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OCTOBER 1ST

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CLIFF FARRELL

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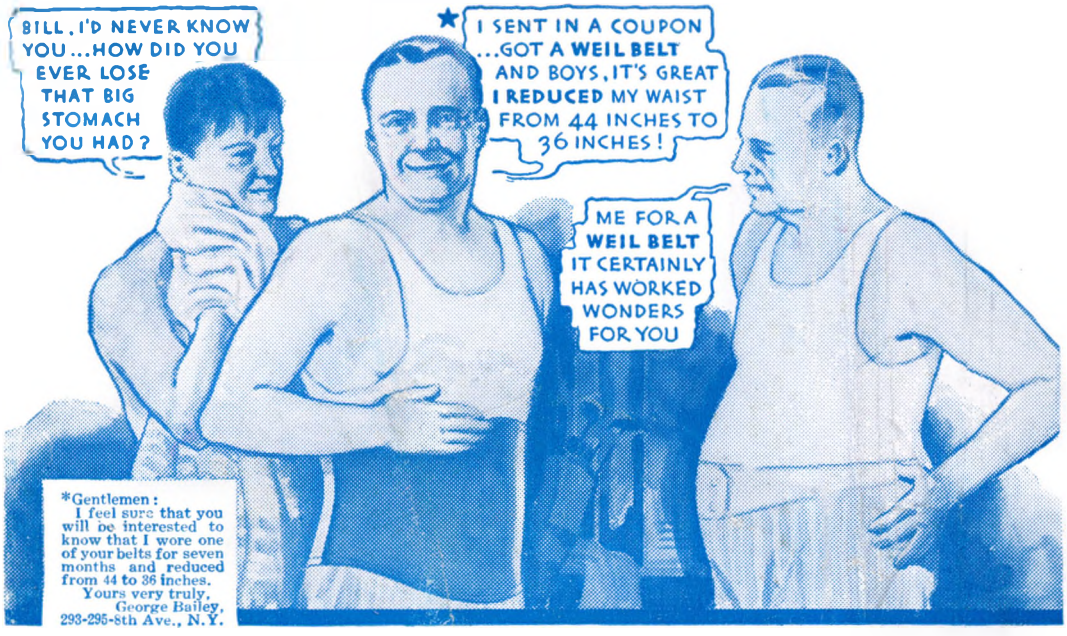

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YOU will appear much slimmer at once, and in 10 short days your waistline will actually be 3 inches smaller...three inches of fat gone...or it won't cost you one cent.

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10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

EVERY STORY COMPLETE — EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 12 — **CONTENTS for JULY 1st, 1934** — **No. 4**

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Issued the First and Fifteenth of Every Month

Watch for the July 15th Issue — On the Newsstands July 1st

Published twice a month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second class matter Mar. 16, 1933, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office.

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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(Please print plainly.)

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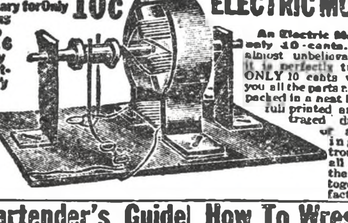

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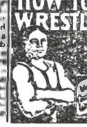

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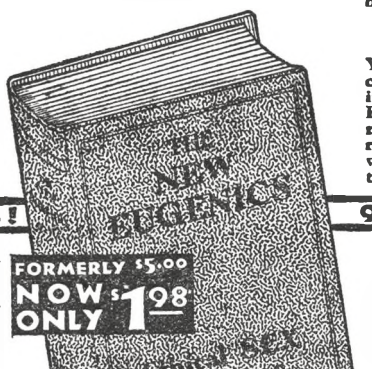

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"Mr. Treavor has had one of his spells—a drink, please."

DEATH DROPS IN

There he sat with murder in his yellow streak down a blackmail-money it would be death that'd —waiting for Clay Holt to cross that his visitor might have been

CHAPTER ONE

All American Hard Guy

CLAY HOLT leaned far back in his swivel desk chair, tossed the highly scented letter into the steel basket and followed it with a half-smoked cigarette. For a few minutes he watched

A Clay Holt Novelette

by

Carroll John Daly

Author of "The Shadow of Holy Joe," etc.

heart—Mulligan, king of killers his threshold. He never guessed sap enough to stake his life on the er's back—that instead of easy drop in to call that afternoon.

the little coil of smoke, and his thoughts drifted to the letter that didn't burn. What in hell had ever made him think that dame was a "great kid?" Maybe he didn't attend sufficiently to his business. His mild blue eyes set hard, he squared his broad shoulders and glared at the door to the outer office. A guy in his business had to

get around, had to know people, had to know women. He half leaned forward, stretched a hand toward the push button that would summon his secretary—when he stopped, listened.

There was considerable commotion in the outer office. A loud voice and the banging of a fist on wood. A cop, Clay thought at first. But what had he pulled off now that the police didn't like? Then he shook his head. Cops wouldn't bang desks; not the cops that came to see him. They'd just barge in.

Feet scraped across the floor; a back hit against the door. Through the stained glass and just above the word *Private* he saw the head; the mop of red hair. He grinned, waited. He'd see just how efficient this self-appointed secretary would turn out to be.

A figure loomed up above her. An arm seemed to rise, come down on the girl's shoulder. Her body jarred heavily back against the glass of the door. Why didn't she call out? Why didn't she make a squawk to him? Why—Clay Holt cursed softly and came to his feet. Then he stood so, both his hands flat upon the desk.

THE door opened slightly. Agatha Cumminks squeezed through. The door closed again and she took four steps forward toward the desk; just four steps, and waited.

Clay Holt spotted the rather large, plain, black, leather hand bag she carried. What she carried it for was a puzzle he wasn't detective enough to solve. It always laid unopen upon her desk. She wouldn't have much use for a vanity case. No powder on her drab face, no rouge on those thin lips. Her eyes! Well, he guessed they might be brown. The heavy rimmed glasses she wore gave them the appearance of sand that had not quite dried in the sun. Freckles, her turn-up little nose, neglected eyebrows and tousled hair finished off the face. "Finished" was right.

As for her figure! Clay had never thought of her as having a figure. Legs? Certainly. She walked about, didn't she? Everybody had legs. Though he *had* seen her shoes; small, neat, flat-heeled shoes; always carefully polished. She wasn't dowdy; that wasn't the word at all. She was neat and clean, and plain. *Plain.* That was the word that saved her; saved him too. If he hadn't thought of that word she would have been down-right ugly. And he couldn't stand ugly things; especially ugly women. Even at that, he was planning to give her the air.

"Well," he said, "trouble outside! Why didn't you call me?"

"Trouble?" the girl repeated in a high voice. Clay didn't know if her eyebrows moved, but he did know that her glasses slid back along the bridge of her nose.

"Yes—trouble." He mimicked her voice. "Or are you going to make a habit of banging your head against the door every time we have a client?"

"Every time!" She smiled; at least her teeth showed. They were good teeth; no getting around that, though why she spiked them with that gold insult almost in the center got him.

He opened his mouth to ask the question, then changed it. He said: "You were to help me hang onto clients. So—what?"

"Yes." There was a sincerity in her voice. "This man! It seems as if he wants to make trouble, though he spoke of putting money in your pocket. Watch him."

"Watch him! I'll handcuff him to the chair until he shells out. Lock all the doors and—"

"I'm afraid he's impatient," she interrupted. "Anything else?" She half turned toward the door.

"Yes." He just blurted out the word. "Tell me why I hired you. Why?"

She turned and regarded him very seriously. "Because I sold myself to you. On the ground that pretty girls hurt your business, took up your time; and that you lost enough time outside the office without losing it inside. I let you know most tactfully that I would help your business; that I was not susceptible to masculine charms and was very hard to "make."

Clay looked straight at her. She was not smiling; just watching him, those peculiar glasses muddying up the dull sandy eyes.

