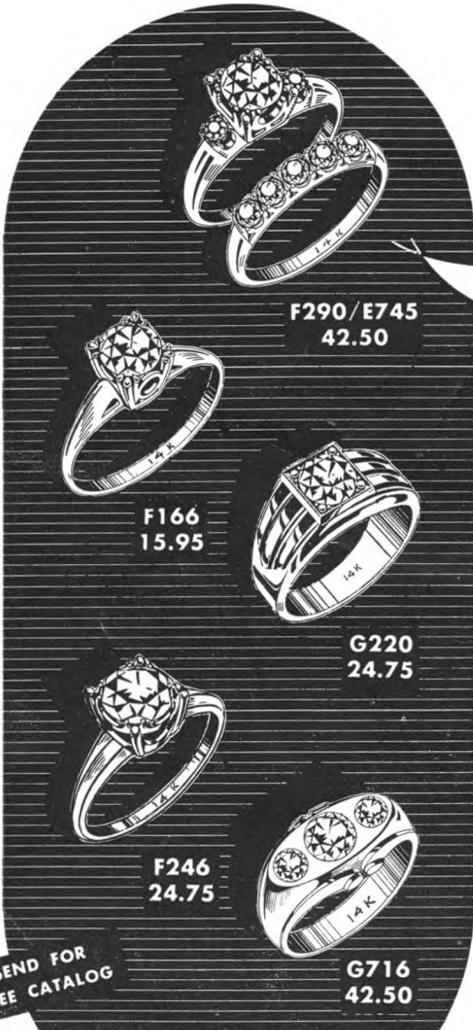
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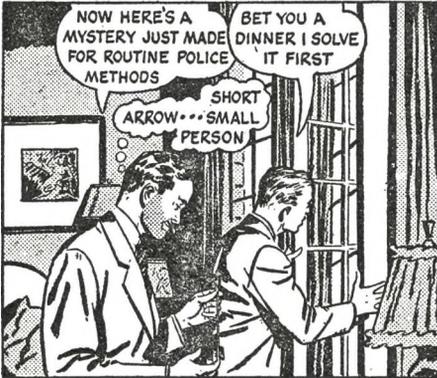
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VOL. THIRTY-SEVEN

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NUMBER TWO

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—corpse, I shouted, and make room for me, because there are five dead now, and at the rate I'm going, here's one more who'll soon be needing a permanent pine-box abode!
2. **GOOD MORNING, KILLER!**.....*C. William Harrison* 56  
—Don't bother stretching your neck now . . . The cops'll take care of that little detail just as soon as they find out whether it's legal to execute a corpse!
3. **A DAME CALLED FLAME**.....*W. T. Ballard* 82  
—started me walking on a dead man's treadmill that could end up in either marriage—or murder!

*Spine-Chilling Mystery Novelette*

4. **CRY MURDER!**.....*Cyril Plunkett* 36  
—just as loud as you want," said the D. A., "because where you're going, there'll be three feet of sod and a heavy tombstone to keep the world from hearing you!"

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—all the cop-killers in Hell wanted to know.
6. **TALK HIM TO DEATH!**.....*Don James* 33  
—before he has a chance to cleanse his hand of blood!
7. **IF THE HEAD FITS—**.....*Edwin M. Adair* 46  
—said Jeopardy Jackson, this here corpse must have worn it. . . .
8. **THE CRIMSON PATH**.....*Larry Holden* 49  
—led Anna Sprague right up to the door of murder. . . .
9. **LONG SLEEP IN THE DEEP**.....*Dan Gordon* 71  
—wasn't Dick Harris' idea of comfort, unless he could take with him two quick-chill killers!
10. **THE ICEMAN KILLETH**.....*Morris Cooper* 76  
—but whether Mike Tolliver could get away with it, depended on how fast he could melt 100 G's worth of hot ice!

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# CRAWL OUT OF THAT COFFIN!

*Gripping Novel  
of a Death-Doomed  
Dynasty!*

**By  
DAY KEENE**

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Over My Dead Body*

**I**F I SAID that I wouldn't have taken the case except that I needed the money, I would be lying. It got under my skin from the start although I knew I was in for trouble when I took it. You can seldom dig into a grave without disinterring a corpse. I had an idea this one would smell. It did.

Sherry and I had been to see Maurice Evans in *Hamlet* and had dropped in at the Sherman House bar for a couple of drinks and a steak to take some of the culture out of our mouths, when the drunken little brunette planted herself in my lap and, peering into my face with alcoholic earnestness, recited:

"They bore him barefaced on the bier;  
Hey no nonny, nonny, hey nonny;  
And in his grave rained many a tear . . ."

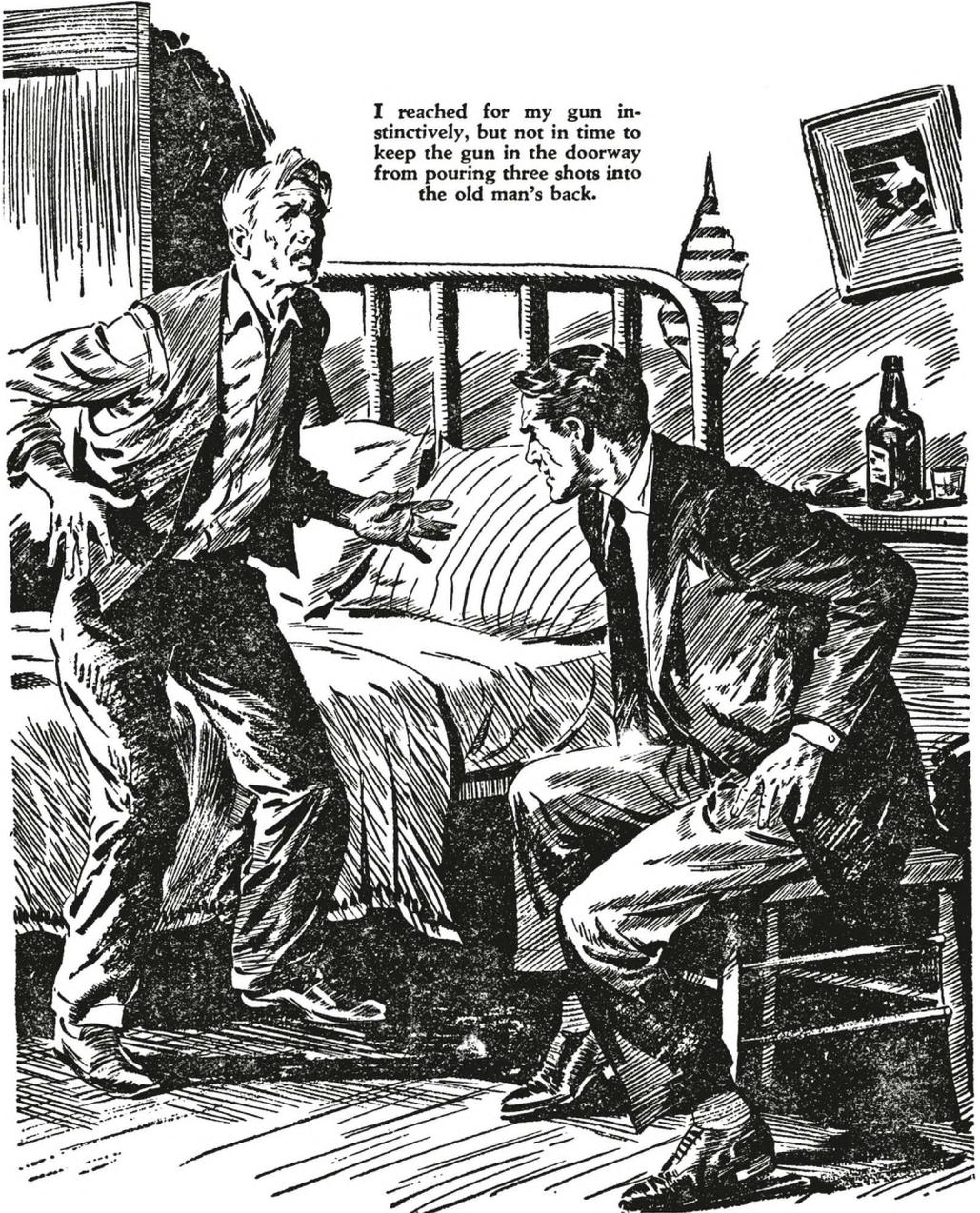
I said, "The hell you say," and looked at



The door opened and two men stood there.

*Somewhere in that madman's crazy-quilt mansion on the edge of Lake Loon was the answer to the multiple murders that had carried off almost a whole generation of the D'Andrea family . . . And though I had to tear that sprawling, jerrybuilt monster apart room by room, dark hall by dark hall, and attic by attic . . . And though my sanity, and life itself, might be the price, I had to prove that the dead can't come back!*

I reached for my gun instinctively, but not in time to keep the gun in the doorway from pouring three shots into the old man's back.



Sherry. She gave me a raised-eyebrow look.

Before either of us could speak, the little brunette demanded: "Isn't that sad, Mr. Mercer?"

I said it was very sad, wondering how she knew my name, and hoping I didn't know her.

As if reading my mind, she added, "You don't know me, do you?"

I said I did not and she began to snivel. Here we go again, I thought. Sherry isn't red-haired for nothing. Me, I'm just an average guy. If a pretty dame talks to me in a bar I am liable to talk back. I have even had horses named Florence call me up. I tried to place the brunette. She looked a little like the twenty-six game girl at Matt's Place and a little like the new cashier at Tony's. But the diamond drops in her ears were real, her evening gown looked like Adrian, and you didn't buy the kind of perfume she was wearing in the dime store.

Hoisting the storm flags, Sherry said, "Now look here, Matt—"

Before she could go any further, the brunette turned in my lap and pointed a finger at her. "You stay out of this." Then she cuddled up closer to me. "You're a nice man, aren't you, Mr. Mercer? And even if you don't know me you wouldn't want to see me in my bier, would you?"

"Of course not," I lied. "But if you'll get off my lap like a good girl and sit down in a chair I'll be glad to buy you a beer."

Sherry said over her dead body.

"Oh! Am I in your lap?" the brunette hiccupped. "Excuse me. I never sit in strange gentlemen's laps." She transferred to a chair with drunken dignity. "And I'll buy my own drink, thank you. I have money."

She dumped the contents of her evening bag on the table. There was a compact, comb, lipstick, handkerchief, cigarettes and matches. There were also two crumpled one-hundred-dollar bills.

I told Sherry I seemed to be in the wrong business. Still looking daggers at me, she said I seemed to be doing nicely.

The little brunette gulped what was left of my double rum, then ignored us to cup her chin in her palms and stare off into what would have been space if we hadn't been sitting just under the kettle drums. "Dead at twenty-one," she sniveled. "Alas, poor Yorick." So saying, she passed out on the table.

Her lips a thin line, Sherry wanted to know who she was. I told the truth. "So help me, honey, I don't know. To the best of my sober knowledge, I never saw her before."

**S**HE WAS getting ready to call me a liar when Charlie Pierce threaded his way between the tables and stopped at ours. "Oh,

here she is," he said. "I thought I might find her here."

"If you know her, take her away," I told him. "Here I am full of Shakespeare and culture, sitting here minding my own business, and what happens to me? A lady drunk."

A distinguished-looking man in his early fifties, Charlie is one of our better Chicago lawyers. By that I mean he has piled up enough in the tort and writ of habeas corpus business to leave the short corners and ambulance-chasing to lads on their way up. He laughed and sat down at our table, saying, "Every time I see you, Sherry, you are more beautiful than you were the last time."

She wasn't to be soft-soaped. "Who is that girl?" she demanded. "And how well does Matt know here?"

He laughed. "Oh. So that's how it is. Believe me, Sherry, to the best of my sober knowledge, Matt has never had the privilege of meeting the young lady before."

Sherry wanted to know what this 'sober knowledge' business was—a wolf lodge of some kind?

"I mean it," Pierce said. "I pointed Matt out to her during the intermission." He turned to me. "We were coming to see you in the morning on a matter of business and Betty must have slopped over while I stepped out into the foyer to make a phone call. Are you busy, Matt, or can you take a case for me?"

I lied that I was busy as hell, but seeing it was him I would see what I could do.

"There's good money in it," he said. He indicated the passed-out girl. "She's Betty D'Andrea."

The name didn't mean a thing to me. It did to Sherry. She gasped, "*The Betty D'Andrea?*"

Pierce nodded. "Right."

I asked Sherry who in hell Betty D'Andrea was.

She repeated, "*The Betty D'Andrea*, the heiress, the one in the society pages half the time. The girl who inherits half the D'Andrea money the day she is twenty-one."

"Oh," I said, "that Betty D'Andrea." Both the name and the girl were still Greek to me but there was some yarn connected with the name chasing around in the back of my mind. I tried to make it come forward and couldn't. I asked Pierce what she wanted with a private agency man.

"She doesn't want to die," he said simply. "Would you want to die if you were heir to fifteen million dollars?"

The girl's 'hey non nonny' business and her 'dead at twenty-one' began to make some sense. "No," I admitted, "I wouldn't. In fact I am worth considerably less than that amount of money, but the thought of dying and having

Sherry marry some other mug to take care of my twins fills me with considerable abhorrence."

Sherry wrinkled her nose at Pierce. "Don't ask him how to spell it."

Pierce said, "I'm serious, Matt. Miss D'Andrea will be twenty-one the fourteenth of next month and while I know it has been some years since you have done personal bodyguard work, it will be worth one hundred dollars a day, all your expenses, and a bonus if Miss D'Andrea is still alive and can walk into the office of the law firm handling the estate on the fourteenth of next month."

Good pay for that type of work being twenty-five dollars a day, and a lot of lads willing to work for less, I asked him what the joker was. "What's the matter with her? Is she man-crazy, a dope, or a dipso?"

Pierce said to the best of his knowledge that her personal life was above reproach, she was not addicted to drugs, and this was the first time he had ever seen her drink to the point of intoxication. He added, "Not that I blame the poor kid. I'd probably be stiff as a board. You aren't familiar with the D'Andrea yarn, are you?"

I said a vague something connected with the name was buzzing around in the back of my mind but I hadn't been able to isolate it.

"The D'Andrea's don't live to be twenty-one," he told me. While I was considering that, he motioned our waiter to the table and told him to bring whatever we were drinking and a rum Collins for himself.

The waiter looked at the passed-out girl.

"No. Nothing for her," Pierce said straight-faced. "Miss D'Andrea is driving."

It was quite a yarn he told. If you have been shaving for twenty or thirty years you may remember the start of the affair. It began back in the slit-skirt and gaslight era just before the First World War when a good cigar was a nickel, the best bonded bourbon fourteen dollars a case, and the butcher threw in a pound of country butter as lagniappe if you bought three pounds of twenty-cent sirloin steak.

The D'Andreas moved in the best social set, the smell of the tannery on which D'Andrea Senior had founded the family fortune having been removed from his money by liberal applications of giving to this and that and sending the offspring to Harvard and Wellesley. There were two sons and one daughter, Gene, Rene, and Renée, the last two perfect models of deportment but the oldest son and heir, Gene D'Andrea, being what was known in that day as 'fast' and a 'sporting man.'

Rene and Renée married in their set and settled down. Gene, however, continued to haunt the race tracks, wear out shoe leather on bar rails, and have his name linked with

some of the slightly soiled lilies of his day, until the elder D'Andrea publicly threatened to disinherit him unless he ceased his evil ways and conducted himself like a gentleman.

A new will, in fact, was already in preparation when both of the elder D'Andreas died suddenly and mysteriously one night in a fire that gutted their Indiana Avenue mansion, leaving the new will unsigned and the old one naming their beloved son, Gene D'Andrea, as sole executor, without bond, of their estate.

A family squabble, so Pierce said, immediately began, with the married son and daughter charging their unmarried brother with dilatory tactics in settling the estate, concealing valuable community assets, and transferring still others beyond the jurisdiction of the Cook County Probate Court.

He, however, continued his merry way untroubled, climaxing a madeap career by marrying one Flora Fredric, a beautiful wench who was currently engaged in out-quivering the muscular contortions of Little Egypt at one of the local burlesque houses. Then, as if this wasn't sufficient to damn him in the eyes of the well-bred gentry of the day, on the night of March 28, 1915, during a poker game, on being accused of cheating, he shot to death a prominent and respectable merchant by the name of Harvey M. Bunting.

"THIS is better than *Hamlet*," Sherry said. Pierce told her the best was still to come.

With the police close on his heels, Gene D'Andrea had fled Chicago with his beautiful chorus girl bride for the dubious sanctuary of the D'Andrea summer home in Michigan. Then with the local police pounding on the front door, he had promptly put a bullet through his own brain, but not before he had made a hand-written will by-passing his brother and sister and leaving the bulk of the D'Andrea money to any issue they might have, said money to be paid to them when they reached the age of twenty-one. And as a final, ironic gesture he had named his wife Flora to be executor without bond.

Sherry wanted to know if he had gotten away with it, and while Pierce was explaining some of the legal angles and suits and counter-suits the will had brought into being to the great delight of the legal profession, I remembered what I knew of the D'Andreas. It wasn't much. But the summer before, while touring the north Michigan country we, Sherry and the twins and I, had driven past the damndest house I ever hope to see. It looked like something Rube Goldberg had dreamed up and discarded as too fantastic. There were at least two hundred rooms in it, all of different architectural persuasion and roof levels with wings running this way and that and

bathroom fittings poking out where one might reasonably expect to see a door or a window. Nor had its owner finished with it, as a crew of men were busy roofing an obviously new wing.

I asked about it when I got gas in the next town and the service station attendant informed me it was the D'Andrea house, that old lady D'Andrea was a nut, with a firm belief that as long as she continued to expand her house she would never die. The house, to his knowledge he told me, had been under construction for twenty-eight years and he was personally acquainted with a man who had worked on it for eighteen.

I told Pierce that what he had been saying was very interesting, but I wanted to know what it had to do with the drunken brunette being willing to pay one hundred dollars a day and a bonus for a bodyguard.

He said, "She and her nineteen-year-old cousin Marvin are the last of the D'Andrea children."

I scoffed, "Don't tell me a screwball will like that stood up?"

He said it had. There had been a dozen court battles about it with fortunes spent on both sides, but Flora D'Andrea, the former chorus girl, had emerged from each one triumphant as the sole executor of the estate. Since then, the two other branches of the D'Andrea tribe had made spasmodic attempts to have her removed as incapable, but each time a court inspection of her books had proved that despite her passion for building, she had not only conserved the estate, but by shrewd market and real estate manipulations had increased it from five to thirty million dollars, the amount due to be divided between Betty and her cousin Marvin.

Nor had she been stingy with advances. The old lady had insisted that all children eligible to inherit under the will be raised in a manner fitting to their future stations in life and had on at least two occasions petitioned the court to advance sums ranging from payment for extra tutoring to the sixty thousand dollars she had insisted on spending on Betty D'Andrea's debut.

Sherry asked Pierce, "What do you mean, *all* children? I thought you said Betty and her cousin were the only heirs."

"Only *remaining* heirs," he told her. "Rene and Renée had, in all, seven children. The oldest child, a boy by the name of Georges, should have collected his share of the fortune back in 1935. But to date, and in answer to Matt's question why Betty is willing to pay one hundred dollars a day for protection, *none of the third D'Andrea generation have ever celebrated their twenty-first birthdays.*"

I felt a cold chill on my neck and it wasn't from any draft.

Pierce named the deceased heirs on his fingers. "On Renee's side of the family, Georges drowned while swimming at the D'Andrea estate two weeks before his twenty-first birthday. Charles died here, in Chicago, of a mysterious stomach complaint the night before he was to collect his share of the fortune. A girl named Madelaine was killed by a hit-and-run car shortly after she turned twenty. Rene's children fared no better. All of them were girls. Ann was killed by a prowler in the family home. Marcell was actually on her way to the lawyer's office when she disappeared."

"And the girl was never found?"

"No. Although from information in my possession the D'Andrea estate has spent well over two hundred thousand dollars in vain attempts to trace her. There is, I believe, a firm of private detectives still investigating her disappearance."

It was a honey of a case all right. I asked Pierce when he had to have an answer.

"Tonight. Right now," he told me. "If you don't want the case I'll have to get someone else." He laid his cards on the table. "I'm getting a sizable fee from Flora D'Andrea to see that Betty is alive to collect. I intend to see she is. And if it's money that's worrying you, that bonus I spoke of can go as high as ten thousand dollars."

I looked at Sherry. She was looking at the little brunette. "Poor scared little kid," she sympathized.

That settled it as far as I was concerned. "Okay. I'll take it," I told Pierce. "But only on one condition. Starting from right now until the morning of the 14th I want someone with the kid every minute of the night and day. I want them to eat with her, dress with her, sleep with her."

Sherry's eyes narrowed slightly.

I continued, "It being impossible for me to do so, I know just the girl op for the job. I've used her before and I'm willing to pay her salary out of my part of the take." I forestalled Pierce's objection. "Not that I won't be around. I will. But I also want to feel free to do a little digging into the background of the case, Marcell's disappearance and the deaths of Georges, Anna, Charles, et al. Is that okay with you?"

He said it was and I asked him to buy Sherry another drink while I got Gwen Hayden on the phone. She was home and glad to get the work. I told her to pack a bag and come right down to the Sherman House. Then I went downstairs toward the men's room before going back to the table.

Two well-dressed huskies walked down the steps behind me but I paid no attention to them. I was to wish I had, later.

I walked on through the door and had just

plugged the stopper into the wash basin when I realized I wasn't alone.

"Tough guy, huh?" someone said behind me.

I turned to see who had said it and a fist caught me between the eyes. A second and third fist followed before I could get up my guard. Then something that felt like a blackjack, and undoubtedly was, caught me in back of one ear and I lost all interest in the proceedings.

I came to sitting on the floor with my back against the wall. I got stiffly to my feet. Nothing seemed to be broken. My ring was still on my finger. My watch was still in my pocket. Nothing but my wallet was gone.

I looked at myself in a mirror. My eyes might color some later but right now they were only puffed. The lad who had handled the sap was an expert. He hadn't even broken the skin.

I doubted if robbery had been the motive. My ring cost three grand, slid easily on my finger, and diamonds are about as difficult to identify as cash. My watch was worth another hundred in almost any hock shop. Considering my recent conversation with Pierce, it was more likely the lads merely wanted to know more about me and had chosen, for reasons of their own, to use this rather unconventional manner. The contents of my wallet would tell them plenty.

I tried to remember what the two huskies who had followed me down the stairs looked like, and couldn't. Both had been big men but I doubted if I would know them if I saw them again.

I walked out into the ante-room and an alert-looking colored boy sprang to attention, a whisk broom in one hand. "Brush you off, sir?"

I gave him the change in my pocket but told him, "No thank you, son. It would seem two experts have attended to that little matter."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Exit Paddy Quinn

**M**MORNING was cold and gray. Exploring fingers of wind felt around the Loop corners, tugging and patting and flipping the skirts of the work-bound cuties. White-topped nylons were everywhere. But there was little howling being done. The rain that accompanied the wind was cold and when it wasn't beating into your face it dribbled down your neck off the building cornices and el structure.

Jimmy, the morning barkeep in Matt's place, wanted to know what I was doing up so early. I told him I was working on a case and he scoffed, "Yair. I'll bet. You private eyes

have it soft. You don't know what work is."

I admitted that could be so. But I could still feel the edge of the chair on which I had slept all night pressing into the small of my spine. It had transpired after Gwen Hayden's arrival that Betty D'Andrea's mother was dead, her father had married again, and the poor little rich girl was living alone in a smart but small furnished apartment on the drive. There being but one bed and one bedroom in it, and three in a bed being considered somewhat illegal since the Mormon Manifesto of 1890, I had gotten what sleep I could on an understuffed chair in the living room.

I asked Jimmy if Inspector Haig had been in. He said he had, so I bought a small fire for my stomach and went next door to the Detective Bureau.

I found Haig in the squadroom putting the fear of God into a young punk who was suspected of being one of a juvenile mob who had killed a druggist during a hold-up. Haig wanted to know what brought me out on such a lousy morning. I told him I was working on a case and would like to check some of its back history with him when he had time.

When I mentioned the name D'Andrea, he grunted and told one of his squad to take the punk back to his cell. Then he walked into his office with me. "That's a screwball affair if there ever was one," Haig admitted. "Just what do you want to know?"

I told him I wanted to know what the department had on the case, and if any charges had ever been brought against anyone. He sent one of his boys for the file but there was little in it Pierce hadn't told me the night before.

His file consisted mainly of the autopsy report on Charles, the killing of Anna by a prowler, and the mysterious disappearance of Marcell. But there was nothing newer than 1940. And no one had ever been apprehended.

There was also mention made of Madelaine's death but it had officially been written off the books as an unsolved hit-and-run case in which the driver had never been apprehended. Georges having drowned in Michigan, there was nothing on him at all but a written notation by Haig that at the request of the boy's parents he had contacted the Michigan authorities by phone and they had assured him they were satisfied that the boy's death was accidental.

"But it's screwball just the same" Haig said. "Five kids dying or disappearing just before they turn twenty-one *can't* be coincidence. Such things just don't happen, Matt."

I said that was the way I felt about it. He wanted to know who had brought me into the case. I told him Pierce and why. Then I

asked if he had ever met Flora D'Andrea, the executor of the estate.

Grinning, he said he had. "Innumerable times during the various investigations. Believe me, she made it tough for us." He sobered. "But if you are thinking of trying to tag the four deaths and Marcell's disappearance onto her, put it out of your mind. We worked on that angle for two months after Marcell's disappearance. And the old lady is positively in the clear. In that instance she was waiting in the office of the law firm handling the estate when Marcell left the house. In the others outside of Georges drowning, she wasn't within five hundred miles of the scene of the crime. In the second place she has no motive. The money doesn't go to her even if they all die."

I asked where it did go.

He said from the legal information he had, that was a moot question but it would undoubtedly revert to the original D'Andrea heirs, Rene and Renée.

Which left the case right where it had been all the time—up in the air.

I wrote down the name of Flora's lawyers—Prosper, Allen and McCready—and thanked Haig for his information. On my way out, I turned in the doorway to ask if he had known Gene D'Andrea, the original core of the boil.

"I did," Haig told me. "I was a rookie patrolman working out of the old Peking Station then. And Gene D'Andrea was an insufferable, arrogant young pup. After his parents died he used to boast in the levee bars that neither his sister nor brother would ever get a penny of the D'Andrea money."

I said it would seem that he had made good his boast and called Gwen Hayden from a pay phone in the hall. She said Betty was up and trying to eat breakfast, but that the heiress to fifteen million dollars had a peach of a hangover, remembered nothing of the night before, and had insisted on phoning Pierce to have Gwen's presence in the apartment explained. I told Gwen to keep her in the apartment if she could as I wanted to talk to her later that morning. Then I grabbed a cab over to LaSalle Street and the offices of Prosper, Allen and McCready.

**I** ASKED to see one of the partners and was ushered into Allen's office. A red-checked old man in his middle sixties, dripping respectability, he was kind enough to say he had heard of me and was pleased to learn I had been called into the case to protect the person of Betty D'Andrea, whom he called a very sweet child.

His firm, he said, had acted as Flora D'Andrea's attorneys for thirty years. As young men, the estate contest had been a Godsend to them. But in later years the constant court

battles and wranglings had begun to wear on their nerves. He passed one hand over his eyes. Then there had been the fatalities. He, for one, would be pleased when the estate was finally divided between the two remaining heirs. He sounded tired.

I asked him to tell me something of Flora D'Andrea. He said she was a remarkable woman, typical of her class, attractive at fifty-three, and an excellent business woman, the D'Andrea fortune having swollen under her guidance from five to over thirty million dollars.

I asked what he meant by "typical of her class."

The old man's grin was almost boyish. "Well, Flora was a chorus girl. And she has never quite gotten over it." He repeated, "Even at fifty-three she is a *most* attractive woman and I have never been able to understand why she insists on spending nine-tenths of her time up in that lonely North Michigan county."

I said I had seen her house, and his grin widened.

"That house." He shrugged. "Well, I guess all of us are entitled to one weakness. And that monster of a house is Flora's. She is thoroughly convinced that the day she stops building, she'll die."

I asked him the same question I had asked Haig. He said by now the issue had become so confused he would hesitate to venture even a guess as to what would become of the D'Andrea money if both Betty and Marvin should die. "But let us hope that doesn't happen," he added.

As my last question, I asked if it was true that Flora D'Andrea had spent two hundred thousand dollars trying to trace Marcell. He said it was, and that from time to time he still got a bill and a report from a firm of investigators by the name of Gleason & Bailly.

I thanked him for his time and left. Out on the street again I tried to figure my best move. There were two things I could do. I could go back to the apartment and pass the next seventeen days in pleasant chit-chat, never allowing Betty out of my sight except when she was sleeping. Or I could keep on moving, smelling into graves.

Seventeen days was a long time. The other heirs had undoubtedly been watched. Still, Georges had drowned; Charles had died of a mysterious stomach complaint; Madelaine had been killed by a hit and run car; Anna been killed by a prowler; and Marcell had disappeared. Death had found a way to get at them.

Rain dribbling down my neck, I considered Flora D'Andrea. Both Pierce and Allen were above suspicion, and both men had given Flora a clean bill. Both men seemingly liked her. But as the executor of the estate she was

the core around which the whole thing revolved. I wanted to know more about her. Both men had mentioned the fact and seemed to accept it without question, but, while I was no judge of such matters, it seemed a trifle strange to me that a former muscle dancer should suddenly blossom forth with the type of financial brains that could build up the D'Andrea money as she had.

The more I thought about it the stranger it seemed to me. It was a starting point at least, and as far as I knew, a new one. Inspector Haig was no fool. There was no need for me to back-track over the ground he had covered. Besides, that angle of the case was eight years old.

What I wanted was action. I got it.

By Inspector Haig's own admission he had been a rookie at the time that Gene D'Andrea had been haunting the levee. But back in 1915, or thereabouts, old Paddy Quinn, long since bumped off the force without a pension during one of Chicago's periodic reform waves, had been a Captain of Detectives. I bought a pint of bonded rye, whistled down another cab and gave the driver Quinn's address.

I had been at the West Side rooming house before to buy information from Quinn, and the witch of Endor who ran it knew me. A slattern with two missing front teeth, she hissed that Quinn was in his room and went back to whatever she was doing in the basement.

The place was bad enough when the weather was dry, but in the rain it smelled like the original sin, with variations. Someone was frying onions in one of the rooms. A couple was quarreling in another.

I climbed the moldy carpet to the second floor, making a mental vow never to take a crooked dollar, or at least be certain it couldn't be traced back to me. Paddy, they told me, had been quite a gay blade in his time and a high liver. But the reform wave that had swept him out of office had also washed out his bank account. The last time I had called to see him, he had been swamping in a bar.

A big hulk of a man with flesh hanging where the fat had been, he had failed a lot since I'd seen him last. It took him a little time to place me, but once he did he was cordial. "Come in. By all means come in, Mercer. I'm always glad to see an old friend."

His voice was still deep and rumbled like an old time actor's. He insisted I sit in the one chair and fumbling a pack of crumpled cigarettes from under the pillow, offered the package to me. I took one so as not to offend him. I knew he didn't have a dime. He had been strictly from larceny all his life. But the old man still had his pride and had to be handled with kid gloves.

"I'm in a jam again, Paddy," I told him,

uncapping the bottle of rye. "And I thought maybe you could help me out with a little information."

**HIS FACE** lighted as he said he would be pleased to do what he could for me. I took a drink and handed him the bottle. As he drank I considered giving him a ten-spot for the information that I wanted, then tripled it in my mind. I would never miss the money. It would mean a lot to him. "Of course I'll pay for it," I continued. "That's only fair." I slipped three ten-dollar bills from my wallet and laid them on the battered dresser. "I don't know what we younger men would do without you, Paddy."

He licked his lips looking at the money. "As I said, I'll be pleased to help you, Mercer. What is it you want to know?"

"Everything you know about Flora D'Andrea," I told him. I nudged his mind. "You know, the burlesque muscle dancer who married Gene D'Andrea, the rich young punk who shot that merchant in a poker game, then blew out his own brains."

"Oh, yes," Paddy nodded. "I remember it very distinctly. I was in charge of the case." He nipped at the bottle. "That was back in—hm—1914 or '15. D'Andrea and his wife skipped out for Michigan." He snorted. "And very officious they were about it."

The remark didn't make sense to me. I asked who had been officious about what.

He told me, "The Michigan authorities. As I recall his name, it was Baily, an incompetent, damn little rube county sheriff and his deputy whose name I can't remember." He dramatized the scene. "There I was, hot on D'Andrea's heels and if the damned farmers hadn't jumped the gun and flushed the quarry I'd have taken him alive."

I tried to quite his mind back into the channels in which I wanted it. "A pretty girl, Flora, wasn't she? I imagine she had lots of lovers before she married Gene."

"She was popular," Paddy nodded. He chuckled. "There were a lot of gay blades of that day who were willing to pay plenty to have their names changed to John Doe when the case broke in the papers."

I asked if the names of Prosper, Allen, McCready or Pierce had been among them.

He said, "I think Charlie Pierce squired her around for a while, although I wouldn't swear to it." He hit the bottle again. "That was so long ago. But if he did, he wasn't to be blamed. Flora was a pretty girl."

"But how was she for brains, Paddy?" I asked him.

He was taking a drink of whiskey and he almost blew it through his nose. When he had stopped choking he snorted, "Now that's a hell of a thing to ask a man about a muscle

dancer when he has a mouthful of rye. She didn't have any brains. She was the kind of a dumb little blonde you had to tell to come in out of the rain. And I mean that literally. That's why she fell so hard for Gene. Not that he wasn't a good-looking devil. He was. Tall, dark and handsome, as they say nowadays. And as bad as he was good-looking."

I said Flora must have had a few brains to do what she had with the D'Andrea fortune.

"That," Quinn said, "is just what I'm getting at." He nipped at the bottle, then stared out the grimy window at the rain. "You know, Mercer," he told me finally, "I'm an old man now. About all I can do is think. And I've laid here many a night wondering about that case, about the way Gene drew his will, about none of the heirs ever living to be twenty-one."

Rain pelted at and dribbled down the window in spurts. A board creaked in the hall. The smell of frying onions grew stronger.

Quinn continued, "And the more I've thought about it, the more I have come to the conclusion that there is a stranger in the woodpile. It wasn't Flora's brains that kited the D'Andrea fortune up to its present fantastic sun. But I think I know whose brains are responsible. I tried to tell Haig my theory the time that last girl disappeared. But he was so damn full of his own importance and so afraid I was going to try to borrow a ten-spot that he wouldn't even listen to me."

I added two tens to the three that I had put on the dresser. "I'm listening, Paddy."

He lowered his voice confidentially, but it still continued to boom. "Digest this point first," he told me. "Gene D'Andrea had no real right to any of the D'Andrea money in the first place. In the second place I don't think—"

Whatever he didn't think was lost in the creaking of the opened door. I instinctively reached for my gun but not in time to keep the gun in the doorway from pouring three shots into the old man's back.

I fired at the face I couldn't see but that I knew had to be back of the gun. I doubt if I even came close, though, for Paddy, rearing from the bed like a stricken stag, lunged into me and sent me spinning against the wall, with lead prickling holes in the faded paper by my head.

Out in the hall, some woman began to scream for the police. Then one of the big men who had slugged me at the Sherman the night before barged into the room and made a swipe at my head with his empty gun. That was a mistake on his part. I put two .38's through his stomach, dodged him as he fell and ran out into the hall to run smack into his partner with sufficient force to knock my gun from my hand.

But either he didn't know that, or he had had enough. Before I could recover the gun, he ran down the steps five at a time and, brushing the screaming slattern aside, raced out the front door.

I followed in hopes of getting a shot at him, but by the time I had reached the stoop he had disappeared into the rain. It would have been suicide to follow. I walked back into the rooming house to find the slattern already at the phone.

I took the receiver out of her hand, dialed Central Bureau, asked for Inspector Haig's extension and began the conversation by saying I wished to report a homicide.

Then I phoned Charlie Pierce. He wanted to know where I was calling from and how I was doing. I told him that could wait and asked him if he had ever kept company with Flora D'Andrea.

I expected him to lie. He didn't. "Why, yes, I did, Matt," he admitted. "That was one of the reasons she came to me about this matter concerning Betty." He chuckled. "In fact, I was paying my attentions to her, as we called it in those days, when Gene D'Andrea practically waltzed her out of my arms. Why? Why do you want to know?"

I hung up without bothering to answer and went back up stairs. Paddy was dead. The big hood I had shot was still alive, but dying. "It's your last chance if you want to talk, chum," I told him.

He said distinctly, "The dirty heel ran out on me," and died.

Haig arrived less than ten minutes later with a tail of reporters close behind him. "Now who would want to kill Paddy?" Haig asked. "The old man was almost eighty."

I said that was the reason he had been killed, his memory went back too far. "You wouldn't remember, would you, Inspector, some crackpot theory of Paddy's that he tried to tell you while you were investigating Marcell's disappearance?"

He said, "Hell no. That was eight years ago, Matt. And Paddy was full of theories. Why?"

I told him what Paddy had said, then gave him the old man's last words. Haig thought a moment and said he believed he could explain the first part of the statement. Several times during the various trials, Rene and Renée D'Andrea had attempted, unsuccessfully, to prove that Gene was an adopted child. He wanted to know if that helped me any.

It was to mean more later but it didn't mean anything then and I said so, adding that if we could identify the hood I had been forced to shoot it might help to clarify matters.

None of Haig's squad knew him. Neither

did any of the reporters. He was a husky guy in his middle twenties. His clothes were expensive and well cut, but somehow he didn't have the city look that should have gone with the clothes. I looked at his hands. They were calloused. If the sudden hunch that I had was correct, he wasn't too long away from a plow.

Ben Gandy of Haig's squad went through his clothes. "No labels and no laundry marks," he reported. "In fact, the only thing I find in his pockets outside of cigarettes and some change, is this."

He held up a familiar looking wallet and the reporters crowded closer. I took my wallet out of Gandy's hand and checked its contents. There were eighty dollars more in it than I'd been carrying but otherwise its contents seemed to be intact.

"Don't get too eager," I told the boys. "I know that his name isn't Mercer."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Gleason and Bailly

**T**WELVE days had passed. The big lad lay in the morgue still unidentified. Nor had his partner been found. He had seemingly disappeared into the same void of space that had swallowed up Marcell. Everyone concerned with the case was getting jumpier by the minute. I had proved to my own satisfaction that Charlie Pierce and the firm of Prosper, Allen & McCready were acting in good faith. My spine had a permanent ridge from sleeping on the understuffed chair. But I was no closer to a solution of the case than I had been on the night in the Sherman when Betty sat down on my lap.

She came out of the bedroom with Gwen, who was too heavily made up and had deep circles under her eyes. The kid was scared. She had reason to be.

She wanted to know if Jimmy had shown up yet.

I was still saying he hadn't when the doorbell rang. Gun in one hand I opened the door on the chain. It was Jimmy Mason with a corsage for each of the girls.

A nice punk about Betty's age whom she had met at college, he worked in an architect's office for peanuts but after an under-the-epidermis search of his background I had allowed him to drop in evenings to get her mind off of herself and, incidentally, make a fourth hand at bridge. The punk was obviously in love with her, and she with him. But being a well-bred young lady *she* couldn't propose. And I had a very good hunch he was sitting on his, "Will you be mine, darling," for two very good reasons, both of them being money. He hadn't a dime. She was heiress to fifteen million dollars.

If she lived to collect it.

I made my nightly call to Sherry and said good night to the twins while the girls made little fluttering noises over their corsages.

Sherry wanted to know if I was certain I wasn't enjoying my work. I assured her that I wasn't, then herded my flock together.

The proposed gathering of the clan was strictly Haig's idea. He thought that if all concerned were to get together and kick the ball around a bit we might come up with something. It was as good an idea as any. God knows I hadn't made any progress.

Mason remarked as he helped Betty into her coat that he had noticed two uniformed men on the walk. I told him they also were Inspector Haig's idea. From now on, up to and including the morning of the fourteenth, Betty was to be under constant guard.

We met at Renée Moran's home on the South Side just north of the South Shore Country Club. A big, square stone house set well back from the drive on a wide lawn well dotted with bushes, it was class without climbing up into the confiscatory brackets. Moran was a prosperous South Side doctor, and D'Andrea money had never been anything but a heartache to him. It had cost him three of his children. Marvin, the only one left, a likeable kid in the sweat-shirt age met us at the door.

"Hi, sister grave-bait," he grinned at Betty.

She returned his grin, but feebly.

Mason said he shouldn't talk like that.

Betty's father and his new wife had arrived before us. Both of them seemed like nice folks. I had questioned both of them exhaustively several days before. Neither one stood to gain a penny. And Rene D'Andrea, like Moran, had lost two children, both of them girls.

"Chin up, sweetheart," he greeted his daughter. "We're going to lick this thing."

She said she hoped so. So did I. And I wasn't thinking of the money angle. I like anyone with intestinal fortitude and Betty D'Andrea had it. Outside of the one night she'd slopped over she was taking the thing in her stride.

The living room was in the back of the house, over-looking what I imagined was the garden. Allen was sitting in one corner of it with Pierce, earnestly discussing whatever it is high-priced lawyers discuss in their off moments. Charlie was still a trifle provoked with me for the grilling I had put him through, but he offered to shake hands. "That is, on one condition," he qualified his offer. "Your admission you are convinced I am not a mass murderer and merely called you into the case to cover my back trail."

"You cut a wide one," I told him. "I sure

as hell thought I had something when Paddy Quinn said that you and Flora used to hold hands."

"We did," Pierce grinned. "I don't know where it might have led, but once Gene D'Andrea cut in I didn't have a chance. I don't know what Gene had, but whatever it was, it made women crazy about him."

There was the usual round of cocktails. I sipped Betty's before she drank it, much to her indignation. "Why, you don't think," she exclaimed, "that my own uncle and aunt would poison me?"