"Hard to 'make'!" Clay said. And with a nod and a laugh, "That's right. But you told me all that before. That's your point of view. But why did I fall for your proposition?"

"Want to know?"

"Sure—sure!" He was emphatic about that. The office had seemed dull and drab. No excitement, no chats, no—just clippings of robberies, kidnapings, blackmailings and murders ever since she came. Damn it! She must get every paper in the country. "Sure!" he repeated. "I want like hell to know."

"Well!—" she was at the door now with her hand on the knob—"for just a moment—just a single split second—you knew the truth, and hired me."

"The truth!"

"The truth. That you were a sucker for women."

She jerked open the door, held it so and spoke to someone in the outer office. Her voice was pleasant but with just a note of firmness in it. "Contrary to custom, Mr. Clay Holt will see you without an appointment," she said.

THE door closed, and a tall, erect, broad-shouldered man stood glaring at Clay. Two red spots were high up on his cheeks; the yellow-gloved hand that held a cane gripped violently; gray eyes blazed and lips trembled. At length he spoke. "Is it customary for your secretary to stick guns in the stomach of visitors who—"

"Oh!" Clay smiled. "So that's what was in the bag."

"I'll tell you," said the man. "I half intended to abandon my visit for the time being and go straight to the police."

"But you didn't." Clay shook his head; he didn't smile now. "Maybe it's your custom to come banging into offices and knocking young ladies around. You're very lucky the girl didn't press the trigger. Since we've found out what's wrong with your stomach, maybe you'll tell us just what's on your chest. You better sit down." Clay suddenly remembered that Agatha had told him the man spoke of money. "You're a client, eh?"

"Client of yours!" The man laughed disdainfully. "Of course not. But I've got a proposition for you. You're Clay Holt, the detective."

"That's right," said Clay. "But if you expect me to tell you that you shave by daylight, in a room situated on the northeast corner of the house, or—"

"I didn't come here to joke."

"And you didn't come here to give me a case. Well, let me have what you did come here for."

"My first impulse was to give you a good thrashing, then I thought better of that." A pause. "At least, for the moment."

"A change of stomach, so to speak." Clay grinned. "What's the business?"

"Has Miss Della Van Ort been to see you?"

"That," said Clay slowly, "is not your business, but mine." But he wondered who Della Van Ort might be. The "Della" was not so ritzy, so expensive; but the "Van Ort" had an opulent ring. He liked that.

The man set his feet, leaned forward, the cane partly bracing him, the thinning hair at his forehead slightly visible. "No matter," he said brusquely. "I am offering you now a thousand dollars to refuse to handle her—her little business, if she comes."

Clay looked toward the ceiling. A thousand dollars; a single grand for turning down a case he didn't have! That was a lot of jack. Easy money if the Van Ort woman didn't show up. Easy money! He looked at the man again. The straight nose, the rather nice features, the fine athletic build. Then he glanced at the gray eyes—eyes that were slightly bleary—pouches under them. Sleepless nights! The man was worried; was hitting the booze, and it was playing him false. Neither pleasure nor forgetfulness. Just getting his liver.

"No," said Clay after a bit. "I'm sorry we can't do business. There are certain ethics even in my profession."

"Ethics!" The man sneered. "I thought you were a private detective."

Clay nodded. "Contrary to the general opinion of my profession, I don't sell out clients; even prospective clients."

"Mr. Holt—" the man bit his lip before he continued—"this is not an ordinary request. I have known the young lady for a great many years; she is younger than I am. I know her father and her mother. I am offering you one thousand dollars, or double that amount if you say so. And my purpose is to save this young lady a great deal of unhappiness."

"Yeah?" Clay kept blue eyes on gray ones. "Spill your story. If she trots in and I can see things your way, to her benefit, why—maybe I can use a couple of extra grand." And when the man did not speak, "Let's have it. I'm a good listener."

"I can not tell you more than I have already told you." He put fingers in a vest pocket, produced a card and tossed it on the desk. "That," he said, "should convince you that I am a—a gentleman."

"Sure!" Clay looked at the card and read—*Albert Treavor*. "But if you were the girl's father I'd give you the same line. Now, get out!"

TREAVOR straightened even more. Six feet two; two hundred pounds of hard muscle. "You haven't heard the alternative, Mr. Holt. If you accept her case I'll thrash you within an inch of your life."

"All right." Clay nodded, as if he were talking to a child. "Come back when I have the case. Good day!"

"I am not going. Unless you refuse to take the case, now—I will go through with it. I've been told about you. You're just a step above or below the blackmailers you and your kind deal with. I am not going to let this unfortunate young lady fall into your hands." And stepping forward menacingly. "Don't grin like a monkey, either. It's only twelve years since I was full back on my college eleven, and less than five years since I could have had the State amateur boxing championship."

"Amateur, eh?" Clay stroked his chin. "And that, Mr. Treavor, is just what you are putting on now. An amateur performance."

Treavor's lips set tight, his eyes narrowed, he laid his cane against the wall close to the radiator.

"I'd do anything for this girl," he said slowly, though the words seemed to stick in his throat. "I am a man with a purpose." His lips curled slightly. "And I'm not thinking of the consequences, though my lawyers will be able to handle that. I warn you, Mr. Holt. Move a hand toward the drawer of that desk, and your opportunity to change your

mind and accept my offer will be gone."

Clay Holt moved from behind the desk, went to the side of it. He spoke very calmly, very quietly. The words didn't stick in his throat.

"Mr. Treavor," he said, "you are nervous and excited, and no doubt acting under a great strain. But if my business and character are such as you paint them, you must realize that I have been threatened before, attacked before; and therefore am in a position to take care of myself. Besides, you must understand that I couldn't tolerate common brawls here in my office."

"You don't like it, eh?" Treavor's huge body swayed forward. "I warn you, Mr. Holt, that once I lay my hands on you, you will be unable to handle Miss Van Ort's case or any other case for several days—maybe weeks. For the last time, will you do as I request?" And moving his left foot slightly, "Remember—I was All American—"

"All American boy, eh? All American play-boy," Clay Holt said. "This is no back room, and—"

And Clay got no further. Gray eyes flashed; great arms with huge hands came up; a heavy body shot forward.

Clay Holt stood his ground. His legs may have moved slightly but the rest of his body remained motionless. Then, just as those ham-like hands reached for his throat, Clay's right hand came up; not with any great force, but with a quickness that comes only with long practice.

Treavor paused as if an unseen hand had stretched out behind him and gripped him by the shoulders. His arms dropped quickly, his mouth hung open and his eyes stared vacantly at the detective. Then his knees buckled and his body sagged.

Clay shrugged his shoulders, braced his feet, caught the falling bulk; and with some difficulty, though he stood six feet himself, eased the limp figure into the leather chair.

"Miss Cummings!" he called; and when his secretary hurried into the room, "Mr. Treavor has had one of his spells. A drink, please."

THE girl's eyes widened behind thick glasses. She looked from the pale face of Treavor to Clay Holt; to the strap about his wrist and the heavy leather-covered object that hung from it.

"You hit him with that—a black jack?"

"Sure!" Clay nodded. "I dare say I could have taken him on. But he talked too much about how strong he was. Besides, I expect a client—a lady client—and didn't want to be all banged up when she came."

The girl hesitated, turned to the wall cupboard, swung it open, caught up a bottle and glass.

"Hell!" said Clay, "not that brandy. I can't be feeding him liquor at that price. Get the whiskey, Awful, and—" He stopped.

"Go on." The girl nodded, switching bottles. "I've heard you use 'Angel' and 'Sweetheart' and 'Beautiful' so much to others that I rather like the name. You can call me 'Awful.'"

"Yeah." Clay took the bottle, put it to the man's lips. "Look at that. Nearly a half pint. He's been saturated with it for days." And when the man blinked open his eyes and tried to grip the arm of the chair, "You've got to get used to it, Awful. I felt the same way at first. But I can't spend my time rolling around the floor with everyone who feels entitled to a little exercise."

"But a blackjack! He was a gentleman, and—"

"And a scholar." Clay grinned. "He admitted it. Knocked you around to prove his point."

"But he didn't. He was just excited with me, and I— I—." She stopped. "Why didn't you just throw a gun on him?"

"Like you?" Clay nodded, then shook his head. "It wouldn't have worked. Something's got under his skin. I saw it in his eyes. I'd have had to shoot him."

The man jarred erect in the chair, rubbed at his shin. There was a surprised, hurt look in his eyes. "You—you hit me?"

"That's right." Clay twisted the strap and shoved the length of steel covered with leather up his sleeve. "It won't show. Just a clip on the button."

"I guess I'm not— not—" Albert Treavor came to his feet, swayed slightly, leaned against the wall, took the cane Clay put into his hand. "I've— I've been a fool," he said.

"Sure!" Clay nodded and smiled. "Aren't we all? But who's to know it? That's Mr. Treavor's glove on the floor, Miss Cummings. Good afternoon."

He held the dazed man's arm as he half led him through the outer office and to the elevators. Treavor was better now; stronger. His eyes were clearer; that is, they were still misty—but from the hooch, not the blow on the chin.

"I don't fully understand it," Treavor said. "It seemed—"

"Don't try to understand it. Things are Jake now, eh?"

"If you mean the thrashing—" Treavor tried to smile and made a failure of it—"why—yes. But"—gray eyes burnt now—"I'd go to any length to protect that girl." And very slowly, "I would even kill the man who harmed her."

"Very commendable." Clay nodded, spoke lightly, but his lips were hard. "If you're speaking of me, Mr. Treavor, remember you're trying to play another man's game. Flaying fists are not half as much in my line as guns. Don't get too deep in my line of work, or—"

"Or—" said Treavor just before the elevator came.

"Or you'll get a bellyful of lead."

THE elevator door clanged open. Albert Treavor got in. Clay Holt watched him until the door closed. Then with a shrug of his shoulders he walked back into the office.

"He wasn't much trouble for you." There was hardly admiration in Agatha Cumming's voice. "He doesn't understand the racket—your racket."

"No." Clay shook his head. "But I'd rather get a threat from a big-time gunman."

"You're afraid of him then?"

"In a way, yes. He's the kind of man you might have to kill. Something snaps in his head, and blooey—out comes a gun and starts to pop. He's twice as dangerous as—well, Mulligan."

The girl's lips set tight; all sarcasm left her voice. "I'm afraid of Mulligan; afraid of the attitude you take. He's a killer. Every gunman, every dope peddler, every crook in the city knows he'll get you. He's got to, Mr. Holt. He's got to kill you or die himself. Every bit of influence he holds in the city dies if you live. Even now he's losing prestige; others are horning in on his rackets." She paused a moment. "He's going to strike quick. His brother was electrocuted last Thursday."

"Yep, they burnt him. Some day I'll get the evidence that will burn Mr. Mulligan himself. He hasn't been so dangerous; at least, yet."

"And that's the real danger. He never waited before for vengeance. He has only to raise his hand and a hundred gunmen would be ready."

"But he hasn't." Clay grinned. "Every bit of evidence that gave his brother the

hot seat was built up by me; every witness who went on that stand was found by me."

"He'll kill you. He'll kill you himself. He's going to make your death a personal one. That's why he's waited. He's got to get you in order to stay in business." She came close to him now. "I know! I know how you look on such men; just yellow rats. But yellow rats have killed people—many people. A gun against your stomach; a gun—"

"Speaking of guns," Clay laughed, "have you got a license for that popgun you buried in Mr. Treavor's stomach?"

"Why, no. I thought, being here—"

"I'll get you one. You can give my sister's address up State as your residence."

"And my reason for having a gun?"

He grinned. "You want it to stick in guy's middles." He walked to his office door. "But it doesn't matter. My sister knows people, and your fingerprints are probably on file anyway."

CHAPTER TWO

Just Mulligan

DELLA Van Ort proved an eyeful and brightened up the office considerably. She knew how to set herself off, too, Clay thought. Just the right walk; a pleasant swing to her body, easy grace as she dropped into a chair. Her smile too was pleasant as she crossed her legs, pushed her blond head into the proper light and regarded Clay.

Clay Holt's pleasure was somewhat dissipated when he saw the youth she had dragged in with her. He was tall, dark, with a tiny mustache and jet black hair. Everything about him was perfect; too perfect. But what Clay didn't like about him particularly was an indescribable something he never liked in men; an assured insolence with women.

Della Van Ort waved her hand toward the man. "That's Tony—Tony Verges," she said. "We are going to be married if things go right." A short pause, a smile that made Clay forget the man, and, "So I guess it's up to you, Mr. Holt—eh, Tony?"

Tony walked over to the arm of her chair, eased himself onto it, patted her hand and said: "It looks like that." And to Clay, "It seems simple enough but we don't want things to go wrong."

"Let us have it," said Clay. "Blackmail, I suppose."

"Yes," said the girl, "blackmail. I'll tell it, Tony. It's letters, Mr. Holt; two letters I wrote to Tony. People have them and want ten thousand dollars for their return."

"Letters to a man you're going to marry?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Oh, don't look at Tony! He's romantic, poetic. He kept those letters and read them every night; kept them when he traveled. They were stolen from him. It's not his fault; I wanted him to keep them."

"Are they—they bad enough to be worth ten thousand dollars?"

"Oh! I'm modern and all that." The girl shrugged. "I don't care if the whole world knows how I feel about Tony. But there's my mother and father and what they call our social position. We don't want a scandal."

"I see," said Clay. "And just where do I fit in?"

"You—" the girl opened her bag and took out a flat package of bills—"are to meet these blackmailers, give them the money for the letters, and bring the letters to me."

"And just who—suggested me?"

"Does that matter?" Tony cut in, and when the girl looked at him, "Well, we didn't like to do the thing ourselves. I would have gone through with it alone,

but Della—Anyway, we picked out several private detectives and—"

"That's not exactly true, Mr. Holt," the girl said. "I'm afraid Tony's a business man. He asked people and was told that you were the most trusted in such matters, and it was Tony who finally got them to agree."

"But it's your money." Clay watched the girl.

"Yes." The girl looked at Tony. Clay's face twisted. What a swell dame like that could see in a squirt like Tony he couldn't understand.

Tony smirked, said: "That's true, I guess. But they agreed to give you the letters after receiving the money. It's really all very simple. We—Will five hundred dollars be all right?"

Clay Holt shook his head. "My charge in such matters is always a straight ten per cent. And it's not quite as simple as you think. Blackmailers are not exactly the upright business men the ordinary citizen believes. They sometimes turn out quite dishonest and like to keep both the money and the letters."

"That's what I thought. You too, Tony. That's the real reason we've come to you. And we'll pay it, Mr. Holt. I was a fool to write the letters."

"And Tony, to keep them." Clay had to get that crack in. But since Tony, after all, had brought him a piece of business and since it was entirely through the folly of his fellow men that Clay made his living, he added, "But bigger men; older men have done things more foolish."

"And we don't want any—any attempt to outwit these blackmailers. We just want the letters back." Tony was impatient.

"Of course," said Clay. "What else?"

"Nothing," Tony said. "They are to ring me up this afternoon and tell me where you can meet them. We want things as quiet as possible, naturally."

"And you want me to take this money now?" Clay ran his fingers through the bills, glanced up at the girl.

"Yes, yes," she said. "I want you to get those letters for me."

CLAY HOLT nodded. "I'll have to have specimens of your handwriting of course." And when she opened her bag he shook his head. "Just anything will not do. I'm not a handwriting expert, though I know my business. You'll have to write me things—words, sentences, paragraphs—taken from those letters as nearly as you can remember them."

"Oh! I can remember them. There was some poetry."