I said I was past the thinking stage. From here on I hoped to emulate the frog who, having fallen into the milk can, had to keep moving and churning around in the hope that he would make butter and be able to climb out.

**H**HAIG SHOWED up at nine with a surprise. He said he had been in telephone contact that morning with Flora D'Andrea at Loon Lake and she had insisted on being at the get-together, qualifying her insistence only by her ability to charter a plane to fly her to Chicago.

I studied the faces of the family as he told us. Despite the thirty-year-old will contest all of them genuinely seemed to like 'Auntie' Flora, as they called her.

Rene D'Andrea explained it to me. "The mess was Gene's making, not Flora's. And all the time the will has been in the courts, Flora has been most generous about making advances. Outside of what she has done for the children, time after time she has come to my personal financial rescue."

It sounded like appeasement to me, throw the dog a bone and he won't bark. But I didn't say so. I did ask him the same question I had asked his sister Renée: that is, if his brother Gene had been an adopted child.

He said he didn't know for certain. They had been raised as blood brothers and sister. And it wasn't until after Gene had committed suicide that someone had begun to circulate the rumor that Gene had been born out of wedlock to their father before he and their mother had married.

I asked if they had attempted to trace down the rumor. He said they had, without success. "But personally," he concluded, "I can't see what possible difference that could make."

The germ of an idea eating at my mind, I thought I could. I asked him if Gene had been cruel as a child.

Rene told me, "Gene was a veritable little devil, the kind that pulls wings off of flies, blows up toads with straws, and actually likes to drown puppies."

I checked the various notes I'd made and walked over to where Allen and Pierce were sitting. "What did you tell me," I asked

Allen, "was the name of that firm of private investigators who are still checking on Marcell's disappearance?"

He told me, "Gleason and Baily."

There it was. It had been in front of my nose all the time, ever since my conversation with Paddy. I had the whole thing then. I thought I knew what to do about it. But I couldn't run out on Betty, leaving her unprotected. Besides I wanted to see Auntie Flora.

I asked Allen if he remembered the firm's address offhand. He said he did not but would be glad to look it up in the morning and phone me the information. I walked out in the hall and checked the classified phone book. There was no Gleason and Baily listed.

"Phone Prosper, Allen & McCreedy in the morning," I advised Inspector Haig, "and get the address of a firm of alleged private investigators by the name of Gleason and Baily. You'll probably find they have desk room somewhere. And on one of the desks you should find the fingerprints of the big hood I killed at Perry's."

From then on, up to the almost-fatal payoff, the gathering was a bore as we exhumed the dead children one by one and their respective parents wept over them.

The Morans had been summering at Loon Lake when their oldest son Georges had died. It had happened early one morning. He had gone down to the lake alone, as was his custom, and had not returned. Two days later his body washed up on shore. There had been no evidence of foul play and the local coroner, a Doctor Gleason, had stamped the death as "accidental drowning."

I asked if they had been staying in the D'Andrea mansion.

Moran said they had not. "We were summering in one of the guest cottages on the grounds," he told me. "We were on the best of terms with Flora but she already had her building bug and the main house was impossible for the hammering."

That had been in 1935 and had been the last summer that any of them had spent at the lake.

Charles was dug up next. On the night before his twenty-first birthday his parents had given a party to celebrate his coming of age. Only the two families had been present. Shortly before ten, Moran senior had been called, erroneously as it transpired, to the bedside of a patient. Promptly at ten, Auntie Flora had called from Loon Lake to offer Charles her congratulations and advise him to spend his money wisely. A few minutes after ten, and before his father returned, he was dead. An autopsy disclosed he had died of some form of obscure poison believed to have been administered in powder form.

"He had a cut on his lip?" I asked Renée.

She looked at me, puzzled. "Why yes. Some stranger had picked an argument with Charles only that afternoon and punched him repeatedly in the mouth."

"And what time was it when the man from the telephone company came to check the trouble on the line?"

"He came while we were eating," Moran answered. "But how did you know? I haven't thought of him from that moment to this."

I looked at Haig. He looked sick. He spread his hands in a futile gesture. "No one told me about the repair man."

"The poison was sprinkled on the mouth-piece of the phone," I explained to Moran, and dug up Madelaine's body.

From what her father and mother told us I was inclined to believe her death was accidental. At least it could have been. Then we started in on Rene's children.

He looked old and worn and tired. All of the time we talked he fondled Betty's hand. His daughter Anna's death was definitely murder and listed as such in the police files. She had been alone in the family house and Rene and the girl's mother had returned from a late party to find their home looted of most of its valuables and their daughter dead on her bedroom floor, brutally slugged to death.

I asked Betty where she and her sister Marcell had been at the time. She said she had been ten years old, in bed asleep, and had heard nothing until she heard her mother scream. Her sister Marcell, nineteen, had been at a dance with a boy friend.

I asked where Auntie Flora had been and was informed she had been at Loon Lake.

"Surely, Mercer," Rene D'Andrea said, "you don't suspect Flora of complicity in these crimes?"

I told him my ancestors had been English and I followed the custom of English law in all matters concerning crime. To me every one was guilty until they had been proved innocent.

**WE** TOOK up Marcell's disappearance next. That one was really a honey. A high-spirited, strong-willed girl with a definite flair for writing advertising copy, she had left home when she was twenty and established her own apartment.

On the morning of her disappearance she had reported at nine o'clock at the advertising agency for which she was working, informing her immediate superior, however, that she was leaving at eleven o'clock to collect her share of God knows how many million dollars.

There had been a lot of good-natured joshing about it in the office, but she had left promptly at eleven. Someone had seen her in the elevator. Someone else had seen her cross the walk. Then she had stepped into a pass-

ing cab—and had never been seen again.

Rene blamed himself. He blamed his divorced wife. In the light of what had happened to Anna they should never have allowed Marcell to leave home. If he had escorted her personally to the office of Prosper, Allen & McCready—

"She would have been killed some other way," I told him. "Possibly shot down on the street. Our killer cut it pretty close that time."

"Our killer!" Haig said sharply. "Then you know who it is."

"Yes, I think I do," I told him.

Any further revelation was interrupted by the doorbell.

"That must be Auntie Flora," Marvin said hopefully. "I'll let her in."

He started for the door. Haig would have let him go. I stopped him halfway across the room. "Not without me, sonny."

"Gosh you're suspicious," he grinned.

I said in my line I had to be.

By the time we were halfway to the glass door we could see the caller wasn't a woman. It was a uniformed man. At least a man wearing a uniformed cap.

"Darn it," Marvin said disappointed. "It's only a Western Union boy. Shucks. That means Auntie Flora isn't coming. She probably couldn't charter a plane."

It was a good gag. It fooled me. My hand dropped away from my gun butt as the lad on the stoop pushed the button again and called, "Western Union," impatiently.

I opened the door and Marvin took the telegram.

"Sign here," the lad on the stoop said brusquely. But instead of a book he was holding a gun in his hand.

I admit it caught me off balance. Even so I didn't do badly. I caught the twin heir by the collar and yanked him around behind me, taking the burst of slugs intended for him through my left arm.

The messenger didn't wait to fire a second burst. He thought, for one thing, that he had gotten me. Besides, the grounds were lousy with Haig's men. He wasn't, or thought he wasn't, taking any chances. But as it turns out in most cases, quantity seldom replaces quality. One man could have stopped the would-be killer. But with heads popping up back of every other bush everyone, including myself, was afraid to fire at the fleeing man for fear of shooting someone else. I did throw two slugs at his heels as he darted across the parkway into the traffic on the drive but couldn't tell if I had hit him or not.

Then the criss-cross of cars on the drive blotted him from sight. Haig charged past me into the night and the things that he called his men would have had anyone less than an

inspector on the carpet for language unbecoming an officer. But as one of them told him to his face:

"Now who in hell would expect a Western Union boy to turn out to be a killer?"

I turned back into the hall. Marvin, white-faced and trying hard not to cry, the way a kid of that age will, said, "Thank you, Mr. Mercer." He wasn't cocky now. And when his mother, weeping buckets herself, took him into her arms, he did bawl.

Haig came back grim-faced to report the would-be killer had gotten away and to ask if I had gotten a good look at him.

I said I had not. There was no light on the stoop and he'd worn the brim of his cap so cocked as to hide his eyes. "But don't let that worry you," I told Haig. "I know who he is."

I picked the telegram from the floor. It was post-dated Loon Lake and read:

Sorry. Unable to charter a plane because of weather conditions. Am leaving in the morning and should arrive by noon. Meanwhile spare no expense to protect Betty and Marvin. Hire more private detectives if Inspector Haig thinks wise. I will foot all bills. All of my love.

Aunt Flora

Eating humble pie, Haig wanted to know if I thought the telegram was a fake. I said I doubted it although that would be easy to check. I said it was far more likely the would-be killer, knowing the approximate time of the arrival of the message, had slugged the messenger.

Charlie Pierce said I seemed to be calling my shots but asked how the killer had known that Marvin would answer the door. I admitted that one was beyond me but pointed out that if neither Betty or Marvin had answered the door all that he had to do was deliver the telegram and no one would be the wiser.

Haig started to ask the question that was burning on his tongue but I shook my head at him.

Betty and young Mason had crowded into the hall with the others, Gwen Hayden close behind them with a small-calibered gun in one hand. Betty was the first to notice the blood on my shirt. "Those shots!" she cried. "They struck you!"

I unbuttoned my shirt and looked at my side. One of the slugs had nicked me slightly. "That's right," I agreed with her. I took off my coat and rolled up my sleeve to see what damage had been done to the cork-and-metal affair that Uncle Sam had given me to replace the flesh-and-blood affair the boys of the Briefly Rising Sun had considered expendable. None of the slugs had struck a control. There

was nothing wrong with my arm that I couldn't fix with a pair of pliers.

My most immediate concern was Betty. I had things that I wanted to do. But I had been hired to protect her. I couldn't be in two places at one time. I couldn't take her with me and I didn't dare to leave her for fear the killer, desperate now, might double back. So I thought up what seemed to me a logical solution.

Pointing at the poor little rich girl I told Haig, "Arrest that woman, Inspector. I accuse her of being an accessory before the fact of attempted murder."

Maybe there is such a charge. I wouldn't know.

In the dead silence that followed, Haig looked at me like I was crazy. Then, no lame brain, he saw what I was driving at.

"Right," he said shortly. "Get Miss D'Andrea's wrap, Miss Hayden. I am taking her down to the Bureau and locking her up on Mr. Mercer's charge."

That much was off of my mind. Haig would be able to hold her at least twenty-four hours without having to book her. She would be safe for that length of time. And a lot could happen in twenty-four hours. I intended it should.

Tears trickling down her cheeks, Betty's voice was that of an unjustly punished child. "But I haven't done a thing, Mr. Mercer, except what you've told me to do. And I *can't* be an accessory to anything. I haven't been out of yours or Miss Hayden's sight for two weeks."

"Don't give me that hey nonny stuff," I said gruffly.

Pierce swore, "The man is out of his mind."

Young Mason swore he was going to get a lawyer.

"There are two of them in the room," I pointed out. Then I walked Haig into a corner and he and I had a heart to heart talk on the subject of resurrection.

**S**PRING hadn't gotten around to getting this far north as yet. Early morning was so cold the snow creaked under my feet and great patches of it still clung to the spreading branches of the first growth pine that rose high on both sides of the clearing.

From the slight knoll on which I stood, the D'Andrea monstrosity looked even more like a Rube Goldberg creation than it had the summer before. But studying it carefully, I could see it had been built on a plan carefully masked by the series of seemingly meaningless wings. It was, from the vantage at which I viewed it, a huge wooden spider web with the original D'Andrea home the core or the base of the maze.

Smoke rose from one of the chimneys of this

inner core and I could see lights in the windows. Beyond the house proper was Loon Lake, a solidly frozen body of water perhaps three miles wide and five miles long. To the left of the house on a level plain, and also on the shore of the lake, I could see three hangars and tattered wind sock rising from what appeared to be a small private air field.

I considered going directly to the house but doubted if once I had left the hill I would be able to find my way through the maze to the inner core. Besides I had several fish to fry and I wanted it to be known I was in town before I turned the fire under the griddle.

Small towns begin their days early. Most of the store windows were lighted. A dozen cars were parked at the curb. I drove directly to the Baily Hotel. A big frame affair it had been filled to capacity when Sherry and I had tried to get in but had, I imagined, few guests but traveling men during the winter months.

I asked for a room with bath, paid for it in advance and went into the coffee shop. A well-padded, middle-aged waitress was making fresh coffee in the steamer. I ordered coffee, sausages and hot cakes.

She took a look at my clothes and asked me if I had been driving all night.

"No. I just drove up from Marquette," I told her. That much was true. I had flown from Chicago to Marquette. And if Paddy Quinn had found the Loon Lake authorities uncooperative, I hadn't had the same experience. At least not with the State Patrol. It was one of their cars I was driving, or rather, a car belonging to one of them.

Over my coffee I asked the waitress if there was an airport in town.

"Yeah. Kind of a one," she informed me. "Old Doc Gleason's boy started one out at the lake last summer. It was supposed to be a flying school. But he never taught no one to fly that I know of. He spends most of his time flying Mrs. D'Andrea here and there or taking long jaunts with Sam Baily."

I said flying must be interesting and asked

if he ever flew nights. Yawning, she told me he did. "He just came back from somewhere last night. At least I heard a plane about three o'clock this morning. You want syrup or sausage grease on your hot cakes?"

I said syrup would be fine. From where I sat I could see almost all one side of Loon Lake's main street. There was a Gleason movie house and the one-story bank on the corner featured the names of both Baily and Gleason in the gold leaf on its window. There was also a Baily dry goods store and a Gleason filling station.

When the waitress brought my hot cakes I pointed out the fact, suggesting that the Baily and Gleason families must have been among Loon Lake's first settlers.

Her smile was wry. "You don't know the half of it, Mister. Sheriff Baily and old Doc Gleason are Loon Lake. You should see the homes they live in. And the way they act. Honest to goodness it makes you sick sometimes. You'd think they came over on the Mayflower with Pocahontas, or something."

A blue-eyed, elderly man with his overalls tucked into high-laced boots, and wearing a shabby blue-and-red mackinaw came in and, sitting down at the counter beside me, wiped his mustache with the back of his hand. "Just passing through, stranger?" he asked me.

He had a pearl-handled gun on one thigh and I had a fair idea he had a star pinned to his suspenders.

"No. I have some business in town," I told him. "My name is Mercer, Matt Mercer. And I've called to see Mrs. D'Andrea about a grave."

It didn't faze him. He merely said, "Oh," drank a cup of coffee and went back out into the cold.

"That's Joel Gray, the day constable," the friendly waitress told me. "He hates Sheriff Baily like sin on account of he should be sheriff but even his friends are afraid to vote for him on account of the sheriff having a mortgage on most of the farms in the county.



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER



But what did you mean you've called to see Mrs. D'Andrea about a grave? You selling tombstones?"

Before I could tell her I wasn't, a swarthy man wearing a soiled cook's cap poked his head in through the swinging door leading to the kitchen and called, "You're talking too much again, Mabel. What do you want to do? Get both of us fired?"

I paid my check, asked the room clerk for my key and went up and lay down on my bed with my gun convenient to my hand. It took about forty minutes for the news I was in town to reach the ears I wanted it to.

I don't know what I expected Baily to look like. Whatever it was, he wasn't it. A big man with flesh hanging where fat should be, he looked a little like Paddy Quinn. He also looked like a man who had carried too big a burden too far. What's more he hated my intestines. And the more that I looked at him the plainer it was why he should hate me.

"Excuse me for barging in like this," he apologized. "But the name Matt Mercer isn't too common and when I heard a man by that name was in town I wondered if you could be the Matt Mercer the Chicago papers have reported to be acting as Miss Betty D'Andrea's bodyguard?"

I said I was that Mercer.

He introduced himself as the local sheriff, but seemed at a loss just how to proceed from there. He finally asked outright what I was doing at Loon Lake. I told him the same thing I had told the constable. "I want to see Mrs. D'Andrea about a grave."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The House That Lots of Jack Built

**H**E KNEW what I was talking about. I could tell by the way his fingers shook as he lighted a cigar. But he didn't know what to do about it. When he couldn't stall any longer he said, "That is a rather interesting statement, Mr. Mercer. Just what do you mean by it?"

I said I would prefer to explain that to Mrs. D'Andrea, but seeing he represented the law as far as Loon Lake was concerned I would be pleased to have him accompany me when I did talk to her.

He chewed that one over, shook his head and lied, "I'm afraid you are too deep for me. But I not only accept your offer; I insist on being present when you do talk to Mrs. D'Andrea. You—are alone?"

I said I was and he seemed vastly relieved.

"We'd best get going then," he said flatly. "It seems to me I heard someone say that Mrs. D'Andrea was flying to Chicago this morning. Come on. We'll use your car."

A thin man with a gray goatee was standing on the walk just outside of the hotel. Baily introduced him as Doctor Gleason. "His name is Mercer," he told the other man. "And he wants to see Flora D'Andrea."

"Oh. Is that so?" Gleason said. "Hmm. Funny. I was just on my way to get my car and drive out there. Mind if I ride with you, Sheriff?"

It was so patent it was funny.

"Not at all," Baily said. "But if it's okay with Mr. Mercer, I think we'll use his car." He got in back. Gleason slid in beside me and slammed the door.

I was glad to see Constable Gray watching us from a doorway. Somehow I didn't feel quite so alone.

As we got out of town, Baily leaned forward and said, "Mr. Mercer says he wants to see Flora about a grave."

"Well," Gleason said, "you don't say. Yours must be an interesting profession, Mr. Mercer."

I admitted I seldom had to take any great quantity of benzidine tablets and asked if either of them had ever heard of a firm of private investigators in Chicago by the name of Gleason and Baily.

Both me straightened in their seats but said that they had not.

I left it there until we reached the house. Close up, it looked even worse than it did at a distance. Some of it had been painted and some had not. A group of blue-nosed carpenters were warming their hands at a fire they had built in an old oil drum.

One of them wanted to know if the sheriff knew where Mrs. D'Andrea wanted them to start in next. Baily said he did not but that he would speak to Mrs. D'Andrea and send word back to them. "Park right over there," he told me, "under that portico."

I parked where I was told and he led the way into what appeared to be a kitchen with a bathtub in the center of the floor. From there he had his choice of five doors. He chose one that led into a forty-foot ballroom that, in turn, opened into a bathroom from which a flight of stairs led up to another kitchen which, in turn, opened into a parlor complete with a mirrored wall.

None of the rooms was heated. None of them was furnished. The whole thing was jerrybuilt, and where the plaster had fallen off the walls I could see the outside through two-inch cracks in the siding.

The rest of the house was as bad. The damndest things kept cropping up in the damndest places. As if in explanation, Gleason told me, "Mrs. D'Andrea is slightly eccentric."

It was a masterpiece of understatement if I've ever heard one.

**T**HEN THE character of the building changed. The inner wings were well and substantially built. After passing through perhaps fifty rooms we descended a flight of stairs, and Baily rapped on a closed door at the bottom. "It's Sheriff Baily, Mrs. D'Andrea," he called. "That private detective you had your Chicago lawyer hire to protect Betty wants to see you."

Flora opened the door in person and a gust of heat rushed out. The picture I had seen of her failed to do her justice. She looked closer to forty than fifty-five, and a young forty at that. Her hair was bleached, but artistically so, and she still bulged just enough in all of the proper places. She was dressed in a smart traveling suit and carrying a mink coat over one arm.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Mercer?" she asked, puzzled. "You are supposed to be guarding Betty." The fingers of one hand caught at her throat. "Don't tell me that something has happened to her?"

It was well done. If instead of marrying Gene D'Andrea she had left muscle dancing for the dramatic stage, I have no doubt she could have gone far.

"No. Nothing has happened to Betty," I told her. "And nothing is going to happen to her."

"Oh I'm so glad," she said, relieved. "Gene's money has been nothing but a curse from the very day he died."

"Blew his brains out," Baily told me.

Gleason added, "Messiest thing I ever saw. I'll never forget how he looked in his coffin."

Baily grew dramatic. "There we were, hot after him, ready to arrest him for murder. He knew he didn't have a chance with us. So—"

"Yes. You told me before," I turned him off. "So he ups with his trusty .45 and took off for the promised land."

Baily looked at me sourly. I looked around the room. This wing of the house was both heated and furnished. The furniture alone had cost as much as my house and lot.

I sat down on the arm of a chair. "Look," I said, "there's no sense wasting time. I've come to see you about a grave."

It grew so still in the room that I could hear my arteries hardening.

She said, finally, "A grave?"

I nodded. "That's right." I included the others in the remark. "Look. Why stall around any longer? We are all adults, I hope. And I know the whole thing. I know why none of the D'Andrea heirs have ever lived to the ripe old age of twenty-one. I know how Gleason and Baily, here, came to own all of Loon Lake." I threw in the bait. "And I want in on the racket, see? Then ten thousand dollars Pierce offered me is peanuts. I want at least one hundred grand in cash, or when I

leave here I am going to blow the whole thing to the State Patrol."

Breathing hard, Flora said, "The man is crazy."

"Out of his mind," Doctor Gleason agreed.

"Not by that hair on your chinny chin chin," I grinned at him. "I'm not as crazy as you are if you really think you can get away with murder. The old saws have a way of coming true. One of them is that murder will out. There is another to the effect that it takes brains to make big money. That was the first thing that tipped me. No muscle dancer ever lived who had the brains to run a few-million-dollar stake up to the present size of the D'Andrea fortune. You had to have help," I told Flora. I scowled at Gleason and Baily. "And both Sheriff Baily and Doctor Gleason seem to be excellent business men."

Both men seemed relieved rather than frightened by the left-handed compliment. But Baily shook his head. "You're barking up the wrong tree, Mercer. And I am afraid that your attempted shake-down has failed. Tom Gleason and I may be good small-town business men," he walked right into the trap, "but we know nothing what-so-ever about the stock market."

I swung on Flora. "*Who did advise you then?*"

**S**HE DID her best to tear her handkerchief to shreds but couldn't seem to find any words in it.

"Flora," Gleason helped her out, "got the financial tips that helped her to build the D'Andrea fortune up to its present size from her spirit control. The same spirit control who warned her that if she ever ceased to expand her home she would meet with sudden misfortune."

I said that was quick thinking. "But now can you tell me this, Doctor Gleason? Or will we have to call the spirits in? How has it happened that despite the present size of the fortune and Mrs. D'Andrea's well-known generosity, none of Gene D'Andrea's heirs have ever come into their share?"

"Ah," Sheriff Baily said softly. "Now we come to the grave you spoke of."

"Five graves," I said coldly. "Georges', Charles', Madelaine's, Anna's, and Marcell's."

"Nonsense. Arrant nonsense," Doctor Gleason snorted. "Far too much has been made of that angle. Their deaths were purely coincidental."

"But convenient," I pointed out. "Even Inspector Haig of Chicago Homicide and Mrs. D'Andrea's own lawyers seem in doubt as to what would be the eventual disposition of the fortune should none of the heirs live to collect their share. But I will venture a layman's guess that, having done so well with it to

date, the money would remain in Mrs. D'Andrea's control for at least the balance of her life."

She licked at her lips and the gesture somehow disgusted me. It reminded me of a buzzard feeding on carrion. However it turned out I wanted the whole thing over—and fast.

Slipping my gun from its holster and resting it on my knee I tried to force the issue. "I charge the three of you with the five murders. Now what are you going to do about it?"

A little of the gray left Baily's face as he dug up a small portion of courage somewhere. "Laugh at you," he said unsteadily. "The charge you make is absurd and can readily be disproved in any court of law. With the exception of Georges D'Andrea's death which was accidental, and so certified by Doctor Gleason as county coroner, not one of the three of us has been within hundreds of miles of the so-called crimes when they happened, and we can prove it."

I slapped my next one right into his teeth. "Can you also prove that your son, the one lying unclaimed in a drawer at the Chicago morgue, wasn't present at the time that Doctor Gleason's son shot Paddy Quinn and attempted to kill me?"

I had known he would break. He did. "Damn you, Mercer!" Baily screamed. "My boy was worth two of you."

"Then you should have raised him better," I said. "You shouldn't have allowed him to keep the company you did. Another very true old adage is that one rotten apple will spoil a barrel." I raised my voice. "All right. Let's get it over with. Come out, rotten apple! I don't know which door you are standing behind, but I do know you are listening to me. Come on out and join the party, Gene!"

In the silence that followed, the former muscle dancer began to cry. Her mink coat slipped unnoticed to the floor. Then, somewhere behind me, a door opened and a man's voice advised me, "Lay your gun carefully on the carpet, Mercer. Then kick it over toward Sheriff Baily and it could be that you will live a few minutes longer."

I did as I was told, then turned around on the arm of the chair.

A tall, well-dressed, handsome man with a thin, ascetic face and jet-black hair was regarding me gravely from the doorway. He was holding a long-barreled Colt in one hand and an automatic in the other. Behind him, also armed, was the young husky who had slugged me in the Sherman and run out on me at Paddy's.

I got up off the arm of the chair. "Welcome back to the land of the living, Lazarus. For a man who blew out his brains thirty-

three years ago, you are looking remarkably well."

The supposedly dead Gene D'Andrea swore at me.

"Tch, tch, Gene," I reproved him. "Remember Auntie Flora is present."

**H**E CAME into the room slowly, young Gleason at his heels. Still tearful, Flora wanted to know what they were going to do.

D'Andrea said he would think of something.

"It better be good," I needled. Before I could say more, the phone on the end table rang. He nodded Flora to it.

One palm over the mouthpiece, she reported, "It's the carpenters. They say they are finished with that wing and want to know what to do next."

He considered his answer, told her, "Tell them to go home. That phase of this thing is finished. And the fewer eyes there are around during the next few hours, the better for our purpose."

Baily shuddered violently. "No more killings. Gene. Please."

Flora told the carpenters to go home.

D'Andrea turned his eyes on Baily. They were gray and flat, unblinking. "What do you suggest?" he asked. "Phoning the State Patrol?"

The once-fat sheriff shuddered even more violently. "I wish to God," he whimpered, "that I had never gotten into this."

"You should have thought of that thirty-three years ago," D'Andrea told him. His face and eyes were expressionless. His voice reminded me of Peter Lorre playing one of his suavely sinister characters. But Gene D'Andrea wasn't playing. He turned his flat eyes on me. "We'll have to kill you, of course. I'm sorry I didn't kill you last night. For a few moments I was hopeful I had."

I said, "You were the Western Union boy."

He nodded. "Yes. Time is running short as far as Betty is concerned. I was going to announce the telegram was for her. But your being there spoiled that. You have spoiled quite a few things for me, Mercer. Everything was running so smoothly until you came into the case."

I asked if that was so why he had told Flora to commission Charlie Pierce to engage me.

"I didn't," he admitted. "We merely told him to engage a private detective and to spare no expense. There have been so many 'tragedies' among the D'Andrea heirs I thought it best that Flora have an unassailable cover. I thought I could outwit you. But I see now I made a mistake."

I told him it was one of the few mistakes he had made. It seemed to please him.

"I think I have been fairly clever," he admitted, "especially for a 'dead' man forced to depend on others for most of his leg work." His eyes moved back to Sheriff Baily's face. "Principally stupid oafs like you and your dead son." His eyes moved on to the Gleasons. "And on a pair of cowards like you."

Young Gleason flushed but said nothing.

I asked him what kind of a punk he was to let a fifty-five year old man get away with a remark like that—and those damned eyes came back to me.

"It is no use trying to stir up dissension among us, Mercer," D'Andrea told me. "We are in a bad spot. They all know it. They also know the only possible thing that can pull us through is my brains. You knew, or at least suspected, I was still alive when you came here. To how many persons did you entrust that suspicion?"

I told him the truth. "Two men. Inspector Haig of the Chicago Headquarter's Homicide Squad and an Inspector Harry Gillman of the Michigan State Patrol."

"That makes our position difficult," he admitted. "Otherwise you could simply disappear." He smiled for the first time. "As Marcell did." Still holding the automatic leveled on my middle, he scratched his cheek thoughtfully with the long barrel of the Colt. "Nor, with Betty still alive and due to come into her inheritance in only a few hours, can we waste much time on you." He came to a decision. "No. It looks as if you and I are going to have to make a deal."

I was interested to know how much he would offer. It would be nice to know in moments I was scrambling for a living, and finding the scrambling hard, that I had once turned down a half-million-dollar bribe. "How much do you offer?" I asked him.

He said, "You insult my intelligence, Mercer. Give me some credit as a judge of men. You wouldn't cover for murder for ten times thirty million dollars. No. I was speaking of your children."

My children?

He left me sweating to turn to Flora. "It looks very much, my dear, as if I am going to have to depend on you to take care of Betty. I will describe the method and detail later. If you are clever about it, I doubt you will even be suspected. After all, you *are* her loving aunt. You advanced sixty thousand dollars for her debut."

The woman worshipped the heel. I could see it in her eyes. She said, "Whatever you say, Gene."

**M**Y THROAT was dry. I demanded. "What was that crack about my children?"

He ignored me to tell young Gleason, "You will fly Flora to Chicago this morning just as

we had planned. And you will take your father with you. You observed the routine of the Mercer family as you were instructed?"

"I did," the younger Gleason said. "Mercer's wife takes their twins to the pre-kindergarten school every afternoon at one o'clock. They stay there until four when she calls for them again."

I said, "You leave my kids out of this!" a mental picture of what Rene D'Andrea had told me flashing through my mind:

*"Gene was a veritable little devil, the kind that pulls wings off of flies, blows up toads with straws, and actually likes to drown puppies."*

D'Andrea continued to ignore me. "You will assist your son in getting the children and taking them to a spot I will designate," he informed Doctor Gleason. "And you will stay in that spot with them until you hear from me."

"No," the elder Gleason protested.

"But yes," the resurrected dead man insisted. "For years you and Sheriff Baily and your two sons have bled me. I have made you rich and a power in the community, all for a



"Come out, rotten apple!" I said.

little favor you did for me many years ago. I would have hanged in those days. Today, if caught, I will go to the chair. But I can promise you if I do that you will both go with me."

Sheriff Baily whimpered there was no capital punishment in Michigan.

"Ah. True." D'Andrea smiled for the second time. "But all we did was conspire in Michigan. I committed the murders in Illinois."

"Lay off my twins," I told him. "I am a reasonable man. What kind of a deal do you want from me?"

He said, "In a few moments you will phone Inspector Haig of Homicide and Inspector Gillman that after a thorough investigation of the old D'Andrea mansion you are convinced you erred in believing me alive. Then you will remain here with me until your twins are in

my hands. After that, what happens to them will be strictly up to you."

I asked how he hoped to waltz the twins out of their pre-kindergarten school.

"You are going to write a note to their teacher," he told me. "They should have a sample of your handwriting and when presented by a professional man of Doctor Gleason's appearance. . . ."

I took a quick step toward him and he thumbed back the hammer of the Colt. "Or you can die right now," he continued, "secure in the knowledge that your children won't be very far behind you. And I assure you, Mercer, I am a man who keeps my promises."

I was beginning to see how he had built the D'Andrea fortune to its present size. The man was clever.

"Well, you seem to have it about sewed up," I admitted. "Just tell me this one thing, Gene?"

His smile was patronizing. "What do you wish to know?"

I asked him, "Just how are Flora and the two Gleasons going to get from here to Chicago to kill Betty and kidnap my twins with the house surrounded by State Police? And just where are *you* going to hide?"

He turned to Sheriff Baily, livid, "You said when you phoned me that Mercer was alone and there wasn't a State Patrolman in town."

"There wasn't," I answered for Baily. "But if you think I am one of those private detectives you read about in books who go poking their heads into vipers' nests without a pit of their own to hiss in, you are crazy. At six o'clock this morning, an hour before I hit town, Inspector Gillman phoned Constable Gray to be on the look-out for me. And as soon as he saw us leave the hotel Gray was under instructions to phone the farmhouse where Inspector Gillman and a flock of his troopers were waiting."

His face a shade paler than the belly of a shark, the resurrected dead man trained both of his guns on me. But by then I was in motion, my hideout in my hand, blazing away at his knee-caps as I dove for the carpet.

He went down screaming and blasting at everything in sight. The younger Gleason, caught in the back by a slug just as he wrenched open a door, fell through it flat on his face. I felt two slugs pound my shoulder, hard. But I managed to get to my feet again and kick D'Andrea in the jaw.

The elder Gleason and Sheriff Baily wanted no part of hot lead. Both of them stood with their hands over their heads.

"You louse!" Flora screamed at me. "You've killed him! You've killed my Gene!"

But she wasn't screaming very loud. She

had the fingers of both of her hands laced under her left breast, and as I watched, little trickles of what it takes began to paint her white fingers the same color as her nails.

I picked up all of the guns I could find, including two that I found on Baily, then sat down on the floor with my back against the wall, thinking what a hell of a way I had picked to make a living and hoping the boys wouldn't be too long in finding their way through the maze.

"It looks like we've lost," Baily whimpered.

"Yeah. So it does," I agreed.

Her fingers and nails one color now, the former muscle dancer who had loved not wisely but too well tried to kneel by the heel she had loved, and collapsed on top of him.

At least one part of her alleged metaphysical prognosis had come true. The day she had stopped building the wooden web around her spider, she had died, with a slug from one of his guns in her heart. . . .

**A**FTER leaving the doctor I had gone to for a check-up and a bit of fresh repacking, Sherry wanted to know if I was certain I felt strong enough to join the wake in Inspector Haig's office. I told her Charlie Pierce would be there and for an eleven-thousand, eight-hundred-dollar check I would cheerfully climb Mt. Whitney with the twins on my back.

She said I would look damned silly doing it but agreed it was a lot of money.

Pierce and Allen were both there, as well as Betty and Mason. The men all shook hands with me and Betty kissed me. "I think you are wonderful," she said.

"We won't keep you bit a minute, Matt," Haig told me. "Both Baily and Gleason have talked their heads off for hours. The story was just as you told it to me. When Paddy Quinn showed up with his warrant, they beat it out to the D'Andrea place and made a deal with Gene. For so much down and so much now and then they agreed to pass him off as a suicide. Facing the rope, it was a Godsend to D'Andrea and he jumped at it. . . ."

"As deputy coroner, Gleason certified him as dead. He also saw that Paddy and the town folks didn't get too good a look at the body, just enough to convince them Gene was dead. But Paddy, so Baily says, has always been a sore spot with Gene. He was always afraid the old man, on thinking it over, would smell a rat, and he transferred his own fear to young Baily and Gleason who were taking up the leg work where their old men had left off. That's why they trailed you to Paddy's and shot him. They were afraid he had finally worked it out.

"And, of course, as you figured out, that crazy building was just a super hide-out for Gene. It would have been almost impossible

for the police to ferret him out of the place—even if we had known he was alive.”

Pierce said, “Gene *had* to be smart. He *had* to increase the fortune to support the drains on it. More, he knew what he was doing when he made that will. He knew he couldn’t live in his tomb without money and he intended to see that none of the heirs he named would live to collect their allotted shares.”

I asked if he had admitted the killings.

Haig said that so far D’Andrea had admitted nothing, his jaw being broken in two places. But Gleason and Baily had given them enough to work on and he was certain he could send D’Andrea to the chair if he never confessed. Haig said, “It was Gene who drowned Georges. It was Gene who poisoned the mouthpiece of the phone. He boasted to both Gleason and Baily that his own sister had seen him but had failed to recognize him in his repairman’s outfit. . . .

“Madelaine came next. She was easy. He ran her down with a car. He was the prowler who killed Anna. But both Baily and Gleason swear he would never say just what happened to Marcell.

“Once he started killing,” Haig continued, “he couldn’t stop. Once the money was out of Flora’s hands he had no way of getting more. Then, too, he considered it *his* money.”

That reminded me of what I had come for. I told Pierce to get busy writing me a check. He started to protest that the client who had commissioned him to engage me was dead, but Allen told him to keep his commitment and he would see the estate okayed it.

Haig scowled at the size of the check as Pierce handed it to him to hand to me. “I work almost two years for that much,” he scowled.

Sherry scowled back at him. “Well, what do you want Matt to do, cry about it? After all he has twins to feed.”

And then the clock on the wall struck midnight and old Mr. Allen got out of his chair and shook hands gravely with Betty. “Congratulations, my dear. And may your money bring you all the happiness in the world.”

The first of the legitimate D’Andrea heirs had come under the wire a winner.

Betty came over and kissed me again. “Thank you so much, Mr. Mercer.” Then she went back and stood in front of Mason. “If you won’t ask me, I’ll ask you,” she said softly. “Will you please marry me, Mr. Mason?”

All of us laughed but Mason. He couldn’t laugh. The young punk had his mouth full and was acting like he enjoyed it. In fact he was still making up for lost time when Sherry and I left the office.

“It all just goes to show you,” I told her, “what can come out of culture. If we hadn’t gone to see *Hamlet* that night we wouldn’t have had this check.”

She said, “Darn the check,” and I noticed that her eyes were wet. She glanced wistfully back into the office. “Am I still attractive to you, Matt? Do you still love me like that? I mean like when we were first married?”

I kissed her hard, right there in the hall. When I’d finished her eyes were shining.

“Yes. I guess you do,” she told me.

THE END

## THE SHROUD OFF HIS BACK

*Thackeray Hackett Novel*

Hackett, the cynical investigator of Headliner Files—who dug up dirt, data and details on celebrities—had to excavate the past of a blonde night-club entertainer who played guest star on the corpse-parade.

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The window above him creaked ever so faintly, and Sam flicked his safety off.

# Why Don't You Die Right?

By HENRY NORTON

*While the life of Detective Sam O'Dell ebbed in red, sticky streams under him, he waited patiently, hugging the concrete sidewalk...waiting for the jaws of the trap to close. . . .*

SAM O'DELL slumped in his chair with his feet planted flat on the floor, feeling the push of it against his heavy thighs and up to the ridge of muscle that touched the chair back. He watched the man at the desk with eyes that had grown tired and disinterested and jaded in the never-ending war against crime. He wondered sulkily what new miracle was going to be demanded now.

"Sam, use your head!"

The man at the desk wore the insignia of a lieutenant of police. The nameplate on his

desk said that his name was Donald Kilrain. The expression on his face said that he was not happy about the big man in the chair. Kilrain's jaw was nearly square, and set in rigid lines. His eyes, heavy-lidded, were sharp and coldly blue.

"Sam, you're not dumb!" he said.

His tone contradicted the words. Sam O'Dell looked at him in mild unconcern.

"That's right," he said.

"Then look at this thing sensibly," snapped Kilrain. "Glover claims this guy tried to hold them up on the park bridle path. They grapple, and the guy's gun goes off and Mrs. Glover is killed. There's a trampled place on the grass. There's a gun, no prints on it."

This was simple fact and did not rate an answer. He did not move a muscle. Only his eyes roved away to the window, to the shadowed towers of the city outside, and came restlessly back to look at Kilrain. There was boredom in them, a fed-upness that was older than his face.

"So it's the same old gag," Kilrain said. "Glover wants to get rid of his wife. He kills her himself. Then he tramples the grass, wipes the gun and hollers for a cop."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's gotta be that way," Kilrain said angrily. "The grass is trampled, but Glover could have done all of it. No prints on the gun—that could be Glover again. And what heist in his right mind is gonna try a stick-up on that bridle path, with a hundred people on the sidewalk forty feet away?"

"Sounds reasonable," Sam admitted.

"Glover married her for her money in the first place," Kilrain said. "They been fighting like stray dogs ever since. I don't know she's been two-timing him, but he thinks she has, and that's just as bad. So why wouldn't he take a chance on bumping her off?"

"He claims it was a holdup?" asked Sam.

"What else could he claim?" Kilrain demanded. "Sam, you been in this business long enough to know there ain't any new angles. When the merry-go-round makes one circuit, you've seen it all. From then on, it's the same old set of horses—maybe different people riding, but the same old stuff. Hell, man, you know that!"

Sam O'Dell said, "Do I?"

"You couldn't be in the bureau ten years without knowing it," Kilrain said. "Honest now, how many times have we had to break down that robbery-in-the-park gag?"

"Offhand I remember four."

"There you are! Every time that story comes up it's a phony, and still they keep trying it. Wouldn't you think they'd get wise to themselves?"

"Maybe this one's okay."

"Oh, hell!" Lieutenant Kilrain lost his sud-

den air of joviality and scowled at Sam O'Dell. "You know better than that, Sam. This is just like all the rest."

"So what do I do?"

"Keep on this Glover, that's all. Keep sniping at him and he'll crack some place and give himself away. That's all there is to do. It's open and shut."

Sam O'Dell stood up, yawned and went through the motions of stretching. He got a soft gray hat from the rack in the corner and stopped in the door for a look back at Lieutenant Kilrain. He batted the hat idly against a muscular thigh.

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

He went out of the office, and stopped in the corridor to light a cigarette. Kilrain would not have liked the look in his eyes, reflecting the flare of the match. They were bored no longer. They were shiny, hard and interested.

**I**KE PATTERSON was waiting for Sam in the tiny office down the hall. Ike was thumbing through a notebook, and he left off that to give Sam a smile as the big man entered. Ike was little and worried-looking, dressed in rumpled gray. He had perfect white teeth and a pleasant smile. Both were completely false.

"What've you got?" Sam asked.

"Quite a little," Ike said, "but I wouldn't guess what any of it's worth. Must have been a nice happy home life for these two."

"That's what Kilrain thinks."

Ike Patterson slanted a sharp glance up at Sam, and then started reading from the notes. "Henrietta Glover had been married once before, to Lawrence Kane. They were divorced three years ago, and she remarried within six months to Tom Glover. Glover, as far as is known, didn't work much before he was married, or any after he was married. The woman had quite a bit of dough, and another boy friend, name of Frank Enser."

"Wait now. Lawrence Kane, the contractor?"

"That's him," Ike said. "Big-shot builder and philanthropist. Started working for the city engineer, and then quit to start his own firm. If you can drive five blocks in this town without running on Kane paving, brother, you're flying."

"Go on."