Clay Holt looked up suddenly. There was a difference in her voice; a sort of bitterness, and her lips had set rather tight.

"I'll do it at home—alone, Mr. Holt. Where I can think better. I'll telephone you when it's ready."

She came to her feet, half shook off the hand Tony stretched out to her. Then the movement of repugnance, if it was repugnance, was gone. Her lips parted; she smiled as she took Tony's arm.

Clay Holt was thoughtful as he stood by the door and watched them cross the outer office. When the door closed he turned to Agatha Cummings. "Business, my dear Agatha, is looking up. We may think again in terms of money."

"You'd better be thinking in terms of Mulligan; that he doesn't get you before you get the money."

"You're so comforting; so bright and cheerful." Clay grinned. "But peculiarly, I was thinking of Mulligan." He stopped, looked at her a long moment. "Now, what do you suggest in the way of business?"

"In way of business—watch Miss Van Ort. She has eyes that are big and won-

dering, and she rather looked on you with that air of future proprietorship."

Clay laughed. "Miss Van Ort is going to marry the sheik." He turned and started into the private office but swung back when Agatha Cummings spoke.

"Miss Van Ort hates the sheik," she said.

"What!" Clay leaned on the desk. "She told me—"

"I know," said the girl. "A woman sees more than she's told. It was written in her face; something else too. She rather liked you; has set you up as a hero. If you should be the one to help her, save her from this threatened scandal—why—humans are above animals. Leopards can't change their spots, but women can change their men."

"You haven't much faith in your sex." Clay laughed.

Agatha Cummings looked very serious, too serious. Sometimes Clay was annoyed. He wondered if she were laughing at him. He looked again at the freckles, the turned up nose. No, she had nothing to laugh about.

Clay Holt got his telephone call from Della Van Ort much sooner than he expected.

"I don't want you coming to the house," she told him, "and I don't want to go to your office again. Can you meet me for tea?" She named a small tea room in the Forties and gave him the address.

"Right!" said Clay. He dropped the receiver and adjusted his tie. He was whistling softly when he left the office and winked at Agatha Cummings in passing.

"Don't forget—" his assistant's voice was matter of fact—"that we can use that two thousand dollars, and that the rent hasn't been paid for three months."

"To say nothing of my excellent secretary's salary."

"Oh, that doesn't bother me."

"No? Why?"

"Because you can't fire me, owing me money. It's your stupid pride."

"Don't worry. I'd choke the most beautiful woman in the world to death for two thousand dollars, sweetheart." He slammed the door closed, opened it quickly again and grinned in. "I mean—Awful."

CLAY HOLT took the heavy note paper Della Van Ort passed across the little table in the high-backed booth and whistled softly as he read it. So she went in for poetry! The words themselves weren't so bad; certainly, since she was going to marry the man, hardly worth ten grand. But the sentiment was terrible.

"You don't like poetry." The girl caught his scowl.

Clay shrugged his shoulders. "I'm a guy who can take it or leave it alone," he told her. "But it wasn't that. These little sonnets; that night-on-the-beach stuff! Is that—are they the choice bits of letters, or did you pick up the minor parts?"

"That's the worst of the letters—or the best of them, according to how you look at it."

"Well—" Clay stuck a cigarette between his lips and set fire to it. "It's not good business for me to tell you this, but I think you exaggerate the scandal." He paused. "It isn't worth ten grand in anybody's money."

"It's worth ten grand in mine."

Clay's broad shoulders moved. "It's your dough," he said and tapped a particular line in the poem. "The beach, now. Atlantic City! Well, even on a summer night Atlantic City is hardly deserted. Is that all real or just imagination?"

The girl laughed. "Tony's very fascinating when you're not with him. I think, then, of his little black mustache, the dreamy look in his eyes, his natural

graceful carriage. Sometimes I long to marry him, go far away, just take his photo with me, write him poetry, feel that I've been deprived of the greatest thing on earth; his nearness, his love, his— You understand?"

"Well—no. Not exactly." Clay didn't get it at all.

The girl laughed. It was a bitter, hard sort of laugh. "That's romance!" she told him. "That's when I dream. But I'm two persons. You can't get away from the fact that the material Tony—when you look at him that way—is just a bit greasy."

Clay jarred erect. A minute ago the girl was almost dripping with sentimental slush—romance! When she bounded back to reality she certainly landed with a thud. But she was right. Tony was greasy.

"Miss Van Ort," Clay put it bluntly, "are you going to marry this man?"

SHE hesitated a long time. Her large eyes rested on Clay's. "I'm paying the ten thousand dollars to destroy those letters so I won't have to marry Tony."

"Oh!" said Clay. "So that's how it is. Does Tony suspect?"

"I think he suspects that I love him more—at a distance. But he can't know."

"In plain words," Clay looked straight at her, "you are not sure he lost those letters, or that they were stolen, or—"

"I don't know."

"I see," said Clay. And then, "Who is Albert Treavor?"

"Albert!" It was the girl's turn to jar erect. "Then he did go to see you." She laughed. "I didn't think he'd put on a show. Did he talk of the Amateur Boxing Championship and of being All American in Twenty-two? Poor Albert! So modest, so quiet; never used to mention his accomplishments. Then I started him on it, and now he talks of nothing else. Gets his friends to talk it; thinks it appeals to me. But it's my fault. He's not really that way. He would no more fight for what he wants than—"

"Don't you believe that," Clay cut in. "He's in love with you. Knows about Tony?"

"He thinks I love Tony, if that's what you mean. Why should I let him think otherwise? He warned me against Tony from the very first day he saw me with him. No, I didn't tell him."

"But he suspects something about the letters—about me. He threatened me."

"He did!" Her eyes widened. "Yes, he knows. He's a business man. I asked his advice. Tony doesn't know that. And Albert advised me against you, Clay. I can call you 'Clay?'"

"Sure! Why not? It's my handle." Clay blew a few rings of smoke toward the ceiling. "Tell me just how you met Tony. Socially?"

"If you mean, is he in our set—no. At least, he wasn't. I've dragged him around a bit. I don't remember who introduced him, now. It was at a tea dance at the Astor. He told me how beautiful I was, and that my soul was a gorgeous poem and—"

"You liked that bal—"

"I liked that baloney, if that's what you were going to say. But even a girl whose social life is caviar and champagne can get too much baloney. You suspect the whole thing of being a frame-up, but it wasn't; not in the beginning. Now— I suppose he wants that ten thousand dollars; needs it. I'd be glad to give it to him for the letters. But why did he complicate the matter by bringing you in; insisting on you? All this to—to frame me?"

"I wasn't thinking it was all done to frame you." Clay rubbed at his chin. "No, I wasn't thinking just that." And when she would have questioned him he came to his feet. "Come on, Miss Van

Ort. We mustn't give Tony cause for suspicion. I'll get the letters for you."

She stretched a hand across the table and clubbed at his fingers. "I think," she said, "it was fated for me to meet a man like you. All my troubles, my trials; these letters and Tony! It took all these things to bring us together. And what do you think they mean?"

"They mean," said Clay as he held her coat for her, "just Mulligan."

CHAPTER THREE

The Man in the Closet

CLAY HOLT got Tony's address from Della Van Ort and watched her climb into her high-powered coupé, pull away from the curb. Then he turned east and walked toward Park Avenue and Tony Verges' apartment.

Tony was dressing for dinner and greeted Clay in a purple robe that did not fully hide the violet lounging pajamas. "My dear fellow," he said, "I tried to get you at your office. Things are arranged for tonight. So glad you dropped in. My man's out."

"You don't have to apologize to me nor lie about your man. Times are hard; my rent's due too," Clay said abruptly. "We're both in the same boat. I haven't any rich girl to marry either."

"What do you mean?" Tony threw out his chest. It wasn't much of a chest. "Are you trying to be insulting, or is it your American idea of humor?"