"Anyway, she had money—Kane money—when she married Glover. But he didn't get his hands on all of it; she was slick, from what the apartment people tell. She paid the bills, she handled the purse strings and she gave Glover an allowance to cover his drinks, shoe shines and lunches."

"And he stood for that?"

"Up to a point, I'd say," Ike pointed out.

"They've been married two years."

"Maybe it took him that long to get fed up."

Sam O'Dell said, "Go on."

"They been fightin' like hell lately," Ike said in a rapid sing-song. "The people in the apartment and all of their friends noticed how much worse they'd been scrapping. Mostly about this Enser. The night before the murder, a real knockdown and dragout!"

"Who told you about that?"

"People in the next apartment."

"Pretty thin walls."

"No, it's a good apartment," Ike Patterson said. "It was just an extra loud argument."

"Did you talk to Enser?"

"Yeah, he lives in the same apartment house, two floors down. Smallish guy with black, wavy hair and a trick mustache. He thinks Glover done it."

"He does, eh?" growled Sam. "I don't suppose you bothered to find out what Enser was doing himself while all this was going on?"

Ike smirked. "He was playing bridge with three guys at the Arcadian Club all evening. He took Frye, the city engineer, for two hundred thirty bucks."

Sam said, "That's that."

"I don't see why Kilrain put you on this," said Patterson. "It's as plain a proposition as I've seen in a long time. How Glover figured he'd get away with—"

He stopped then and his sharp, worried eyes probed at Sam O'Dell. "That's it, ain't it? I mean, you haven't got any other angle on it?"

"Where would I get an angle?" Sam's voice was full of injury. "I only heard about this case last night. I talked to you and I talked to Kilrain. So where would I get an angle?"

"Don't kid me," grunted Patterson.

Sam said, "But suppose Glover's telling the truth?"

Patently, Ike Patterson said, "If he was, it'd be the first time one of these cases was on the up-and-up. You've seen enough of 'em to know. The pattern repeats itself every time—"

"Yeah, I know all that," Sam said.

"Well, don't it?" Ike demanded. "Hell, that's about the only advantage the cops've got—crooks always do things the same way. You see one and you see 'em all."

"Like a merry-go-round?" Sam suggested.

"Hey, that ain't a bad way to put it," Ike said. "Same old things keep comin' around. Watch it a while, an' you know just what to expect."

"Sure makes it easy for the detective bureau, too," Sam said. "All we have to do is run to the files, dig out the last similar case, and bingo—we got our man!"

Ike stared with dropping jaw.

"You got an angle," he said bitterly.

SAM WENT down to the police garage and got one of the grubby little cars assigned to the detective bureau. The one he chose didn't look like much; it clanked and rattled as it went, but Sam knew it of old. It had a special racing head with overhead valves, twin carburetors and a special camshaft. It could peel off 103 miles an hour without half trying.

He nudged into Fifth and went out past the park to where the apartments were a solid rampart along the drive. He found the one he sought, brushed past a uniformed doorman and an equally impressive desk clerk, and went up.

Tom Glover looked no better, and no worse than you'd expect a man to look the day after his wife's murder. He was a little drunk. The Scotch bottle on the buffet, with an ebb tide of amber in it, was the kind you pay plenty for. The rooms were furnished expensively.

"Just routine," Sam assured him. "I've just been assigned to the case, and I'd like to have your story at first hand."

Glover's red-rimmed eyes tried for a belligerent stare, but dropped in the face of O'Dell's calm regard. He poured himself a drink. As an afterthought, he waved the bottle in Sam's direction, and acted surprised when Sam shook his head.

"I can't add anything," Glover said. He drank, and patted his small mouth with a linen handkerchief. "There was an officer on the scene almost immediately and I told him everything that happened."

"That's what I want—what happened."

"You've got it—why bother me?"

"Must have taken some nerve, going after that guy when he had a gun in your belly," said Sam O'Dell.

Tom Glover looked at Sam over the rim of a glass, and for only an instant there were strong lines in the pale, carefully barbered face.

"I was a fool," he said bitterly. "If I hadn't jumped him she might not have been killed. It wasn't as if I stood to lose anything by being robbed, anyway!"

"Your wife wearing any jewelry?"

"Some, I guess—nothing extra."

Sam leaned back and carefully crossed his ankles. His black oxfords were bench-made, laced carefully over fine silk hose, sturdy, comfortable as moccasins. Sam did not consider fifty-dollar shoes a luxury. His job, he knew, was one of extremes. A cop needed a reasonably good head, and unusually good feet. There wasn't much a man could do about the thinking department, except use what he had. Shoes were different. They were insurance.

"You think the guy just picked on you by accident, or had he been waiting for you?" He shot the question at Glover and saw the man's lips tighten.

"It had to be accident," said Glover sharply. "We were just out for a stroll. No one knew our plans. How could anyone be waiting for us?"

So he knew how bad the story sounded. Well, that wasn't surprising. They didn't hire policemen in this town for acting ability. The man who'd taken the first report had probably betrayed a cop's normal suspicion of the killing-by-an-armed-robber yarn. Sam decided he could make use of it, anyway.

"Plenty of ways, Mr. Glover." He was polite, but not to the point of quieting the man's suspicions. "The doorman, for instance, could've overheard your plans."

Glover's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. It was an attractive thought for a man who knew he was suspected of murder. Sam could see the fellow roll it around in his mind. Then Glover shook his head in frank regret.

"Can't make it fit," he said. "We didn't decide where we'd walk until we were out of the building."

"Hadh't you walked there before?"

"Come to think of it, yes!"

"Or you could've been followed."

"By George!"

"Here's the point," Sam said comfortably. "Either some one obtained knowledge of your movements, or it was a purely chance meeting, or one of you was involved."

"You don't have to tell me!" Glover's voice was that of an aggrieved little boy. "You cops'd love to pin this on me, wouldn't you? It'd be such an easy way to solve your case!"

"It almost pins itself," Sam said with fine frankness. "You see, we've had a number of cases like this, and each one turned out to have been planned to look like a holdup, simply to cover a premeditated murder. So you can't blame us for being suspicious."

"But, my God, man, I didn't kill her!" exploded Glover. "I won't pretend I was still greatly in love with her, but I had a good thing here; why would I kick it over? And if I did, why would I use such a weak and obviously phony story?"

"Maybe this made it a better thing?" Sam suggested.

"Like hell it did! She had five thousand a month lifetime allowance from her first husband—that was all. With Henrietta dead, that stops. Back to work for little Tommy."

"Maybe you were jealous of somebody."

The man looked over the rim of his glass in acute disdain. "She was a tramp," he said. "I didn't care what she did. I'd given up caring a long time ago."

"And what did she think of you?"

Glover stared.

"Like this," Sam said deliberately. "Maybe it was your wife who hired the guy—to kill you! When you jumped him he had to shoot in a hurry, missed you, and hit her by mistake."

The highball glass rattled like a castanet as Glover put it down on the coffee table. He fumbled with his lips for the shape of words, but no sound came out.

Sam went on as if he had not seen the man's quick reaction. "That makes a little more sense," he said. "She probably figured it out with some boy friend. He might even have been the one with the gun. In that case—"

He snapped his fingers, then leaned forward to level a blunt forefinger at Tom Glover. "Don't you see, that man'll never be safe while you're alive! He'll always be afraid you can identify him. He's going to have to finish the job, Glover, by killing you!"

"But I can't—I barely saw—"

"He's gotta be sure," said Sam O'Dell. "You'd better blow for a while, mister. You'll be a damn sight safer out of town."

"Police guard," Glover stammered. "I couldn't—"

"If this thing is to be solved, you'll have to be out of the way. Be sure to let me know where I can locate you, though."

He went down to the street and stood a moment near the apartment marquee. He waited until the doorman had gone to the curb to open a taxi door, and then went down the block to where a small man in a blue suit sat in a parked car, smoking and reading a paper. He stopped by the car window and said, "Got a match?" While his hands were cupped around his mouth he went on talking.

"Glover's gonna lam, Mason," he said. "He'll probably sail inside half an hour. His car's a Cadillac Club, so you better take my heap. It's hopped up."

Mason said, "Want me to tag him?"

"Let him get out of town so he can't hand you a stall about just driving around," O'Dell cautioned. "He may try to tell you I advised him to pull out, but don't pay any attention to that. Take him in and book him on suspicion of murder."

Mason eyed Sam O'Dell speculatively.

"Did you tell him to blow?" he asked.

Virtuously, Sam said, "Who, me?"

"NICE WORK, the way you smoked him out," Kilrain said happily. He was not often happy, and there was something the least bit unnatural about the smile that drew his lips tight across strong teeth. He did not look directly at Sam.

"All right, huh?" asked Sam O'Dell.

"Just right," Kilrain said. "With that run-out, we could take the case to a jury now and

get a conviction. That's what the D. A. wants to do."

"No confession?"

Kilrain glanced at Sam obliquely and lost some of his smile. "No. He said some peculiar things about his conversation with you too, O'Dell. We're crossing it off as an obvious attempt to justify his flight."

Sam nodded.

"Well, thanks again, Sam, for a swell job," said Lieutenant Kilrain. "You want to look into that Newhouse bank job? I've got a hunch there was an inside helper."

"I'm not quite through with this one."

"Don't worry about it," Kilrain said. "You've given us a fine start. We can make a case."

"There's a couple of things—"

"For instance?"

"What if Glover is telling the truth?"

Kilrain smacked an open hand on his desk top and frowned at Sam O'Dell. "Now cut it out!" he said sharply. "Get to work on that bank case, where you're needed. This one's sewn up."

"I'd better take a few days off."

The lieutenant stared at him coldly a moment, his blocky jaws tight. "All right, Sam," he said finally. "Go clear off duty, though. I want you fit for the next job. Don't do anything but rest up."

"Sure," said O'Dell.

But the agreement was on his lips and not in his mind. The job gets to some guys like that, he was thinking. After a while they begin to confuse their own power with the power of the law. Kilrain hadn't worked his way up to lieutenant by being a little Hitler in the precinct house. He'd been a good cop, smart and tenacious. But this, his coverage of the Glover case, was neither smart nor tenacious. It was screwy.

Sam yawned and repeated, "Sure."

He found Ike Patterson in the shower room, getting ready to go off shift. Sam stripped and went under the adjoining spray and there, with their voices masked by the rushing water, they talked.

"If there was a holdup man in the park that night, we'll be able to find some trace of him, Ike," Sam said. "There are a lot of people in this town. Somebody saw him, before or afterward. He talked to somebody. He left some kind of a trail, somewhere."

"If there was one."

"Assume there was! You've got a couple of days to find out. Don't ask cops. Go down to the back streets. Down where guys like that come from. Use every channel you know, except the ones that'd spill back to Headquarters."

"You're off on another wild pitch," Ike said.

"Maybe."

"You'll get your rear end in a sling some day."

"Just do what I tell you."

Sam got back into his clothes. He seemed smaller somehow in the neat business suit that snuggled over his massive shoulders and thighs. He took his own car this time, and thirty minutes later Lawrence Kane was looking up from his desk to ask "What can I do for you?"

"Tell me about your ex-wife," Sam said.

Kane settled back in his chair and looked at Sam. There was something vaguely familiar in the tilt of his head and the way his jaws tightened as he stared. His eyes were the blue of shadows on ice.

"Is this an official investigation?"

Sam shrugged. "Why put a name on it?" he said. "I want to find out about a woman who was murdered. You were married to her once."

"Several years ago."

Sam said, "What was she like?"

The muscles on Kane's jaws made ridges, but his voice stayed even enough. "She was plenty of woman, all right. Too much for me, that was partly the trouble. She started playing the field: Glover, Frank Enser, God knows who all. I kicked her out."

"You let her get the divorce. You paid her plenty of alimony, even after she remarried."

"A man does those things," Kane said.

"Sixty G's a year is a lot of dough."

Calmly, Kane said, "I've got plenty. It cost me maybe ten thousand above taxes."

"You think Glover killed her?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Kane said. "You do."

He turned the late edition on his desk so that Sam could see the headline. **GLOVER HELD IN WIFE'S DEATH.** It was a long story, and Sam saw his own name in it in a place or two. His eyes wandered from that to a hole in the lower left hand corner of the page, almost square, where something had been clipped out.

Sam said, "You can't tell me much, then?"

"Sorry. I'm a little out of touch."

"I may drop around later."

Politely, Kane said, "Do that."

Sam O'Dell stopped at the first newsstand and looked at the late edition. The clipped item was disappointing: a routine announcement by the city engineer that all bids on the new parkway had been rejected as being too far above the paving estimate. Sam went home, and by the time he had made a number of phone calls and brewed himself a pot of coffee, darkness was clouding the windows.

When his phone rang he picked it up, expecting Ike Patterson's voice. But it was Kilrain calling, and there was urgency in the lieutenant's voice.

"Sam, I hate to cancel your day off," he said, "but I've got to have you with me, right away. We've got a line on the leader of that Newhouse job."

"What's the lay?"

"Get your hat and gun. I'll be right over."

Kilrain was in uniform, his gun strapped to his side. He talked as he drove, taking the squad car across town and down along the river.

"It's Florida Jack Tilson," he said jerkily. "He's holed up in one of those Delancy Street rooming houses. I'm going in front, and you can wait for him out back. He may give up. If not, you can take him when he runs."

"We could use more men."

Kilrain gave him a quick look. "Since when isn't two to one enough odds for you?" he said. "Besides, we're short-handed tonight. You and I can cut this."

It was fully dark when they got to their destination. Sam O'Dell took up his stand in the shadows of the alley where Kilrain indicated, with a view of the second-floor window and its rusty fire escape. He waited then as Kilrain faded around to the front of the building.

This was one of the lousy things about being a cop. Sam felt his palm grow moist against his gun butt. You yelled, to give the guy a chance to surrender, and nine times out of ten you drew fire. Or you pulled down on him without warning, and hated yourself. Well, Florida Jack would be no loss to society. His thoughts turned back on him ironically. What loss would Sam O'Dell be?

The window above him creaked ever so faintly. For an instant he could see the wid-

ening slit at the bottom of the sash, see the uncertain movement of soiled white curtain. He cleared his gun and flicked the safety.

Then a giant's fist sledged his left shoulder. His breath went out in a sudden whoosh and he found himself spun around and lying on his face on the filthy paving. He tried to get up while echoes crashed around his head like thunder. He heard the ring of another bullet from the concrete an inch from his head then, and knew that to rise was to die. Then pain began to hammer at his shoulder, and as sticky wetness crawled under his chest, darkness closed in.

**T**HE RACKING throb of his shoulder wakened him. It was still dark, but there was an unmistakable odor in the air, and his uninjured hand slid smoothly across cool sheeting. So the killer hadn't been given enough time to make sure of him, Sam thought. He was still alive. That, he hadn't expected.

Lying in the darkened hospital, with the raw, hot edge of pain scraping at his mind, Sam O'Dell laboriously took up the matter of being still alive—of dealing with the things that were entirely too clear.

Throughout the morning he steadfastly refused to take anything for pain, and by afternoon his head was clear. Visiting hours came, and Ike Patterson.

"Jeepers, guy!" Ike said.

Sam grinned at the man's stricken face.

"Forget it," he said. "Find our holdup man?"

"So help me God, I turned the town inside out an' shook it," Patterson averred. "It was nobody from downtown, Sam. But a couple



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bums think they saw somebody at about the right time."

"It doesn't matter, anyway."

"Florida Jack got away for the time bein'," Ike said. "But we'll get him—the boys are really worked up. They're buzzin' the town like hornets!"

"Tell 'em I'm okay," Sam said. "Kilrain didn't get hurt in the deal, did he?"

"Cripes, I almost forgot," Ike said. "He's out in the hall now, waitin' to see you!"

Sam stopped him on the way to the door. "Wait a few minutes," he said. "I want to talk to you. You can send Kilrain in as you go."

Kilrain's jaw was blockier than ever as he came into the room.

"Sam, old boy," he said. "You don't know how glad I am to see you alive."

Sam said, "Sure I do, Kilrain."

His voice was dull and unstressed, but Kilrain stepped back and looked at him in quick indecision.

"The hundred to one shot paid off," Sam said. "Glover was telling the truth. There was a holdup in the park. That's how Henrietta Glover was killed."

"The hell!"

"Lawrence Kane did it. It was a fake hold-up, of course. All Kane wanted was to kill his wife in such a way that Glover would be accused of the murder."

Kilrain's voice was agitated. "Can you prove this?"

"She was blackmailing Kane." Sam was tiring. His voice was getting husky and he had trouble keeping his eyes open. Kilrain seemed to advance and recede before him. "She had something on him about his city paving work. That's why he kept paying her five grand a month, even after she remarried. It wasn't alimony, it was blackmail, and things being like they are, Kane couldn't afford it any longer."

"But can you prove it!"

"Sure," Sam said. "Kane's washed up. The city engineer's not only thrown out the bids, but he's starting an investigation tomorrow. Frye in that office will testify that Kane paid him to tie Enser down in a bridge game that night, so suspicion couldn't fall on anybody but Glover for the murder. Just to make the frame tight."

Gently, Kilrain said, "Nice work, Sam. Just relax, and I'll start checking on this. If

it's like you say, I think maybe we can—"

Sam started to struggle up on one elbow, but gave it up and dropped back with his face whitening.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Kilrain, you figured out that murder frame for Kane. It smells of cop. Who but a cop would know that the park-holdup gag is a cinch ticket for homicide? You gave him that."

"I don't get it, Sam."

"You were a sap to do it," Sam said. "Somebody was a cinch to spot you and Kane for brothers by your looks, even if they didn't take the trouble to check the birth records. Kane used to be Lawrence Kilrain. He changed his name when he started to go places in the contracting business so they wouldn't get wise to your helping him."

"So he's my brother. So what?"

"So you helped him figure out how to kill the woman and frame Glover. And when I wouldn't play along, when I went after him and he called you, you sucked me into an alley trap and tried to kill me. You walked into an empty apartment and blasted me, covering it with that malarky about Florida Jack. Hell, the bullet'll show that, now that I warned Ike to have it checked against your gun!"

That one rang the bell. Kilrain's lips drew thin and one hand shifted behind him. Sam looked at him and shook his head slowly from side to side.

"No," he said. "I've told Ike, remember? And don't try to warn Kane, because he's staked out by now. They'll take him in half an hour. Time for him to do a dutch, if he wants to. It might be better."

Kilrain said, "Sam, I—"

"You're the one that needs a rest now," Sam said. "Take a vacation, Kilrain. Ike and I won't talk. Don't come back to the force. Just go away. That's all."

Sam O'Dell shut his eyes then, and his face was drained of determination and strength, drained of all but a great weariness. Kilrain didn't matter—he'd go, and there would be an end to it. But sock him in jail, or drive him to something desperate, and—well, when you smeared one cop, you smeared all cops. Why make it any tougher. When you had a bad one in the family, you kept it in the family. That's where Kilrain had been right. That was what kept repeating itself.

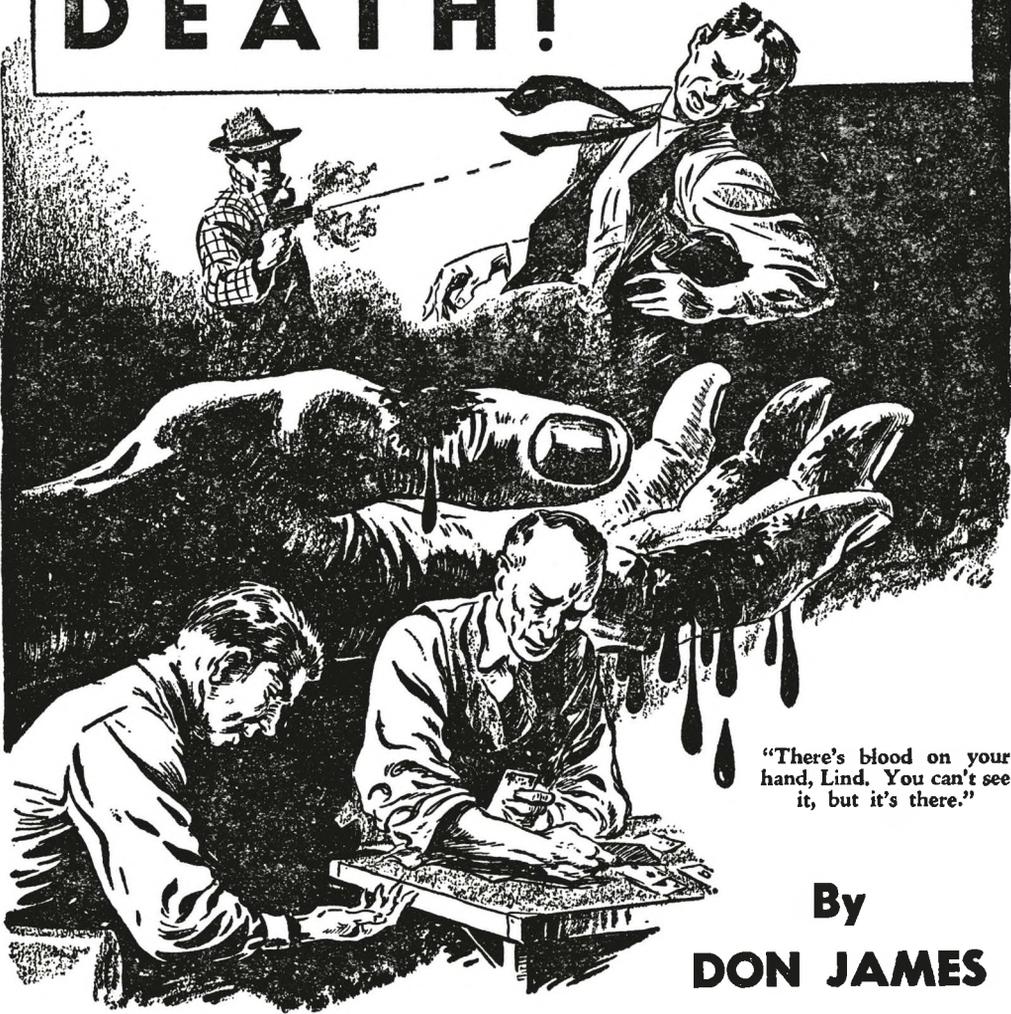
When Sam opened his eyes, Kilrain was gone.

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# TALK HIM TO DEATH!



"There's blood on your hand, Lind. You can't see it, but it's there."

By  
**DON JAMES**

*"That hand of yours," Eli Mark said. "You can scrub it from now until Doomsday, but you can't wash the blood off. . . And that's the hand that's going to send you to the gallows!"*

**E**VEN seated at a folding card table, Eli Mark looked small and frail. His thin hair was almost colorless except for gray at his temples. His face was thin and sharp. His shoulders were hunched over a narrow chest. Only his eyes looked much alive, and they were pale blue and keen.

With thin, quick fingers he shuffled a deck of cards and laid out a Canfield spread. The rows of cards were neat and precise. He looked them over and put a black queen on a red king and then looked up from the table at Carl Lind.

Lind sat morosely in an upholstered chair,

his thick shoulders straining at the seams of his shirt, his heavy features blank of expression as he dully watched the card player.

"So it went off without a hitch?" Eli Mark asked.

Lind grunted an affirmative.

Mark said, "The boss says Charley Grange saw you two leave the apartment house. Charley's a smart cop."

"No cop's smart," Lind said. "Not as smart as the boss. It's all fixed."

"When they find Elim's body, Grange is going to say, 'I saw Sam Donner and some guy come out of that building. Pick them up.' So the cops will pick up you two. What are you going to say?"

"Why don't you ask the boss? He's asleep in the other room."

Mark smiled and started to deal the cards in threes. "He won't talk to me about it. I tried to stop him from having Elim bumped."

"You was wrong, Mark. The guy moves in from Chi and tries to take over the town. The boss has got to get rid of him. He's got to protect his gamblin' rackets."

Mark's fingers trembled a little and he put the cards down.

"He should have kept away from Elim," he said quietly. "It was a wrong move."

Lind twisted his lips into a humorless smile. "Maybe you ought to just mastermind his gambling deals. That's what he hires you for. You're smart with the odds and the cards. But you ought to leave it at that."

"Did Donner say that?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I had my say to him. But how are you going to get out of the spot? What about when the cops come, any time now?"

"They don't know me," Lind said. "I got no record here. I just got in town. So I alibi the boss. Sure, the boss was in there. We went to see a friend who wasn't home. There's some guy there the boss knows. We already checked. He wasn't home. So we came out again. The boss is clean."

Mark was thoughtful as he played several cards. "So Sam tells the cops you were with him and you're his alibi?"

"Yeah. For each other, maybe."

"And they don't know you?"

"No."

"So just the boss and you and I know who was with the boss this afternoon and that you bumped Elim for the boss."

"That's right. And you're not talking, little man."

Mark looked up quickly with veiled eyes. "No, I'm not talking."

"So that's it."

Mark put his cards down carefully and leaned back in the chair.

"Lind," he said, "you're going to hang."

Lind gave him the smile again. "You crazy?" he asked.

"Look at your right hand. The one that held the murder gun. It's going to send you to the gallows."

Instinctively, Lind looked at the hand and then glanced up a little foolishly.

"You blowing your top? What's my hand got to do with it?"

"Hold it up and look at it, Lind. There's blood on your hand. That's a figure of speech. You can't see the blood, but when you murder, it's blood on your hand."

"You're nuts."

"There's something else on your hand that you can't see, Lind. But it's there. When you fired that shot, a certain amount of gas and burning powder escaped around the gun breech. The unburned powder is embedded in your skin."

Lind listened and laughed doubtfully. "The boss says you read too many books. He says a brain like you is nuts. So I got powder in my skin. So what?"

Mark shook his head. "They'll take you down to the station and they'll coat hot paraffin on your hand. When they take it off, the powder will come with it. They'll know you fired the shot that killed Elim. They call it the dermal nitrate test."

**T**HERE was a heavy silence as Lind absorbed Mark's words and eventually the thought processes became evident in his expression. His bulky shoulders tensed and he leaned forward.

"You mean they tab me for murder from the powder on my hands?"

"Exactly."

Slowly Lind brought his hand up and stared at it.

"You're not kiddin'?"

"No. That's the hand that's going to send you to the gallows as soon as Donner identifies you as the man who was with him."

Suddenly Lind smiled. He stood and walked across the room to a hallway. After he left, Mark dealt the cards thoughtfully, smiling a little as he heard the sound of running water. Lind returned and sat in his chair again with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Thanks for the tip, Mark. I took care of it. I scrubbed it good."

Mark put a black six on a red seven. "No good," he said.

"What d'ya mean, no good?"

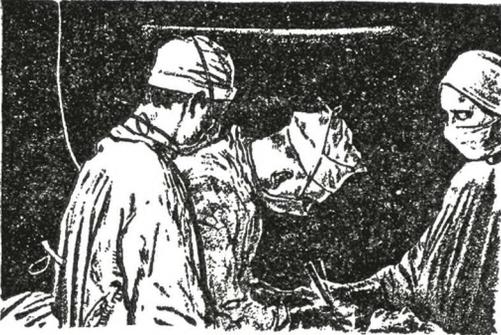
"You can't wash it off. It's there for two or three days. And the cops will be testing it before that."

Abruptly Lind stood again and walked toward another door.

*(Continued on page 96)*

# ODDITIES IN CRIME

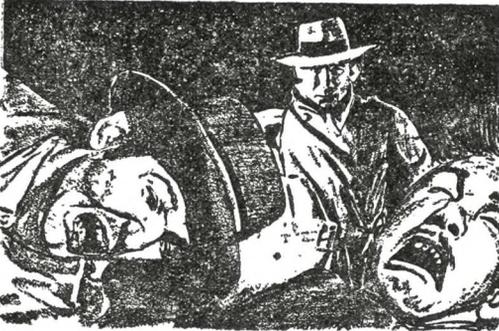
By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON



← In Russia, Cobbler Kalesnikoff got tired of cobbling. He decided cutting living hides would be more fun—and declared himself a surgeon. Without any medical training, using nothing but his native intelligence, an officious manner—and sharp knives—he managed to work his way up to the position of chief surgeon at the Kiev Hospital. Kalesnikoff cut up more than five hundred persons—counting only major operations—before bungling a job so badly as to reveal himself as a phony! He has not been heard of since.

One of the weirdest convictions on record was handed down by a Swedish tribunal, back around your great-grandfather's time. A pair of identical twins had just been nailed on a murder rap and were all set to entrain for eternity via the gallows, when it occurred to somebody that here was a swell chance to find out about those coffee nerves. At the last minute the two condemned men were offered a chance to drink themselves to death—on coffee and tea respectively. The idea was to find out which would kill them quickest.

The tea-drinker succumbed first—at the early age of 83! Now the Scandinavians drink more coffee than anybody.



← There are, by various estimates, anywhere up to 50,000 strong-muscled and, presumably, hair-trigger gents operating as sort of adult baby-sitters in these United States. They guard hairresses, movie stars, politicians and gangsters, for salaries ranging from a few bucks to a few thousand. Highest wages for bodyguards were commanded by Bernard Rosenkrants and Abraham Landau, who looked after the well-being of Dutch Schultz and got about two thousand a week apiece for the chore.

The job was cheap at the price—both were shot down when Dutch got his!

Mattawa, Canada, is probably the only town in the world where every native with a high school education is a prison graduate. It is probably the only place in this creation, too, where the weekend drunk who lands in jail is liable to wake hearing strong young voices wrestling with the three Rs. Because of lack of funds during the depression of the '30's, authorities decided to use the jail for a high school. It's worked out okay. To the kids the joint is no worse than any school—and the crime rate has dwindled. Even a hardened crook will quail at the prospect of having to face a schoolmarm!



# CRY MURDER!

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Eyes of Fear

**T**HERE WAS, at first, no tension. In the beginning it was simple. There was a man named Field—Lanning Field. The word for him, as everybody knew, was fixer. There was, among others, a man named Samson, the D. A. And all young David Drake

*"There's only one thing I'll promise," the D. A. told Drake. "I won't release this confession until you're dead—which should be in about twenty minutes!"*

By  
**CYRIL  
PLUNKETT**





There were two quick shots then and, curiously, Drake thought, the first one seemed to come from where Linda stood.

had to do was prove corruption and a link between this Field and Samson. A problem of investigation, then conviction. Essentially that uninvolved, that simple.

"I welcome this investigation," Samson told the press. "It is nothing more than political strategy. When reform, so-called, sweeps in, grave doubts always are raised. So I welcome Mr. Drake, the Special Prosecutor, and his investigation. The District Attorney's office will afford him every cooperation."

Linda Drake, however, was worried. Linda was Drake's wife, and shortly after his appointment she had seen a long black car drive slowly past their house three nights in succession. Of course she had wondered, worried. She began to sit there at the window evenings, watching until David Drake came home. She would take a deep breath when she saw him. She would meet him at the door, her eyes alight, the color warm and fresh then in her face. Her hands as she'd grasp his, would be still cold though, and sometimes trembling.

"Darling!" she would say. "Oh, I'm so glad that you're home!"

"Wait a minute, now. What's that I see in your eyes?"

"My eyes?"

"You look frightened. You look like—like a rabbit that's just watched a hunter walk past with a gun."

"David, how silly!"

"Sure?"

"Of course I am, darling!"

She began to drop in daytimes, at the office. Just drop in. Just look around, examine faces there, around him. His desk stood before a window, and for a few days, staring at it, she was worried.

"David, why not move your desk a little?"

"Move it?"

"Yes—away from the window."

"But, I like it at the window."

"David, for me?"

He moved the desk, for her. And he was puzzled, though not yet alarmed. At times, a moment here and there when he dared relax, he'd lean back and stare off into space. It was as though a tide were rising, but so slowly, creeping, that he could not be sure, see it. She began to phone. "Darling," she would say—and he'd hear the quick catch in her voice—"everything's all right?"

"Of course, dear!"

"No—no complications?"

"Good Lord, my job is full of complications!"

"I mean nothing has—happened?"

"Linda, what on earth are you trying to say?"

She said it, the first day of the trial. It was still a first step then, the trial. It involved the lesser fry, the first step in Drake's cleanup. It

had been designed, this trial, to show the public sleeves were rolled, the law upheld with vigor. In itself, the trial was not important, but. . .

She met him at the door with the car. It was not a cold day, and she wore fur, but her teeth were as castanets and her eyes great round pools and he could see at once the tautness in her. It seemed she had been in the courtroom.

"David," she chattered, "I saw it!"

He looked aside at her; then he put the car in gear and rolled it into traffic.

"David, I felt almost like screaming!"

He turned at the corner. He was very calm. His right hand reached out for hers. He gripped it.

"Then it is fear, isn't it, Linda?"

"But David, I tell you I *saw* it! David, if looks alone could kill. . ."

"Oh, so someone doesn't like me?"

"I tell you it was so pronounced— David, he didn't know I was watching. I had to put one hand to my lips to keep from screaming."

"Who was it?"

She whispered, "A man."

He sighed, leaned back, squeezed her icy hand.

"You've got to find out who he is, David, be prepared."

"Then you didn't know him?"

"A gray man, about fifty."

"Oh, no." He managed a small laugh. "Millions have gray hair. No, dear, that's no good description."

"In a blue striped suit, David, a blue hom-burg and white gloves."

"White gloves?" he said sharply.

"Yes, I wondered at the time—"

"That's Field" he muttered. Drake's face was lean, eyes frowning, gray, direct. His chin was cut with stubborn squareness. "Linda, we've got to understand each other. I know you've been worried. I've suspected why. But—"

"David, who is he?"

Field? The man who made machines. The man it was said, who, with a crook of his finger, could send one man to his grave and another to a judge's bench. The man, if all else failed, who always turned stones over and gathered in, for personal use, the crawling things he found underneath. Everyone knew Lanning Field. No one knew Field—when it came to the clinches. Mr. Murder in white gloves; his hands were always immaculate.

"Dear," Drake said again, "stay out of this. It's not for you. You don't understand it. I know what you're thinking, that—"

"That what, David?" she asked quickly as he paused.

He smiled. "Never mind. I'm all right. I'm in the public eye now. So I'm strong. And Field's no fool. No more jitters, understand?"

That night a key witness was murdered. And the next day Drake brought home a gun.

SHE LOOKED at the automatic. Then she looked at him. Two quick red spots appeared in her cheeks and slowly faded.

"Darling, not for *me*?" she asked.

He said, "No? Why not?" He chose his words carefully. "Suppose you go down a road and meet a barrier. Wouldn't you search for side roads to go round it? Okay. Now suppose I take back the words I said last night. Suppose *Field* decides to look for side roads?" He juggled the gun in his hand and looked at her again. "For you," he said. "Why not?"

"But I wouldn't know what to do with it!"

"You'd just pull the trigger. It's as simple as that."

"David, you aren't serious?" The red spots had come back. She was five-foot-two, and suddenly she was standing on tiptoe to reach his lips with hers. There was something in the fierceness of her kiss that made him wince. Then she looked up, laughed. "I—I couldn't hit the broad side of a barn."

"Maybe so. We'll see. Suppose we go out now and try it?"

They donned sweaters. It was cool as they walked swiftly down the wood slope behind their home, to the creek. On the way she wondered aloud about Junior. For example, she would take him with her, shopping. Suppose someone crashed into her car? Suppose someone took him, when her back was turned? Wouldn't it be best, she wondered, to leave the boy with a nurse, at home?

He set up a target. He shot one clip himself, to show her how it worked. Then she tried closing her eyes each time she squeezed the trigger.

They walked back to the house. He said, "It's only the first time, dear." He said, "Of course you must keep your eyes *open*." He said finally, "Tomorrow we'll try it again. . . ." Until then she'd been silent. Until he said the word 'again' she'd walked woodenly, staring straight ahead. Then her hand tightened on his arm.

"No, David, never again."

"Hey, now!"

"David, listen. It's not as though we were poor and couldn't do now what we wanted. David, we're insane. We can't stay here, like this. David, please, please listen to me."

She stopped, just inside the fringe of trees. There home stood solidly ahead, stone and brick, white doors and white windows. The lawns were very smooth and green now with the spring; and white concrete cut wide paths like satin in the sun. There were benches and a pool, with rocks around the pool, and soon there would be roses on the arbors. There were evergreens that had found root, thrived

and spread as though to show they liked to live and stay here.

"David, it's we who matter. Not this Field, not Nate Samson, or the D. A.'s office. We'll be smart. We'll start all over, somewhere without risk. David, we'll simply go away."

He just looked at her. "Run?" he whispered. "Run?"

"But it wouldn't be running, David! It would be using common sense. Oh, why fight the machine? No one really cares. . . ."

"Linda," he said, "stop it!"

She was clinging to him suddenly and sobbing.

"I've never run from duty in my life," he said angrily.

"But the danger!"

"I'm prepared to fight it."

"Darling, you can't! You can't because—because they're dirty and you—you're clean."

He took the gun from his pocket and looked at it. He saw her wince and grimly then he put it back in his pocket. He put it, later, in his study, in his desk.

Every night from this night forward, she would hear strange sounds in the house. She would like awake then, taut and scarcely breathing.

"Can't sleep?" he would say.

"No, David, I—"

"You poor kid!"

"David, I admit it. I—I'm just scared."

Now, curiously, the danger was always here, at home. She didn't call him at the office. She almost never left the house. It was something she could *feel* now—in the house.

Pain?

"Oh, no, David. I'm not ill, not really," she cried.

"Field? It's the killing of that witness and the picture I gave you of Field?"

"Darling, I can't tell you! I don't know!"

"Linda, if you'll only try to rationalize this thing—"

"Rationalize a draft, a shadow on the wall? The rattle of a window, David, the creak of a board or the crack of the furnace? Oh, David, David, whatever it is, it's moving and near."

He would lie there, thinking. Not danger at the office, not downtown. But *here*. From the day he'd brought the gun home. He would shake his head and weigh again her safety, his precautions.

"David, please don't ever leave me."

"Huh?" The springs creaked beneath him as he sat straight up in bed. "Leave you?"

Would he cut off his right arm? Just, say, because he had a sore finger? Would he cut his heart out, because it had missed one beat? Joke, huh. Funny business. Leave her and little David and the house . . . in his right mind, faculties all working?

## CHAPTER TWO

## Sirens in the Night

SO THE tide moved in. He came home one night, a Friday, earlier than usual. He drove around the back and ran for the side door. There was a storm, a downpour, lightning and sharp thunder. A mighty clap resounded as he closed the door. He heard her voice at the phone, so instead of calling as he always did, "Hi, Linda!" he was momentarily silent.

He pulled off his hat, his tan topcoat and his gloves. His head began abruptly, queerly, to cock a little to one side, for he couldn't help but hear her saying, "Yes, I understand. . . . No, I—I wouldn't want something to happen—"

Silence. A silence that revolved around that one word, *happen*. What would happen? When? He almost cleared his throat, checked the impulse as she said, "How much?"

Silence. Perhaps three or four small seconds. First *happen*. Now *how much*. He put these three lilly words together and suddenly he had a mountain. Suddenly the hall was tight and small, and there he stood, within it, without room to breathe. Just he and this molehill that had grown and grown until—

She said, "But I couldn't raise that much! Please—if you'll only give me time!"

Her breath caught in a gasp. He discovered he'd ceased breathing. A thudding began in his ears, his temples, as though the thunder had slipped into the house. The lash of rain behind him at the door was angry, vicious.

She was crying. He could tell it in her voice as she said at last, "All right. Yes, I—I understand. I'll do what I can. Yes, at eleven sharp. I'll be there."

The phone met its cradle, but there was no other sound. He began, curiously, to count. He lost the count somewhere in the twenties. What had happened to her? Had she turned to stone? Why didn't she sit down? Or, if sitting, why didn't she rise? He could visualize her graven figure, wounded, eyes fixed, staring.

Abruptly he turned, opened the house door again, then again closed it. He closed it loudly this time, almost with a bang. He called out, "Hi, Linda! Hey, I'm home! Where are you?"

She didn't answer. She was like a frightened mouse. He looked down at his clenched fists, then hung the tan coat in the closet. He saw himself in the door's full mirror, white, eyes too bright, aware and grim now. He closed the closet door then, softly, and took a deep breath. "Linda," he called, "where are you? Upstairs?"

"Here, David," she said.

She was in his study, at his desk, her back to

the doorway. She was looking out the window. She turned at last from the window.

"What's the matter," he asked. "A blue funk?"

"Something like that," she said.

"Not tears?"

She didn't answer, and he contrived to smile.

"Trouble with the butcher?"

"No, of course not," she said.

"Just—trouble?"

She looked at him. "The rain," she said.

"It's been so gray all day. I—I suppose the drabness got on my nerves."

He crossed to the desk, elaborately casual. "Anyone call?"

"Oh, did you expect a call, David?"

"No calls?"

"I think I have a headache, David." She walked past him. She walked to the door. At the door she paused and turned. "David, I—I think I'll lie down for a while."

"Late dinner?"

"Can you manage, David? I'm not hungry."

He sat awhile, alone, at the desk. He examined the window and didn't see it. Then he examined his knuckles. Who the devil had she talked to on the phone? "How much?" she'd said. Money? "But I couldn't raise that much!" Yes, how much? And for what? He lit a cigarette. The smoke curled, died away in the tray. Suddenly he rose and went upstairs. She was lying face down on the bed.

"Linda, look," he said. "We've always shared everything."

Her body quivered, then tightened.

"You've got something on your mind."

"David, please!"

She kept her face down, in the pillow. He looked at her back and said finally, "Uh-huh."

"Please, David! I'm trying to doze."

"Uh-huh," he said.

"David, please go down now. You'll find cold cuts for dinner."

SHE CAME downstairs at ten-twenty. She wore a black coat and gloves, a white scarf tight around her throat. She wore a beret and carried a black purse. A large purse. "Baby is asleep," she said. "Nurse promised to stay late with him." She was jerky with her words and in her movements.

"You're not going out?"

She said, "Restless, darling. Just for a small walk."

Dressed with such care? Dressed to look lovely? Would she use perfume, a heady scent, to tramp out in the rain, around the block?

"Fine," he said. "I'll go with you."

"David—" She clipped the word off, wide-eyed, quickly tense. "David, haven't you wanted ever to be just alone?"

"Oh?" He took a deep breath, let it slowly

out. "Sure. Sure. I know. Go ahead."

"I won't be long, dear. Please don't worry."

She caught a taxi three blocks from the house. He'd grabbed his coat and hat from the hall closet. He'd run to the garage, got his car out, left the lights off and followed. He turned the lights on as the cab wound off, swung into the speedway. It cut off again then, into a wide street, came to a park, rolled straight through to higher ground; and here were stone facades, the cliff-like ramparts of plush buildings.

Lanny Field lived here, in one of these fine buildings.

Drake slowed as the cab came to a stop, watched as she got out. It was five of eleven, exactly. He parked, pulled the collar of his coat up and got out. He walked past the front door and through the main foyer—just as she had. He walked on, through shadows, a dark garden, just as she had. He came to a door. There was no light here, above the door—but it was unlocked.

He stepped into an onyx hallway, very small, very dim, silent now except for a slight humming. The elevator was humming. He started up the stairway and just beyond the first turn was an iron gate. Like the grilled gate to a vault—air. He climbed on, unhurried, stolid, plodding.

There was no one in the upper hall; she had gone inside, of course, by this time. He followed her perfume straight to the door and raised his hand to knock. Then he changed his mind and tried the knob. It turned and the door opened.

He could see the body, sprawled face down. He could see the knife stuck in its back, and the stain was blood, red and glistening. Even as he stood there, the ugly stain was crawling, spreading.

Drake's gloved hand reached out for the jamb; it felt as if there was nothing underneath him. The wheels within his mind just stopped; and then the floor was there again, suddenly, with an impact, a jar. He recovered with the jar. His heart dropped from his throat, began to thump, to race, and he slipped inside, closed the door and called one quick word, a hoarse whisper, "Linda!"

No one answered. The silence was intense, as though the room had become paralyzed with shock.

Drake crossed over and kneeled. His gloved hands turned the body over. It was Lanning Field, all right, and he was dead. He was warm, the wound still oozing. His life had slipped away within the last few seconds. Apparently he'd been stabbed just as Drake was climbing the stairs.

Drake closed his eyes, then opened them again. The breath he'd drawn and held began to ache. She had been expected, his Linda.

Field had wanted money. How much money? Plainly more, much more, than she could have raised tonight. Why? What was the threat, the lever, the hold Field had had or thought he'd had? Drake passed over that. He was breathing again, swiftly. Time now was the all-important factor. Time and decision and Linda's life, her safety.

"Linda!"

She wasn't in the next room, the bathroom or the kitchen. But here a door stood open. It opened on a hall that turned and cut back to the front. So she could have come around the corner just after he'd walked in. Of course she would have heard him. It didn't follow, though, that she'd seen him, or, in her panic, guessed who he was. She could have run on tiptoe for the stairway, completely unaware that he was here now.

He cut back to the gray room. The knife hilt might bear prints—but no, he remembered she'd worn gloves. Perfume? Somehow it was gone now. Thank God it was gone now. Somehow he had lost it. A note or her name on Field's desk? Drake's gaze brushed the desk, at once lifted. Pounding in his mind was—

*Sound.* A cough. Someone in the hall. Someone who'd come up the stairs.

Eternity swept past. The person rapped, and Drake discovered he'd stopped breathing. The ache had returned to his chest and swelled into his throat. He tried to swallow and couldn't. Every muscle in his body was now rigid. The ache climbed to his jaws; they were set like concrete.

"Lanny?"

A man. A voice he didn't know. A man who might turn the knob and open the door. Drake set himself as though to take a blow, but the knob didn't turn, the door didn't open. The man outside muttered, again coughed. Then his footsteps retreated. Drake stood there a long moment, panting, dripping sweat. He shivered then, and slipped into the hall.

Below, the foyer was empty, the black yard empty. A broad, dark figure, the man who had rapped, was moving briskly forty yards away, across the lawn.

And Linda's cab was gone.

Samson, the D. A., would call it murder. The world would call it murder. True, God might not call it murder, but could he, David Drake, step up and say, "I'm God?" Could he return home and say to Linda, "You've committed murder!"

He got in his car. Down the street near the corner was the broad man, walking. At the corner was a tall man, walking. The two met, paused, conversed. Drake drove off the other way. The anxious windshield wipers began working, began asking questions of him! "What will you say when you return to Linda?"

Linda, you didn't take the cab back home? Not all the way back home? You didn't leave a trail?

Linda, you didn't get his blood on your coat, your gloves?

Linda, you *wore* your gloves? You did, didn't you?

What time was it? Midnight? He'd been driving aimlessly, almost an hour. The broad man must have returned and found Field's body. Not that finding Field, in itself, could matter. What could matter was—*what could he say to Linda?*

\* \* \*

"David?" She called down from the hall upstairs.

"Yes," he said. He stood inside the door, his hands clenched, shaking.

She said from the darkness of the upper hall, "Is everything—all right?"

"I was called downtown."

"Oh!" she gasped.

He winced. "I'll be right up, dear, in a little while now."

Yes, he'd be up in a little while now. Not to sleep though. How could he ever sleep again? He walked into his study and sat down at his desk. He was still there at his desk when he heard the small snarl of a siren.

**T**HE CAR was breaking from the broad street, coming round the corner. Every muscle in Drake's body began instantly to quiver. He hadn't thought that they would come at all, surely not this soon. *Make them pass now*, he was saying, a voice frantic in his mind. *Please God, make them pass now. . . .*

Upstairs, there was a sudden flurry as high-heeled mules tapped quickly to the front window, and then as quickly tapped back to the door, the hall. His breath caught and he held it; he sat like that at his desk, braced, gripping the chair arms hard.

Yellow beams rammed into the house, through the wide, low windows. The car had turned and stopped. And then the breath began to slip slowly out of him and his strength ebbed out of him. He could hear the shutting of car doors, then footsteps. One man? Two?

"David!" Linda called from upstairs. "It stopped here!"

He fought to keep panic from his voice. "Yes, there's someone in the driveway."

"The siren! David, it's the police!"

It was. The door chimes were already sounding, mellow, low, somehow very sad tonight, like church bells far off, tolling. He shook himself, made the supreme effort and pushed back his chair. His body, long and lean, at last unfolded. For a moment then he swayed, steadied himself on the desk, walked

into the hall. Linda stood at the stairtop. Slim in a white robe, her hair like night around the whiteness of her face, she stood gripping the banister.

Now, too, from the hall he could see them outside, through the leaded glass. Samson, the D. A., and two others: police, of course. Then the door was open and Samson, small, dapper despite the rain, was forcing a thin smile as he said, "Hello, Drake. I see I've found you still up."

The two men with Samson looked at Drake and nodded. One of them was a dick on the D. A.'s staff; the other Homicide, Lieutenant DeSota.

"Come in," Drake said and stood aside, shooting a glance upstairs. Linda was no longer there. She'd slipped back into darkness, and it was desolately still, empty there, upstairs. He closed the door and motioned toward the study.

Samson, his raincoat flapping around him, had pushed his hat back on his forehead. The skin beneath it was pink below a thin black hairline. There were malicious lights in Samson's small black eyes now as he said, "I suppose you're wondering why we're here?"

Drake's heart climbed to his throat. He avoided a direct look, closed the study door with care. A score of times he, as Special Prosecutor, had swept down upon a man like this to swing the sharp sword of the law. A score of times he'd looked upon a drawn white face and felt pity. No, not pity. He'd felt glad, in the past, to be on the right side of the fence; smug perhaps, a little, to see someone with whom he'd matched wits begin squirming. Now, though, he felt pity, a sharp wave that for a moment almost left him blinded.

"Sit down, gentlemen. You'll find cigars on the desk."

Samson's dick took one and wandered on to the window. Lieutenant DeSota, frowning, embarrassed, produced a pipe. All the while, Samson, standing across the desk, was watching Drake closely.

"Alone, Drake?"

"Quite."

"Your wife, of course?"

Drake stared before seating himself, and Samson shrugged. "I mean it's rather late. I hope we didn't wake her or the baby."

Then Samson pulled up a chair. He sat down, feet outstretched, his narrow shoulders relaxing. He pulled a freshly opened pack of cigarettes from his pocket and took one. "Field was murdered tonight, Drake."

*So the broad man had gone back and found the body.* The words fell out of Drake's mind as he noticed Samson waiting, grinning.

"And I think we've got it all wrapped up."

"Already?" Drake's voice was beginning to stretch.

Samson reached to the desk for a match and struck it. The cigarette lit, he threw the match in a tray. "Look, Drake. After all, you've been rather running the show. I—my office—has been on the spot. My position therefore tonight is—what shall I say? Peculiar? Naturally, I'd prefer to talk this over."

"Talk what over?"

"The Field case."

Drake put both hands down flat on the desk, and DeSota at that moment cleared his throat. Neither Drake nor Samson looked aside at him. Samson let the smoke drift up past his bright watchful eyes before he said, "Lieutenant, this is between Drake and me. Suppose you boys wait outside."

DeSota, scowling, made no move to rise.

"Outside, boys," Samson said again, curtly.

DeSota gave him a blank stare, took a deep breath, let it slowly out. He shoved the pipe back in his pocket. "Okay. If that's the way you want it."

"That's the way I want it."

DeSota rose, motioned to the dick, and the two men left the room quietly.

When the study door had closed Samson said slowly, "I'm afraid the lid's off, Drake."

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Face of Death

FROM UPSTAIRS came again the faint sound of high heels tapping on the floor. The nursery floor. Linda was with little David. Drake looked straight ahead, straight through Samson. Then there was a thin, small wail and Drake winced. His son, David. It was almost as though the child, somehow, had heard and wakened with alarm. One small wail. No more. No more tapping.

Sound, from outside, swept in against this new stillness. DeSota and the dick had got back in the squad car and slammed the doors. Then the rain fell with an even drone, and Drake jerked free from his lassitude as Samson's voice intruded.

"I admire your control, Drake. I rather thought you might go to pieces."

His mind was actually in pieces, sick, a block of ice that had just fallen and then cracked. Everywhere around him lay the pieces, moist, glassy shards, all weeping. He sat there looking at Samson, and Samson looked almost malevolent.

"I admire you," Samson repeated, "but I warn you, Drake, the case is sewn up tight. If it's facts you want we've got them."

"That's what I want," Drake said then in a low voice. "Facts."

"All right. Field was murdered tonight, at approximately eleven. He was shived. It was a spontaneous thing apparently; the killer just

grabbed up the knife from Field's desk. No prints on the knife, of course. No prints in the room, none that we could use. Obviously the killer made belated, clumsy attempts to be clever."

Clever? What did clever mean? Just to leave no clues? Or now a flat denial? A laugh? A calm, controlled, "Samson, you're insane!" Oh yes, he might say that. But would it be clever? Drake's teeth began to click, and he clamped them at once tightly.

"A man like Field," Samson was saying, "had innumerable enemies. Granted. He lived by his wits. He sat up there in his tower, pulling strings. A man in prison wants out—okay, for a price Field springs him. No, not jailbreak, nothing so crude. Field played his game shrewdly, with skeletons—and there was almost certain to be one rattling in everyone's closet. Check Drake?"

"Check," David Drake whispered.

"All right." Samson licked his lips. "Field had something on everyone. On nearly everyone. Field could pressure judges and black-mail saints. I'll come back to that in a moment. Now, though, I think we've established that the killing came about through fear. It wasn't planned, as I've said; it happened. And when murder is committed like that there's got to be some disorganization and inevitably a physical clue."

"In this case?" Drake said.

"In this case a button."

A button. For a moment Drake's mind whirled. Button from what?

Samson took another cigarette and lit it from the first. He tossed the half-smoked butt; it missed the tray and fell on the desk and a quick gray ring appeared, a small burned spot.

"Half a button, to be quite exact," Samson said. "The kind that snaps. A gray button from a man's gray glove. Not Field's. Field didn't wear gray gloves, ever. Furthermore, his suite had been cleaned earlier this evening, and that clinched it. The button had been dropped by someone who'd been up there this evening."

"Y'know, Drake," Samson went on in his hard, flat voice, "it worried me, that button. It bothered me because I knew I'd seen a gray glove with a loose or lost button, only I couldn't recall when it was or where until—"

Samson's face wore a malicious grin. "Until the ball started rolling. Facts you want, Drake? Okay. It seems a flattie on the Field beat saw you park your car down there tonight at a few minutes of eleven. The flattie waved to you, he said. Apparently you didn't even see him. Then, a little later, one of Field's good friends stopped the flattie—"

*The broad man who had rapped, and the man he'd met on the corner. "Officer, something seems to be wrong in the Field apart-*

ment. *Lanny doesn't answer the door. . .*"

"Motive?" Samson was now saying. "I think I can answer that too. I think, Drake, there was something in your past that Field found out. I think Field offered you a deal, a clean slate for him in return for his silence—"

"Wait a minute." Drake was breathing hard now. "Just what do you want?"

"I? What does any prosecutor want, Drake? Justice."

"Oh, no. Not like this. You sent DeSota and your man outside."

"Well—" Samson leaned forward a little and looked at Drake directly—"I'm realistic. I've long expected, wanted, some day to be governor. Then you went out for my skin, and, however unjustly, you, not I, suddenly had the public's confidence. All right. Now we go to trial. The rap is murder and I send you to the chair. Some people might believe that looks too hard, like vengeance."

"Wait a minute," Drake repeated. "*Just what do you want?*"

Samson's gaze dropped to his nails. He rubbed them on his coat. "Suppose I go out, talk it over with DeSota? I'll say, 'The lad is taking it pretty hard, Lieutenant. Pretty hard. But I've got his confession, his signed confession. I'm giving him a short while with his wife before we take him in.' Suppose I gave you—oh, say twenty minutes?"

"And then?"

Samson sat up straight. His eyes were narrowed now, his thin face grim. "You've got a gun?"

Two red spots appeared on Drake's white face. He closed his eyes, sat very still.

"A signed confession, *now*," Samson said. Drake shivered. "Yes, I understand that."

"Then twenty minutes."

"Yes, I—I understand that."

**T**WENTY small minutes. . . . Already Samson had walked to the door, the confession in his pocket, his long raincoat flapping. The study door was closed. And now Samson was outside, the front door closed. The clock on Drake's desk, as though frightened, began whirring. Drake looked at it, reached up, twisted loose his tie. But the tightness was beneath his skin, and there was nothing he could do about it, nothing.

He opened the top drawer in his desk and looked down at the gun. There was nothing he could do but save her, nothing. . . .

"David?"

Linda was coming down the stairs, was halfway down by the time he reached the door, opened it and saw her.

"David," she said, pausing, pressed against the stairwell, "they've not gone? Dear, what is it? They're still out there."

"Yes, I know."

He climbed the first step toward her, his knees rubbery and aching. The gun was in his pocket and it felt like lead. His feet were lead. All his life, it seemed, he'd wanted to climb toward her. Well, they'd had three fine years. He reached out for her hands. They were marble white and cold, and he gripped them tightly.

"What is it, D-David?" she chattered.

"I'm going away, dear."

"Tonight?"

"They're waiting for me now."

"David, just on—business?"

He found at last the smile he'd tried so hard to show. He put his arms around her, and all at once she clung there to him and he could feel the awful pounding of her heart next to his own.

"The little fellow was awake, dear?"

"A bad dream, I guess. He—"

"Could I go in for a moment?"

Her hand fell. He was almost sure it brushed his pocket, the gun. He was almost sure she'd flinched. He wondered, a small thought, at her intuitive fear of danger, through the gun, the first time she had seen it. He wondered at her strength; of course she'd gone to Field only to aid *him*. She had obeyed impulse, primal law, not man's. Fought and killed Lanning Field, for him. For them, their home, for little David.

"Just a moment in the nursery?" he whispered. "While you get my coat and hat?"

"On tiptoe, David?"

"Sure," he said. "I wouldn't want to wake him."

She ran up on the steps, stopped halfway down the hall to their room to put one finger to her lips, for silence.

Silence. It was still as death around him, in the hall, in the child's dim nursery. Just the lad's small breathing. Just his own harsh breathing.

*Well, good-bye, son.*

His mind refused to work beyond that, and he stood there until— *But why would the broad man, rapping at Field's door, suspect something wrong simply because Field had failed to answer?* The thought went skipping along, and Drake's mind tripped and fell and rose and tried to lumber after. But Linda had returned to the hall now. He could hear her footsteps.

"You didn't wake him, David?"

"No, dear." Five more minutes. The seconds were alive, leaping up and down like frantic little gnomes. There was something he must find yet. . . .

Linda has his coat, his hat, the gloves she'd brought from the bedroom closet.

Suddenly, he stiffened, stared.

"I didn't wear gray gloves tonight!" His voice was hollow. "The button is missing from

these gloves—and my other coat and gloves are still downstairs, the tan ones, where I left them. I didn't wear gray gloves today! My God, it's that simple!"

He heard her gasp as he swung past her, ran on toward the stairs. She was just behind him, calling his name. He was halfway down the stairs when the front door opened and stopped him. Samson slid in and closed the door quickly behind him. Samson had a gun, and he stood on wide-spaced feet, looking up the stairwell.

"Just stay there, Drake," he whispered. "It's perfect, so just stay there."

**E**VERYTHING was new now. The seconds ceased leaping past him now and stood stock still. Just as he did, Drake. Just as she did, Linda, right behind him. He wished he could turn now, comfort her, his Linda. He wished he could tell her that this moment was insane, his doubt of her insane; that this could not be, this sudden danger. No, DeSota was no crook. True, the other dick was Samson's man, but DeSota would see through Samson's plan and so come in before—

DeSota didn't come in, and suddenly the last hope faded from Drake's mind. There was suddenly no light outside, no DeSota, no dick—nothing in the world that was not right here on the stairsteps.

"That's the way I like to see a thing tied up." Samson ran the pink tip of his tongue across his thin pink lips. "I didn't really expect you to kill yourself, to go through with it, Drake. I got what I was after, the first step, your confession. Ah, good evening, Mrs. Drake." He smirked then, jerking his gun hand slightly. "Two clay pigeons."

Linda came down one more step. Drake didn't turn, but he felt her quickened breath, felt her at his bent right arm; the gray topcoat lay across that arm and now she stood there, swaying against him. Two clay pigeons. Samson had intended from the first to shove him in a corner and then kill him. Now, the gun was buried deep beneath Drake's topcoat, in his suitcoat pocket. There was no chance at all that he could reach into that pocket in time. Drake stood, left hand gripping the banister.

"Y'know," said Samson, "the public's going to love this. 'Drake,' they'll read in the papers, 'signed a confession, asked for a few minutes alone with his wife.' Of course, we officials will admit that request should not have been granted—"

"You murdered Field," Drake interrupted harshly.

"My dear fellow!"

"You've always been Field's man. You danced when he whistled, until Field's machine was in danger of falling apart. Then you saw

a way to stop my investigation, dispose of Field himself and emerge on top, with the public's confidence. You posed today as Field and phoned my wife. You'd seen her concern for me, and by telling her that she could buy my safety you knew she'd walk into a trap.

"So I get it, Samson. She was to have been framed for Field's murder. The beat cop was in on it, planted to witness her arrival. The broad man was to come promptly, find her with the body. You were going to discredit and get at me through her—only I showed up. I followed her to Field's door. Now I get it why once inside Field's suite I didn't smell perfume. She never got beyond Field's door. She didn't know he was dead. She heard me on the stairs, saw me. She realized she couldn't hope to complete a bargain then, that I might make things worse, precipitate a scene tonight if I found her there. So she hid in the hall and beat it out, as you did, after her, the minute I walked through Field's door."

"Squirming, Drake?" grinned Samson.

The knuckles on Drake's left hand turned white. Samson held the cards. The confession; DeSota nicely, safely placed outside, a just man and certain to testify that Samson had been in the act of making an arrest. Samson could say, "I knew Drake had a gun. I knew, too late, his promise to submit to arrest had been worthless. I had to shoot, and the first slug missed him, got his wife. There was nothing I could do then but throw a second bullet and kill him."

Squirming? He might still leap ten feet down the steps. He might use his dying body to bowl Samson over. DeSota might get in before—before a second bullet could find Linda. It was small hope.

Linda trembled there just behind him, pressed against his arm.

"So I found Field's body," Drake continued. He had to go on talking. "You had to change your plan then, but that was easy. All you had to do was work fast. You'd noticed recently, no doubt, that I'd lost a button from a glove. All you had to do was show DeSota a button, any button, to tie a tangible clue to the beat cop's story. It wasn't a clue that would be worth a damn as evidence in court, but you didn't intend this case to reach court. All you wanted, Samson, was to exert the proper pressure tonight, catch me quick, tonight. You knew I loved my wife. You knew I'd grab at any out for her while my mind was tangled and my guard down."

"All I ever wanted," Samson snarled, "was to see you dead—"

His gun jerked, and then the whole world convulsed. But David Drake was ready. There were two quick shots. Curiously, the first crack came from next to him, on the

(Continued on page 97)

# IF THE HEAD FITS—

*Jeopardy Jackson had only one theory about that bobbing, grinning object he'd fished out of Little Mill Creek: "Whar they's a haid," said Jeopardy, "they's bound to be a body!"*



The head almost seemed amused, Jeopardy thought.

“IF THEY’S anything I’m hungry fer,” mused Jeopardy Jackson, swinging his fishing pole out over Little Mill Creek and lowering a hook into the water, “it’s a mess o’ fried catfish!”

Jeopardy inserted a finger of Hotchkiss behind his lower lip and settled back to await action. He was a short man with a long skinny neck, gray eyes, and hair that resem-

bled something transplanted from the back of a grizzly. Beside him, snoring loudly, reclined his ancient hound, Blue. The two of them were famous throughout Ringtail County for their ability to land in a peck of trouble, come rain or shine.

A hot noonday sun sifted through tree-tops onto Jeopardy, making him drowsy. He closed his eyes dreamily, sighed, his mouth

● ● **By EDWIN M. ADAIR** ● ●

watering at the thought of a nice catfish, browned and sweet.

Suddenly, he felt a tug on his line and jerked up the pole. It snapped. Jeopardy glared into the water at a man.

The man was grinning and chewing on his hook.

Jeopardy's neck stretched like a turtle's, shooting his bewhiskered face several inches higher. "Let go that hook, you blasted bait stealer!" he roared.

The man said nothing.

Jeopardy leaped to his feet. His eyes took on a bewildered look. "That haid ain't got no man onto it!" he exclaimed.

The old blue-tick hound arose and growled as hair bristled along his spine.

Jeopardy watched the head carry his fishing line downstream. "Blue," he commanded, "go fetch that haid!"

The hound ducked tail and raced for the one-room shanty twenty yards behind, dived into the darkness under it and glared at his master with baleful eyes.

Jeopardy swore and followed the head. He contemplated going into the water after it, but the thought made him shudder.

He trotted along the bank until he came to a footlog. He went onto the log and reached down, making a quick grasp at the head. He lost balance and splashed into the cold water.

Bobbing up like a cork, Jeopardy yelled blasphemy to the mountain tops. "Ain't nothin' I hate worse'n water agin my body!"

He grabbed the fishing line trailing behind and pulled the head to him. "Blamed critter!" he growled. "Skidooded away from me a-purpose, didn't you?"

The head seemed amused.

Jeopardy noticed the face was drawn into a frozen grin. He crawled from the water and shook himself like a doused turkey, stepped on a briar which found the hole in his ragged shoe and danced on one foot, swearing violently.

The world was mighty rough on old Jeopardy today.

He took the head up to the house and hid it. Blue, beneath the flooring, emitted a high, spine-chilling wail.

"Shut up, you flea-totin' coyote!" Jeopardy shouted. He left the house and returned to the creek, directed his steps upstream.

"Whar they's a haid," he mumbled, "they's bound to be a man."

**H**E FOUND the body about a mile up Little Mill Creek. It was lying in a grassy clearing not far from where the road to Gooseneck Springs cut around the mountain. There was a big brown bird perched on the headless torso.

Jeopardy paused and watched the bird, who

seemed puzzled. The creature walked to and fro the length of the body, hopped to the ground and studied his prospective meal suspiciously and, finally, stepped back onto the stomach and stared about nervously.

"Crazy, feathered varmint!" said Jeopardy. "He's so used to starting with the eyes that now they ain't none he's all mixed up!"

The buzzard heard him and glared angrily. As Jeopardy approached, the bird lifted with great wing-sweeps into the air and vanished above the high treetops.

Jeopardy looked down at the body. It was large and it had been shot several times. One bullet, he reckoned, would have shattered the man's belt buckle if he'd been wearing a belt. But he wasn't. Neither were there any suspenders.

"Wonder how he kept his britches hiked," puzzled Jeopardy. "They're powerful big about the belly."

Then he noticed something which caused his gray eyes to pop open wide. There, on the man's feet, was a brand new pair of store-bought shoes.

It didn't take Jeopardy but a few minutes to get them onto his own scrawny feet. "A mite large," he muttered. "But they's awful purty."

"Don't move, Jackson!" commanded a voice some distance away.

Sheriff Sidbury stepped from behind a tree. In the same wise, Liver Ledbetter and Shorty Fields appeared. All three men approached with drawn revolvers and hemmed him in.

The sheriff said, "Always heard a criminal would return to the scene of his crime. I got you for sure this time, Jackson."

Jeopardy frowned. "Never seen this feller before in my life," he said. He reckoned he'd better not mention the head. That would only make matters worse. "I was huntin' coon tracks along the creek and seen him here in the clearing."

"What did you do with his head?" demanded the sheriff.

"What haid?" Jeopardy looked down. "Why his haid is gone, ain't it?"

"You needn't act so innocent, Jackson. You're going to pay for this killing! Where's the money you stole? You might as well turn it over."

"What money?" asked Jeopardy.

Shorty Fields said, "Let's search him, Sheriff. I bet he's got it on him."

"Good idee. Grab the culprit, Liver."

They pounced upon the little man who swore and fought and raved like a pack of bobtailed wildcats.

"What's this!" The sheriff held up a twenty-dollar bill. "You never had so much money before in your life, Jackson! I reckon this evidence is all we'll need. But I want

the rest of that money. There was at least two hundred dollars."

Jeopardy stared at the bill in amazement. "I don't know where it come from," he protested.

"Hah!" Sheriff Sidbury said.

"The rest of the money is probably in his house," said Liver Ledbetter, shaking Jeopardy with a yellow-skinned hand.

"We'll soon find out," said the sheriff. "Drag him to the car, boys."

"You're all crazy as mud hens!" shouted Jeopardy. "I tell you I don't know nothin' 'bout that feller!"

Sheriff Sidbury grunted. "Couldn't resist coming back for them new shoes, could you? Well, they'll walk you to the death house now."

They came to the road where Liver Ledbetter's Model T car was parked. In the rear of it, tethered, were the sheriff's two flap-eared bloodhounds. Jeopardy was made to occupy the space between them.

The hounds sniffed at Jeopardy and Jeopardy scowled at the hounds. The dislike was mutual.

Liver Ledbetter inserted a key in the ignition. "When I gave Jackson a ride home yesterday," he said, "I never dreamed he'd turn out to be a murderer!" He released the brake and the car rolled off down the dirt road.

Jeopardy's captors fell to talking and he learned more about the dead man. The fellow was a salesman. He had taken orders at the Turkey Hollow general store and also at Gooseneck Springs. It was estimated he must have possessed at least two hundred dollars when in the latter settlement last night.

Shorty Fields had found the salesman's car deserted on this same road and had driven it into town to report his find to the sheriff. Then Shorty, Sheriff Sidbury and Liver Ledbetter had returned to search for the missing man in Liver's Model T.

They'd found him, all right. And Jeopardy, with his usual streak of bad luck, had walked square into the mess.

Jeopardy reckoned now he was in a pretty bad fix. If they found that head in his shanty he was just as good as a hanged goslin.

Then he remembered something which gave him a ray of hope. Yesterday, when Liver Ledbetter had given him a ride home, the car had overheated and stalled on that steep hill leading up the mountain, just before arriving at Jeopardy's place. Jeopardy had had to get out and push as steam whistled from the radiator cap.

Undoubtedly it would stall again today. Jeopardy decided that when it did, he'd make his escape. He needed time to figure this whole thing out and clear himself.

As they started up the hill, Jeopardy tensed,

made himself ready. The car slowed almost to a halt.

Then Liver Ledbetter stomped on the low gear pedal. The Model T shot forward and scooted over the crest of the mountain like a flushed jackrabbit.

Jeopardy groaned and sat back. The car's cooling system had been fixed!

They arrived at Jeopardy's house, left the car and escorted him inside. They commenced to search for the money.

"Aha!" said the sheriff suddenly.

He had found another twenty-dollar bill. It had been lodged in a crack of the wall. "Keep searching, boys. It's all here somewhere."

Liver Ledbetter picked up the water bucket. He screamed and flung it to the floor. The head rolled out.

It grinned at all of them.

"Well!" said the sheriff.

Beneath the floor, Blue emitted another long wail. The bloodhounds answered from the car.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Jeopardy dove through the door, raced around the house and disappeared into the woods.

**J**EOPARDY halted atop a mountain, panting heavily, and listened to Sheriff Sidbury's bloodhounds who were now hot on his trail. He started off again. Long, lofty strides carried him bounding down the other side of the mountain. Then he turned up another higher mountain and sped along its rocky crest where the stiff breeze would whisk away his scent.

This threw his pursuers off for a while, but presently he could hear them again, mouthing their eagerness.

Jeopardy paused. He reckoned there wasn't much use running himself to death unless he could think of something good in a hurry. Then, remembering his mind functioned best with a lip full of Hotchkiss, he helped himself to a goodly finger of the fine brown powder from his little tin can. Immediately, his brain cells commenced to work like a pack of busy beavers.

"I gotta get back to the shanty!"

The hounds were now roaring up the hill directly behind. Quickly, Jeopardy poured some of the Hotchkiss upon his leathery palm and tossed a cloud of it into the air. Then he ran on.

Leaping a small stream minutes later, he listened to the pair of snorting, sneezing, bewildered bloodhounds. The old man allowed himself a congratulatory smile and trotted toward home.

Arriving at the house, he went to the Model T and jerked up the hood. He took one look and said, "Just what I figured!"

*(Continued on page 98)*

# THE CRIMSON PATH

By  
**LARRY HOLDEN**

**T**HE DOORBELL shattered the brittle, freezing silence. Anna Sprague sat up in bed and clutched the covers around her against the iron cold that had closed down when the snow had stopped falling. The bell shrilled again; someone pounded the door with muted fists.

Anna said sharply, "Dave! Dave, wake up. Someone's at the door."

The covers heaved in the other twin bed and Dave's face emerged drowsily. "What's 'at?" he mumbled.

"There's someone at the door."

"At this hour?" His eyes searched for the luminous dial of the clock. "'S two o'clock."

The bell clamored hysterically, and Anna's voice bit at her husband, "Are you going to answer it, or do I—"

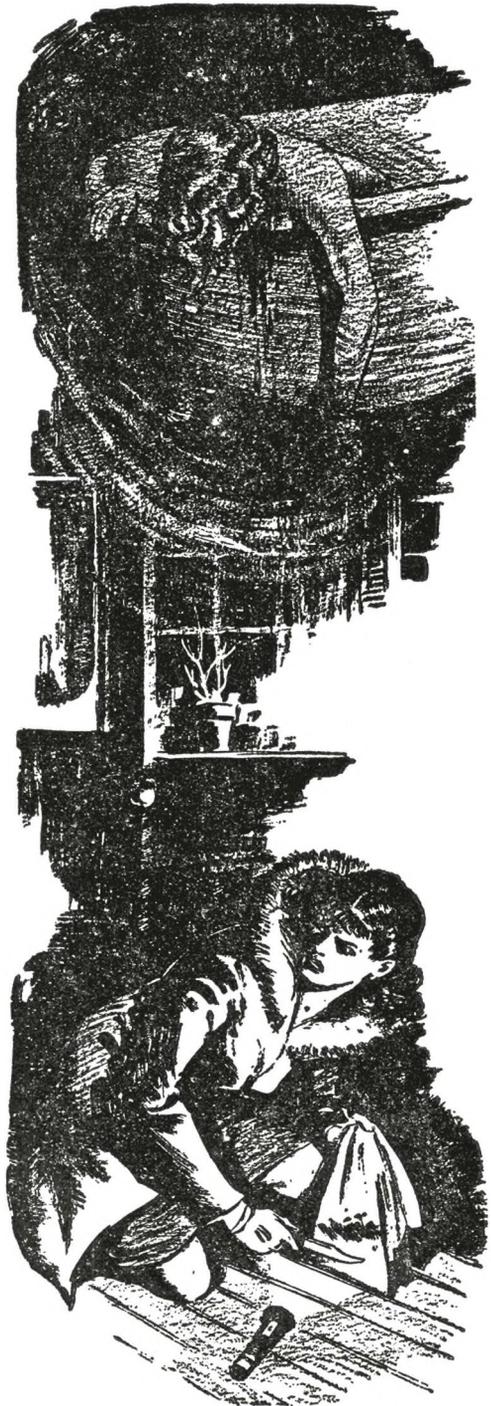
"I'll go, I'll go." He slid, shivering, from under the blankets, felt for his slippers with his feet, snatched up his woolen robe and stumbled from the room, grumbling to himself.

Anna lay back against the warm pillow and listened as he opened the front door. He exclaimed, "Good God!" His voice rose, "Anna! Anna! Come down. It's Mrs. Taggart. She's in some kind of trouble!"

Anna's lips compressed. Mrs. Taggart. She would be in trouble! Probably had been drinking. Anna moved with deliberation. She wasn't hurrying for any Mrs. Taggart.

When she walked into the living room, tying the sash of her housecoat, Mrs. Taggart

*There was only one way to save her man from the hot seat, Anna Sprague knew: Build a better mantrap—and then wait for a red whirlwind of death to beat a path to her door!*



It was quiet all around her as she went down on her knees on the floor, the knife in her hand.

was lying on the sofa, crying hysterically. Anna noticed with grim disapproval that the younger woman was wearing nothing but a man's overcoat and a nightgown, and her feet were bare. Trouble or no trouble, it was no way to show herself to neighbors.

Dave was patting her hand in a clumsy ineffectual way. He gave Anna a grateful glance and said to the weeping woman, "Here's my wife. She used to be a nurse. She'll take care of you."

He jumped up as if escaping. He mumbled unhappily to Anna, "It's something to do with her husband. I can't make out what it is. Maybe an accident. I'll run next door and see."

Anna looked past him and sniffed. "He gave her a black eye, that's what's the matter!" But he had already rushed out into the hall. Anna walked to the sofa. She buttoned the open overcoat. She was efficient if not sympathetic. "You're suffering from shock. You'll have to keep warm. I'll get you hot coffee. And something for that eye."

Dave did not return for twenty minutes, and when he did he looked unhappy and flustered as he always did when there was something he didn't understand. He gave Mrs. Taggart an embarrassed glance and beckoned to Anna from the doorway.

"I don't know what it's all about," he muttered when she came to him. "I found Ben Taggart sitting at the kitchen table bawling his eyes out. He said a lot of stuff about going down on his knees and begging her forgiveness. You know, Anna, it's kind of awful to see a man cry. I wish I knew what it was all about, honest."

"He hit her in the eye. That's what it's all about."

"But, gosh, I always thought they were pretty happily married."

"Dave Sprague, you're a fool. I know for a fact she's a nagger, and if Ben hit her, she deserved it. You'd better take her home while he's still in the mood to forgive her. And look how she's dressed! You'd think she'd have some self respect. Take her home. I don't want her in my house." She turned and walked up the stairs.

The light was burning in the bedroom and Anna was sitting up in bed sipping a cup of hot coffee when Dave came back, his lips leaden from the cold. There was a cup of coffee on the night table for him. He gulped it eagerly. "Getting colder by the minute," he said. "It'll hit ten below or worse."

Anna said very steadily, "Why did she come here, Dave? Why didn't she go to the Morrison's? Joe Morrison's a police detective. Seems to me he's the one to turn to. Why didn't she go there?"

"How do I know, Anna? I didn't ask her. Maybe she didn't want the police mixed up in

it. I wouldn't. Anyway," he grumbled, pulling the covers over him, "I'm just an insurance collector, not a mind reader. I've never been able to figure out why people do the things they do, especially women. Let's get some sleep."

"Well, I don't want her coming here again. I don't want any scandal."

"Good night, Anna. Please?" He was plaintive.

"I'll tell her myself." She turned out the light.

**T**HE NEXT morning at the breakfast table he avoided her searching, suspicious glance. He made one feeble attempt at conversation. "Just looked at the thermometer. Twelve below. That's cold!"

But it wasn't as cold as Anna's brief, "Is it?" She was waiting. He had something on his mind and he felt guilty about it. She knew Dave.

It came out when he was tugging on his galoshes at the door. "Thought I'd run next door," he mumbled, "to see if everything's okay. I have to collect her insurance today anyway, and I—"

Her voice crackled at him with sudden hostility, "Keep your nose out of it, Dave Sprague, and you'll save yourself trouble."

"Aw, Anna, it's the friendly thing to do. Friendliness is an insurance collector's bread and butter. And maybe—" he laughed feebly—"maybe I can even sell her some accident insurance."

She stood at the window and watched him trudge across the back yard through the heavy snow. Joe Morrison was out shoveling his driveway, and Dave stopped to chat. Dave loved to chat with people, and it was always the same thing—the weather, or something. Anna had long ago stopped listening when he started one of his rambling conversations. She went "Tch!" hardly knowing she did it, hardly realizing her annoyance.

Finally, Dave waved his hand at the detective and turned into the Taggart's large glassed-in rear porch. He staggered, waved his arms violently, his collection book went flying and he disappeared from her view as he went down. Her second "Tch!" was sharper. Clumsy fool, always falling over himself. She saw him get up, reach for his collection book and brush at his knees. He knocked at the door, opened it and called something, then walked into the kitchen. Her eyebrows drew together and her mouth fell open a little. There had been something in the easy familiarity of that gesture, something in the way he had walked in without waiting for anyone to open the door, something . . . something that caught at her breath and pulled it short.

*This was not the first time he had done that!*

She turned away from the window, her mouth a thin line of bitterness. She went to the stove, picked up the glass coffee pot and poured herself a cup of coffee. She sat at the table, put in milk and cream and stirred it slowly. The spoon made a little rhythm as it clinked against the side of the cup, and she rocked to and fro in time with the beat. She kept stirring and stirring and stirring. . . .

Although she had seen it with her own eyes, the way he had walked into that house, the way a man walks into his own house, she was still incredulous, but a thin edge of anger was beginning to cut in, was beginning to harden her. She put down her spoon with a decisive gesture and drank off the coffee at a gulp, hot as it was. She went to the broom closet and took out the oil mop.

She'd speak to Dave when he came home for lunch!

**B**UT IT WAS within less than two hours when he called her. His voice was all high and funny, the way it always got when he was excited.

"Anna, something terrible has happened. Terrible! I'm still over at the Taggarts. We found Mrs. Taggart dead in the bathtub with her head split open. And the police don't think it's an accident. They didn't say so, but I can tell from the way they're—"

A heavy voice broke in roughly at the other end. "Hey, what's going on here? Who said you could use that phone?"

Dave said meekly, "I was just calling my wife to—"

"You ain't calling nobody!"

Anna winced at the crash in her ear. She hung up the receiver, her mind racing. The thoughts sped so quickly she had hardly time to recognize them as articulate entities.

But there was one thing she knew: she had to get over into that other house before Dave talked himself into a mess, and her along with it. He was a friendly, blundering, good-natured man, and he'd never in the world realize that the police were going to be anything but friendly. They had already stopped being good-natured.

She ran upstairs, unbuttoning her house dress as she mounted the stairs. With swift, deft fingers she reset her hair and applied color to her pale lips and cheeks. She was by far a more striking woman than Mrs. Taggart, who had been a plump blonde turning to fat at thirty. But where the other woman had been warm and soft, Anna was hard and cold—in her eyes, in her mouth. She quickly appraised the dresses hanging in the closet and chose the olive silk, the one that looked so well on her.

Her reasons for doing this were woman's

reasons. Put into words, it might have gone like this: "By showing myself attractive and desirable, I can prove to the police that the idea of my husband even looking at another woman is silly and baseless." But if you'd asked her, she probably would have snapped, "Do you think I'd show myself to a houseful of strangers in my work dress?" And that would also be true. Anna was like that.

A policeman stopped her at the back door of the Taggarts' house. "Sorry, ma'am, but you can't come in now."

"My husband's in there. Ask Detective Morrison if I can come in. I live right next door. I'm Mrs. Sprague."

"Well," he was doubtful, "I'll see."

He went inside, and when he returned Joe Morrison was with him. There was something in Joe's eyes that Anna recognized as his professional look. As a nurse, she had seen that same hard alertness in the eyes of surgeons in the operating room.

He said, "I was just coming over to see you, Anna."

She looked at him. "Is Dave in trouble?"

"What makes you think that?" swiftly, probingly. "But wait. Sit down."

He pulled out a chair from the kitchen table for her. Her eyes swept the kitchen in a housewife's automatic appraisal. There were dirty dishes in the sink, a used coffee cup on the table; the floor linoleum was soiled, except in front of the stove, and there the pattern leaped out, startlingly clean; the oven door was open and a chair stood before it. Mrs. Taggart had probably lit the oven to take the chill off the room. The house was cold enough, Lord knew. Anna shivered and drew her coat more closely around her. Joe looked at her and took a breath.

"Dave's in a mess," he said abruptly. "He came in here about nine and stayed fifteen-twenty minutes. I know. I saw him. Ben Taggart went out about eight. I heard him call goodbye to his wife. When Dave came out he gave me a hand getting my car started, and kinda let drop that Mrs. Taggart wasn't home. I didn't see her go out, so I think it's a little funny, so in we go. We find her in the bathtub with half her head knocked off, and the house cold as an iceberg."

"But what has that to do with Dave, Joe?"