"The girl's rich, isn't she?" Clay sneered. "It's hard to give up a berth like that, and you haven't given it up entirely, Tony. You're very optimistic. You want that ten thousand to work on, and you hope, maybe, by keeping the letters to force her into marriage also—if you can catch her in the poetic stage and off the greasy mood."

Tony drew back as Clay stepped toward him. His hand moved behind him, rested on the flat desk, parted four books that stood between miniature bronze lions.

"What do you mean?" What do you mean?" Tony repeated as he straightened from the desk, his hand moving slowly now from behind his back.

"The finger's on you, Tony," Clay said. "I want you for blackmail. In plain words, it looks like a pinch."

Two hands moved at once. Tony's from behind his back; Clay's from across his chest, from beneath his left armpit. Tony screamed with pain. His right hand fell to his side, a small automatic dropped to the rug.

"You can't—can't prove anything—anything against me," he cried out. And when Clay only grinned down at him, "Della wouldn't—couldn't—couldn't stand the publicity. I'd—I'd—"

Clay stretched out a hand and fastened it on the man's throat. "I don't like blackmailers," he said. "Especially ones who only have the guts to work on those who trust them. But I won't turn you in."

He raised his right hand and with the open palm struck Tony so viciously that he staggered against the table, twisted once and fell to the floor.

Clay jerked him to his feet, fastened his right hand upon the lapels of his coat. "I ought to give it to you, Tony. I ought to muss up that pretty face of yours so it will be no good to you any more. The soulful eyes, the romantic mustache! It's all you've got, Tony; you'd be no good to yourself without it." And very softly, "Nor any good to me if you were marked up. People might ask questions."

"You can't know. You can't know. How did you know?"

"Listen, Tony; listen hard." Fingers tightened upon Tony's jacket; he gasped slightly for breath. "You couldn't have

planned this; not all of it. I know that. You saw a bit of simple blackmail; it was put into your head that way. Now, if you'd gone through with it and I had gone through with it, the police would want you for murder. And they'd get you, Tony. Della Van Ort would talk; the letters would be forgotten when murder popped up. They'd burn you, Tony."

"Murder! I don't know what you mean. They—these blackmailers might kill you?"

"Might! 'Would' is the word." Clay shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe you don't know what I mean. Still, blackmail has a bad smell to the jury these days."

"But you said you weren't—weren't—"

"No, I'm not—not if you listen to reason." Clay Holt put his face close to the man, spoke low, rapidly.

Tony Verges tried to draw away, shrink from those clutching fingers.

"I can't. I can't!" he whined. "I didn't know. I swear I didn't know. He'd kill me. He'd kill you."

"Listen, pretty boy." Fingers tightened, twisted the coat tighter about the white throat. "You've got nothing but your soulful eyes, your thin lips, the white even teeth and the half lisp. You can take them out of town with you if you have any sense. If you haven't—" broad shoulders moved up and down—"I'll knock a few of those teeth down your throat and give you a real lisp. I'll gun whip your face from your eyes to your mouth and—"

"No, no." Tony was whimpering now, and as Clay's gun came up and jammed hard against his mouth, "I'll do it."

There was a sudden light in those soulful eyes; fear too, perhaps terror. But back of it Clay thought he saw a hope. At least, a shrewd cunning glint. He grinned.

"Don't try any tricks." Clay released his grasp and let the man go. "If anything happens to me, pop—like that comes the hot seat."

CLAY HOLT lounged easily back in the big soft chair for the hour or more that Tony was gone. Once he dialed his office and spoke to Agatha Cummings.

"Listen, beautiful—got a date for tonight?"

"Awful, to you," The girl's voice came over the wire. "And I never let dates interfere with business."

"Good! You know my apartment. Drop over there at—well say eight o'clock."

"I've got a date," she said quickly.

"But you said—"

"Your apartment doesn't sound like business."

"Do you think I've suddenly gone blind? It is business."

"I'll be there then."

"And bring your bag, and what's in it."

"Why? What do you want me to do?"

"I'll want you to shoot a man to death, maybe. See you at eight."

He hung up the receiver as a startled question clicked in the girl's throat. He smiled too. It was nice to be able to get a rise out of Agatha. Hell of a name—Agatha; but then, it fitted her, he guessed.

Tony was pale when he came in. There were two pink spots on his cheeks. His eyes avoided Clay.

Clay took his feet off the mahogany desk, ran his cigarette across his mouth with his tongue and said: "How did it come out?"

"Fine. Fine." Tony brushed a hand through slick black hair. His fingers twitched. When Clay did not speak he said again: "Fine. Just fine. It's all fixed. Right end of the couch."

"O. K.!" Clay came to his feet. "Are they going to buzz you again?"

"No, no," said Tony. "I'm going to be with the girl. That's my alibi." He watched Clay walk toward the door, turn, shove his hat far back on his head.

"Good night!" Tony said a little awkwardly.

"Not yet, nice boy. Don't take your coat off; we're going out together."

"Where?" For a moment fear showed again in black eyes. "I'm not going. You said I'd—I'd be free."

Clay's gun flashed into his hand; it twirled on his index finger. "You've got funny ideas about this thing called freedom. Come on!"

Tony moved toward the door. "Where are you taking me?"

"To the girl. Boys tell you anything about me?"

Tony licked at thin lips. "Yes. You'd kill a man without a moment's hesitation. I was to be careful. I don't think I should go with you."

"I hope you have been careful, Tony. But you're going. Put on your bonnet." And when Tony still hung back, "Why get cut up if you don't need to. I don't like blackmailers, Tony, and I haven't got much power to resist temptation. Coming—nice?"

There was something in the blue eyes that Tony didn't like. In fact, everything about the man Tony didn't like. But his legs jumped forward as if they were pulled by wires.

"Hell!" said Clay, "don't skip out of the place. I've got a reputation that doesn't go in for violets and the light fantastic."

And that was all either man did say until they left the taxi and entered Clay's apartment.

"I thought you were taking me to the girl."

"Sure!" said Clay. "She'll be here shortly." He looked at his watch. "Eight bells. You say my date is for ten."

"That's right," nodded Tony. "I don't like this."

"You're going to like it a lot less."

Clay took off his coat, threw it over a chair, watched Tony shed his. Then he walked over to him, ran hands about his person, nodded his satisfaction.

"Don't carry hardware about with you. Sensible boy, when you don't know how to use it. Sit down, Tony; a drink?"

FOR the first two or three drinks Tony was sullen and silent. Once or twice he asked about the "girl," never mentioned by her name. Then he perked up, spoke about himself, his conquests with women.

"Poor or rich; fine clothes or cheap, women are all the same. It is simply a question of meeting the right people. One and all, they fall for me. I smile, I nod. I put these eyes upon them that they can not resist. It is an art. Always it is easy."

"Sure. Sure!" Clay nodded. "But it's an expensive hobby."

"As a hobby, yes; but when one makes it a business, then it becomes a most conservative investment."

"That's what you think. And maybe I'm not exactly averse to a few good-lookers myself. But it's a bum business, Tony. I'm broke and you're broke. At that, I give you credit." Clay looked for a long time at the man. "Of course, I haven't got eyes like a sheep; but then, I'm not bothered by the grease."

"What grease?" Black eyes smoldered.

"So—" Clay stroked his chin. "Someone has told you about it. No, I don't mean the pretty speeches and the poetry; that's 'oil,' Tony." He looked at him closely. "She was right, too. But I daresay you're like a high-priced motor; it makes you run smoothly."

"So—" Tony was on his feet now. "She told you that too, and she is coming here!"

"The girl is coming here." Clay nodded.

"You are a fool." Tony waved his hand. "I should not have done as you wished. But you are a brave man, a very

brave man; and I have done it. Let us hope you come through all right. As for me! I have nothing to fear now on a blackmail charge."

"Not from me, Tony, if you've done your stuff."