He shook his head and looked pityingly at her. "The medical examiner put the time of murder at *nine*, a little this way or that, allowing for the cold. Nobody but Dave went in after Ben left. Nobody but Dave and Mrs. Taggart was in the house at nine. You see, Anna?" His manner was slightly apologetic.

Anna's chin was up. Her heart lunged at her throat, but her face was composed, and her voice was quiet. "Dave didn't do it, Joe."

"God Almighty, Anna, I put it up to Dave.

I said, was there anybody else in the house, Dave? No, he said, he didn't hear anyone. Yet at the very minute he's there, the woman on the second floor is getting her brains beat out! Does it stand to reason, Anna? Does it?"

"Yes. It does. I know Dave. He didn't kill her."

Morrison held out his hand to her, palm upward. "Let's be sensible, Anna. Dave's a nice, easy-going guy, likeable but—" He turned his hand over and slapped it on the table, "Do you know what Ben Taggart and his wife were scrapping about last night? Dave! According to Ben, Dave's been hanging around here altogether too much and—"

"Dave's an insurance collector. He has to—"

"He don't have to stay an hour at a time to collect insurance, and sometimes twice a week. Hell, Anna, Dave collects *my* insurance too. Once every two weeks, stays ten-fifteen minutes at the most."

**T**HE DOOR leading to the dining room opened and a policeman looked in. "Those two dames from across the street are here, Joe."

"Be right in." Anna and Morrison both stood. He put his hand on her arm. "Look, Anna, we picked up Ben Taggart, and he's got ten witnesses to prove that he was in his office at eight-thirty and stayed right there at his desk until we picked him up. Where does that leave Dave? Put it up to him, Anna. If he fights it, it'll be first degree murder and he'll burn. If he confesses, says he did it in a fit of anger, she was going to squeal to you or something, maybe they'll make it second degree." He patted her arm. "By the way, don't let on I been talking to you like this. They'd crucify me at headquarters."

Anna's back was stiff and if his plea had touched her, she didn't show it. Her face was a little paler and she kept her hands clamped at her waist to conceal their trembling, but her voice was stony and unshaken. "I'd like to go in with you, Joe. If those two women have anything to say against Dave, I want to hear it."

"God, Anna—" He rubbed his hand across the side of his face. "Oh, hell, I've gone this far, might as well go the rest of the way. Come along."

There was no sound in the living room except the beat of their heels on the floor. Dave was sitting on the sofa fumbling with a cigarette, his hair mussed, his face acutely unhappy and a look of complete bafflement in his brown eyes. Opposite him sat Ben Taggart, tense, hate-filled, glaring.

Dave looked eagerly at Anna, but she merely gave him a brief, cold glance and looked

down the room at the two tall, rawboned women standing there. They were the Lane sisters, old maids, the magpies of the neighborhood. They lived diagonally across the street. They flushed under Anna's hot, cutting eyes and looked hurriedly at Joe Morrison.

Morrison said shortly, "Mr. Taggart says you told him something about his wife. What was it?"

They bobbed their heads in unison and one said in a deep, harsh voice, "We warned him. We told him about the goings-on between her and that—" she jabbed a bony finger at Dave—"that young feller."

"What were these goings-on?" Morrison pressed her.

The woman leaned toward him and hissed with a kind of malicious triumph, "Came once or twice a week, he did. Stayed an hour or more each time. Used to watch him, we did."

"Yeah, sure. But what were the goings-on?"

"Why," she looked puzzled, "I just told you. He used to come—"

"I get that. But what *were* the goings-on you talked about?"

"Humph! If them's not goings-on, young feller, I'd like to know what is. Visiting a married woman!" Both nodded their heads with an air of aggrievement, as if their evidence weren't being treated with the respect to which it was entitled.

Morrison turned his back on them and spoke directly to Dave. His voice was mild. "That a fact, Dave? What they said?"

Dave looked at him with despair, as if the cumulative effect were too much for him, beyond his understanding. He made a small, bewildered gesture with his hands.

"I guess so," he mumbled. "I used to drop in now and then, and we'd kind of just talk. Nothing in particular—the garden, fishing, kids. Nothing in particular."

"Is that all, Dave?"

"Sometimes we'd talk about dogs. We both liked dogs. Always wanted to get one myself. . . ."

"That's not what I mean." Morrison looked up at the ceiling and back at Dave. "You still say you didn't . . . ?"

Dave's voice was patient. "I told you all I know, Joe."

Morrison threw up his hands and turned to the cop. "Bring him along. Let's go."

Anna said sharply, "He didn't do it, Joe, and I'm getting the best lawyer in the city if I have to mortgage the house to—"

Morrison's face burned. "I don't think you'll have to do that, Anna. See Con Welsh. Say I sent you. He'll treat you fair."

The big cop reached down, took Dave's arm and pulled him to his feet. "Let's go," he said gruffly.

CONRAD WELSH was a bright-eyed man with a pointed face and restless hands. He put them in his lap when he caught Anna watching their convolutions. "I saw your husband," he said.

Anna said, "Yes?"

"I want to tell you, Mrs. Sprague. I'm not going to take your savings or your house. I'm not going to take anything. In fact, I'm not even going to take the case. Impossible!"

Anna's eyes narrowed and she asked, "Why?"

"My God, the woman asks why! Why? I'll tell you why. Because, Mrs. Sprague, your husband doesn't need a lawyer. A lawyer would do him no good. What he needs is a witch doctor, a sorcerer, a Houdini! Do you know the case they have against him? So do I. The only other man with a motive is Ben Taggart, and he's got so many witnesses he would go broke trying to pay them—if it was that way. And what does your husband have? He has a kind nature and the statement, 'I didn't do it.' So maybe he didn't, but who believes him? If he would admit the murder, maybe the prosecutor would take second degree murder. But otherwise. . . ." His agile, expressive hands made a gesture of futility.

Anna rose from her chair and said calmly, "My husband is not going to admit a murder he didn't commit. I am not the wife of a murderer. I'll get another lawyer."

"Certainly, certainly. No hard feelings? Understand my position. His conviction is certain. The money I don't care about. But my reputation. It would be silly."

Anna said expressionlessly, "Good-bye Mr. Welsh," and walked out of the office.

Welsh watched her go—and shivered. "What a woman," he muttered, "What a woman!"

But it was not only Welsh, Anna discovered, who was jealous of his reputation. Other lawyers also were curiously reluctant to taking a day in court with certain conviction staring their client in the face. Or—"I'll take the case if you insist, Mrs. Sprague, but I can't hold out a vestige of hope for your husband. Under the circumstances, I think it would be wiser to take a lawyer with more faith in the case."

It wasn't until Anna got down to S. Ferenc, Attorney—and Ferenc was pretty far down—that she found one not only willing, but eager to help, for Ferenc was behind in his rent. But after one look into Anna's level, flinty eyes, his eagerness evaporated, replaced by caution.

"Now mind you, no promises, Mrs. Sprague," he told her after seeing Dave, "I will do my best. I will build my case on your husband's character. Such a beautiful, lovable, childlike character! We will hammer at

the state's case. Because what do they have? Two sour old maids and a husband who fought with his wife. We will show your husband as a family-loving, home-loving—"

Anna said drily, "I'm all the family there is. You'd better stick to his childlike character. You'll both be better off."

Ferenc looked at the carved composure of her face and said hastily, "Just as you say, Mrs. Sprague." He wasn't as sensitive as Welsh. He didn't shiver.

And Dave? Dave was Dave—friendly, blundering, good-natured. A night's sleep—even in jail—blunted the shock of his arrest, and when Anna went to see him, he greeted her with a grin.

"Aw," he said, "it's just one of those mistakes. The police are human like the rest of us. But they don't execute innocent men in the good old United States. Hi, Harry." He flipped his hand at a passing turnkey, and the turnkey waved back. Everybody liked Dave Sprague.

But that was all Anna had to fight with. She faced him bleakly through the wire mesh, and something she had kept dammed in the stony pit of her heart momentarily flooded to her lips. "You fool!" she cried. "You fool!" Her eyes blazed.

The grin disappeared from Dave's face as if he had swallowed it, and he stammered in disbelief, "What, Anna? What did you say, Anna?"

But she had caught and thrust back the rebellious emotion. She stood. "Nothing, Dave. Nothing. I have to go now."

The news photographers were waiting for her on the steps outside, and she met them with her head high—not defiantly, but with her iron, enforced calm. And when the reporters roiled around her she said, "I am *not* the wife of a murderer!" That was all—but they made much of it.

#### WIFE LOYAL TO SPRAGUE

NEWARK: Grim-faced, chic, Mrs. Anna Sprague today asserted her belief in the innocence of her husband, David Sprague, accused of the murder of. . . .

Anna's smile was a one-sided shallow line that dug into her right cheek. She threw the crumpled newspaper into the waste can.

Grim-faced and chic, Anna continued to march through the pictures, the publicity—and through the trial. She was gaunter now, hollow-cheeked, but her head was still up. And it was still up after the verdict. The jury had deliberated a scant hour.

SPRAGUE GUILTY!  
Wife's Loyalty Unshaken  
by Verdict

DAVE FACED Anna haggardly through the mesh. The trial had put fear into him. Though well-intentioned, Ferenc had bungled it putting him on the stand, for Dave had had no weapons with which to meet the savage cross-examination of the prosecutor. He had made a poor witness for himself—unhappy, stammering, seeming guilty.

He said in a dull voice, "Has Ferenc made the appeal?"

"Not yet."

"There's no new evidence. You need new evidence, Anna."

"You didn't do it, Dave, so don't worry." She touched one of his fingers that protruded slightly through the mesh. "I'd like to go over it with you again, Dave."

He shook his head. "Go home, Anna," he said gently. "You've done more than could be expected of you. Go home. You need the rest."

"Rest? Rest, Dave?" A smile tortured her ravaged face. "Rest, when I'd crawl over an acre of broken glass to get you out of this horrible place? Rest? The kind of rest you're talking about, Dave, would be torment. Let's go over it again. Please?"

He wasn't a sensitive man, Dave Sprague, and her plea touched him more deeply than he knew. He said, "All right, Anna. Right from the beginning. I went into the house and called, but—"

"First you stopped to talk to Joe Morrison."

"Yes, Anna." Anyone but Anna would have seen he had no faith in this, that all that carried him forward was her force, her drive. "He said twelve below was almost as cold as his wife's feet. Then I—"

"You tripped on the porch."

"That's right. I slipped on the ice."

"Ice? How would ice get on the porch?"

"Maybe the roof leaked."

"Roofs don't leak at twelve below. And it was a new roof."

"Maybe somebody spilled something. I don't know. So then I—"

"Wait, Dave! Tell me, was it cold inside the house?"

"Cold?" he hesitated. "I took my overcoat off, so it couldn't have been cold. No it wasn't cold."

"And how long after that did the doctor examine the body?" she was beginning to tremble, but she had an eager strength that held her.

"Oh . . . an hour and a half. I helped Joe with his car—"

Anna's eyes were bright. She leaned suddenly forward and kissed the tip of the finger that stuck through the mesh. "Thanks, Dave," she whispered. "Thanks!"

"But, Anna?"

"Never mind, Dave. It'll be all right, now."

"But Ferenc went all through that in the trial. . . ."

"But Ferenc didn't know, darling. He didn't know. I have to go now, Dave, but remember, it's all right now!" She stood abruptly and walked toward the door.

He called, "Anna, Anna!" But she merely turned and waved her hand.

It required all the steel in her to face the reporters when she came out, for they were waiting to hear what she had to say about the impending appeal. She repeated herself but her voice had a new ring, "My husband is innocent!" She hurried through them and darted into her car.

Waiting for darkness in the kitchen, drinking black coffee, was the worst, waiting for the clock to toil sluggishly through the minutes.

But even there in the kitchen, with no one else to see, she fought down the trembling of her hands, holding tightly to the table edge when the tremors came.

At dark, she crept out of the kitchen door, like a fox slipping from its lair in the night for hunting. She carried a tiny flashlight, a dull silver knife and one of Dave's large white handkerchiefs.

If the Taggarts' back porch had been locked, she would have broken the glass, but the door was open. She went down to her knees on the floor. She wrapped the handkerchief around the dull blade of the knife, and holding the flashlight close to the floor, she carefully drew the knife down the crack between two of the boards. She wrapped a different portion of the handkerchief around the knife and ran it down another crack.

She hurried home without looking at the marks until she was under the strong light in her own kitchen. Her mastery of herself had slipped so far that she was not able to hold the handkerchief steady enough to look at it. She groaned, "Dear God. . . ." and her knuckles showed white at their apex.

She spread the handkerchief flat on the kitchen table and weighted it with knives. She bent over it and looked until her eyes throbbed from looking. There was the gray and black of plain dirt—and a faint, a very faint touch of brown. Perhaps not brown at all. Imagination could play a trick like that, or hope, or a prayer. But yes, it *was* brown, but was it blood? And if blood, was there enough for a conclusive analysis?

Thoughts like these had centrifugal force when set whirling inside one's head. Anna held her hands to her temples, closed her eyes and rocked from side to side.

Something seemed to whisper in her ear, "Let yourself go, Anna. Let go. Let go!" And perhaps it would have been better, clean-

er, if washed out with tears—but there were no tears.

**B**EN TAGGART came home promptly at seven. Sitting in the dark of her kitchen, Anna saw his living room light go on, then upstairs his bedroom light.

She went to the phone and called Joe Morrison. "Joe, this is Anna Sprague. I want you to come over right away."

She didn't wait for his knock. She had the door open for him when he came, and she took him into the living room and put him in the easy chair at the end farthest from the door.

"Now, Joe, you know I'm a graduate nurse, don't you?"

He rumbled his untidy hair. "Seems like Dave mentioned it. Yeah."

"So I know what I'm talking about. I know, for instance, that the temperature of the room has to be taken into consideration when a doctor is examining a corpse and is trying to set the time of death."

"But, so what, Anna? You can't get around that."

"I'll show you."

She went out into the hall and sat at the phone. She picked it up and muffled the mouthpiece with a dish towel she had put there for that purpose. She took a long breath, then called Ben Taggart.

"Mr. Taggart?" she whispered. "This is a friend. The police don't think your wife was murdered where she was found. They want to clear Sprague and incriminate you. I wanted to warn you." She hung up before his answer could go beyond a startled gasp.

She strode back into the living room. Her eyes were bright—too bright, too wide. And when she spoke, the words rushed out as if pursued by the devil that was in her.

"Joe," she cried, "Ben Taggart killed his wife that morning before he went to work. He killed her on the back porch. Then he put her body on the chair in front of the lighted oven, and after that went into the cellar and got the furnace blazing, sending heat into the house. They had a hot air system and it comes up fast. Then he put her body in the bathtub when it was warm enough there. At eight o'clock, just before leaving, he went back into the cellar and shut off the heat, so the house would cool slowly. When you treat a dead body that way, you can fool any doctor in the country. No one told the doctor the room had been warm only an hour before, so he naturally thought it had been cold all along. But I know it had been warm. When Dave went in, he said he took off his overcoat because the kitchen was warm, but when I walked in nearly two hours later, it was freezing cold.

Taggart fooled you, Joe, he fooled you!

"But that's not evidence, so here it is. She was in the bathtub so you could account for the lack of blood by thinking it went down the drain. But she had bled on the porch and in the kitchen. He scrubbed both places. Remember how clean it was in front of the stove, Joe? And Dave slipped on ice on the porch. Why? It was so cold, Joe, that when Taggart scrubbed, it left a thin skin of ice. And what was he scrubbing, Joe? Blood!"

His face had sharpened, but he said cautiously, "That's not proof, Anna."

"Wait. If that happened, it would clear Dave. Dave was only in there fifteen minutes. You said so yourself. He wouldn't have time for all that. Killing her downstairs, taking her upstairs, scrubbing the back porch—and scrubbing the blood off himself. You can't carry anyone with a head wound without getting blood and lots of it on yourself. There was no blood on Dave.

"And here's the proof. No matter how hard Ben Taggart scrubbed that back porch, he'd never be able to get the blood out from between the cracks in the floor unless he took the floor apart. Go over there, Joe, and look in the cracks between the boards. There's blood there!"

Morrison lunged to his feet. "If you're right . . ." he gasped.

"I'm right. Come!"

They went into the kitchen and out into the darkness of the backyard. A light gleamed in the Taggart kitchen. Anna tiptoed to the side window of the porch and peered in. She beckoned him closer.

There on his knees was Ben Taggart, scrubbing at the floor, as if his life depended on it, scrubbing, scrubbing. . . .

As Morrison opened the door, he looked up at the grim face above him. He held out his clawed hands before him and screamed.

\* \* \*

For the first time in months, Dave Sprague sat in his own living room, in his own chair. Before him on the coffee table stood a tall glass of iced coffee and a plate of dainty cupcakes with mocha icing that Anna had made especially for his home-coming, because Dave was such a kid about mocha icing. He liked to stand around in the kitchen and lick the spoon when the icing was made.

Impulsively, Anna put her hand on his cheek and kissed the tip of his chin. He reached for a cupcake and munched it contentedly. She smiled quietly, sat on the arm of his chair and rested her cheek against his head. After the nightmare she had been through, it was good to feel the closeness of Dave—good-natured, easy-going, believing ill of no one. . . .

# GOOD MORNING, KILLER!

## CHAPTER ONE

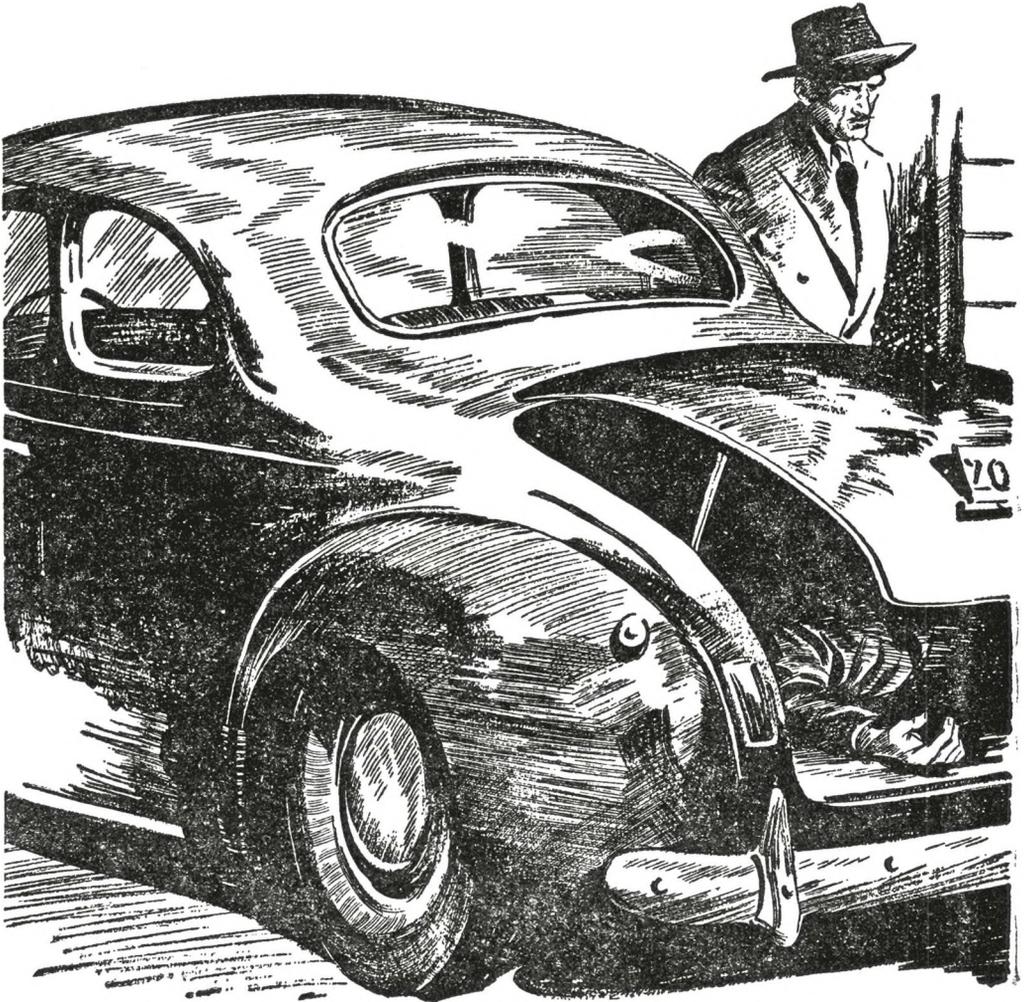
*If a Body Meets a Body . . .*

**I**F YOU'LL pardon the unladylike expression, Arthur Beeker was the damndest guy I've ever met for hanging crepe. He could make a meadowlark sound like a mourning dove.

I suppose, Art being what he was, thinking in terms of shrouds was the trademark of his profession. Even his temperament had that

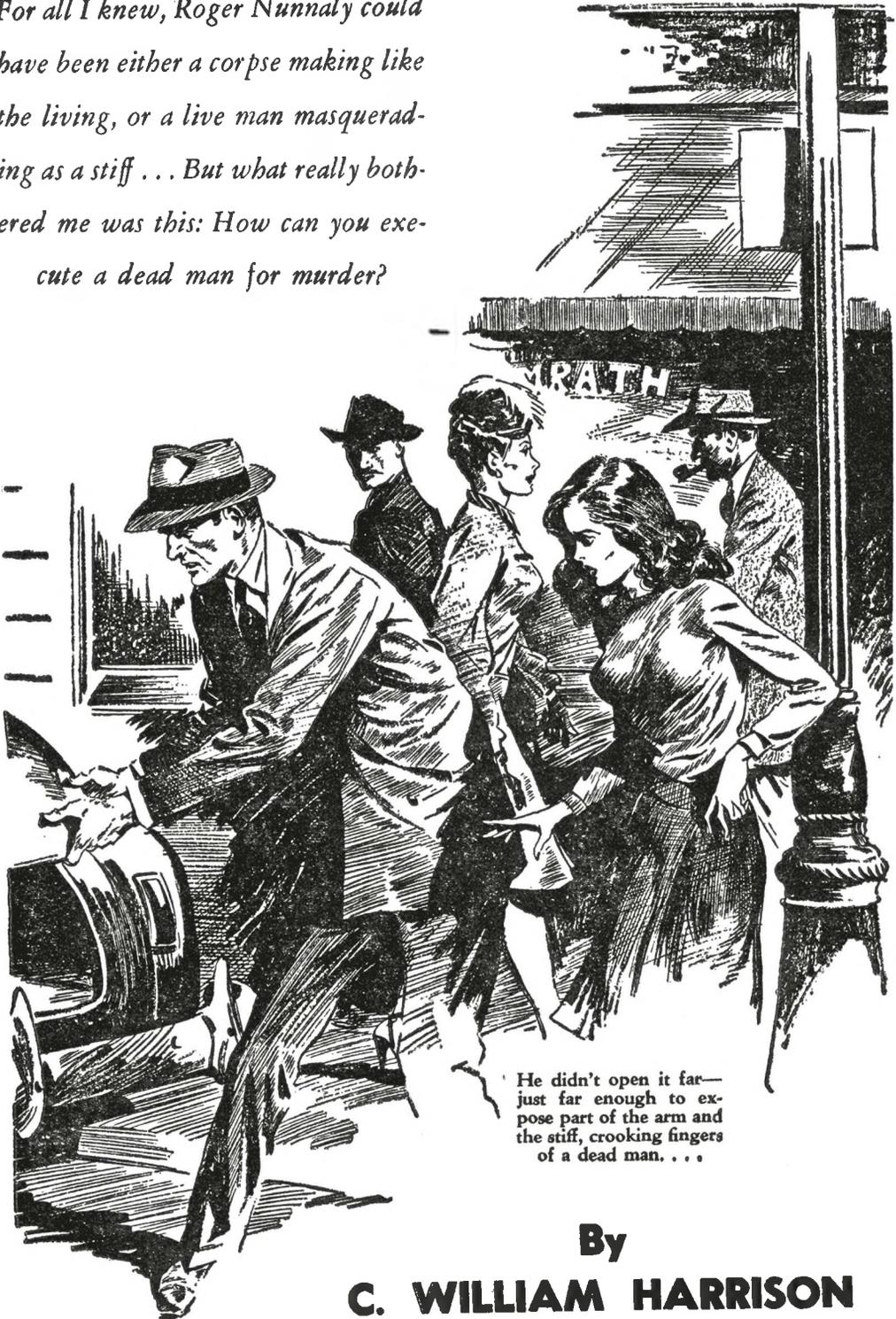
certain dark quality which can be found in a well-filled grave. He had a funereal voice, and could talk a 4-H Club health winner into thinking he was about to do business with a mortician. He was Indianapolis' prize purveyor of peace and prosperity, *post mortem*. A life insurance salesman, in other words.

Art Beeker had a propensity for black serge



*Action-Packed Murder-Mystery Novel*

*For all I knew, Roger Nunnally could have been either a corpse making like the living, or a live man masquerading as a stiff . . . But what really bothered me was this: How can you execute a dead man for murder?*



He didn't open it far—just far enough to expose part of the arm and the stiff, crooking fingers of a dead man. . . .

**By**  
**C. WILLIAM HARRISON**

suits and anxious-about-thee expressions. He had long features and small sad eyes. He was tall as a rail and thin as an author campaigning for a raise from his publisher.

But he was my man. He charged me only twenty-five dollars to make him my temporary husband. Art was factual proof that the woman always pays, although his fee could hardly be called a compliment to my sex appeal. But then, ours was strictly a wedding of convenience, a marriage that I could put on and take off at will like an old coat. As long as I had the required twenty-five bucks, of course.

Art Becker could recite statistical evidence as to the uncertainty of life, but it was Roger Nunnaly who showed me how easy it is to die and how difficult it sometimes is to stay dead.

This Nunnaly affair began with what had promised to be just another idle day in the life of Thelma Mathews. That's me—Thelma Mathews—single, sweated and svelte. I was at my desk, and across the room the frosted window of the office door proclaimed in black letters to a disinterested world that this was the office of the Shadow Arts Investigation Agency. Nobody seemed to care; they stayed away in droves.

I had inherited the business from my father but none of his ability to stir up business. I had leafed through the latest issue of *Fashion*, and picked out a luscious gabardine number that I could never afford to buy. When I wore myself out with the wish book, I swiveled my chair to the window overlooking the street. Art Becker was seated across the office behind me, reading an insurance pamphlet and no doubt wondering how many of the people due to die in the next minute carried adequate insurance. I ignored him.

It was a particularly beautiful day for Indianapolis, warm and breezy; the sun was even shining. I opened the window and borrowed a lungful of air from the unappreciative citizens passing beneath my window.

I watched a coupe swing out of the traffic and pull in at the curb just below my window. The coupe wasn't quite as long as a boxcar and it wouldn't any more than temporarily blind you with all its chrome. Which put it in the less than three grand class. But it was nice enough to drive to the beauty parlor in if you didn't want more than a year's income wrapped up in wheels. Me, walk.

The man who stepped out had about all any woman could dream of in the way of looks and lucre. He was about *so* tall and his shoulders had not been manufactured by a tailor. He wore a dark mustache and obviously had an intriguing reputation. He looked the type. He closed the car door, turned and ran his eyes across the street-level windows. He didn't seem to see what he wanted and he lifted

his glance, taking in the upper stories.

He saw me leaning across the sill, gawking like a campfire girl. He smiled, but there was a definite impact to his bold gaze that gave me the queer cold feeling of standing there in view of the street minus my sweater. He had the kind of eyes that do that to a woman and I didn't like it. I turned away quickly.

But the man with the boudoir eyes came into my office. He came to my desk, not noticing Art Becker seated in the far corner of the room. He removed his hat and exposed gray-shot waves. He smiled.

"I would like to talk to T. Mathews, if you please." He had a deep, soothing voice, like Don Ameche.

I told him I was T. Mathews. He seemed pleasantly surprised.

"But coming into a detective agency like this, I naturally assumed T. Mathews would be a man."

"Naturally," I agreed calmly. "The 'T' once stood for Thomas, but after my father died and I took over his business. I let the 'T' stand. It means Thelma now, and I'm not male."

He showed perfect white teeth, the kind of smile that would turn most women's heart over. But I was a career gal and had my heart in chains.

His glance roved again, and when it came back to my face I asked coolly, "Is there something I can do for you, Mr.—"

"Roger Nunnaly."

Ah, I had known he would have a reputation. Roger Nunnaly, according to the newspapers, was a man who played when most playboys were only trying. He was a wolf but not in cheap clothing.

"Something I can do for you, Mr. Nunnaly?"

"Yes, you can have dinner with me while we talk business."

"It's too early for dinner."

"Cocktails then?"

"I'm afraid my husband would object, Mr. Nunnaly."

"Oh." Then he smiled disarmingly. "But you're a business woman. I'm sure your husband wouldn't object to you having cocktails with a client. We'll discuss business, of course."

"Of course."

"And your husband would never know."

"But he *would* know, Mr. Nunnaly. You see, he's sitting just across the office."

The situation must not have been a new one for Roger Nunnaly because he was not the least embarrassed. He looked across the room at Art Becker, and grinned. The twenty-five dollar question was in Art's glance at me. I nodded and closed the deal. So far as the wolf brotherhood was concerned I had become

in that silent exchange of glances Mrs. Arthur Beeker. Art was good protection when clients like Nunnaly got ideas, even if he did put a price on his name.

Art Beeker said in his weary tone, "In business she's Miss Mathews, but in the sanctity of our home she's Mrs. Arthur Beeker. Sorry she can't accept your invite, Mr. Nunnaly."

Nunnaly shrugged. He was frowning. "Arthur Beeker. . . . I seem to have heard that name before."

"You bought a twenty-thousand-dollar life insurance policy from me a month ago," Beeker advised. "You didn't let me see you personally, but I left the papers in your office and you filled them out. I never did get a chance to think you for your business."

Nunnaly let that pass. He swung back to me and with calm frankness put his business on the line.

"I'm willing to pay any reasonable price for your services, Miss Mathews, providing you guarantee results. I'm saying this now because I realize what I want from your agency is somewhat unusual."

Unusual? Roger Nunnaly was a master of understatement.

He planted both hands flat on my desk top, leaned forward on stiffened arms. It was a simple gesture that somehow took the playboy out of him and changed him to a man grim and driven by desperation.

"I want," he said quietly, "for you to find out exactly who and what I really am."

**I** DON'T know what Art Beeker did that minute, but I just stared at the man. It was all I could do. The obvious change in him was a shock in itself. He had come into my office looking like his reputation, a playboy, but now all that had cracked like thin veneer and I could see him as he really was, a man goaded by anxiety and something close to fear.

I heard myself say, "Don't you know who you are?"

"I'm Roger Nunnaly." He pulled a chair close to the desk and sat down heavily. The smile he gave me was faintly bitter. "At least I think I am."

Art put in drily, "What do you mean, you think you're Roger Nunnaly? Don't you know?"

However strong the anxiety in Nunnaly, he had the self-discipline to keep it out of his voice. He swung his glance to Art Beeker.

"Do you know who you are?"

"Of course I do."

"But how do you know?"

Art snapped back, "Ever since I was a little shaver so tall I can remember being myself. I remember from then until now, and I never

was anyone but Arthur Lawton Beeker."

Nunnaly's smile held a weary sort of patience.

"That's it; you remember your past clearly. I don't. I think I remember everything, but it's like looking through a diffusing screen. There's nothing clear. I don't know whether I actually remember the details of my past or whether it's all just an illusion created in my mind when the doctor told me all about myself."

I've read all the books in dad's library of criminal investigation, but at best I'm just a fumbling female in this business. Which is another reason I like to have Art Beeker around. He can build facts into a web of evidence, but all I'm good at is asking questions.

"Doctor?"

"Doctor Harry Jordan."

"Who's Doctor Jordan?"

"The head of the Cole Memorial Hospital. He helped me during my—ah, illness."

I wondered about the nature of his illness, and was trying to frame a tactful question when Art Beeker proved that in the detective business the shortest distance between two points is not always found in subtlety.

He said dourly, "We've got no time for playing questions and answer, Nunnaly. Suppose you just start at the beginning, and tell us what's biting you."

It didn't sound to me like the proper way to handle a client. My theory has always been that business is a lot like a pair of hips—wave them too much and you lose the effect; be too obvious with a client and you scare him off. I expected Roger Nunnaly to get up and walk out at Art Beeker's blunt approach, but he didn't. He would have started talking if the telephone hadn't rung.

I picked up the handset, but I didn't get a chance to advertise the Shadow Arts Agency.

A voice said abruptly, "Let me speak to Joe." A man's voice, dry and strangely malevolent in its tonelessness.

"Who?"

"Joe Balner, honey."

"I'm afraid you have the wrong number." I cradled the handset.

Roger Nunnaly wanted to talk, but the phone never gave him the opportunity. It rang again, instantly, and it was the same voice that came grating through the receiver. Harsher this time, almost savage.

"Look, sister, don't try to give me the runaround. I know what number I'm calling. You're a private eye, or call yourself one, and you've been talking to a guy who left the Chrysler coupe in front of your office. Maybe he's Roger Nunnaly to you, but he's Joe Balner to me. I want to talk to him, catch—now!"

I handed the phone to Nunnaly. "I guess

it's for you, Mr. Nunnaly, although he—"

He was frowning slightly as he took the phone. As he listened his frown changed to ruffled irritation. "I've tried to tell you—" But he was cut off short. He suddenly whitened. Then the phone clicked and he handed it to me.

When he spoke his voice was lower than Mr. Pettigrew's pants the day his belt broke.

"He—that man on the phone—said I'm Joe Balner."

I kept my eyes on him. "I know. I heard that much."

Art Beeker was coming slowly across the office. "Are you?"

Nunnaly closed his eyes. He shook his head like a man trying to deny a dream. "I don't know."

Art Beeker spoke savagely, "You claim you're not sure of your past, and now you're not sure whether you're Roger Nunnaly or Joe Balner. What do you know about yourself?"

Nunnaly pressed the tips of his fingers hard against his temples. He didn't answer.

Art said, "Who is Joe Balner, if he's not you?"

"I don't know."

"You ever hear the name before?"

A small muscle was pulling and relaxing high in Nunnaly's left cheek. His eyes were still closed, and his answer to Art Beeker's question couldn't have been any more automatic if Art had put a nickel in a slot machine and pulled a lever; it was as dry and toneless as that.

"Three times in the last two weeks people I met on the street have called me Joe Balner. I don't know why. To the best of my knowledge I'd never seen those people before."

Art Beeker said relentlessly, "Had you ever heard the name Balner before that?"

"I think so."

"Where?"

"I don't know. I've tried to remember, but I can't."

Art laughed cynically. He acted like he was trying to talk me out of a fee. If that was his motive, he was making a good try. His sniping and the inflections of his tone as good as called Roger Nunnaly a liar. But that was Art Beeker for you, tough and artless, but effective.

"What else did that guy on the phone tell you? Or can you remember three minutes ago?"

There was a brief pause. Then Nunnaly opened his eyes and put them on me. He no longer looked like the glamor lad who had haunted the city's bright spots for the last six months. He looked more like a small boy caught with his hand in a cooky jar. Cloudy eyes, haggard with fear and uncertainty.

"He called me a murderer."

Are Beeker's lanky torso hinged forward. "Are you a murderer?"

Nunnaly said hollowly, "He claimed I murdered a man last night. He said I've got the body hidden in the trunk of my car."

We went downstairs to the curb. Art Beeker's mouth was hard as he took Nunnaly's key and unlocked the coupe's trunk. He twisted the handle and pulled upward. Not far, because there were pedestrians passing by, but just far enough to expose part of the arm and the stiff, crooking fingers of a dead man huddled in the cramped space of the luggage compartment. For a moment I thought I was going to scream.

Art Beeker closed the trunk and glared at me. "This is why I like you so much, dear. You meet the nicest people in your business. It was nice being married to you, but from now on we're divorced. I don't like murder."

He touched his hat, and turned stiffly away.

## CHAPTER TWO

### No Place Like Homicide

I CLUTCHED quickly at his arm. "Please, Art, don't leave me now!" I led him to one side, out of Roger Nunnaly's hearing. "Art, what will I do if you leave me now?"

He stared down the thin ridge of his nose at me. "You still worried about Nunnaly, or whatever his name is?"

"Of course."

Beeker said, "You could wave your charms at him like a flag, but he wouldn't see them. You don't need a hired husband on this job, baby. The only thing Nunnaly will make a pass at from now on is a hot seat."

I cried out desperately, "I'm not worried about Nunnaly getting ideas about me. He's my client, and if you leave me now what will I do about that—that dead man in his car?"

Beeker was frigid. "Call the cops." He shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Good-bye now."

I clutched his arm again, pulled him back around. A dozen strides away a thick-shouldered man with a bent nose and the swollen ear of a prize fighter stopped and turned, looking curiously at Art Beeker and me.

I said, "But I can't call the police, Art. Roger Nunnaly is my client and I've got to help him. If I call the police now, they'll pin this murder on him."

"They will anyhow."

"But I don't think he's guilty," I argued.

Beeker said acidly, "You're letting his wavy hair get you. You're putting your heart before the corpse, little one. Don't be a fool. Nunnaly is guilty as all hell and he's just trying to use you for an alibi."

Art was trying to pry my fingers loose from his sleeve, but I wouldn't let go. The man with the tin ear was beginning to frown at Art.

"But that can't be true!" I cried out. "If Nunnaly had known about that body in his car he wouldn't have tried to play wolf when he first came into my office."

I was grasping desperately for logic, but Art Beeker had a way of punching holes in every theory I formed.

"Nunnaly put on his playboy act just to make you think that. He gave you that hog-wash about not being sure who he was just to build up your sympathy. You're supposed to be the detective here, bright eyes. Detect, then. He rigged up that 'who am I?' business in order to be able to cop an insanity plea if things ever got tough enough.

"But what he really wanted was to look so obviously guilty that you and everyone else would naturally think he was framed. That's why he had that guy telephone and call him a murderer, and that's why he hid the body of the man he killed in his own car. Any other murderer with less brains would naturally try to keep as far away from the body as possible."

Art Beeker made it sound good. But what I lacked in male logic I made up in feminine intuition. I couldn't make myself believe that Roger Nunnaly was a murderer. I didn't know why. I just couldn't, that's all.

I changed my plan of attack. I had failed to work on Art Beeker's sense of justice because he was morally certain Roger Nunnaly was guilty. So I swallowed my pride and tried the more personal approach. I moved close to him and fluttered my eyelashes. I'm not the demure type, but I tried.

"Please, Art. Do this for *me*. Maybe when this job is finished, you and I—"

But I didn't even get to first base. Art was as impervious to man-woman stuff when he wanted to be as a marble statue.

He said, "No, thanks, baby. In my book you can't trade murder for soft lights and sweet music. See you some time, maybe."

He yanked my hand from his arm and turned away.

"But, Art—" I cried out.

The man with the tin ear moved in then. He was deliberate in what he did, but thoroughly effective, attracting no attention from passers-by. He intercepted Art Beeker before Art had taken two full strides. He put the flat of one big hand against Art's chest and kept walking.

Art said, "What the hell?"

He tried to side-step away, but the man with the tin ear side-stepped with him. "You're not goin' no place, chum." He crowded Art back against the brick wall of the office build-

ing and held Art pinned there with the weight of his thick shoulder. He looked calmly at me.

"You havin' some trouble with this guy, lady?"

In many ways Art Beeker was the original ninety-seven pound weakling you read about. He had narrow hips that tapered upward to narrow shoulders and he didn't look strong enough to knock a fly off a molasses jar. But he had brains and courage that wouldn't quit. He twisted and jerked, but he couldn't move the man who held him pinned against the office front.

"How about it, lady?"

I manufactured heart-broken anguish and put it in my voice. "He's my husband, mister, and he won't come home. He's a good man, but he never thinks of his wife and children when he gets like this."

The man with the tin ear frowned. "Gets like how?"

I said with a quaver of sorrow, "He drinks. He's a good man until demon rum gets him, and then he comes home at night and beats me. Whiskey is my husband's ruin."

The frown changed to a scowl on Tin Ear's glove-scarred features. "One of them Lost Weekend mugs, huh? I hate drunks, lady. If I ever meet up with that Ray Milland guy I'm going to put a slug right on his kisser." He pivoted his glance to Art Beeker. "If I ever catch you drunk I'm goin' to put a slug on your kisser too, chum," he promised darkly.

Art Beeker strangled an oath. "Damn it, she's not my wife!"

He struggled free and made an angry pass with his fist. But the man with the tin ear was an expert. He swayed to one side and brought up his left hand. To me it looked as if he only tapped his knuckles against Art Beeker's chin. But Art's eyes went glassy and his knees started to buckle. Tin Ear held Art erect and grinned broadly at me.

"I didn't hurt him at all, lady. Just nudged him, that's all."

He walked Art to the curb, and pushed him into the coupe. Roger Nunnaly got in under the wheel and I climbed in beside Art.

I said, "Thank you, sir."

"Don't mention it, lady. Any time you want your husband nudged again, you just call on Punchy Malone."

He walked away, muttering something about the slug he was going to put on Ray Milland's kisser some day.

I had tricked Art Beeker into being publicly seen riding away from my office in a car which—and this was bound to come out before long—contained the body of a murdered man; and I had tricked Art into getting clipped on the chin. He had every right to be thoroughly sore at me, but he didn't take it so bad.

In fact, I think he rather enjoyed it. It flattered his masculine vanity to know I had resorted to feminine trickery in order to hold him. Which was what I had hoped for. If sex appeal won't hold a man, play demure and innocently helpless. If that fails, bare your claws and fight with every trick you know. Men like that, girls. It puts fire in their eyes and grows hair on their chests.

**I**N LOOKS Art Beeker was far from being the season's best catch. His nose was large enough to have been born first, with the rest of him growing on behind it—what there was to the rest of him. You can't pack a hundred and fifty pounds on a six-foot-three-inch frame and call it obesity. But he had a brain that gathered no fungus, and brains were what my detective business needed. Even if I had to beg, borrow and steal them.

We drove, for lack of any other place to go, to Roger Nunnaly's home on the north side of town. It was a modest little shack, containing about ten rooms, with a stone front and picture windows and a slate roof. It was a modified ranch style and didn't cover more than half an acre of ground. In Indiana's capricious winters it probably cost a small fortune to heat those rambling rooms.

We followed a curving, crushed-stone driveway and rolled into the garage. We climbed out of the coupe and Art Beeker pulled down the overhead door.

"Now we'll have a look at your friend," he said.

He opened the luggage compartment. There was plenty of light inside the garage to see all there was to see. Rigor mortis had locked the dead man's body in a huddled, uncomfortable position. He was medium tall and medium heavy. He had lean features and a mustache that was like a slender shadow above his thin, straight mouth. He was wearing a dark blue suit and red tie that should have made even a dead man blush. The back of his head had been caved in by a blow from some heavy instrument.

Art Beeker asked, "Do you know him?"

Roger Nunnaly was white around the mouth. "I saw him on the street about a week ago. He stopped me and said he knew I was Joe Balner and I was crazy if I thought I could get away with a double-cross. I don't know what he was talking about. I'd never seen him before, to the best of my knowledge."

There was Roger Nunnaly's uncertainty of his past coming out again. I was at the point of asking him about it when Art Beeker spoke.

"I'll tell you who he is." A dry, flat voice. "He's Tony Renalt. That mean anything to you?"

Roger Nunnaly shook his head.

"Renalt had his hand in a dozen shady deals

around this town. He used to operate with a partner named—" Art's tone abruptly sharpened. "Now I remember!"

I looked at him, but Art's small prying eyes were on Roger Nunnaly.

He said grimly, "I thought all along that name Joe Balner was familiar, and talking about Renalt brought it back to me. Balner was Tony Renalt's partner in some blackmail deals around here a few years ago. The cops never could get enough on them for a conviction. That help you remember anything, Nunnaly?"

A muscle was twitching the corner of Roger Nunnaly's right eye. "No." He was like a man desperately trying to capture something and desperately afraid that he would capture it.

Art Beeker said, "Joe Balner was killed—at least that's what the newspapers said—about three years ago. Maybe the newspapers will have a retraction to print now. Maybe that wasn't Joe Balner killed in that explosion. Maybe it was Roger Nunnaly!"

A fine beading of sweat was breaking out on Nunnaly's upper lip. But was this man Roger Nunnaly? Art Beeker was suggesting he wasn't. And if he wasn't Nunnaly, who was he? The man named Joe Balner? Or someone else? I was beginning to feel that crime was definitely no career for a lady.

At that moment I didn't even feel like a lady. So when Nunnaly failed to speak, I blurted out, "What the hell are you talking about, Art?"

Beeker gave me a reproving glance. "Such language!"

"But Art, if Roger Nunnaly is dead, then he can't be alive. If Joe Balner wasn't killed by that explosion, then he must be still living."

"Brilliant, my dear."

"Oh, don't be so—so damn superior, Art Beeker. This is murder, and I want to know the answer."

Roger Nunnaly, or whoever he was, spoke then.

"What you suggest, Mr. Beeker, seems to confirm what Dr. Jordan hinted at vaguely while I was under his care. Dr. Jordan told me everything I know about myself. He thought that by telling me a few details he might help me fill in the blank pages of my past."

Art Beeker murmured, "Amnesia?"

Nunnaly nodded. "This is what Dr. Jordan told me: He said my name is Roger Nunnaly, that I'm a chemist. He told me I worked in a chemical plant that did war work for the government. About three years ago there was an explosion at the plant. I was found beside the body of a dead man. The skin on our hands was too badly burned for the police to take fingerprints. The dead man and

I could not be identified by what was left of our faces. The police decided I was Roger Nunnaly and the dead man was Joe Balner by what they found in our pockets."

"Then you're not certain in your own mind that you're Roger Nunnaly?"

"No."

"Then it is possible," Art Beeker said softly, "that you are really Joe Balner."

My client's answer was hardly audible. "Yes."

I BROKE in impatiently. "I don't see how there's any doubt who was who. The police made identification from what they found in the pockets of those two men, didn't they?"

Art Beeker said grimly, "Joe Balner was a crook, so obviously his reason for being in the chemical plant that night was crooked. He and Tony Renalt weren't beyond stealing war secrets to sell to enemy agents, but they were smart enough to want to cover up. What better way was there than for Balner to change clothes with Nunnaly, knowing that what was left of Nunnaly after the explosion would be identified as himself."

"But *both* Balner and Nunnaly were caught by that explosion," I argued.

"The evidence showed that Nunnaly had jumped Balner, and that the fight kept Balner from escaping the explosion." Beeker looked at my client, and gestured with his thumb toward the dead man in the coupe's trunk. "What made Tony Renalt think you were really Joe Balner?"

"He claimed he'd had a tip from someone. He said I was Balner and that the plastic surgeons had rebuilt my face so that I looked like Roger Nunnaly."

"Do you think that is possible?"

"Yes." My client's eyes were haggard, "Dr. Jordan told me the surgeons had worked from photographs of Nunnaly in rebuilding my features. But they might have been remaking Joe Balner into Roger Nunnaly. That's why I came to the Shadow Agency today. Ever since I got out of the hospital I've visited all the bright spots in the city, doing everything possible to be seen. I built up a playboy reputation in order to be photographed and written up in the newspapers. I thought someone would see my picture or read about me, and help prove who I really am. All that got me nothing, so I decided to hire detectives."

Art Beeker was ruthless in what he said. "You might have done that to build up an alibi for this murder."

"How do you figure that?"

"The old insanity plea," Art bit back, "with a shot of amnesia tossed in for good measure. You don't know who you are, you claim, and you don't know who murdered Tony Renalt here."

My client was white around the mouth. "It's the truth. I don't know who killed him."

"Then how did his body get in your car?"

"I don't know that."

"Guessing from what little I know about rigor mortis, it looks like Renalt was killed within an hour either way of last midnight. Where were you at that time?"

"At the Club Royale until midnight. Then I came directly home."

"Alone?"

"Yes. My wife didn't feel like going out last night. She stayed at home."

"Was Tony Renalt waiting here for you when you came in last night?"

"No. At least I didn't see him, if he was. I unlocked the door, and let myself in. I think I picked up the poker before I tried to turn on the lights."

I felt Art Beeker's small black eyes stab at me. I felt my stomach muscles tighten.

Art asked, "What poker?"

"The fireplace poker. It must have fallen out of its rack, and I stumbled on it when I stepped inside the door. So I picked up the poker and then tried to switch on the lights."

"What do you mean—tried? Didn't the lights come on?"

"No. Nothing happened when I pushed the wall switch. A fuse was burned out, I suppose?"

"Didn't you check to be sure?"

"I was tired. I planned to replace the fuse this morning." My client made a vague movement with his hand. "I even forgot to do that when I got up this morning."

"What did you do?" Art asked in his sharp, persistent voice.

"I dressed and had breakfast. I looked through the classified section of the telephone book and chose the Shadow Arts detective agency. I spent the rest of the morning trying to decide whether to go through with my plan to hire a private detective. After all, it seemed crazy to hire someone to find out who I am."

"It sounds crazy all right," Art Beeker said drily.

I didn't say what I thought.

My client went on, "After lunch I made up my mind to go through with it. I drove to Broadripple and stopped in a garage for a change of oil. Then I drove directly to your office."

"Not *my* office." Art Beeker was irritable. "You couldn't hire me to be a detective."

"Your wife's office, then."

A door opened behind us, and a woman's voice said, "Is that you, Roger?"

The three of us turned as if we had been jerked by strings. Mrs. Nunnaly was a tall woman with hair the color of ripe wheat. She was wearing slacks and had all the equipment

necessary to flatter her fawn-colored sweater. She was as pretty as black chiffon, but not as transparent. A man stood in the doorway behind her, but in Mrs. Nunnaly's presence Van Johnson himself would have remained a nonentity. Her smile could have sold toothpaste to the toothless.

"Darling, I thought I heard you drive in. Dr. Jordan and I—"

She saw what was in the coupe's luggage trunk then. Dr. Jordan caught her as she fell.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Accent the Negative

**S**HOCK had loosened Corla Nunnaly's muscles and she had sagged at the sight of the dead body, but she hadn't fainted. She didn't look like the type who could faint easily, even at the sight of murder. She straightened quickly and pushed away from Doctor Jordan as if ashamed by her momentary display of weakness. Her face was paper white.

"Is—is that—"

I nodded mutely.

"A man," Art Beeker put his disagreeable voice in. "Tony Renalt, if you want a name."

Mrs. Nunnaly kept looking at me. I felt sorry for her. Her husband's coupe with a dead body in it! I knew how it must have been with her—fear and panic running down the spiral staircase of horror.

"Is he—dead?"

I nodded again.

"Only slightly," Art Beeker said. I hated him for the cynical, unfeeling callousness with which he could speak at times like this. I hated him, but I couldn't do without him. He could be hard and cruel, but there was no fungus on his thinking apparatus. Hard as he sometimes was to take, he rounded out a good team: I furnished the agency and he furnished the brains.

"Nothing serious, Mrs. Nunnaly. It seems the back of his head was bashed in and he stopped breathing. That's all."

Corla Nunnaly shuddered. "My God!"

She looked mutely at her husband. Roger Nuannaly's face was the color of cigarette ash. I looked at Dr. Jordan, at the unlighted cigarette clamped between his lips. I thought, if he lights that I'm going to be sick.

But he made no attempt to light it. He said with a physician's insatiable hunger for certainty, "Are you sure?"

Art Beeker had narrow hips tapering up to narrower shoulders. He moved his shoulders. "His heart has stopped beating." He made a sound in his throat. "I checked."

Dr. Jordan said, "Ah."

Corla Nunnaly's eyes were stunned. "But

Roger, how—why is he in—" She couldn't get it out.

"I don't know." Roger Nunnaly opened his hands and closed them tight, like a man trying to grip something solid and catching only air. If he was trying to pretend bewilderment, as Art Beeker believed, he was doing a good job of it. "I don't know how he got in my car, Corla. He—he was just there."

Art Beeker hacked out a dry snort of cynicism. "Sure, Tony Renalt did this just for a joke. He decided to climb into the trunk of your car last night, drop the lid, and then bash in the back of his head. It was all in the spirit of good clean fun."

I said sharply, "Why don't you let him alone, Art?"

He turned an acid glance on me. "All right, dear, suppose you handle this, then. After all, you're the detective here."

Surprise widened Mrs. Nunnaly's fine eyes. "Detective?"

"I operate the Shadow Arts agency." I told her about her husband's visit to my office, about the telephone call to Roger and the subsequent discovery of the body in Nunnaly's coupe.

Mrs. Nunnaly listened with her knuckles pressed hard against her lips. Dr. Jordan weighed each word in analytical silence, his left eyelid drawn down as though puckered for a squint through a microscope.

When I had finished, Corla Nunnaly said eagerly, "Can't you see, there's no reason to suspect Roger! You didn't even know this Tony Renalt man, did you, darling?"

Roger Nunnaly was hesitant. "I don't think so."

Art Beeker grinned meaningly, a cruel grin.

Mrs. Nunnaly went on blindly. "And a murderer wouldn't hide the body of the man he had killed in his own car, then let the body be discovered. A murderer wouldn't deliberately point suspicion at himself. Would be, Harry?"

She turned to Dr. Jordan. The man frowned slightly, opened his hands and looked at them.

"Would he, Doctor?"

Dr. Jordan lifted his glance. He said uncomfortably, "He might."

Roger Nunnaly stiffened.

Jordan shifted his shoulders. "Let's look at this honestly. The brain of a murderer can work in devious ways. He could try to throw so much evidence against himself, make himself look so guilty that everyone would naturally assume he was innocent."

Roger Nunnaly swore harshly. "Damn you, Jordan!"

Mrs. Nunnaly cried out desperately. "But what motive could Roger have for—for this?"

She looked at me, at Art Beeker, at Jordan again. "He didn't even know Tony Renalt."

"He doesn't *think* he knew Renalt," Jordan reminded quietly. "But he's not sure." His speaking turned crisp and decisive. "Let's look at the facts as they are. Roger was injured three years ago in that chemical plant explosion. The man whose body was found near Roger was killed, and when Roger recovered he had no memory of his identity. The fingerprints and features of both men found in the explosion had been so badly damaged that all we could do was assume from the effects found in his—" he pointed to Nunnaly—"pockets that he was the real Roger Nunnaly."

Art Beeker asked, "Was the identity of the other man ever established?"

"Yes. As definitely as possible under the circumstances."

"Who was he?"

"A crook named Joe Balner."

Mrs. Nunnaly said doubtfully, "Well?"

"Can't you see?" Jordan said grimly. "That war plant explosion was undoubtedly caused by Joe Balner. It's quite possible that Balner planned to disappear after that explosion. In other words, it's likely he was working with a gang hired to sabotage the war plant, and wanted to skip out on them. He might have forced Nunnaly to change clothes with him before setting off the blast. In which case the body found would have been identified as Balner, and the authorities would have been looking for Roger Nunnaly, who was dead."

**I** COULD see now how it was adding up and I didn't like it. It made an ugly picture, dark and ruthless in its pattern.

Mrs. Nunnaly said bitterly, "You're intimating your plastic surgery might have rebuilt the features of Joe Balner into those of my husband. Don't you think I know my own husband?"

Jordan's smile was patient. "So far as outward appearances are concerned, yes. But you'll remember mentioning several times to me that Roger seemed different, somehow, since the explosion, that he had lost all those little mannerisms he used to have. If this man you believe is your husband is actually Joe Balner with rebuilt features, it would be impossible for him to have the same mannerisms as Roger Nunnaly. Maybe that is the reason you thought him changed by the explosion."

White-faced, Corla Nunnaly stared at the doctor. I didn't know what to say or think. It sounded crazy to me, upside down, inside out. It seemed too impossible to be true. Yet, there was a plausibility in the doctor's reasoning that could not be denied.

Roger Nunnaly said in a strangled voice,

"So you're saying now that I am really Joe Balner."

"I'm just stating what could be. I'm simply giving you a preview of what the police will think."

I was way ahead of the doctor. The police would say that the real Roger Nunnaly could have no earthly motive for murdering Tony Renalt. Therefore the man who had been known for three years as Roger Nunnaly, the man standing white-faced in front of us, was actually Joe Balner.

The police could wrap this case up tight without half trying. They would say Renalt recognized the false Roger Nunnaly as Joe Balner by Balner's old habits. Little things, the way he walks or lights a cigarette or tilts his hat—these small things could identify a man as well as the lines of his face.

The police would say that Balner had accepted the new identity given him in order to escape from the past and to step into the Nunnaly bankroll. The police would say Balner had murdered Tony Renalt in order to protect his new identity, counting upon the utter obviousness of his guilt making him appear innocent. As simple as that!

I looked at Corla Nunnaly. Uncertainty was in her wide eyes, and dawning horror. I looked at Dr. Jordan, a man to whom facts were unquestionable and the quirks of the human brain were clearly and easily understood.

I looked at Roger Nunnaly, or the man I had known as Roger Nunnaly. Who was he? Nunnaly, the chemist? Or Joe Balner, the man who would and had reached beyond the law to get what he wanted?

Whoever this man was, he knew fear. It was in his face, starkly alive, thinning his nerves until he was ready to break and run or fight like a cornered animal.

Fear of what? Fear that stemmed from his guilt as a murderer? Or an even more consuming fear of what he could not remember about himself.

I looked at Art Beeker. The thin man was standing near the coupe and the huddled body it contained. The smile was gone from Art's face and his mouth was tight. And there was a barren stoniness in his small dark eyes that should have warned me of what was coming. He had two small rectangles of paper in his hand, and their dimensions could not have been more than four by five inches. They looked like photographs. They were photographs.

He said drily, "Look what I just found in Renalt's pocket, bright-eyes. Pretty pictures. Want to see them?"

He gave Nunnaly no choice. He held the two photographs out and went on acidly. "Ever hear of Duval's Photo Studio on east Vermont street? No, I guess you haven't. But Tony Renalt had. He hired Duval to make

up these two prints to help prove who you really are. Want to see how they work, Nunnaly?"

I watched, and Dr. Jordan watched, and Mrs. Nunnaly watched. Roger Nunnaly, or whoever he was, stared at those two small rectangles of paper, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly and then widening ever so slightly, like a man trying to break by sheer desperation of will power the dark web of evidence that was being lashed around him.

Art Beeker said, "Notice how these prints have been waxed or greased on the reverse sides. The photographer did that to make the prints more transparent. One picture is of Joe Balner, Renalt's former partner in crime, and the other is of you, Nunnaly, probably snapped some time when you weren't aware of it. Watch close, chum, and then decide how close the name Roger Nunnaly fits you."

Beeker moved the two prints together, super-imposing one upon the other. The greased, single-weight paper passed light through as if the prints were transparencies. I watched the eye of one image slide across the eyes on the other image until one pair was imposed upon the other. Two mouths merged into one. Now instead of two separate faces, there was one. From where I stood, the hairlines, the slant of noses and the curve of chins seemed identical.

Beeker said coldly, "See what it means, pal. One face fits the other. Maybe there's a little difference, but that's probably because he didn't quite hit the same angle when he shot your picture to use with this old snapshot of Balner. But he got it close enough to satisfy Tony Renalt. And to satisfy me. You're Joe Balner, chum, the murderer of the real Roger Nunnaly and Tony Renalt."

Mrs. Nunnaly cried out a single thin horrified word. "No!"

Nunnaly—or Joe Balner—cursed hoarsely. He moved with sudden desperate violence. He lunged at Art Beeker, grabbed the two prints with one hand and swung the other at Beeker. The blow spilled the thin man to the ground.

Dr. Jordan rushed in from one side, but his was the futile gesture of an untrained man. Nunnaly's fist caught Jordan in the mouth and drove him back. Then the man was rushing out of the garage toward the house beyond.

Corla Nunnaly cried out, "He's got a gun in his room!"

Somehow, Art Beeker got past me, running after the killer. I high-heeled after him, followed by Mrs. Nunnaly and Dr. Jordan. We ran into the kitchen. Beeker threw his shoulder against a closed door and we spilled into the dining room. We halted so abruptly that Corla Nunnaly piled against us.

She pointed. "In there. It's his room. He

must be in there now getting his gun."

Whatever my hired husband lacked in brawn, he more than made up in courage. He seemed to think the statistics gathered by his insurance companies did not include the probability of himself being killed. He ran to the door, kicked it open and plunged into the bedroom.

But the killer was not there. All of us halted there, gripped by a moment of uncertainty. Then, standing there, we heard from behind us the clang of metal on metal and the grinding protest of gears desperately meshed.

A strange malignant smile bent Art Beeker's mouth. "Smart," I heard him murmur. "He led us in here and then doubled back to the coupe. He's smart, but the cops know a few tricks, too."

**T**HE POLICE came and asked questions and wrote notes in notebooks. They prowled around and took pictures and grumbled sourly because they had been handed a murder that was minus a *corpus delicti*. They put out a dragnet for the killer and wondered bitterly what bookwork would be necessary to declare the real Roger Nunnaly legally dead and then bring Joe Balner back to life so they could later destroy him by action of law.

I had read all of dad's books on criminology and criminal law, but all this was very confusing. I didn't like the thought of getting a client with a fat bankroll and then learning my client was a murderer who would not pay me a fee. I didn't like to think of a man with Roger Nunnaly's nice features being a crook with a custom-built face. I felt somehow sorry for the man. I felt sorry for myself. I felt sorry for the twenty-five dollars I owed Art Beeker for his doubtful services as my hired husband.

I settled my hips in an overstuffed chair, and brooded. Corla Nunnaly was in the Chesterfield across the room, her face in her hands. I wondered why I didn't like her, and decided it was because she was too pretty and had a figure that I could only dream about. A rather hard, selfish prettiness, though. I tried to wash out that catty thought, but I couldn't.

Art Beeker paced the floor like a groom on Judgment Day. I watched him as he bent over the dry dark stain some distance from the front door, near the stone fireplace. I hated a man who could look at the place where another man had died so suddenly and violently without a show of emotion.

I spoke sharply, "Art, can't you stop that?"

He didn't look up. "Stop what?"

"Staring at that—at that blood on the rug."

He looked up and smiled thinly. A masculinely indulgent smile. "Are you ready to

admit that your playboy client is guilty?"

I shook my head.

"You're just being stubborn."

"Roger Nunnaly could be the real Roger Nunnaly." I tried to straighten that out. "My client could be the real Roger Nunnaly. After all, you admitted yourself that those two photographs you superimposed didn't necessarily mean Balner and Nunnaly were the same man."

I was getting confused. Becker waited patiently. I said, "Suppose Dr. Jordan was right three years ago in assuming the man who lived through that chemical plant explosion was Roger Nunnaly. Nunnaly survived, had his face rebuilt by plastic surgery, but never regained the memory of his past. In which case he wouldn't really know whether he was Joe Balner or Roger Nunnaly."

Becker grinned. "Then why did he murder a man he wouldn't have known if he were Nunnaly—Tony Renalt, Balner's old partner?"

"I'm not admitting he murdered Renalt."

Becker held one hand about four feet up from the floor. "Honey, you're walking way up here. Come down to earth."

I refused to bow. "Maybe somebody used Nunnaly's amnesia as a frame for his own murder."

"Somebody? Who?"

"I don't know."

He kept crowding me. "If your client isn't guilty, then why didn't he hold still for the investigation? Why did he grab those prints from me? Why did he break and run?"

I used the only logic I could rake out of my confused thoughts. "Nunnaly had no memory of his past. That's enough to frighten a man. Then suddenly he is confronted with the murder of a man he does not know, a murder he might not remember committing. So he gets panicked and tries to escape from what he is so much afraid."

"You and Freud!" Art Becker scoffed. "You're building cloud castles, baby. Your client is Joe Balner, take that from me! He lived through that explosion and found out he'd been given a new identity. He was no longer Joe Balner, a guy the cops never let far out of sight. He was Roger Nunnaly, an amnesia victim who was worth a lot of dough. So he played the role, counting on gradually learning enough about the real Nunnaly so that he could later pretend a memory cure and regain control of the Nunnaly money."

"But Tony Renalt got the idea the fake Nunnaly was really Joe Balner. Renalt began working on Balner, getting evidence, photographic and otherwise, to prove your so-called Nunnaly was a fake. Last night Renalt came here to get more evidence against Balner. What, I don't know yet. But your client dis-

covered Renalt here, murdered him with that poker over there, stuffed Renalt's body in his own car trunk, and then pretended to be an innocent amnesia victim who had been framed."

It sounded good, all wrapped up and tied, but I couldn't give up. I didn't know why.

I said, "When my client came home last night, he punched the light switch and got no light. Obviously Tony Renalt had pulled the master switch before breaking into the house. How could he expect to hide in a completely dark room, as we know he must have done, and get evidence against my client?"

If Art Becker had any answer for that, he was reluctant to air it. It was Dr. Jordan who broke the silence.

"I may have an answer for that."

We looked at him. Jordan was in the far corner of the room where the hardwood floor reached beyond the end of the Oriental rug. He was frowning slightly.

"I may not be right about this. But I'm an amateur photographer and it occurs to me these three scratches we noticed on the hardwood might have been caused by a camera tripod."

I didn't understand. "But if the room was thoroughly dark—"

Art Becker was way ahead of me. He was saying, "I had the same idea about those marks on the floor. Renalt didn't come here alone last night. He brought Sam Duval, the photographer, with him to get more photographic evidence against Balner."

"But if the room was dark—" I fumbled.

Becker said placidly, "Pictures can be taken in the dark, sugar. Ever hear of flashbulbs? But since Renalt had taken the precaution of pulling the main light switch he certainly wouldn't have exposed his presence by using an ordinary flashbulb. He must have had his photographer come equipped to take an infrared flash picture, and that kind of flash is invisible in the darkness to the human eye." He looked at Dr. Jordan. "Right?"

Jordan nodded. "You seem to have quite a knowledge of photography."

"I boned up on the subject once before I went out to sell insurance to the shutterbug trade. Buy a policy from me and I'll help you perform your next appendectomy."

That was Art Becker for you. He could study and absorb a working knowledge of any profession in order to talk the same language as a prospect. I watched the thin man grimly.

"You may be right, but before you call my client a murderer we'd better have a talk with the photographer who was hiding here with Renalt last night."

"That," Becker said softly, "is a good idea, sugar."

But he was only half right. It was a good

idea for us, but a bad one for Sam Duval. The photographer was dead when we found him.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Death Walks in Darkness

**I**T WAS a shabby little "photo while you wait" studio on Vermont street. There was a display of gaudy hand-painted portraits in the front window, and inside we found the camera on its stand and a faded background of a castle on a hill.

We called, but there was no answer. I said, "Maybe he just stepped out."

"Maybe." Art Beeker was sniffing the air like a hunting dog. "Smell that?"

I could smell a lot of things, dirt and human sweat and cigar smoke and old photographic chemicals. And something that put a sharper, more pungent odor in the air.

"Cordite," Beeker murmured. "Gunpowder."

A cold finger went sliding down my spine. I followed Beeker through a draped doorway, and there was Sam Duval. He lay face down on the floor near his enlarger, and I knew with dread certainty that he was dead. The bullet had entered near the base of his neck.

I just stood there staring, but Art Beeker was a man who could not long be shocked by the sight of sudden death. He bent, touched the dead man's hand briefly and straightened. He explored the room with a quick glance, his lank frame taut as a bowstring.

"He hasn't been dead five minutes!" He began cursing in a soft, bitter monotone. "If I hadn't been such a fool I'd have known this would happen."

Shock was still bumping along my nerves. I tried to smooth them out. "But how could you have known?"

He turned almost savagely on me. "How?" He spoke with harsh self-condemnation. "Because I stood there in front of your kill-crazy client and gave him the name of the photographer Joe Balner hired. I was just asking for him to murder Sam Duval."

I didn't understand. Beeker went on bitterly, "Tony Renalt had Sam Duval hiding in the darkness with him when your killer-client came home. Balner—or Nunnaly, if you're still stubborn about him—couldn't see the blackout bulb when Duval flashed his picture, but he must have heard the shutter click and that tipped him off someone was in the room. Balner grabbed a fireplace poker, and used it on Renalt in the darkness. Sam Duval heard the sounds of a fight and slipped out. When I mentioned the photographer Renalt had hired, Balner—or Nunnaly—knew then what he had heard in the darkness, the shutter going off.

He knew there had been a witness to his murder, so he grabbed a gun at the house and came here to shut up Duval." He pointed to the litter of film and paper on the photographer's work bench. "And to get the negative of the picture Duval took last night."

The disordered confusion of the bench testified to the desperate haste of the killer's search. I could picture him standing there over the body of the man he had murdered, running frantically through the negatives. Had he found what he had committed murder to get? I probed the dark corners of the drab little room wondering about the doorways and what lay behind them. If the murderer had found the negative he would be gone by now. But if he had found the negative he might still be behind one of those doors, watching. I shivered.

Art Beeker muttered, "Uh-huh."

It was an empty expression, yet one with a world of meaning in it. He was watching me queerly, with a dripping negative in one hand.

"Found it." His tone was dry, dark. "In this tank of developer. The negative had already been processed, but yet I found it in the developer solution." He seemed to find some dark question in that fact.

I said, "If the killer didn't find that negative he may still be here someplace."

But I couldn't pry myself into the focus of his concentration. He was examining the negative intently, and against the droplight I could see the image on it. It was of a man—the one I had known as Roger Nunnaly—standing inside the door of his house gripping a poker in one hand, and at one side, near the fireplace, lay the dead body of Tony Renalt. It was all locked in that small rectangle of celluloid, violence and murder unveiled, stark and undeniable. My client was the murderer! I could feel all doubt sliding from me.

"Art, I'm afraid."

"So am I, baby. Scared as hell. Which is why I wouldn't be a detective for a dozen Shadow Arts agencies."

"Then let's get out of here, Art. If that killer comes back. . . ."

He was no longer listening to me. He put the wet negative into an envelope and pocketed it. He crossed the darkroom, rumaged through several fibre-board cases and came up with a press camera that looked old enough to have photographed Sherman's march to the sea. He studied the lens a moment, then gave me a tight glance.

"Let's get out of here."

He didn't have to say that twice.

**I**T WAS later than I had imagined it could be, and a mixture of smoke and November fog spread an impenetrable veil between the

quiet city and the moon. The night was cold.

I looked at the man beside me, at the angular cut of his face, at the set of his mouth and the grim singleness of purpose with which he drove my car.

I repeated my question, "But why are we going to Dr. Jordan's house?"

He answered me as if each word cost him money. "Call it a hunch—I haven't any other name for it."

I was tired and hungry and fed up with the work my father's will had left to me. "I've another name for it. Darn foolishness. I suppose now you're afraid Nunnaly—Joe Balner—will make an attempt to murder Dr. Jordan."

"Something like that."

"I don't see why."

"Neither do I. I don't see any honest reason for any murder. But I'm not taking any chances this time. Maybe Balner will try to knock off Jordan simply for revenge. After all, Jordan helped put the bee on him today."

"So did we."

"I'm not forgetting that."

"Maybe the killer will be looking for us, too. You won't make a very handsome corpse, Mr. Beeker."

"But you will, baby." He grinned mirthlessly at me. "You'll be cute."

He pulled in at the curb near Dr. Jordan's house.

It was in a nice north side neighborhood, a large brick and frame structure that was old enough to be comfortably mellow. The house sat far back on a shrubbery-laced lawn, its lightless windows like black eyes peering futilely at the darkness.

Art Beeker said, "I won't be long. You wait here."

I told him I was damned if I would.

In features and physique Art Beeker wasn't the season's best catch, but for twenty-five dollars he was nothing less than a bargain. He had, for a man of such lugubrious temperament, surprising talents. It didn't take him more than two minutes to pick the old-fashioned lock on the back door of the house.

"Sold insurance to an ex-con once," he confided softly. "But I had to crack his office safe before he'd buy."

I didn't remind him that breaking and entering was against the law and also a good way to get shot. In the darkness of the kitchen he slipped the murdered photographer's camera into my hand.

His voice breathed in my ear. "Don't make any noise following me."

It was a wasted warning. Roger Nunnaly and Dr. Jordan had been lifelong friends—Mrs. Nunnaly had told that—and so it was probable that the man I had known as Roger Nunnaly had a key to the house. I wondered

if he could be somewhere in this clinging darkness. Somewhere, anywhere . . . but *where?*

Art Beeker moved away from me, feeling his way across the kitchen. I followed him, my nostrils picking up the faint odor of cigarette smoke that was in his clothes.

We moved out of the kitchen, and into another room, and then into what seemed to be a hallway. Here the darkness was complete and the intangible threat of danger seemed to crowd against me from all sides. I thought I could hear, somewhere ahead of me, the soft whisper of Art's shoes on the thick carpeting. I hurried after him. But I couldn't find him.

"Art?"

No answer.

I moved on, crowded by a fear I could not drive away. The darkness all around seemed a thing alive, black and threatening. I came to a stairway, moved uncertainly past it and came to an open doorway. Another room. But was it the room into which Art Beeker had gone? I couldn't tell. I could hear nothing, see nothing, feel nothing.

I groped around the room, hoping my outstretched hands would feel some other presence, yet afraid that I would. I turned back, moving again toward the stairs.

Something touched my sleeve. I wasn't sure at first, so brief and light had it been. Then it came again, the exploring touch of fingers on my arm. Relief flooded through me in a swift warm glow. Somehow I had got past Art in the darkness. I had searched the front of the house for him and all the while he had been behind me.

The hand slid up my arm and to my shoulder. A strange, vagrant uneasiness began filtering through me. Something was wrong. But that was Art beside me—*it had to be.*

The hand settled on the top of my shoulder, was joined by another. They moved steadily, inexorably toward my neck, my throat. For one frozen instant I stopped breathing. That wasn't cigarette smoke I could smell in the other person's clothing; it was the heavier, more solid odor of a pipe. That wasn't Art Beeker beside me. It was some other man. Art smoked cigarettes, but this man used a pipe.

The false Roger Nunnaly—the murderer—smoked a pipe.

I screamed.

**M**Y SCREAM cut through the black silence, ran from room to room, and came back to me. Somewhere, I heard a man's alarmed shout, the sound of blind running through the darkness of a strange house.

Then new noises broke around me, the sound of flesh striking flesh. A groan and a sigh. Art Beeker's anxious cry.

"Thelma!"

"Over here, pappy. And safe—I think." I must have sobbed that out.

Lights came on, pushing the darkness into the distant corners of the hallway. Dr. Jordan, in pajamas and robe, was coming down the stairs, and Art Beeker was a few feet away, bending over the loose form of the man I had known as Roger Nunnaly.

I heard myself saying, "I thought he was you, Art. He met me in the darkness and he was reaching for my throat. . . . I screamed."

Dazed, the man on the floor said, "I wasn't going to hurt you." There was something plaintive, appealing in the way he said that. "I was trying to find out who you were. I thought you were my wife. I thought you were Corla."

Dr. Jordan paused at the foot of the stairs. He was, I thought, shaken by what had happened, but he was holding this in the grip of steel-willed composure. He smiled at me.

"I owe you a vote of thanks, it seems." He looked at the gun in his hand, thrust it into the pocket of his robe. "I couldn't have hit the wall of a room with that thing anyhow."

His glance moved to Art Beeker, to the press-type camera in the thin man's hand. He frowned.

"That's my camera you're holding, isn't it?"

Beeker nodded. "I found it in your darkroom just before Miss—before my wife screamed. The camera she dropped during the scuffle belonged to the murdered photographer, Sam Duval. It's a hobby we both have, collecting cameras. Especially murderers' cameras."

Jordan's frown etched deeper. "Murderers' cameras?"

"Cameras like yours," Art Beeker answered.

He let it rest on that. He let the silence pile up, and then he broke it with dry, flat words.

"You almost did it, Jordan. You played on Nunnaly's loss of memory—and this man on the floor is the real Roger Nunnaly—to get what you wanted. You built up in his mind the possibility that he might actually be Joe Balner, the crook. You also planted this in Tony Renalt's mind.

"Last night you baited Renalt to Nunnaly's house and then murdered him. You left his body on the floor and planted the poker you had used near the door where Nunnaly would stumble on it when he entered the house. Nunnaly picked up the poker, just as you knew he would, and from your position across the room you flashed a picture of him and the poker and the body of the dead man by using a blackout flashbulb."

I cried out, "But I thought you believed—"

"I thought Nunnaly was guilty until I found

that negative in Sam Duval's darkroom," Art Beeker cut in. "I found the already-processed negative in a tank of developer solution. That proved it had been planted there by someone unfamiliar with Duval's working methods. Jordan meant to put it into the hypo where it would appear the negative had been developed and fixed just before Duval was murdered, but Duval kept his chemicals in an order just opposite of what Jordan uses in his amateur photo work. Jordan got the negative into the developer instead of the hypo."

I looked at Dr. Jordan, rigid and silent, waiting.

Art Beeker was saying bitterly, "You planned to get Nunnaly out of the way through these framed murders, and step into the Nunnaly money by marrying Roger's wife. But you made a couple mistakes, Jordan. Not bad mistakes, but they're enough to get you a short acquaintance with the chair.

"For one thing, you tipped your hand when you planted that negative in the wrong solution in Duval's darkroom. For another, you used your own camera when you flashed that picture of Nunnaly with Renalt's body. Your camera has a short-focus lens which gives it a wide field of view. Sam Duval's camera had a longer-focus lens; it couldn't possibly have gotten everything in the room that your lens caught.

"And another thing: We'll probably find the gun you stole from Nunnaly's room somewhere around here. It's the one you used on Duval tonight, and you haven't had enough time to hide it or plant it in Nunnaly's car the way you'd probably planned to do. And a paraffin test will undoubtedly prove that you fired a gun tonight when you shot Duval."

Jordan's hand suddenly stabbed toward the pocket of his robe. But for such a thin, vitamin-starved man, Art Beeker was surprisingly fast in his movement. His hand slashed out and down, ripped loose the pocket of the killer's robe, spilling the gun to the floor.

Jordan bent, clawing for the weapon, and Beeker swung the heavy camera in his hand. It was not a hard blow that he struck. But it was hard enough.

That twenty-five dollar question was in Art Beeker's eyes as we went out the door after the police had come and gone. And there were other things in the man's eyes, things more warm and personal that mingled with his silent dun for the twenty-five dollars I owed him. I couldn't tell which was the most important to him.

Sometimes I think I would save money by marrying the man. And then I remember the little policies he would have to write up later on. Me, I couldn't afford that.

THE END

# LONG SLEEP IN THE DEEP

By **DAN GORDON**

*Five hundred clams is a lot of dough for a little swim . . . But what good would all that lettuce be to a guy—me for instance—when he had become a lifeless lump, good only for fish food?*

**T**HE FOG was coming in off the bay—that, and I didn't have much under my belt. I had a date, though. Count on me to have a date. In six short hours I was due to tiddle with a curvaceous member of the upper crust. We were meeting at the Warren Roof. I had half a buck, all my own. It was the only coin I had.

I shoved into a hotel lounge—not the Warren—brushing against a pair of wrens who were stumbling out. I didn't even look at them



I wasn't listening any more. We were at the rail and I was going backwards, taking Twitchy with me.

That's how low I was. I didn't even look at them.

Other wrens who had come and gone had left different kinds of perfume. The brands had mingled and hung there, and now they were part of the place. A little bit like a florist's shop—or an undertaker's plant. There were other people there, not many, just a few. I didn't want any part of them. I wanted to worry in peace. I chose a table against a dark wall. The waiter brought me a beer and I sat there, sipping it and staring at the wall.

When I heard the guys behind my chair, I didn't turn around. One of them said, "Dick Harris?"

I said, "Yes." They came around on the side then and I saw that "yes" wasn't necessary. I said, "Yeah, I'm Harris."

They pulled back the chairs and sat down. "It's a lovely party," I said, "but before you order, let's get it straight. I wouldn't mind buying you guys a drink, only this beer just wiped me out."

The deadpanned one with the twitching mouth twitched his mouth and said, "We'll buy."

"Don't do me—" I began unpleasantly.

The other one cut me off. He had yellow eyes like a tomcat. He talked like a tomcat purrs. "Get happy, Harris," he said. "Nobody wants your autograph. We got a proposition."

"So?" I said.

"You're a swimmer. Right?"

"I was. Why?"

"You still in pretty good shape?"

I could feel those yellow eyes on me. The guy was weighing my shoulders like you weigh a hunk of beef. "I'm always in shape," I said. It was true. Overeating was the only thing that bothered me when I was mowing them down in the meets. And that hadn't been bothering me lately.

"We need a swimmer," Twitchy said.

"Goldfish aren't bad," I told him. "You can buy 'em two for a quarter." The sneer was for me, not him. And that, my boy, I told myself, is straight. You can't do a thing a fish can't do, can't do it as well as a fish. You're a pool-punk, bub, aged twenty-five. A has-been with pretty medals. . . .

"A goldfish," Twitchy said seriously, "has got neither brains nor guts."

"Also," Yellow-Eyes purred, "a goldfish opens its mouth."

I said, "You tried Billy Rose? He's got a lot of swimmers. Their shapes are better than mine."

Twitchy said, "Quit clowning. We're talking five hundred clams."

"How many exhibitions?" I was taking it calm, trying not to think of that lonesome half

dollar way down in the bottom of my pocket.

"One. *Unadvertised*," said the man with the yellow eyes.

I looked down to see if his claws were covered. His hands were not in sight. "It's a lot of dough," I said, "for one dip. Where do I start from? The rail of the bay bridge?"

"It ain't where you start. It's where you finish. That's why the price is right."

"Well?"

Yellow-Eyes leaned forward. "The island," he said. "You finish on the island."

"The prison?" I quit spending the five hundred in my mind. "You're mixed up," I told them. "Nobody swims to the island. Swimming from the island, or trying to. That's the way it's done."

"The thinking," said Twitchy, "is our department. All you do is the swimming."

"And the getting shot," I said. "I've never been there, but I rode by several times. It didn't look like a summer resort. Not a beach umbrella in sight."

"I been there," Yellow-Eyes said. "And we got it all worked out. All you do is deliver a package."

"Package?" I said. The Harris Delivery Service. Speed swimming or freight delivery. Swimmers leaving on schedule for the island, carrying crated machine guns and other goodies on their brawny, sun-tanned backs. . . .

"Package?" I said again. "You know what that current is? It would take a hell of a swimmer to make it in the first place, much less carry a package."

"We heard," Twitchy said, "you were a hell of a swimmer."

"We also heard," Yellow-Eyes put in, "you owe dough all around the town."

"That any of your—"

"It's our business. Our business is knowing things." Twitchy leaned back and the corner of his mouth kept tightening and loosening—one half a grin that wouldn't stay. "You need dough bad. We need the job done bad. What say?"

"You're crazy," I said.

"Not crazy," said Yellow-Eyes softly. "Just a couple of boys in a tight spot. We need a favor done."

"Well," Twitchy said, "that's the way it goes. He won't do it for dough, he'll have to do it for free."

Yellow-Eyes got up. Hands sunk deep in his pockets, he was looking down at me. "Yeah," he said, "that's the way it goes. Let's get goin', champ."

I got up. Now was the time for me to shove the table over on Twitchy and clip Yellow-Eyes on the jaw. I didn't do either of these things. You'd be surprised how you don't. "You got a boat?" I asked. "A boat could get fairly close

without being seen in this thick fog." Twitchy nodded. "That's what we figured. We'll get a boat," he said.

**THEY GOT** a boat. Getting the boat was when I first began to be sorry I hadn't made a break for it on the way down to the docks.

It was a little tug, one of those tiny jobs you sometimes see grunting along with a string of barges lined out behind. Lying there at the dock, it had apparently just come in from a trip, or else it had steam up to go out on one.

The tug skipper was salty and wiry. He didn't put up much of a beef, only said something quick and nasty. He didn't have it out of his mouth before Twitchy raked the barrel of the gun across one side of his face. It left a long white mark that stayed white for a while; then the blood came pouring out.