"And even if I haven't—bah!" He drained his glass. "I am to be alone with her here. In thirty minutes—no, fifteen—I will have talked her out of all that; all suspicions; all— She will be pleading with me to take her back and—"

A bell buzzed, the knob of the door turned. Clay swung to open it. Tony jerked down his coat, straightened his tie, was picking carefully at the end of a purple handkerchief when Agatha Cummings walked into the room.

"This is not— Where is the girl?" Tony demanded.

"Here!" Clay grinned. "You didn't mention any particular girl; indeed, you were very careful not to. Now, try the soulful eyes, the poetry and the grease—"

Tony's eyes flashed. Anger—fear. And he dashed forward, toward the door. Clay reached out, clutched at his arm. Tony moved quickly, shot sideways, avoided those grasping fingers, and pulling the girl between Clay and the door struck her violently, knocking her against Clay.

The girl staggered, was directly in Clay's path as Tony reached the door, grasped the knob and jerked it toward him.

For one brief moment Agatha felt herself in Clay's arms; at least, in his left arm. He just swept her to him, stepped forward, swung her completely off her feet. It was rather nice, she thought; very nice—and then she didn't think.

She saw a big hand raise, turn into a fist as it shot by her face. There was the dull thud of Clay's knuckles, a sudden squeal that died almost the minute it started. She turned her head in time to see Tony Verges pound against the door, knocking it shut again just before he sank slowly to the floor.

"You're very strong," Agatha Cummings said as she smoothed down her hair, pulled at her dress, felt of her neck close to her ear, where Tony had struck her.

"Strong! I could have blown him over."

"I didn't mean that." The girl sucked in great gulps of air. "Another second and I'd have lost a couple of ribs. Do you always treat your women like that?"

"They like it." Clay grinned, reached down, lifted Tony, glared down at the flickering lids. "I'm glad I had one sock at him. I never could take a fancy to blackmailers."

As he bound the unconscious man's hands and feet he told her about Tony, about Della Van Ort.

"She wouldn't find much romance in you." Agatha watched him. "But then, she wouldn't find any grease either. She's very rich and very beautiful. Watch out, Clay."

"A lad could do worse." Clay grinned and proceeded to tie up Tony.

TONY VERGES opened his eyes to find himself bound hand and foot in a straight-back chair that was shoved far back in a large closet. Clay was standing beside him.

"Things clear, Tony? You understand what I say?" He jerked up Tony's head, looked at his eyes.

"Yes—clear." Tony fairly spat the words. "I'll kill you for this."

"Fine!" Clay's smile was pleasant. "I like guys that can joke when they face real danger; face death."

"Death!" The anger left Tony's eyes, the red disappeared from his cheeks. "You're—you're going to kill me?"

The smile left Clay's eyes. It was very serious. He said: "You don't think I'd

trust my life to the honor of a blackmailer. Listen. I'm going to gag you." Clay looked at his watch. "It's a quarter to ten. Ten minutes to get there; fifteen for business, and then— Well, if I'm not back by eleven o'clock you take it."

"Take what?" Tony gasped.

Clay stepped aside. Agatha Cummings was standing there, a gun in her hand. Her eyes seemed very large through the glasses.

"If I don't return at eleven o'clock, Tony, she'll shoot you to death."

Tony laughed. There was not much mirth in it. His voice shook when he talked. "She—she couldn't do it."

Clay was very serious. "Maybe you're right, Tony. You've had plenty of experience with women. But if you put the double cross on me you'll find out. At eleven o'clock!" And to the girl, "All right. Wait in the front room." And when she was gone, "At the worst, Tony, she would notify the police, tell them where you had sent me, and I guess they'd even stick a murder rap on you."

Tony gasped. He saw the cloth in Clay's hand, saw it raised ready to slip across his mouth.

"Wait!" he said. "Wait! You promised me freedom, the train out— You—"

"The train," said Clay, "doesn't leave until after twelve. You'll have lots of time if you're able to take it. If you have anything to say, Tony, say it now." The gag raised again, stretched out in both Clay's hands. "If you've got a head, use it now."

The white cloth came nearer, clapped over the mouth, tightened upon the thin lips, and Tony cried out. "No! Don't! I— I—"

'Well?" Clay's blue eyes were hard. "So you were sending me to my death!"

"No. I— I—" Twice Tony opened his mouth and no words came. Finally he spoke. "Just a change of plans, nothing else. I did it. But not the couch!"

Clay nodded. "Clever boy, Tony. And I guessed as much. If you were free you'd let me take a bellyful of lead; if anything like this happened—why, you had an out. Well, let's have it."

"And afterwards— I'm free?"

"Free, if I return."

"You must be careful then, very careful. They're desperate men. At least, he is. I know how. I— I— God! They'll kill you sure."

'You've got to chance that, Tony. I'm chancing it."

"But—" And eagerly, "Let's go. I've done my part. I'll tell you the truth. I intended to tell you. But let me go in case things go wrong. It wouldn't be my fault. Why should I die because of you?"

"We live or die together."

"But why, if I do my part? I—"

Clay looked at his watch again. "If I'm late it will make him suspicious and that much more dangerous for me—and for you, waiting here. Quick!"

Tony wet his lips. He said thickly but quickly: "You go in the door. It's a big room—a fireplace, a couch alongside of it. But—well, I didn't use the couch. Beside that couch is a big plant. The pot is set in another one—a green tub, bright green. There's soft stuff packed around the plant. Moss—artificial moss."

Clay bent low, to catch his words.

"O. K., Tony," he said, slapped the gag across his mouth, bound it tightly. "Maybe if the girl looks in you can go to work on her. But you'll have just the eyes—and the grease. Good night."

CLAY stepped outside, closed the door, turned the key but left it in the lock. "You've got a fine face, Awful; at least, a good one. Tony couldn't see murder in it. But I've typed the whole thing out; the blackmail and all. He'll get ten years anyway."

"But why type it out?" She took the slip from his hand.

Clay shrugged broad shoulders. "In case I don't come back."

"I know." She nodded. "It's Mulligan then."

"It looks like Mulligan—very much so."

"Then it's police business, not your business. There's nothing in it for you. Why not tell them and—"

"I've got a client, too. She's paying for letters. She's going to get them."

"You believe Tony is on the level?"

"Enough to risk my life on his word. You see, Tony's life is very closely tied up with mine tonight."

"And his death, too," the girl said.

"What do you mean?"

"Why—your orders to shoot him to death at eleven o'clock."

Clay laughed as he got into his coat and put on his hat. "I thought he was frightened enough to believe anything. But, even so, he couldn't see murder in that face of yours. I told him eleven. Don't notify the police until twelve."

"Why until then?"

"Oh!" said Clay. "I'll be dead an hour."

The girl looked at him very seriously. "If I don't hear from you at twelve I think I'll obey orders and—and—"

"And—"

"Shoot him to death."

"Good girl!" Clay pinched her cheek, turned toward the door and swung back. For a full minute he looked at her. She didn't seem so bad then; the freckles rather set her face off, the turned-up nose looked rather cute, and her chin and lips— But then, there had never been anything wrong with the chin and lips.

"Good kid—" he said slowly. "For the moment I thought you meant it."

"Kid!" She raised her eyebrows. He had never called her that before, had never called her anything in just that voice. And when he was at the door, "Don't go, Clay," she pleaded. "Mulligan fears you as he does no other man. He—if it is he— Perhaps he will open fire as soon as you enter the room."

"Not Mulligan." Clay shook his head. "He likes to talk. That's my hope tonight."

"What—your hope?"

"That Mulligan will talk himself to death. Take care of the grease ball. Good night!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The House in the Seventies

CLAY HOLT walked slowly across town, reached Times Square, turned down Broadway and swung east on Fortieth Street. He walked leisurely along the block, his hands sunk deep in his pockets. Fingers clutched tightly twin thirty-eights. He didn't expect an attack; but the street was dark, not many people on it, and men have been gunned out on Fifth Avenue in broad daylight.

Still, Mulligan or anyone else would hardly go to all the trouble; careful planning to get him, if the thing was to be such a crude job as a blast-out on the city streets. But he turned sharply and watched the car slow down, stop as it reached him.

"Clay— Clay Holt!" a voice called from the rear of the big sedan.

Clay walked over to the car, looked at the man who leaned out the door. He was a stranger to him. "That's right," Clay said. "Let's have it."

"I understand you're quite a collector of autographs—letters. I've got a friend who wants to sell a few."

"That's right," Clay said again. "I've got cash for the right letters."

"Enough?" The man's eyes narrowed.

"Ten grand."

"Well, hop in. I'll take you for a look at them. If you're satisfied, then buy." He flung open the door.

Clay's eyes peered into the blackness. Just one man, the man who spoke, was there. In the front seat only the driver.

Clay climbed in and dropped back on the cushions. The car did not pull quickly from the curb.

"Well," Clay tried, "aren't we going places?"

"Not until you turn over your hardware."

Clay laughed. "That wouldn't make sense."

The man shook his head. "I'm only doing my job. I'd trust you any place. But the guy who makes the sale hasn't got my trusting nature. He says, what's to prevent you pulling a rod and getting both the letters and the money?"

Clay tried to study the man in the darkness. He had expected this, of course. Knew, if his guess about Mulligan was correct, they would never let him reach Mulligan—heeled. And what's more, he intended to give up his guns, but in a way that wouldn't arouse suspicion. That's why he carried the third gun in his sleeve tonight.

"And you people get both the money and the letters?" Clay put a sneer into his words.

"Nix on that." The man laughed. "There's plenty more letters and we might like to see a guy like you make delivery. There's a good fee in it; that's why we recommended you."

"So you recommended me, eh?"

"Sure. Sure! And we'll throw some more dough your way next week if things go right tonight. You earn it easy." A moment's silence. "Well, I'm not going to argue it with you. There are other dicks in the city who know how to pick up easy money."

"O. K.!" said Clay, suddenly putting his face close to the man. "If you put it over on me I'll gun you out some day." Clay jerked his hands from his pockets and thrust the two guns forward.

The man laughed, took the guns, shoved them away. "That's the talk. After tonight we'll be like brothers. I don't mind telling you this is a try-out. If you play ball and keep a tight lip I'll see that you're chucked real jack next week. Now I've got to frisk you. That's orders. Don't mind?"

"No." Clay placed his hands in the air, turning his left arm slightly, so that his sleeve gun would be away from the man.

Practiced fingers ran about his person, along his legs, up his arms. For a moment Clay thought that those fingers hesitated just below his left elbow; but the man patted his back, said: "O. K., brother. Drop your hands. Don't mind my rod in your side."

IT was in the Seventies, not far from Central Park West, that the car stopped. At a motion from the man beside him Clay climbed to the sidewalk. The man followed, took his arm. Something hard was pressed against his side.

"Don't mind the artillery," he told Clay. "The boss is just cautious. That's right; the basement entrance." He stretched out a hand, tapped twice—and the door opened.

A hawk-faced individual said: "All right, Jerry. The boss is waiting."

A dimly lighted hall; folding doors at the end. They were partly open and Clay stepped inside. With one quick glance he took in that room. The couch, the fireplace, the lamp and the huge plant sunk into the green wooden base with the artificial moss packed thickly around it. It was the meeting place, just as Tony had described it.

Then he saw the flat desk with the man behind it. The man looked up. Piglike eyes seemed out of place in such a large head. The man parted thick lips and drew in a deep breath which he slowly expelled through large nostrils in a wide, flat nose. It was Mulligan.

"A little surprised, eh, Clay? But I promised you this. So they burnt my brother last week."

Clay moved his shoulders. "Didn't think you were capable of such affection."

"Affection!" Mulligan laughed. "He was a fool to let an idiot like you put the finger on him. But they wouldn't have known he was my brother if you hadn't of talked all over your face to the police. He had enough sense to keep quiet on that." And to the two men, "You frisked him?"

"Sure!" The man called Jerry nodded. "I thought he came along too easy for a wise guy. But he—" And Jerry turned suddenly as the other man clapped a gun hard against Clay's back. Jerry clutched Clay's left arm, twisted it violently, shot a hand along his sleeve, jerked the gun free. "Sap!" he said. "I knew the gun was there all the time."

Clay Holt shrugged his shoulders as the money was taken from his pocket and tossed onto the desk. "So it was a frame-up all around. You and Tony and the Van Ort girl!"

"Hardly." Mulligan laughed, drew a couple of letters from his pocket, hesitated, then laid them on the desk. "Maybe it won't be so good to have them found on your body. No, the Van Ort woman knew nothing. As for Tony! He don't know much. The thing was just dumped into my lap. Jerry, here, met Tony, brought him around and I showed him how to make ten grand easy. He liked it." Huge shoulders shrugged; the short thick neck disappeared. "I guess he thought there was a beating coming to you. I bought those letters from him, but I didn't pay him yet."

"So it's vengeance. You intend to kill me because I sent your brother over the wires."

"Well," Mulligan rubbed at his chin, "it sounds more refined that way, I suppose." His lips set tight. He lifted his right hand; there was a revolver in it. "Cross the room, Holt." And to the others, "You boys, go. Get out of here, quick!"

"Everything set, boss? Jerry or me better wait. This guy's got a rep with a rod."

Mulligan grinned. "With a rod, yes. Just a minute!" He held them at the door. "Get over there in the big chair; not on the couch, you dumb dick." This as Clay started toward the couch. And as Clay dropped into the big chair and let his eyes rest on the huge plant between it and the couch, "Nervous, eh? You've got cause to be."

THE door behind Mulligan closed; feet beat along the hall. A distant door slammed and Mulligan leaned on the desk, his gun raised now, the nose of it unwaveringly covering Clay Holt's body.

"Just you and me alone, now." Mulligan bobbed his head up and down. "So you think it's vengeance. Maybe it is, but it's business too. Roasting my brother didn't help me any with the boys. Few men have ever crossed Mulligan and lived; none in the way you crossed me. You lost me a lot of jack; boys that never would have thought of muscling in on me became active. The word was around that the skids were under Mulligan; that you put them under me, and that you lived—still lived."

Clay spread his hands slightly; moved his body, jerking the chair to the left and closer to the large plant.

"It's the truth, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's the truth—that you still live." Mulligan's eyes glanced toward the clock on the mantel. "It's the truth for a few minutes yet."

"So that's how it is. You intend to kill me then—tonight—here!"

"What do you think?"

Clay Holt shook his head. "I think you can't get away with it. There's ten grand in that envelope on the table. The letters are beside it. Why not toss them over, keep the money, and we'll call it a night?"

Mulligan's laugh was real. "The ten grand," he said, "goes to Tony. Maybe he didn't know it, but he really earned it." And as Clay would have cut in, "No, he won't talk; that would mean a murder charge against him. But I've got an alibi for tonight anyway; big men who'll look good on the witness stand; impress a jury, if there is a jury."

Clay Holt sparred for time. His eyes shifted, rested on the tall plant; the peculiar moss close to the thin trunk. Just a lurch of his body and—and—

He looked back at Mulligan. Mulligan had come to his feet. His eyes were narrowing. Thick lips were set tight; hard cruel lines showed around his mouth.

Clay spoke quickly. "You can't get away with it, Mulligan." Things were not working as Clay had planned. He should have been on the couch, within reach of that plant—the green tub that held it.

"No?" Mulligan leaned forward. "They won't find the body here. They'll find it in the river."

The gun raised slightly, drew a bead just above Clay Holt's eyes, hesitated.

One more quick glance toward that plant, and Clay's lips curved. Not much of a chance, but still a chance. A chance? His grin was a twisted grimace. He was putting everything on the word—the word of a blackmailer.