The girl came up through the hatch in time to see her father standing there with his face all bloody. She screamed and ran down the deck.

Yellow-Eyes put out one hand and spun her around. "Stay put, sister. This ain't a stickup. We just got a little job."

I didn't like the way he handled the girl. I didn't like the guns. Figuring I'd string along until I could swim my way out was one thing. Watching these cold and deadly men at work was something else again. So was the way the flesh lay back from the slice on the skipper's cheek.

Yellow-Eyes was taking the skipper to the pilot house. Twitchy put the gun away. He was standing near the girl.

"Why so rough?" I asked him.

He eyed me to see if it was a crack. I kept my face polite—and curious.

"Time," Twitchy said, biting the corner out of a pack of cigarettes. "We're workin' on a schedule."

"Jailbreak?" I said.

"We ain't sight-seein'," said Twitchy.

"The swimming," Yellow-Eyes said from the window of the pilot house. "Remember? You take care of the swimming. We take care of the rest."

I said, "Don't show me your muscle. I don't care if you turn loose every convict in the country." It was true. I didn't have any safes to protect against crackers, and that half buck in my pocket didn't make me wary of holdup men.

Twitchy leaned back and relaxed. "You're a sensible guy," he said, "which is lucky, in a way."

The girl said, "I know you." She was leaning against the ladder that led to the bridge. Her short jacket was belted in tight and the wind was pinning the skirt tight against her legs. She had blue eyes, but they were dark

and narrow now. "You're Dick Harris," she said.

"Good guess," I said brightly.

"Dick Harris. My hero. I was a freshman when you were a senior." She laughed and it wasn't pretty. "You've come a long way," she said.

Letting my eyes drift over to Twitchy, I saw that he was enjoying it. "Hard work," I said to the girl. "That—and study. A man is bound to succeed."

She said, "Thank you, Mr. Harris. I'll try to remember that."

She was the pleasantest thing I could think about right then, so I thought about her. I didn't remember her from school—an obvious oversight. She looked like a girl to remember, only I wouldn't be needing one now.

The tug chunk-chunked and pulled away from the pier. The fog closed in around us. All over the bay you could hear ships' whistles making fog signals. Once in a while somebody'd ring a bell. Not on the tug. We weren't making any noise.

I said, "About that package. How big is it?"

Twitchy dipped a hand into his coat and came up with a brown-glass bottle. "Small," Twitchy said. "Don't weigh nothin' at all."

It wasn't explosive. I knew that from the carefree way Twitchy had capered around when they were mauling the skipper. He wouldn't have done that with a jug of nitroglycerin. I very much doubted if he'd do it with a flask of acid.

"Poison?" I said, trying to look eager, like a kid playing a guessing game.

Twitchy dropped one eyelid.

Yellow-Eyes was listening from the pilot house above. "You talk too much," he said.

Twitchy said, "Aw—what's the difference?"

Yellow-Eyes just looked at him.

So there it was, and it had been there from the beginning. What was to keep them from knocking us off? Sportsmanship? The spirit of fair play?

I tried to make my voice sound professional—as if I had poisoned thousands of people at one time or another. "In the chow?" I said.

Twitchy grinned.

Except for their screwball method of getting the stuff into the prison, it wasn't too whacky a scheme. As I saw it, someone would dump the poison into the grub. Twitchy's friends, the men they were trying to spring, would skip that meal. Later, with hundreds of sick, dead and dying prisoners on their hands, the authorities would find it impossible to block the mob's next move.

"Smart enough," I said. "Except for this part of the deal. Having me swim the stuff in is a weird idea."

Lifting his shoulders, Twitchy said, "Best

we can do. We had it lined up, then our boy got transferred to another spot. The grapevine works all right for getting the word in. Sending a package on short notice is tough."

"What do I do when I get ashore? Ask for the head cook."

"Our guy'll meet you on the beach. He'll be wearing a guard's uniform."

I nodded. He was telling me too much. It was as plain as if he had flatly said I'd never tell anyone else. Yellow-Eyes knew I was getting it. He kept his eyes on me all the time. I could tell by the way the skin crawled on the back of my neck. Or maybe I was just cold.

"Nice day for a swim," I said conversationally. I judged we were getting close to the island, so I took off my tie and stuffed it in my pocket. The girl was watching me.

She stopped chewing her lip and said, "I didn't realize they were forcing you. I'm sorry for what I said."

"Don't be," I told her. "I might have done it for money." Not mass poisoning. I wouldn't have helped once I knew the set-up. But it had taken me long seconds to say no back there in the hotel, when I'd thought that all they wanted was to smuggle a message in.

Walking to the rail, I checked the run of the tide. It was moving plenty fast.

**T**HE WATER was dirty gray, like the fog. I knew it would be cold. I looked at the girl. She had pegged me as a heel when I came aboard. Then she had changed her mind. I ought to do something about that. Checking the bulge in Twitchy's pocket, I glanced at the girl, measured the distance between Twitchy and myself.

Twitchy shoved away from the pilot house, stood warily on the balls of his feet. "Dead men," he said warningly, "don't chase no frails."

I let it go and slipped out of my jacket.

Yellow-Eyes spoke from the pilot house: "Our friend says we're close enough."

I was down to my shorts and the dampness was making gooseflesh all over my chest and arms. "All set," I said. "Except how do I find the tug when I come back?"

Yellow-Eyes had the answer. He tossed down a bundle of fishline. "Cord," he said. "Tie it around your waist."

Stooping, I picked up the cord. That cord had me puzzled until I remembered that they'd have no way of knowing whether or not I delivered the stuff—unless I got back to the tug. Even then, how would they know? Why couldn't I swim out of sight, drop the bottle, take in the slack on the cord, then swim back after a time and report that I'd done my good deed for the day?

Lashing the bottle to my good leather belt,

the one that had set me back plenty one prosperous month at Palm Springs, Twitchy said, "You want it in back or in front?"

"Front." I was in a hurry now, wanting to get on with it, get rid of that bottle before the boys wised up. I was legging it over the rail when Yellow-Eyes spoke.

"When you give the bottle to our guy, ask him for a button off his uniform. Bring the button back with you."

"Does he know about the button?"

Yellow Eyes shook his head.

"Suppose he won't give me one?"

Showing his teeth, Yellow Eyes said, "You better pray he will."

"Which way?" I called to the skipper.

He held out his arm and I checked the way the waves were moving. I'd be swimming cross-current. I'd have to allow for that.

"Our guy," Twitchy said, "will be standing on the beach. You swim along the shoreline till you spot him. An' for your own good, don't get any ideas about hollering copper once you get there. Them guards are trigger-happy, even without this fog."

The skin crawled again on the back of my neck. I gripped the bottle and jumped into the drink feet first.

It was cold.

I came up and went into a crawl. When the tug was out of sight behind me, I slowed it to a breast-stroke. The line was light on the surface, but even that gentle pull was enough to slow me down in this tide. I had plenty of time to think. All I could see was fog.

Rolling over on my back, I kicked my feet to keep myself moving, used my hands to unbuckle the belt and take a look at that bottle. The answer was there and I was a fool not to have thought of it sooner. There was no mystery about the cap. It was an ordinary screp-cap such as you find on any bottle. Removing the cap, I let the stuff gurgle out, keeping my face well clear of it. Then I rinsed the bottle thoroughly and refilled it with salt water. Through the amber glass you couldn't tell the difference.

Feeling better, I capped the bottle and put the belt back on. Now I didn't mind meeting the lad on the beach. How would he know it wasn't poison? He certainly wouldn't taste it. . . .

He didn't. He was waiting plenty far up the beach. The tide had carried me down. He took the bottle from me as I waded ashore.

He was wearing a guard's uniform, all right. Gun and all. And he acted jumpy. He didn't say anything, just put the bottle in his pocket and started to walk away.

I said, "Wait a minute, fella. I got to have one of your buttons to prove I delivered the stuff."

He put one hand on his holster. "Get going," he said.

Walking toward him, I was betting that he wouldn't want to fire a shot on that beach, now that he had the stuff.

I won. I walked right up to him, extending my hand. He had the gun out by then. I grabbed at a button and ripped, turned and ran for the water. Behind me, I could hear him cursing. He didn't fire.

Going back to the tug I made good time by hauling on the cord.

Twitchy helped me aboard. He wasn't going to. I knew that by the gun in his hand. But when I said, "The guy on the beach said to tell you—" and wouldn't say any more, I had them beat momentarily.

Standing there, I panted louder than necessary. Maybe I was praying a little.

Twitchy said, "C'mon. Out with it!"

". . . get my breath," I gasped, fumbling with the cord. Then, desperately, I flipped the cord over his head and perked him toward me.

He came up against me—hard. I clipped him. It wasn't good enough. He was cursing and biting and clawing for his gun.

We spun toward the rail. I heard Yellow-Eyes behind me, his voice high-pitched with irritation, "Hold still! I'll plug the—"

I didn't hear any more. We were at the rail and over I went, taking Twitchy with me. He squirmed. I took him down deeper. He quit squirming then and I let him go, kicked my feet and made for the surface.

Breaking water with the bow of the tug looming close above my head, I strained and caught the rope fender that hung down from the rail.

I DIDN'T know how things were on board.

I was too tired to give a damn. Clawing and scrambling, I fought my way up that fender and flopped belly-down on the bow.

Yellow-Eyes was on deck with his gun. The skipper was sitting on a coil of line. One side of his face was hidden by the caked brown blood. The other side looked haggard. The tug was drifting through the fog. The girl was on the bridge.

Yellow-Eyes was facing the skipper. I thought he hadn't seen me, until I looked at the gun. The gun was watching, though. It was pointing at my head.

Turning, Yellow-Eyes said, "You were stalling when you made that pitch about a word from the guy on the beach."

"He said—" I began, knowing he didn't believe me, seeing his lips draw back and reading the death in his eyes.

When the stream of water caught him in the back, he had taken in the trigger slack. The

gun cracked sharply—once. Then the water was driving him forward, destroying his aim and balance. He tried to steady the gun but the water was battering him from behind.

I caught him, chopped the gun from his hand, sent it sailing overboard. I stepped back. He kept driving in, screaming and bellowing curses. It made me slightly crazy. When I finally got a grip on his belt, I heaved. He screamed going through the air, stopped when he hit the water.

With the fog and all, it was hard to tell if he ever came up again. I stood there staring at the spot, then turned to face the skipper.

The skipper said, with a tranquil smile, "Reckon that son'll drown?"

"I guess," I said. "But it couldn't be helped. He slipped right out of my hands." I sat down heavily, and from somewhere ahead in the fog a ship's long blast sounded, hoarse and deep. It came again. I said, "Think we'd better move?"

"We'll move," the skipper said. "My daughter'll handle it."

He was right. The tug shivered and moved. I was drying off with my sweater, pulling on my clothes. "Your daughter," I said. "If she handles the tug like she handled that fire hose, I'll bet on her any time."

The skipper grunted. "We get in," he said, "we'll have trouble explainin' this to the harbor patrol."

"Some," I agreed, "but I've still got the button to back the tale."

"Tain't much. That fellow on the island can get another button before they have time to check all the guards."

I fished out the large and jagged piece of cloth, admired the shiny button. "He'll need a tailor," I said. "I brought his pocket too."

He looked at me, almost grinned, remembering his cheek just in time. "Buy you a drink," he said, "when we get in."

Nodding, I wasn't listening any longer. I was looking up at the girl in the pilot house, comparing her to my chromium-plated lady waiting on the Warren Roof. I was flipping a coin in my mind and the Warren was losing the toss. When I turned back, the skipper's eyes were on me, calculating, amused.

"A tugboat," he said, "can always use a man."

I brought out my half a buck and flipped it high in the air. Heads I'd take it. Tails I'd take it. The half rolled overboard. Shrugging, I said, "You win. You've hired yourself a mate."

He switched his eyes from me to his daughter, and then he spat to leeward. "Git on up to the pilot house then. You're loafin' on the job."

# THE ICEMAN KILLETH

By MORRIS COOPER

*Mike Tolliver was the kind of guy who gave away ice in the Wintertime . . . But it wasn't Winter, and Mike wasn't giving the stuff away; he was taking it . . . And it wasn't the kind of ice that drips water—it was the kind that sparkles like captured sunlight and drips enough blood to float a man right into the death house!*

Mike reached forward and wrapped his hands around the little man's throat. "You ain't talking to nobody," he said.

**M**IKE TOLLIVER still had the first nickel he'd ever earned.

That had been when he was seven, and the kid he had beaten up to get it was five. For a long time Mike had been afraid to spend it. But the beat-up little kid hadn't been sure who Mike was, and after a while Mike felt safe and secure with the nickel hidden where no one would find it. When he had aged a few years and grown a little bolder, the nickel became a sort of lucky piece.

By the time Mike was thirty he had lots of nickels and dollars. He liked the look and feel



of money and he hated to spend any of it. He'd haggle over the price of something he wanted for hours. Over the roll top desk in his office was a framed motto: A PENNY SAVED IS A PENNY EARNED.

Mike Tolliver was a fence. Not big time, because he was afraid to take too large a gamble; but enough money came in to make him happy.

The little man who sat in his office now, facing Mike, couldn't keep his eyes still. They rolled around in their sockets like spinning marbles, and Mike began to feel nervous himself.

"Quit your worrying," Mike said. "There ain't nothing to be afraid of here."

"The cops," said the little man. "I want to get out of town before they find me."

Mike rolled a cigarette carefully, a sheet of paper spread on his desk to catch any fallen tobacco crumbs. "No cop'll bother you here." He laughed contentedly. "They got their suspicions, but they ain't never pinned anything on me."

"Okay. Okay." The little man started to crack his knuckles. "How much will you give me for the Gallagher diamond?"

"Let me see it."

The little man shook his head. "Don't have it with me."

Mike's eyes narrowed. "Afraid?"

"Sure I'm afraid," the little man exploded. "You don't think I want to be picked up with that diamond on me."

Mike put the hand-rolled cigarette in his mouth and touched a match to it. "When will you bring the stone?"

"I won't bring it. You'll have to come after it."

Mike Tolliver inhaled deeply. "What's the angle? Figure maybe on touching me for the dough and then doing a fast fade-out with the diamond?"

"No!" The little man stood up. "Can't you see I've got the jitters? I don't intend to go roaming around this town again. As soon as you bring the money, I'm going to beat it."

The little man walked over to the window. He glanced nervously into the dark street and then turned to Mike. "Well?"

"I'll give you fifteen hundred for it," Mike said.

"Fifteen hundred!" The little man looked at Mike. "It's worth a hundred grand."

Mike nodded his head. "On the open market, maybe. But I'll have to keep it till it cools off, and then have it cut up."

"You'll still get fifty grand out of the deal."

Mike nodded his head again, complacently. "And you'll have fifteen hundred for a fast getaway."

The little man looked at Mike. He spoke slowly. "You're a rat."

Mike chuckled and spread his hands. "Maybe I am. But the cops aren't looking to pin a murder rap on me."

The little man sat down.

"You can always go to somebody else and try to peddle that rock," Mike suggested.

There was a bitter edge to the little man's voice. "There's nobody else will touch that stone right now, and you know it."

"You should have been more careful."

"But the guy saw me. If I'd have left him alive, he'd have had the cops on my tail in an hour."

Mike dry-washed his chin. "So you left your prints instead. Smart boy."

The little man sighed and stood up again. "Everybody makes mistakes."

"That's right. And when they're bad ones, I profit."

The little man started for the door. "I'm holed up at Barney's joint on River Street. The last door on the right, first floor."

"I know the place," said Mike.

"I want the dough in small bills. And no tricks."

"There won't be any. You know I wouldn't last long in this business if I ratted."

The little man nodded agreement.

Mike called to him as he started to open the door. "You keep your mouth shut. I don't want anybody to know I'm mixed up in this, I'll see you around midnight."

Mike grinned to himself when the door closed. It looked like the start of a very profitable bit of business.

**T**HE HALLWAY was dark and musty, but it wasn't the first time Mike had been in this particular house, and he walked over the threadbare carpet without hesitation. When he came to the last door on the right, he paused and listened for a moment. Then he knocked softly.

A soft, stirring sound came through the panel, and then a hoarse whisper: "Who is it?"

"Mike. Open up."

He heard the scrape of the bolt, and then the door edged open. The little man stepped aside to let Mike enter.

The thin light from an uncovered bulb threw a yellow glare over the cheaply furnished room and left deep shadows in the corner.

"Did you bring the dough?"

"Let's see the stone." Mike's voice was eager. He brought out a wallet.

The little man pulled a small wadded-up piece of newspaper from his pocket and opened it. Mike sucked in his breath.

Even under the cheap light, the Gallagher diamond gleamed like a thing alive. He held out a hand.

"The dough first," snarled the little man.

Mike handed over a sheaf of bills. His eyes drank in the beauty of the stone while the little man counted the money.

"What's the idea?" the little man demanded. He held the bills in his hand. "There's only a grand here."

Mike nodded. "I took a risk coming down here."

"We agreed on fifteen hundred."

"I changed my mind."

The little man shoved the handful of money at Mike. "The deal is off. Give me back that rock."

"Don't be foolish," said Mike. "A grand can take you a long way."

"It was supposed to be fifteen hundred."

The little man was stubborn. "Wait till the boys hear about this double-cross of yours. Your name'll be mud."

"You won't say anything."

"No?" The little man stood squarely in front of Mike. "I'll yell till even the coppers can hear me."

Mike's hands closed tightly on the little man's throat. For a long time he squeezed, until finally the little man's struggles stopped. Even then, Mike did not let go at once.

When he did finally release his grasp, the little man slipped to the floor. Mike made certain he was dead, and then he picked up the fallen money.

A man was standing on the sidewalk when Mike left Barney's house. He started, and then he saw that it was a blind beggar.

Mike walked over and stood in front of the blind man. He waved his hands suddenly in front of the man's eyes but there wasn't even a faint flicker of motion. Satisfied, Mike started to turn, when the beggar said, "Buy a pencil, mister?"

Mike started to speak, changed his mind. Blind men generally had good ears and he didn't want anyone remembering his voice. He fished around in his pocket and came up with a couple of pennies, which he dropped into the tin cup. He hesitated a moment, then took a pencil. It would save him buying one some time.

**MIKE** slept in his office that night. He was still half asleep when the knock came on his door.

Sergeant Alver walked into Mike's office.

Mike grinned at him. "Kind of early for a social call, isn't it?"

"This isn't a social call."

Mike sat at his desk and started to roll a cigarette.

"Shorty Ople was killed last night."

"Yeah?" Mike struck a match.

"Strangled to death." Alver was poking

around the office. "Where were you last night?"

Mike smiled. "What time?"

"Oh, say around midnight."

"Here. Fast asleep."

Alver picked up Mike's coat and began emptying the contents on the desk. "What time did you go to sleep?"

"I can't say for certain." Mike inhaled deeply. "But I didn't leave this office after ten o'clock."

Alver looked at Mike. "We'll find the Gallagher diamond if it's here."

"So I'll take a rap for being a fence."

"It's not that simple," said Alver.

"Why not? And who says I got the rock?"

"I do." Alver felt around the desk. His fingers touched a knob and a small drawer shot out.

Mike looked at him, and shrugged his shoulders. "You were lucky to find that drawer."

"Uh-uh. We've known about it for a long time. One of our stooges tipped us off."

Mike stood up. "Guess you've got me this time."

"Sit down," Alver said. "There's no hurry."

Mike sat down.

"When did you get this stone?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

Alver shook his head. "We've got Barney down at headquarters. He says Ople showed it to him around eleven o'clock last night."

"He's nuts," said Mike.

"I don't think so."

Mike shut his mouth. "I won't say any more until I see my lawyer."

"Better get a good one."

Mike sat silent.

"Ople told Barney you were coming to buy this stone."

Mike laughed. "You can't believe everything you hear. Let's get this over with. I'll take a chance on a stolen goods rap."

"It'll be a murder rap you'll have to beat."

Mike started to roll another cigarette. "My word's just as good as Barney's and I say I was here last night."

"We've got another witness. A blind man."

Mike looked up. "A blind man?"

Sergeant Alver held up the long yellow pencil he had taken from Mike's coat. He pointed to some thin lettering. Mike read the words: Blind Sam.

"So what? I could've got that pencil last week or last month."

"No, Mike," Alver put the pencil in his pocket, and pulled out a pair of cuffs. "Blind Sam got those pencils about five years ago."

He clicked the cuffs on Mike's wrists.

"Last night was the first time anybody ever took a pencil from him."



GEN. DAVID COOK

# Master MANHUNTERS

by Ben Nelson & Stookie Allen

## DENVER NEMESIS

GEN. DAVID J. COOK, BORN MANHUNTER, ORGANIZED THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN DETECTIVE ASSOCIATION IN 1863.

THROUGH COMMON-SENSE METHODS, AN UNCANNY ABILITY TO OUTTHINK CROOKS AND AN AMAZING MEMORY FOR FACES, COOK PERFORMED PHENOMENAL FEATS OF CRIMINAL APPREHENSION.

WHEN FOUR ITALIAN MUSICIANS, THROATS SLIT, WERE FOUND IN A CELLAR, COOK SUSPECTED ROBBERY BY COMPATRIOTS. LEARNING A SICILIAN AND A MEXICAN DESPERADO HAD DISAPPEARED, HE REASONED THE GANG WOULD HEAD SOUTH. HE INTERCEPTED THEM STILL WEARING THEIR BLOODY SHIRTS.



DURING A CIRCUS PARADE \$4,000 VANISHED FROM A BANK. COOK SPOTTED IT AS A THREE-MAN PROFESSIONAL JOB, VISITED THE LOCAL HOTEL BAR, FIGURING HE'D RECOGNIZE AT LEAST ONE THIEF, AND DID--ONE HE'D SEEN IN CHICAGO TEN YEARS BEFORE.

WITH COOK HEADING IT, THE RMDA COLLECTED PLENTY OF REWARD MONEY--ON WANTED MEN.



# \$2,000,000 Rat-Race

*Two-bit thief Meyer Frankenberg stood the police world on its ear when he stuck a wad of chewing gum on his cane—and walked off with a cool two million bucks!*

**M**EYER FRANKENBERG is the name. Mention it to the New York's finest, and they will look like so many congressmen with May-fever. Whisper it to the Paris Sureté, and the gendarmes will roll their eyes, stare at you as if you were a particularly eccentric Martian and softly mutter, "Mon Dieu!" Speak of it to Scotland Yard and there will be an immediate exodus, as the boys will go look for the latest Soho slayer-of-six, hoping that he will distract their minds. Bring it up in a casual conversation with your Wall Street broker, and he will excuse himself to go fire five trusted runners, and check over what he, up to a minute ago, thought were his assets.

But utter it at any gathering of paid-up members of the International Brotherhood of Dips, Digit-men and Hot-short Handlers and you will produce a reverent hush, followed by two minutes of silence, after which they will tell you the story. For Meyer is the white-haired boy of the flim-flam fraternity—the original kid who made a killing.

Meyer himself calls his saga simply a tale of bread cast upon waters—except that he substituted beef stew and the returns, as might be expected, were in proportion. It was a cold, blustery early winter's day in 1934 when Meyer bought the stew to feed a total stranger, a young man whose only recommendations were a threadbare appearance and a wistfully hungry look. Meyer, a purse-snatcher by trade, had often known lean pickings and the subsequent pangs of hunger. And though he wasn't too flush this day, he did have the price of a spare plate at the Automat.

Fate took a hand almost immediately. At first the young man ate in ravenous silence; then Meyer heard him mutter, "Millions! Aw—to hell with it!" His expression remained bitterly injured.

Meyer was instantly interested. It isn't every day you meet one to whom the thought of a million of anything is pure gall, even

at the Ritz. At the Automat the odds against it are overwhelming. Meyer cocked an ear and inquired politely. "You mean a million dollars, friend?"

The other shook his head. "Not one million—but many. Dollars, yes." His eyes were a little wild. "I just wish I could lay my hooks on 'em again."

"Oh," Meyer said. His ordinarily alert dark eyes grew veiled. Obviously the recipient of his gratuity was not only broke, but slightly nuts.

"Take it easy, pally," he said, waving away the young man's thanks for the stew. "Get some rest. Not even ordinary jerks like you or me live on food alone. Be seeing you."

He started off, a little moved. But before he reached the revolving doors a thought struck him. He whirled. The young man was still there, staring moodily into space. Meyer retraced his steps.

"Excuse me, friend," he said. "But did you say 'again'? You'd like to handle all them millions 'again'?"

"That's right!" the young man breathed.

Meyer slid back into the seat opposite him, "Tell me about it," he said quietly.

The young man told him and Meyer listened. Gradually his eyes lost some of their sympathetic warmth. As in most hard-luck stories, the young man's troubles stemmed from unused talents. Meyer stared a little coldly. Evidently he was the audience of one whom opportunity had vainly beaten over the head—until she knocked him into the gutter.

The kid had handled millions—and now he didn't have the price of a plate of stew. He had been a Wall Street runner and things were not lively on the Street in 1934. He was out of a job.

His voice vibrant with quiet scorn, Meyer murmured, "Why don't you go back to work, kid?"

But the youth was beyond redemption. "I'd like to," he said earnestly.

Meyer hid his shock at such rampant honesty. "Maybe I could help you," he murmured. The two left the restaurant together.

Meyer did not cultivate his new acquaintance long. This is not surprising, when all the facts are considered. As a purse-snatcher of some thirty years' standing—he was in his late forties—he naturally had little use for one so unfitted for the struggles of existence as to have to work for a living. After pumping the kid, Meyer turned him over to

By  
**LAURI WIRTA**

some friends and then forgot about him.

A telling factor here is that he was not in the least worried that any of his friends might get the same idea from the kid he had. Nobody had ever thought of it before; why should they now? The hallmark of all genius is the big, simple idea that might occur to anybody—but doesn't.

Meyer's idea was big and it was awesomely simple. A few short weeks later he was ready to put it into execution—on December 13th, to be exact. On that memorable date he presented himself at the Wall Street offices of the U. S. Trust Company, clad with becoming unobtrusiveness. In the crook of his arm he carried a cane. On the end of the cane was a wad of chewing gum. It was the scheduled delivery date of \$590,000 worth of U. S. bonds. Meyer's cane flicked with the speed of a snake's tongue through a metal grille, struck the package of bonds unerringly, withdrew them—and before anybody had time to miss them, Meyer walked out of the joint over a half-million dollars richer!

It was really a wonderful idea. With no more operating expenses than another penny piece of chewing gum. Meyer worked his *beau geste* again a scant month later at another firm's expense—this time to the tune of a million and a half, again in U. S. bonds!

The world's richest government rocked gently on its financial foundations. Two million dollars' worth of hot bonds on the loose can play mild havoc with anybody's market. Big shots from here to there burned up the wires, calling each other names; police were alerted in the key cities of the world; G-men and T-men took up the hunt. . . .

In the meantime, nobody thought of Meyer Frankenberg, known to the New York cops as a two-bit dip they could lay their hands on whenever they wanted him. Meyer was as cool as the bonds were hot the day he strolled over to his favorite fence and asked for a good "chinaman." A "chinaman" is a gent who changes serial numbers on hot bonds for a consideration, the name deriving from the use of an old-fashioned laundry flatiron in the process. Bonds thus treated may theoretically be marketed with reasonable safety out of the country. By the time the New York cops were over their laughing fit over an underworld tip that



For history's biggest dip operation, Meyer was sentenced to only a year and a day.

Meyer was their man, and started to look for him—Meyer for the first time in their lives was not where they had put him. He had vanished.

In the course of the next three years, by all the evidence, he traveled extensively, you might say for his health. There were so many people after him—all pretending not to be cops and government specialists in different languages—that it looked like a migration. In the meantime he distributed his bonds through hired hands—who were picked up, along with the loot, as soon as sales were arranged, and tossed into clinks in two hemispheres.

But nobody picked up Meyer Frankenberg. Hardly anybody officially interested saw him, even. Scotland Yard once had him under observation, but by the time they'd arranged for a warrant for his arrest, he'd given them the slip once more.

Nobody else caught hide nor hair of him until 1937, when he voluntarily walked into a U. S. Attorney's office—out of nowhere—and said he no longer thought money was everything. Like so many big-idea men, he had failed to profit fully from his coup. He admitted that he had barely made traveling expenses in one of the world's great rat-races.

But by this time the police of two continents had developed the habit of looking under their beds for Meyer Frankenberg each night before retiring—dead weary from looking for him elsewhere all day. And authorities were so happy to have all this end that they climaxed what was probably history's biggest dip operation—by giving Meyer just a year and a day in jail.

● **By W. T. BALLARD** ●

*"They call her Flame Gordon," the guy said. "She's a corn-colored filly with the bluest eyes in the world, and she's dynamite . . . And all you have to do, snooper, is get rid of her, I don't care how . . . frame her, dump her in the river or even—so help you—marry her!"*

**Compelling Crime Novel**



As I dived, the big glass panel behind me fell out, and there was the sound of a second shot.



Sometimes a dame can be too beautiful. That was the case with Flame Gordon.

# A DAME CALLED FLAME

## CHAPTER ONE

### 2 G's and Trouble

I WAS sitting at my war-scarred desk, thinking about nothing in particular but the rent when this citizen came in. He was a big man in a tan, checked sport coat, with the red face of a British beef-eater and a positive manner as if he had just signed a ninety-nine-year lease on the world.

He wore a tan sport shirt, buttoned at the collar, and a hand-painted, fifty-dollar tie. A good-sized stone winked at me from the small finger of his left hand, held there by a broad, rich-looking gold band.

He gave the office a careful look which didn't miss the dust in the

corners, or the dirty windows. Then he turned and looked at my name in reverse on the glass panel of the door, as if to refresh his memory.

"You Al Corn or one of the operatives?"

"I'm both," I said. I was studying him, trying to remember where I'd seen him before. I couldn't remember, it might have been a picture. His hands had a nice brown on the backs, put there by sun. He might have gotten it playing golf, or deep sea fishing, or one of the other sports that big business men play at. But he didn't fit. His clothes, despite the fact that they'd cost plenty, just weren't right and yet he didn't look like a grafter.

He said, "You don't keep an impressive office."

"Don't let it throw you," I told him. "I keep it looking that way to impress the income tax investigators."

He was trying to make up his mind about something. He drew a fat cigar from the breast pocket of the sport coat, set fire to its tip, blew smoke up to further color the yellow ceiling, and threw the match on the floor.

That riled me. Not that the floor was very clean but I didn't see what gave my visitor the privilege of dirtying it further.

"Pick it up," I said. "There's an ash tray, or if you prefer, the waste basket."

He looked at me, startled, through his expensive cigar smoke. I think probably it's the first time in years that anyone had given him a direct order to do anything. He picked up that match. He put it carefully in the ash tray. He gave me a sheepish grin.

"I guess you'll do. I wasn't sure after seeing the office."

"Do for what?"

"My son's got himself mixed up with a show gal." He said gal, not girl, and he made it sound like a nasty word. "He met her at the club house at Santa Anita."

I knew who my visitor was then. I'd seen his pictures. They were on the sport page. His name was Rexford, Val Rexford, and he owned a ranch somewhere in Nevada.

**A** LOT of people owned ranches in Nevada. Most of them starved a great deal of the time. Rexford had until he started to raise thoroughbreds.

He'd picked up a colt at a bargain in '33, back before inflation hit the racing picture. He'd won a fifty-thousand-dollar race with the colt, training him himself, living in a trailer, cutting corners. He spent the fifty G's buying half a dozen good mares, and he'd been off to the races and the money bags ever since. The Whitneys and Vanderbilts and such had spent millions maintaining their stables. Rexford had spent almost nothing, but he had a way with horses, a keen sense of condition, and the ability to get his horses up to the race sharp

and ready. It made him a millionaire.

I looked at him, sitting there. I realized by the set of his jaw how ruthless he was, how much of the pirate he had in him, and suddenly I almost felt sorry for this unknown dame who was trying to rope in his son.

I said, "How much will you spend to buy her off?"

"Not a dime." He threw the cigar in the waste basket and got up to walk back and forth across the office. "Not one red cent. No one plays Val Rexford for a sucker."

"What do you want me to do then?"

"Frame her, marry her—I don't care. Only show my numbskull kid that she's no good."

"Cut off his allowance," I said. "If this dame is like you say, she'll run the other way, but fast."

"I can't." Little purple lines appeared to network his cheeks. "Five years ago I got in a jam. I turned the ranch and most of the stock over to Bob. It's still in his name although it belongs to me."

I almost laughed in his face. Obviously he was a fast operator. He'd made the title switch to crawl out of something, and now it was backfiring on him.

"Talk to your boy then."

"I can't. He's pig-headed. One word from me and he'd marry her just because. The only chance I have is to prove to him that she's a louse, a stinker. That's your job. I don't care how you do it. Even murder might be a good idea."

"And what do I get for this little chore?"

He glanced pointedly around the office. "Judging by looks, if I gave you fifty bucks I'd be overpaying you."

I grinned. "I'll take a thousand advance, a thousand against expenses and five G's when I finish."

He blew out his cheeks in anger. I just sat there, watching. After a minute he turned and went over and jerked open the door. I guess he expected me to rush after him like a cheap clothing dealer. I didn't. I said merely, "Don't slam it; the glass is loose."

He shut it then, but he was still inside. He came back to the desk and pulled out a wallet. He counted out one thousand and ten hundred-dollar bills. There were others in the wallet, a lot of others.

"I'm at the Brookfield Hotel in Pasadena," he said. "Don't waste time, and I expect results. If you pull a fast one I know some tough boys who would love to mess you for fifty bucks."

"The girl's name," I asked. "That's important, you know."

He grinned wryly. "She's a corn-colored filly with the bluest eyes in the world. She dances at Palmane's Supper Club, and don't go soft on her, snooper, or I'll make you hard

to catch. Just keep it businesslike."

"She has a name, hasn't she?"

"They call her Flame Gordon. That may be her name. It may not be. She's—she's nicely put together and has a little something. In fact, she's dynamite."

I stared at him. I wondered who was interested in the doll, the father or the son.

**P**INKY PALMANE was a little man. He had light sorrel hair and his face had that pinkish red coloring that you find once in a while. His nose was sharp and his eyes popped from his head as if his necktie had been pulled too tight.

Once, he'd been a little guy, running packaged goods into a major studio during the late days of prohibition. That had been a long time ago and the red-haired kid had come up, one night club after another, until he owned the biggest sucker trap in town.

It was a joint where a few movie stars and a lot of tourists paid triple prices for poor food and cheap whiskey. But his entertainment was usually good. He went in for name bands and specialty acts which drew the trade.

I came in over the soft carpet of the entry foyer and found Pinky standing beside the check counter. He wore a dinner coat and he looked as out of place in the soup and fish as I would have in an angel's veil.

He saw me and his eyes popped a little further; then he muttered something to the blonde checker and came forward.

"Out spending money, Al?"

"Not in your trap," I said. "I don't make enough in a week to pay for a tough steak in this joint."

"Business?" He didn't like that.

I shrugged. "I want to talk to a dame named Flame. I saw her picture outside in a glass-covered frame. Got any objection?"

"Let's talk about it in the office." He turned and led the way past the check counter, down a little hall and into an office. It had a white, heavy carpet, blond maple furniture with red upholstery, and the walls were a dusty blue decorated by two Corots. Nice—and expensive. A man's room for a man with taste.

He offered me a cigar, then a drink. I refused both of them. "What's the beef about Flame?" he said.

"A papa doesn't want his boy to play."

He squinted at me—if it's possible to squint pop-eyes. At least he tried. "Val Rexford, huh?"

I showed surprise. "How'd you know?"

He shrugged. "That wasn't a toughie. The kid's been around underfoot for two weeks."

"What kind of a jerk is he?"

"A nice kid with too much dough. Okay otherwise."

"On the level with this girl?"

"You said it."

"What kind of a babe is she?"

"Come and meet her." He didn't lead me back through the foyer. He used a side door which opened on a passage. The passage skirted the kitchen and led back to the rows of dressing rooms.

Music and laughter and the sound of dancing feet reached us faintly from the main restaurant. We went along a brick-walled passage past several closed doors until Pinky paused and knocked.

The first impression you had of the girl was that she was too thin. The next instant you forgot this. Perhaps it was her eyes, perhaps her long, corn-colored hair. Perhaps it was just her. She was well-named, Flame. She went through you like a flame. She made you want to straighten your necktie and smooth your hair and wish that you had gotten a shine. You saw her and you wanted to see her again; you felt as if life would be a little empty from now on unless you saw her.

Yes, I've seen a lot of girls, but never one like this. I didn't know whether she could dance or sing or act. I don't think audiences would have cared. It was enough just to look at her.

She had on a deep blue dressing gown which looked almost black. It was full cut and you couldn't see anything of her save the tips of her slipper toes and the white column of her neck. She sat in an easy chair in the corner of the small room. She had an open book in her small hands and she looked up inquiringly, then smiled when she saw Pinky in the doorway.

"What's up, Pinky?" Her voice startled me; it was warm and husky and had a throaty resonance. She closed the book and laid it on the table. I glanced at it and saw the name Keats. That was too much. First Pinky had Corots on his office walls, and now this girl read Keats.

"This guy wants to talk to you," said Pinky. "He's a private snoop. He's been hired to make you lay off young Rexford." He chuckled. "Watch yourself." Then he closed the door with himself on the outside.

Flame Gordon got up out of the chair. The robe was so full that you couldn't actually see the movement, but you sensed it. She didn't walk, she seemed to flow.

"Okay, handsome," she said. "You'd be almost pretty if it weren't for that broken nose. It makes you cute."

"Save it," I told her, "for your millionaires."

"So Val Rexford doesn't want me playing with sonny boy?"

"Pinky said that, not me."

She smiled. "You know, handsome, the old man amuses me. He's afraid to come out in

the open and object because he knows Bob would marry me tomorrow."

"My name's Al," I said. "Al Corn, and I don't like to be called handsome."

She started to laugh. "I've heard everything. The music is corny, the jokes are corny, even the detectives are—"

I caught her wrist and swung her in against me. The perfume she wore was enough to soften a stone image, but it didn't soften me. "Save it," I growled. "I've heard every gag about my name you could think of and a lot you wouldn't."

"You're hurting me."

"I'll break your arm if it happens to seem a good idea."

"Take your mitts off of her." I hadn't heard the door open, hadn't heard him come in. He was a big bozo with black hair and eyes and an olive skin. A Latin type, but big.

I let go the girl and turned around. I wasn't fast enough. He grabbed my shoulder and spun me like a top. His timing was perfect. When my jaw got in line with his right fist, he let it go—a short blow, not traveling more than ten or twelve inches.

But it had the jolt of a mule's hoof. I went down and he kicked me in the side twice before I even knew I was on the floor. I think he'd have jumped on me, but Flame had him by the arm, dragging him back.

"Frank, stop it, you fool. He wasn't hurting me. You'll kill him."

The man was breathing loudly through his classic nose. "That's what I want to do, kill him."

Her voice was sarcastic. "And sit in the hot chair. Get out of here. I'll handle this."

"But. . . ."

"Get out before I slap you down."

Even to my spinning mind this was one for the book. I couldn't guess at the dame's weight—the robe covered all her curves and corners—but judging by her face she couldn't have scaled more than ninety pounds.

He took it, though. He muttered something, but she backed him to the door and out into the hall. Then she slammed the door, snapped the lock and turned around.

I was picking myself up off the floor and she seemed a little amused. "You don't seem so tough now, handsome."

I shook my head to clear the buzz out of it, without too much success. "Who's the cyclone?"

"Frank Alaverdo, my dancing partner."

"Remind me to beat him up in a dark alley."

"I wouldn't. Frank used to be a fighter."

I didn't tell her that I'd learned a few naughty tricks with the OSS. No use making alibis to a dame when you've just been slugged out.

"Frank doesn't like people who push me around."

"Do people push you around?"

"Weren't you trying it, handsome?"

I shrugged. "This is getting us nowhere. What's the price?"

Her eyes widened. "Do you mean Val Rexford would really spend dough to buy me off?"

I shook my head. "That wasn't his idea. He had it thought out that I should frame you, or marry you or something. In his league that was worth all of five bills."

She smiled with her lips, not with her eyes. They were odd color and very intent. They went right into you without going on through.

"Do you think his offer was high enough—I mean for it to pay you to marry me?"

"I love my work," I said, giving her the eye.

"I can see you do. Get out of here, snoop, and don't come back. If you do, I'll let Frank work you over, but good."

That didn't frighten me. What I wanted most at the moment was a quiet chance at Frank without anyone to interfere. A lump had swollen on the side of my jaw and I wasn't at all certain that two of my ribs hadn't been torn loose from their anchorage. But I don't like threats, or guys who go about numbling them.

Anyway, I was getting no place here. The whole thing was soured. I'd tipped my hand to Pinky like a fool, and he'd wised up the dame. I might as well bow out and let Val Rexford hire some other boy scout. I left. I didn't even bother to say good-bye.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A Corpse to Remember

I CALLED Rexford's hotel from a booth in a bar on the boulevard. They said they expected him in fifteen or twenty minutes. My jaw ached. I went over to the bar and got some medicine. They called the medicine rye. It didn't help much. I tried a second hooker, then a third. It was taking slight effect after the fourth.

I went back to the booth and called Rexford's hotel. He still hadn't gotten home. I went back to the bar. Five drinks later I tried again. My tongue was a little thick by now and the girl at the switchboard had trouble figuring out who I wanted to talk to, but he still wasn't in.

Then I went home. Home is an apartment house high on the hill above Franklin. It used to be that on a clear night you could see the fully lighted pattern of the city's streets. Now with smog, you could only see a blurr.

The walk sobered me. My side hurt where

the punk had put the boot to me and I wondered before I'd climbed halfway up the hill whether it wouldn't have been smarter to have taken a cab.

The place called itself a hotel. There was a lobby and a small desk and switchboard at which someone sometimes sat. Most of the time they didn't. Most of the time you couldn't find the manager or anyone else.

I'd been there so long that I remembered what rents had been like before OPA. When I'd checked in from the war they'd thrown someone out to make room for me. It was a friendly house, a little old, a little smelly in the halls.

I used the automatic elevator to get to the second floor. Usually I walked, but the pain in my side was bad enough already. The hall upstairs showed the effects of the war. The runner was worn and had not been replaced for several years because of prices. I moved to the end and pushed open my door. It wasn't locked. In all the years I'd lived there I'd never troubled to lock a door.

My theory was that if someone actually wanted in, a cheap hotel lock would not keep them out. Besides, there was nothing of any real value in the apartment. I am not a person who collects things of value.

I pushed open the door and turned on the light. The living room looked small, smaller than usual, because it was fuller. Frank Alaverto lay diagonally across the square center portion of the green rug.

He hadn't changed much since I had seen him at the club, except that he was dead. He lay on his back, looking even bigger than he had in the girl's dressing room, and someone had cut a thin slit in his side with a knife.

I stood there in the doorway looking at him, not quite believing my eyes. I'd seen a lot of dead men at one time or another but up to now I'd always managed to keep them out of my home.

I'd climbed the hill outside, hating this guy because at every step my side had had a tortured hot feeling, and now he was dead.

I didn't touch anything. Training is a wonderful conditioner. I stood and looked, wondering how he got there, why he should be in my apartment, who killed him and why. My mind was a montage of conflicting questions as I went back down the stairs and found the manager in her apartment. She hadn't seen anyone come in. She hadn't heard anything and she wasn't very interested until I said there was a dead man in my room. Then she got excited.

**T**HE POLICE weren't as excited as she was. The police, represented by Detective Lieutenant Price of the Hollywood station, had

seen a lot of murders. He showed up with a couple of men, he asked me some questions, and then he hauled me down to the station.

Maybe I should have lied. Maybe I should have said that I'd never met the guy. Maybe I shouldn't have told them anything about the trouble I'd had with him in Flame Gordon's dressing room. I did. I'd dealt with cops before, a lot of times. I had my license to think about and a lot of other things including murder.

Flame Gordon said, "Hello, heel." She wasn't wearing her blue dressing gown now. She was wearing a neatly tailored suit of a soft, checkered material with a gold and ruby butterfly pin to her lapel. She looked like a million dollars. She didn't look as if she belonged in a police station. She didn't like being in a police station. It was obvious that she blamed me for her being there.

We were in Price's office and the crowd was growing by the minute. Price had phoned Pasadena and the police out there had picked up Val Rexford and his son Bob. They arrived only a few moments after Flame.

Pinky Palmane was the last man in. He'd had to straighten out a few things at the club and the cops had waited for him. Pinky in his own right was a big shot and they didn't push him around much.

Young Rexford looked startled when he saw the girl. He started forward but his father put out one big arm and stopped him.

Val Rexford was smoking one of his big cigars. His face was redder than it had been and his eyes had a wicked glint as they met mine. I knew that if I'd been in reach he'd have loved to break me in two.

Pinky Palmane was unconcerned. Cops bored him. He'd seen a lot of them during his life and they'd usually tried to cause him trouble. A little more trouble here or there didn't matter.

Price acted as master of ceremonies. They'd all been questioned separately, and he referred to notes his men had made as he talked.

"Let's get this straight. First, Mr. Rexford, I understand you hired Corn this morning. Right?"

Val Rexford was chewing at his cigar. From his expression it couldn't have tasted very good. "All right, I hired him."

"You hired him to arrange it so that your son would cease to be interested in Miss Gordon."

The younger Rexford threw a startled glance at his father, then glowered at him. He was a big guy, too, like his father. I decided that all in all Al Corn wasn't the most popular guy in the world.

Price went on. He told how I'd gone to the club, seen the girl, had the fight with Alaver-

do, then finally how I'd found the man's body in my apartment.

Val Rexford interrupted. "I don't see why you dragged us down here. Are you intimating that either my son or I killed this—this dancer in Corn's apartment?"

Price shrugged. "I'm not intimating anything. I'm trying to solve a murder."

Val Rexford puffed out his cheeks. "I don't see where we come into this at all. It's rather obvious that Corn, who I know from experience has a nasty temper, went to see this girl, had a fight with her dancing partner and took a rather severe licking. Then when the man followed him home, he got even by killing him."

Price looked at me. "Hear that, Al?"

"I hear it," I said. I figured I didn't owe Rexford anything now. I'd have stood by happily and watched someone, anyone, cut his throat.

Price considered me. He was a long, tall, hungry-looking man with the sad expression of a disillusioned undertaker. I'd never seen him look happy in all the years I'd known him.

Then he turned his attention to Flame Gordon. "What's your idea?"

She shook her head. "I haven't any."

He shook his head like a reproving school teacher. "Come, come, you must have some idea. What happened after Corn left your dressing room?"

"Nothing."

"What did Alaverdo say?"

"I didn't see him. He didn't show up for our number. I figured he was sulking. He did that sometimes."

"Weren't you concerned?"

"No, why should I have been?"

Price looked at her a little helplessly. "I don't know much about such things, but it seems to me that if your dancing partner failed to show up—"

"I did a single," said the girl. "I always did a single when Frank failed to show up."

Price looked at Pinky Palmane. "And what did you think about it?"

Pinky was plainly bored. "About what?"

"About this dancer not being around to do his number?"

Pinky shrugged. "When you've been in this racket as long as I have, you get to expect temperament. I figured he was sore. He usually was. So Flame went on single. For my dough it's a better act that way anyhow. I never could figure why she put up with the bum."

"And you didn't tell Alaverdo where Corn lived?"

"Why should I?"

"But you did talk to him after he'd been in the girl's room."

"That's right. He came whining to me the same as he always did when she tossed him out. I told him to go get drunk and forget it."

Price looked at me and spread his hands. "Looks like it's for you, Al."

I didn't answer. I watched him instruct each one not to get away too far from the city, watched them go. Price looked at me with his sad eyes.

"I don't figure this. I've known you for some years and you never struck me as a killer."

"I'm not."

"Still, this guy beat you up. I suspect you were very mad."

"I was. I'd have waited a chance and messed him up proper, but I wouldn't have killed him. Only a fool would leave himself open for the hot seat."

"Yeah," he said. "But he was a big guy, and quick with his fists. You might have killed him in self-defense."

"Not with a knife. Besides, I'm able to take care of myself. I know a few tricks. At the night club, he caught me when I wasn't looking."

"That's what they all say."

I grinned sourly. "Look, I can handle him or you, or anyone else. Want me to prove it?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't like to wrestle." He stood up. "Think I'll hold you as a material witness."

"Not with my lawyer sitting out beside the receiving desk you won't. Make it murder, or I'll be out on bail."

"You smart guys," he said. "You all sound like sea lawyers. Make it easy, Al, and claim self-defense."

"No."

"Then I'll book you."

"And I'll sue you for false arrest."

We stared at each other angrily. He snorted finally. "You're making it tough for yourself. We'll dog every step you take."

"Dog away," I said.

"We'll nail you to the cross if we find anything."

"You will anyway."

He swore at me. He let me go. I'd known all along that he would. Price was smart. He was one cop who never went into court unless he was loaded, and this case had so many holes in it you could have driven a wagon and team through it in a dozen places.

The bartender at the joint I'd parked in gave me a partial alibi. He couldn't recall exactly when I'd come in, or when I'd left, but he remembered me being there, remembered that I'd been there some little time.

A couple of reporters stopped me on the way out. They weren't much interested after I said I'd never seen Flame Gordon before that night. They angled around, looking for

a peg to hang a story on, but there wasn't much. I knew how the papers would play it: a picture of Flame, a write-up of her comments, very little about the dead guy or me.

They didn't ask a thing about Val Rexford or his son. Evidently they hadn't gotten their hands on that angle at all.

I wasn't feeling at all good when I finally went down the steps and bummed a ride in a police car toward the boulevard. I wasn't in the clear. The very fact that I'd had a beef with Alaverdo and that he'd been knifed in my place would keep the cops nosing around.

One thing was troubling me. How had the dancer known where I lived? I didn't have a phone listed there and I wasn't in the city directory. It would have been easy enough for him to find my office, but not my home address. It was one thing I'd never advertised.

I got off at the boulevard and watched the police car pull away. It was nearly three o'clock in the morning and I had an idea it was getting time for ham and eggs. The liquor I'd taken on earlier had worn off and I wasn't feeling too healthy. I had turned and started to walk east when I heard someone call my name.

I looked around. There was a small coupe pulling to the curb. My first impulse was to jump away. A lot of things I hadn't liked had happened that night. Then I realized she was alone in the car. It was getting pretty bad when I ran away from blondes, especially blondes like Flame.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Bullets for Breakfast

**I** WENT over and got into the car. It was a cheap one, five months old, not the kind you'd have expected a gal like her to drive.

She had on an old trench coat with a scarf tied around her hair. Just a plain little girl, riding around alone in the night.

"You shouldn't be out alone," I said. "Since the war this town is not a place for little girls to go riding alone."

"I can take care of myself, handsome." She was off on the handsome routine again. She evidently knew it annoyed me, and her purpose was to annoy me.

"Okay," I said, "so you can take care of yourself. Can you take care of me too?"

"Did you kill Frank?" she asked.

"Would you believe me if I said I didn't?"

She considered as she started the motor and put the car in gear. "Maybe."

"Well, I didn't. I like to live too well, and I have too much respect for the cops. They do catch a killer now and then."

"Who did?"

"Answer me that and I'll buy you a fur

coat with the thousand Val Rexford gave me."

"Did Bob kill him?"

I stared at that. "Why should Bob Rexford kill him, and how would either of them get up to my apartment?"

She said slowly, "Bob came to the night club shortly after you left. Pinky told him about your being there and why."

I made a mental note to punch Pinky in the nose. "Why didn't you say that at the police station?"

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

"I thought you liked me."

"I'm not quite sure."

"Well," I told her, "if you'd opened your face about young Rexford it might have helped to take the cops off my neck. He put on quite an act in Price's office. He pretended to be surprised as hell when he heard his old man had hired me."

"I saw that."

This girl was sharp as a tack. There wasn't very much she missed. The point was, why had she trailed me from the police station and picked me up? What did she want?

I asked her that.

She turned her head and gave me a slow, appraising look. There wasn't much traffic at that hour and she was driving slowly. "Maybe I like you."

"Sure, and maybe I'm Bing Crosby. Come on, baby, give. You didn't hang around waiting for the cops to uncollar me for love. It's cold tonight."

She laughed. "You don't have a very good opinion of yourself or your charm."

"I've been told off by enough dames so I have an inferiority complex. Stop stalling. Give."

"All right. I want to know who killed Alaverdo?"

"In love with him?"

She said, "Can't a girl have some interest in a friend without being in love with him?"

"Can she?"

"She can. Alaverdo picked me up when I was trying to get started. He taught me to dance, to dress and to sell a song. Pinky never could understand why I put up with the bum. I put up with him because if he hadn't helped there never would have been a Flame Gordon."

"You didn't love him, but he loved you, is that it?"

"He thought he loved me," she corrected the statement. "He was in love with the girl he'd created, the star he thought he'd make me."

"Now you're doing yourself dirt."

She shook her head. "No I'm not, handsome. I'm not trying to sell anything, I'm just another gal with a little ability. I had a lot of ambition once. I've lost a lot of it along the

way. I've found that everything you see under neon lights doesn't glitter. I'd have quit the racket a year ago if Frank would have let me."

"And do what?" I said. "Become a librarian?"

"How'd you know?" She sounded really startled. "That's what I studied in college."

That one floored me. I decided that I didn't know anything about anything, especially women. "All right," I said, "so now you can thank whoever dug a hole in Alaverdo's side and then go back and chaperon a whole building full of books."

"Are you as tough as you sound," she wondered, "or do you just talk that way to impress yourself?"

This gal had a way of getting under my skin. "I'm just hungry," I said. "I've had a hard night and it's getting on toward breakfast."

"I'll cook you breakfast," she said and turned off the boulevard. "It's only a couple of blocks to my apartment."

**T**HIS WAS something new. She could cook. She proved it half an hour later when I sat down in the little dinette at the end of her white-walled kitchen and started on the ham and eggs. The food and the coffee both helped, and I was beginning to feel at least half like myself when the apartment door buzzed.

I looked up, startled, but I wasn't any more startled than my hostess.

"I wonder who—"

It was just getting light outside, a dull gray showing beyond the windows.

"How well do you know the milkman?"

"Someone," she said, "should slap you."

"Try it." She looked cute in the white wrap-around apron she'd put on over her suit.

Instead she rose and went to the door. I noticed that she hesitated a little. I got the idea that she might be afraid.

Personally I slid over so that I'd be free of the little table. I didn't know who it was, but I'd had some experience with her explosive friends. I didn't want to be caught at a disadvantage the way I had been in her dressing room.

It's lucky I did, for the minute I heard his voice I knew it was Bob Rexford and that I was in for trouble. I got to my feet, hearing them arguing in the outer hall.

"Why can't I come in?"

"Because."

"You're cooking breakfast; I can smell it. Someone's here." He certainly had a nasty way of throwing his words. I was just about to move into the hall and settle him when the girl gave up.

"All right, there is someone here. But I

want no trouble, understand that? I want no trouble."

He must have brushed by her because he was the first through the door. I don't know whom he expected, but he certainly didn't expect me. His face fell apart with surprise and for an instant he couldn't think of anything to say. Then it was like a steam engine blowing apart.

"Ha!"

"Ha, yourself."

"I've been waiting for this." He was big and young, and he was very angry. His fists balled up to look like small balloons and he started to swing one at my head.

There was a lot he didn't know about fighting, and he learned some of it in the next half minute. I stepped inside his swing, let it slide harmlessly by, locked my arm over his and used my other to chop him twice in the belly. He grunted with each blow. Then I stepped quickly back, nailed him on the jaw and hit him twice as he fell.

It was neat and quiet and orderly. The girl had stepped into the doorway. She watched without sound. After he'd gone down, I stooped, caught the front of his expensive coat and hoisted him into a chair.

He wasn't clear out, but he was so punchy that he couldn't have told you his name. I told the girl to get some water which she did, still without speaking. I got some of it into his mouth, saw his eyes clear a little and anger come back into them as he remembered.

He was game enough. He wanted to get back onto his feet and start swinging again. "Behave," I said, "or the next time I'll really slap you around."

"You bum." I wasn't certain whether the words were addressed to the girl or to me.

"Save it," I said. "Stop being a hero."

"Go ahead and kill me, like you killed Alaverdo. . . ."

I looked at the girl. "Maybe you can make this jerk talk sense."

She kneeled down on the bench at his side. "Look, Bob, you've got the wrong angle."

"Don't talk to me. My father was right. You're no good."

I took a quick step forward. I was going to slap his teeth loose, but she stopped me. "All right, I'm no good. If you believe that what are you doing up here?"

He looked at her, his eyes filled with unspoken misery. I knew how he felt. This girl had something. She got under your skin. She gave you screwy thoughts. You wanted to protect her, take care of her, and yet, you didn't quite believe in her.

"I couldn't stay away," he said. "I had to come."

"What's your dad got against her?" I shot at him.

He turned to look at me. He hated me, but he had to talk. It was bursting out of him, eating his heart out.

"You know."

"I know nothing. I got hired for a job. After I saw the girl I didn't want the job."

She gave me a long questioning look at that, but she didn't speak. The boy looked at me also and his eyes almost said, "You too." Instead, when he spoke he was talking about his father. "The old man's got it bad."

"Bad, what bad?"

He said, "The old man saw her. He asked her to marry him."

I hadn't known that. I looked at the girl. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She shrugged. "Would you have believed me?"

I shook my head. "Probably not. Is it the truth?"

She nodded.

"And you turned him down. Did you tell him you went for his son?"

"I didn't tell him anything. I just said no. He guessed it was his son. He couldn't believe I'd turn him down unless there was another man."

"What about Alaverdo?"

She looked a little startled. "But Frank was just my dancing partner."

"Did Val Rexford know that?"

"Why?"

"Did you believe it?" I shot at Bob Rexford, "or were you jealous of her dancing partner?"

He flushed. "Are you trying to suggest I killed him?"

"I'm not suggesting anything, I asked you a question."

"Well," he stalled, "I didn't like the way he acted toward her. But I didn't kill him. How could I? I didn't know where your apartment was."

**T**HERE IT was again. No one knew where my apartment was. That is, no one connected with this case. No one but me. I began to wonder if I'd gotten drunker than I thought, if I'd slipped up there and killed the guy without remembering.

That was silly, of course. "Do you know where your dad was last night?"

He shook his head. "At the hotel I guess."

"He wasn't. I tried to call him a dozen times."

"Are you saying my father killed Alaverdo?"

I spread my hands. "Where were you? Got an alibi?"

He shook his head. "No."

"You can tell me where you were."

He hesitated. "You won't believe me, but I went for a drive, up along the coast. I

was upset. I wanted a chance to think."

It was just screwy enough to be true. The average person, asked to account for his time at any given moment, is usually at a loss. It's only the criminal who can always call up an alibi at any moment he needs one.

"This," I said, "is getting us nowhere. I'm still number one on the list of suspects. You still want to find out who killed your friend, and sonny boy here still wants to marry you."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, no."

He started to beg. He started to accuse her of being interested in me. She didn't argue; she just shook her head. "Both of you get out of here."

"But what'll you do, I mean without a partner?" I asked.

"A single," she said.

"What about the library job?"

"You don't know much about libraries," she said. "They're more particular than school boards. They'd never hire me now."

We went. Bob Rexford seemed relieved to find that I was going too. His car was parked in front of the apartment and he offered me a lift. I decided that maybe he wasn't such a bad guy after all.

As we rode back toward Hollywood I pulled out my billfold, found the ten hundred-dollar bills and folding them into a little wad passed them over.

He stared. "What's this?"

"The dough your old man paid me. I didn't earn it. I'm funny that way. I like to earn the dough I keep."

He didn't say anything, but thrust the money into his pocket. "She's quite a girl," I told him.

"Yeah."

"If you can believe everything about her."

"I believe her."

"Sure," I said, but I couldn't help remembering that half an hour before he had come bursting into her apartment with blood in his eye.

I had him drop me at Hollywood and Vine. I had a reason. I watched him pull away, then turned and walked north. It was full daylight, but there was hardly anyone on the streets. And suddenly I was very tired. I felt as if I would never make it up the hill.

My breath was pretty short when I finally reached the top and my legs had the rubbery feel that comes from sheer exhaustion.

The building sat back from the street with a strip of tired grass before it and a bank of heavy shrubbery on the corner. I passed the shrubbery, noting idly that there was a car parked on the side street with the motor running. I paid no attention; I was too tired. I turned in the walk, stepped up on the small entry platform and my hat fell off.

It fell before I heard the sound of the shot.

But I knew what had happened. My subconscious worked faster than my conscious mind. I jerked the door open and dived head first into the shelter of the lobby. As I did so, the big glass panel of the door fell out behind me and there was the sound of a second shot.

Whoever was sniping meant business. The deserted desk seemed to offer the best cover and I dived for it, sliding into the partial protection on my hands and knees. I twisted then, pulling my gun and waiting for my would-be killer to come through the door.

No one appeared. Outside the apartment a motor raced and I recalled the auto which had been parked in the side street. Cursing, I climbed to my feet just as the manager in a moth-eaten bathrobe appeared in the hall. Three or four tenants came stringing down the stairs. I slid my gun from sight and pretended that I too had been attracted by the shots.

"What the devil goes on?"

The manager looked at me, at the shattered glass door. "How come you're dressed?"

I shrugged. "Up early for a change." I couldn't be certain whether she went for the story or not. She was a woman who had heard a lot of stories and seen a lot of life. Apartment managers are that way.

"Probably some of your no-good friends," she sniffed. "The same people who killed that man in your apartment last night."

I was sure she was right, but I didn't mean to let her know. "It doesn't make sense," I told her. "No one knows where I live. Even the cops didn't give out the address on last night's kill. I asked Price to hold it. I like to keep my private life my own."

She sniffed again. "Someone knew," she told me, "unless the police are right and you did the murder yourself." It was easy to see that she had decided that I wasn't a very satisfactory tenant, even if I was an old friend.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Blonde Bait

**YOU HAVE** to sleep sometime. After the radio car boys had asked all their questions I hit the sack. I left orders at the desk that I wasn't to be called for anything short of a fire. I managed to sleep until four. Then I got up, took a shower and went down to my boulevard office to find out if the postman had left anything besides bills.

I didn't find any mail, but I found Val Rexford, and he was annoyed. "The janitor let me in," he said. "I've been waiting for two hours."

One of the metal file drawers was open a couple of inches. I'm careful about small things. I knew I hadn't left it that way.

"Have fun going through my files?" He didn't deny it. "I found nothing interesting."

"Too bad," I said. I dropped my hat on the tree in the corner and sat down.

"A fine kind of a heel you turned out to be. I pay you too much and you blab your business all over Los Angeles."

"I sent your dough back by your son."

"I got it, but that still doesn't change things."

I'd slept all day, but I was still tired and I had a small buzzing headache at the back of my neck. "Look, pal, if you came up here to get me to say I'm sorry, you're on the wrong track. It was a stinking job you handed me, and I'm still not certain you didn't merely hire me for a fall guy."

He blinked. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"You're in love with the dame," I said. "That's why you wanted sonny boy run off, because you go for her yourself in a big way."

He didn't deny that either.

"So maybe you figured it wasn't your son but this dancing man Alaverdo who had the inside track with the chick. Maybe you've been sharpening up a knife to carve a hole between his ribs, only you figured you needed a fall guy. So you hired me. You sent me out to the club, knowing I'd get into a beef with the jerk. Then somehow you lured him to my apartment and did your knife work there, thinking that little Al Corn would get all the blame."

He shook his head. "You must smoke reefers to dream up anything like that. In the first place, I didn't know where you live. I still don't, for that matter."

There it was again. No one knew where I lived. Therefore no one but me could have killed Alaverdo. I chewed a match stem trying to get the answer, but it wouldn't come.

"Okay," I said. "So what are you doing here? You didn't come to see me for love."

"I came to give you another chance to earn that thousand."

"Who shall I kill this time?"

"No one," he said. "I want you to talk to Miss Gordon. She won't talk to me or see me. I want you to explain to her that I meant no harm by what I tried to do. I—I love her."

I had an impulse to laugh. "Yesterday you were saying I should stop her seeing your son, that you wanted her stopped even if I had to marry her."

He brushed this aside. "I didn't mean that. Of course a girl like her wouldn't be interested in a private detective."

I wasn't buying his opinions, but he gave me an idea.

"Okay," I said, "I'll try it."

"You'll talk to her?"

"Why not?"

He pulled his wallet into view. I waved it aside. "Put it in your pocket. You can pay me after the job."

He didn't understand. "What's the trick?"

"She may not see me," I said. "I'll wait to be paid until after I've talked with her."

"You trust me," he sounded surprised.

"I can afford to trust you. You won't welch on a bet like that. You'd always be afraid I'd tell your girl friend you were a piker."

He went finally, after I'd assured him that I'd call his hotel after I saw her. He had hardly gone when Lieutenant Price showed up. He walked into the office as if he were walking into a gang of thieves.

"What did old Rexford want?"

"Wanted me to play cupid," I said, wondering why he'd taken the trouble to come to see me.

"Cupid? You?" Price started to laugh. I thought he'd burst all the buttons from his vest.

"What's so funny about that?" I was getting fed up with insults.

He laughed harder than ever. Then he stopped suddenly as if he'd wiped the laughter off his face with an electric switch. "What were you doing in Flame Gordon's apartment early this morning?"

"So you had me followed."

"Of course."

"I was having breakfast."

"What, with young Rexford?"

"It's a shame your man didn't follow me on to my place. He'd have collared the mugg that tried to blast me down."

"He followed young Rexford instead. Are you certain anyone took a shot at you this morning, Al?"

I stared at him angrily. "You'd have been certain if you'd seen the broken glass scattered all over the lobby where the bullet smashed the front door."

"I was thinking," he said. "I was wondering if I was in your shoes, and if I'd killed Alaverdo and I wanted to get the cops off my neck if it wouldn't be a smart idea to pretend to be attacked, to have fired the shot myself through that door panel."

I stared at him. "You and your bright ideas." I said it bitterly.

"We found the bullet," he said. "It wasn't inside the lobby as if it had been fired from the street. It was in the stucco wall at the side of the entry."

"That's right. The door was open against that wall when the shot was fired. Someone fired from the corner, broke the glass. Naturally the bullet would lodge in the wall."

He said, "You've always got an answer for everything."

"That's right."

He rose. "Don't be too cocky. You're still under the gun, friend."

"Thanks for the tip. I'll remember that." I watched him go. After he left, I sat at my desk for some time without bothering to get up and turn on the lights. I was thinking. It's always an effort for me to think and at the moment it was worse.

**THE CLUB PALM**ANE was doing a nice early business. I went in without seeing anyone I knew and found my way to the bar. A couple of martinis acted like a shot of blood plasma and put some life into my veins. I was about to see if a third would make me feel human when someone put a hand on my shoulder and I looked around to see young Rexford. His face was a little flushed as if he, too, had been taking nourishment in liquid form, and his tongue sounded slightly thick.

"What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd eat," I lied. "They still serve food, don't they."

He frowned at me as if trying to make up his mind. "You're here for my father," he accused. "You're still working for him."

"What makes you think that?"

"I followed him to your office. He's up to something. I can tell by the way he acts."

I shrugged.

"Let her alone," he told me angrily. "She has enough trouble holding her job here, keeping Pinky in line."

"Yeah," I said, "Sure. Now scram, sonny. You're spoiling my drink."

His eyes glinted dangerously. He'd have loved to smash his fist into my face, but he didn't quite dare. He stood there for a long moment, trying to make up his mind. Then he turned flatly on his heel and disappeared toward the door.

I ordered another drink. When it came I pretended that I was out of money. The bartender didn't like that.

"It's all right," I said. "Is Pinky in his office? Pinky's a friend of mine. He'll okay the tab."

The waiter looked uncertain. "I'll see." He motioned to one of the captains and the man disappeared. He came back a couple of minutes later with Pinky Palmane. The night club man was smiling, his face looking redder than ever.

"This I never expected to see, Al Corn bouncing for a drink tab."

I grinned. "Sorry, chum. I've got so much on my mind I forgot the pocket book. How about it?"

"On the house," he said. "Come on back to the office."

I followed him back along the passage. He shut the door and motioned to the open cigar humidor. I shook my head and found a ciga-

rette instead. He held out a match for me.

"What are you doing here?"

"An ambassador," I told him. "Val Rexford sent me. He wants I should play cupid."

Some of the good humor disappeared from Pinky's face. "Listen, Al. I've had about enough of this. Flame Gordon isn't going to be bothered by every john that happens to have a yen for her. The girl deserves a break."

I nodded. "That's right. I agree with you. That's why I'm going to marry her."

"You're going to—" he repeated the words after me slowly as if they didn't quite register.

"Marry her," I said. "We decided it over breakfast at her apartment this morning."

"You're kidding."

I shook my head. "Ask her. Why should I kid you?"

"Why should you?" He was talking to himself. "That's fine, Al, fine. You couldn't have a nicer girl."

"I think so."

"Going in to see her now?"

"Not now," I said. "I'm a little drunk. I don't want her to see me this way. I think I'll get a cab and go home."

"I'll drive you."

"Don't bother."

"It won't be a bother. It will be a pleasure. Come on out this way." He led me out the brickwalled passage to a rear lot. There was no one around.

He got a big black coupe from its parking place and we went out the driveway beside the night club. As we crossed the sidewalk I leaned forward and stared hard at the man leaning against the wall. He returned my stare, then turned quickly away.

Pinky Palmene said, "Not like you to get drunk, Al."

"I've had a rotten day." I put my head back against the cushion of the seat and closed my eyes. We drove down through Hollywood and turned left at Vine. The big car took the grade easily. Palmene said, "I won't bother to drive you all the way up, Al. It's a bad place to turn."

"You had no trouble this morning," I told him.

He had pulled to the curb. He turned his head quickly and I saw the gun in his hand. It must have been in his lap.

"So you know."

"I know," I said. "I think I'd have known from the first if I had only let myself think about it, but I kept trying to work Val Rexford into the picture."

"And what was the final tip-off?" He held the gun loosely, ready.

"The cops," I said. "They followed young Rexford this morning after he left me. He couldn't have circled back and shot at me."

"But his father?"

I shrugged. "The old man was alone with me at my office. The cops were watching outside, just as they are watching this car at the moment."

"It's an old gag," he said, not turning his head.

"But a good one," I said. "Take him, boys."

He turned then, enough so that he could see the police car reflection in the rear view mirror. He swore, and I brought my elbow down on top of his gun forcing it into the seat between us. He pulled the trigger twice, burying the slugs in the cushion. Then I shot him. My gun had been in my other hand all during the ride. It was a little gun, hardly longer than my finger, a .25 automatic.

The bullet hit him in the side and went into the stomach. It hurts there. I wanted it to hurt. I wanted him to talk before he died.

**F**LAME GORDON was sitting in the corner of her dressing room when I pushed open the door. She didn't seem surprised to see me. She didn't look glad. In fact, I had the feeling that she was a little afraid.

"Hello."

I said hello. I walked over and sat down on the bench before her dressing table. "I used your name in vain tonight, baby."

She arched her eyebrows questioningly. The look went through me like a thousand knives. "Yes?"

"Yes, I told Pinky Palmene you were going to marry me."

"You didn't." She was on her feet, all in one motion.

"But I did."

"You've got to get out of here."

"Why?"

She drew a long breath. "Please, you've got to leave. You can't see me again."

"If it's Pinky you're afraid of, he's dead."

The words checked her like a blow. For a long moment she didn't believe it. She drew a long, shuddering breath. "How?"

"I shot him. I used you for bait, honey. In this Alaverdo kill, it made no sense unless you were the bait. Everyone connected with it was connected with you. I tried to blame it on Val Rexford or his son. I even considered the possibility that you yourself might have done the killing. Pinky was so obvious that I fell over him, yet didn't see him."

"How, obvious?" The words weren't more than a whisper.

"He was around you, kitten. Any man who was around you much couldn't help but fall. You've got that something. He knew I'd come here. Alaverdo was bothering him. He knew how loyal you were to your dancing partner, so he saw his chance. He sent Alaverdo into

## A DAME CALLED FLAME

the dressing room, knowing that we'd quarrel. I was a fall guy, made to order. After the quarrel, he suggested that they, he and Alaverdo, go up to my place and warn me to leave you alone. He got him up there, killed him and left without being seen. Pinky admitted it all to the cops before he died.

"The thing I overlooked was that Pinky knew where I lived. His kind knows things like that. It's their business to know, to keep tabs on all the boys who might cause them trouble one way or another. Pinky thought I'd be pinched and that would be the end of the story. But Price happened to be a smart cop and a friend of mine. He didn't hold me. So I got loose and you picked me up and took me home for breakfast. That was more than Pinky could stand. He took a shot at me this morning. He wasn't going to have any rivals."

The girl looked at me. "I—I—"

"You could have told me," I said. "You suspected it last night, didn't you?"

She inclined her head. "But I had no proof, and he'd been so good to me."

"I had no proof either," I said. "But he hadn't been so good to me. So I came out here, purposely to make him jealous. The cops were following me, have been right along. I pretended to be drunk and got him to drive me home. When he knew where to go without asking directions, I was certain I was right. But I had to be sure. The cops were following. I'd made certain they'd seen me in Pinky's car. So that's that. . . ."

She sat down wearily. "I—I'm sorry, but I'm glad it's over. He was funny, Al. He never made a pass, never said a word. But I knew by the way he watched me that he burned up whenever I looked at another man. I suppose he'd been jealous of Alaverdo for months, and he had no cause."

"He was jealous of me too."

She looked up then. "I—I don't know what to say."

"I'm only a private dick," I said, "not Val Rexford with all his dough. He still wants you, baby."

"I don't want him."

"Meaning. . . ?"

"I don't know, Al. Would you be jealous when other men looked at me?"

"Sure, I couldn't help it."

"Then it's no go. I—I can't stand jealousy. All my life men have been that way. I wish I'd never heard the name Flame. I wish I had that job in a library."

"I'll build you one," I said, and suddenly she was in my arms. "We'll put dark glasses on you and hide you in a library. We'll—"

She stopped my talking then. Among other things she knew how to kiss.

THE END

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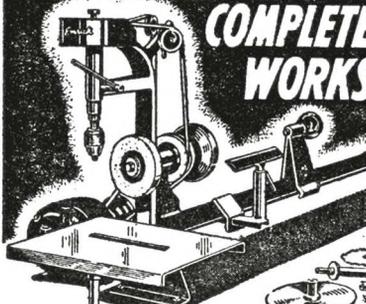
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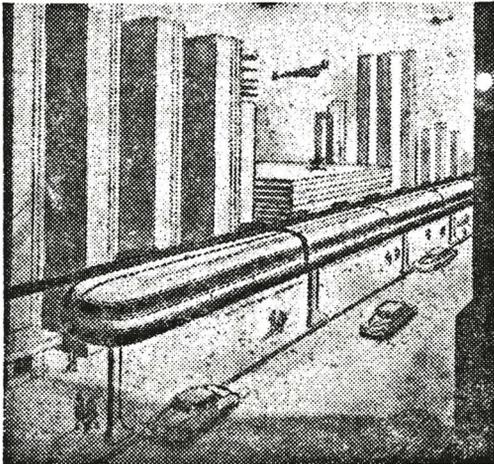
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## DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 34)

"Where are you going, Carl?" Mark asked softly.

"I got to wake up the boss and tell him about this. He better not tell 'em I was there."

"That won't do any good, Carl. They'll find out. You did the killing, Carl. Sam has an out. He'll have to save his own neck. You're hooked, Carl."

"But he don't have to tell that I was with him."

"Charley will recognize you when he sees you again. Maybe if—skip it," Mark said and looked at his cards again.

"Give, Mark. What're you thinking?"

"That you still have time to get away. Only it won't do much good. Even if you get away, the cops will sweat your name out of Donner. They'll get you later."

Mark looked down at the hands covering the cards. "You'd never think one hand could send you to the gallows like that," he said. "But it will. As soon as Donner talks."

Mark leaned back and clenched his slim hands beneath the table to keep them from trembling.

"I'm sorry, pal." He smiled sadly. "Donner really put you on a spot this time."

"No, he didn't," Lind breathed. "It was his idea. It was just a job to me. I got to protect my own interests."

"That's right, too, Lind. If you don't, no one else will. It's your life."

"So Donner doesn't talk."

"You can't stop him. Anyway, there's the dermal nitrate test."

"I'll stop him. Plenty, Pal. Plenty."

Perfectly motionless Mark watched the man pick up a coat and take a gun from the side pocket. He hardly breathed as he saw Lind go quietly to the closed door, open it, and ease himself into the room.

Mark was almost to the stairs when he heard the muffled shot behind him in Donner's apartment. He wondered if Donner had awakened before he died.

Down the street he stopped at a drugstore and made a call to Charley Grange, the cop.

"On the Elim case," Mark said, "Donner ordered him killed. A man named Carl Lind did it. Lind just killed Donner in his apartment. You'd better roll fast on it."

"Who is this?" Charley Grange's voice demanded.

Eli Mark smiled and stentily hung up.

*Charley, if you were smart, he thought, you'd print my name, Eli Mark, and cross out the last three letters. You'd have Elim left. That would be the tip-off. My brother kept his last name. I didn't. And Donner made a wrong move.*

## CRY MURDER!

(Continued from page 45)

stairs. Samson's bullet plowed into the floor, and strangely, Samson, even as Drake leaped, was reeling. The flash in Samson's eyes was sheer surprise. His eyes glazed then as Drake's hard body hit him. Samson's gun flew off to one side.

There was a sharp scream from Linda—and at once hoarse shouts from outside. Footsteps pounded to the door and it swung in to reveal the frightened dick from the D. A.'s office and the grim DeSota.

Samson, half dazed, bloody and mumbling, was now trying to rise. Then he saw DeSota. He saw DeSota's grimness. He seemed at last to realize that his plan had been good only so long as it functioned smoothly. That Drake could be proved guilty only if he couldn't talk and act, only if he were dead. The button no longer could be used as evidence. The broad man and the beat cop could be made to talk. Suddenly Samson put both hands to his face, sat there like that, sobbing.

Drake turned then back to the stairway, to Linda. She stood as he'd seen her once before, tonight, white, like marble. The gun, *his* gun that she'd slipped from his pocket, now hung loosely at her side.

"Suppose, on your road, you would meet a barrier. Wouldn't you look for a side road to go round it?"

He'd said that.

"But David, I wouldn't know what to do with a gun!"

She'd said that.

Now she dropped the gun and her lips were open, her face ashen. Drake clumbed on up the stairs to her side, reached out and touched her. Suddenly she shuddered, seeming to wake as from a dream.

"David," she gasped, "baby's crying!"

He saw DeSota's nod, and he walked with her up the stairs then.

THE END

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## DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 48)

Another voice said, "You come back, Jackson? That's good. Very good!"

Jeopardy looked around. "You killed that salesman, Liver Ledbetter! And it was you kept putting them twenty-dollar bills around so the sheriff would think I done it!"

Ledbetter smiled. "Too bad you guessed what happened, Jackson. Now I gotta shoot you also. Good thing the sheriff told me to stay here in case you come back. He will be pleased to find that I have shot you."

Jeopardy blinked. "How come you cut off the feller's hair? I can't reckon why you done that!"

"Hardest man to kill I ever seen; bullets couldn't do it. Never could stand a wounded man watching me while I took his money. I'm chicken-hearted that way." Liver shuddered, then tensed. "I hear Shorty and the sheriff coming now. Say your prayers, old man!"

But sooner than he could pull the trigger, a stream of liquid Hotchkiss struck him squarely in the eyes. He fired twice, dropped the weapon and tore at his face with his hands. Then he fell swearing to the ground.

"Sorta stings, don't it?" said Jeopardy, crawling from under the car where he'd nose-dived.

The sheriff came around the corner of the house leading his two drooping, sneezing bloodhounds. "What's going on here?" he boomed.

Jeopardy pointed. "There's your killer, Sheriff!"

"What . . . !"

Jeopardy kicked the revolver out of Liver's reach. "Knoved it soon's I recollected his car overheated yesterday. He'd fixed it since then. But how? They ain't no place around here he could of got a new fanbelt to keep his engine cooled. Now, the belt a man hikes his britches with makes a mighty fine fanbelt, Sheriff, as you well know. And that salesman feller didn't have no belt on him. If you take a look under his car hood you will see the new fanbelt and what it's made of—the salesman's missing belt!"

It was as Jeopardy said. Also, Liver's bulging wallet displayed the missing currency.

"Reckon you're right, Jeopardy," admitted the sheriff.

Later, Jeopardy watched the car depart with its three men and the despondent bloodhounds. Then he turned and peered under the house. "Come out from thar, you mangy-eared varmint!" he yelled at the old blue-tick. "And take a peek at my new store-bought shoes!"

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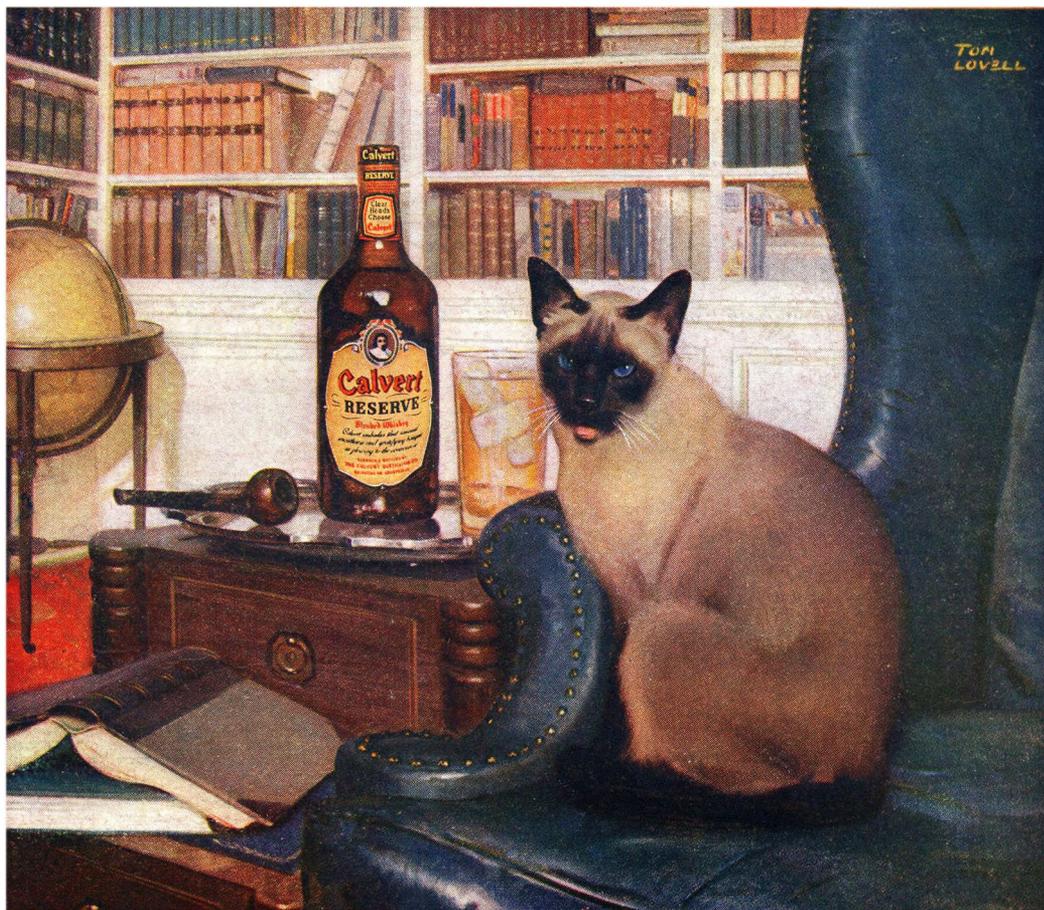
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