His body tensed, he twisted slightly in the chair, braced his hands on the arm and half came to his feet.

The nose of Mulligan's gun lowered. His eyes brightened; his head moved from side to side slowly. "Not in the head, Holt; not in the head. In the stomach." And after a second he added: "Because it hurts more in the stomach."

Everything on the word of a blackmailer! Clay bit his lip tightly. And another thought. No, not the word of a blackmailer. No man could count on that. Everything depended on the fear in the heart of a blackmailer—the cowardice—the yellow streak.

And Clay acted. His body twisted. A quick spin and he was out of the chair, diving for that plant; the moss-covered base. The shot came.

Clay heard the report, the quick curse that followed it. The shattering of glass and the thud of the picture as it hit the floor. Both his hands were above the green wooden tub; in the moss. And—and— It was death. He knew it then; knew it as his clawing fingers struck dirt—just soft dirt.

CHAPTER FIVE

No Alibi

THE word of a blackmailer! The yellow streak of a blackmailer! He had been wrong—all wrong. He should have shot Tony to death. Frantically, hopelessly his fingers clawed in that tinsel-like moss.

"That's right—crawl, you lousy yellow dick." Mulligan's words came from behind the desk.

A gun roared. There was a jar to Clay's left arm, a sudden stab close to his shoulder; a burning stab that was cold. And his searching fingers felt, gripped and held hard steel; the hard steel of his own revolver that Tony had planted.

Mulligan laughed. Clay's body turned. The men faced each other.

"So you're going to take it in the—the—" The words died on Mulligan's lips. His mouth hung open; blue veins came to life and pulsed up and down his face. His hand wavered, his fingers trembled. Blindly, wildly he squeezed a finger on that trigger.

Two shots. Two spurts of yellow-blue flame seemed to meet flash for a moment, then die suddenly.

Mulligan jarred back behind the desk. He started to raise his right hand to the hole in his forehead, then dropped the hand to his side. There was a dull impact as his gun hit the floor. Mulligan straightened; his head jerked violently. He sank slowly, his body half on the desk, half on the chair before it disappeared grotesquely behind the polished wood.

Clay Holt waited a moment, walked to the desk, the gun dangling in his hand. There was a grim smile on his face as he looked down at Mulligan. He nodded his head, bobbed it up and down, spoke slowly to himself.

"They're all the same, all yellow rats. Keen eye, steady hand, stout heart when the other guy is unarmed. But when they look down the round black hole of—" He swung his head, noted the hole in the wall. "Missed me by a foot; more even." He looked at wide, staring, little eyes. "All right, Mr. Mulligan," he said, "get your big friends to alibi you out of this."

Mechanically Clay picked up the letters, pulled them from the envelope, ran through the pages, then placed them in his pocket. He smiled as he lifted the money from the desk and tucked that away. It wasn't such a bad night's work.

Slowly he walked across the room to the telephone, dialed a number and said: "The boss, little one. Everything's fine. The show is over. Let the grease ball go. I'm going to Della Van Ort with the letters." Something wet and warm ran over his hand; he looked down at it. "I'll have to stop at a doctor's first."

Frantic questions came over the wire, or started over the wire. But Clay had dropped the instrument back into its cradle. With his right hand he pulled out a cigarette, jarred one into his mouth, lit it, flipped the match across the room and used the dial again.

"Give me Inspector Quinlan." A minute's wait, and then, "Listen, Inspector. This is Clay Holt. You always wanted Mulligan. I got him." Clay gave the address in the Seventies, and after listening to several frantic questions, "No, he won't beat this rap. Hell, man! It's a body."

And cutting in on the quick, sharp words from the inspector, "No. I've got to leave for a while. I can't eh? I feed you a stiff like Mulligan and then you want me to wait here and bleed to death." He banged up the phone, walked out.

THE doctor said when Clay was leaving: "I'll have to report this to the police. I don't know but what I should hold you."

Clay laughed. "The police know. As for holding me! The guy who plugged me tried that. Good night!"

Albert Treavor opened the door of the Van Ort home, beckoned Clay quickly into a room on the side, through heavy curtains. "She's alone," he said. "She sent for me. She always does when she's frightened. She's frightened now—for you."

Clay's blue eyes shone brilliantly out of a face that was drained of blood. "You're not in a fighting mood, eh?"

"No, no." Treavor spoke quickly. "I was a fool. But I knew Tony was a blackmailer and a cad. I thought you

were in it too, and—and— I was a fool."

Clay grinned, leaned against the wall. "Why didn't you warn her then?"

"I did; a dozen times, about Tony. It was the wrong thing to do with her. I think it started her— Well, her romance with Tony. But I love her, Mr. Holt."

"That's right." Clay's head throbbed. "You should learn to write poetry. You—"

Clay stopped. Della Van Ort was in the room. She was very pale. "Please, Al, wait in the library. Clay—you—it's all right?"

Clay waited until the curtains swung behind Treavor.

"I got the letters." He tossed them on the table. "And the money." He threw the ten thousand after them. But the girl didn't notice the money. She was reading the letters, nodding. Then she threw her arms about his neck.

"Clay—Clay!" she cried. "You're wonderful. You did this for me; for—"

Clay looked into her eyes. Somehow he knew the poetry was coming. Somehow he knew she was off again with the romance; romance that she was making real. Somehow— But things were rather blurred. Certainly her eyes were beautiful; certainly her lips were very close. He leaned down, drew back quickly. Her arms dropped and she turned.

The curtains parted. Albert Treavor stood there. "I know I shouldn't, but she insists. I'm sorry, Della. It's Mr. Holt's wife."

"My wife! Why, I—"

Agatha Cummings had pushed in. She carried herself very erectly as she crossed the room. "I got here as soon as I could," she said to Clay, then nodded toward the girl. "I'm sorry to intrude, but I always attend to the financial end of the business."

Clay was never certain exactly what took place after that. He knew that Agatha kept smiling and the gold tooth kept showing, and that Della Van Ort was very polite and very cold. He knew too that Agatha received two one-thousand-dollar bills from that envelope; that she opened her bag and made out a receipt for the money.

That he didn't speak, that he didn't denounce Agatha, he put down to his sense of humor and perhaps the way Della Van Ort stood there.

DELLA VAN ORT stood in the center of the room when Clay and Agatha left. She didn't speak until Albert Treavor started to follow them through the curtains. Then she said: "They can find their way out, Al. Don't —please don't leave me alone now."

The curtains dropped back. Clay followed Agatha across the hall to the big front door. Hand on the knob he paused.

"You had a nerve," he said.

"I collected our fee and—"

"Yeah. And you'll get your salary. Your salary and the air. Wait here!" He swung quickly and strode back to the curtains. Funny; he wasn't blaming Agatha then. He was thinking of Della Van Ort. What an idiot she was to think he'd marry a dame like Agatha.

At the curtains he paused, his hand upon them. Della was talking.

"I need you, Al," she was saying. "I've always needed a man like you. Protection—protection from myself. Strength of mind; strength of body."

And that was all. Clay turned. He didn't speak to Agatha until they were down the steps and in the taxi.

Then Agatha said: "About the air! You—"

"Kidding you, kid." And suddenly he laughed. "Easy money, Awful. Two grand for killing Mulligan." He scowled slightly. "And putting up with some lousy poetry," he added.

Red Hot

A Cardigan Story

by

Frederick Nebel

Author of "Read 'Em and Weep," etc.

All Cardigan's fifty-buck fee called for was that he persuade Hull to go home and hear his father's will read. When the young fool refused flatly—well, that was that, as far as the agency was concerned. At least that big dick from Cosmos thought it was—until the lead began to fly. Then he decided a little extra service wouldn't be out of place—with a death charge for the overtime.

The other galloped off, with Cardigan after him.

CHAPTER ONE

Hard-Boiled Heir

THE Hotel Citadel was small, decent, with a quiet gray front and no doorman. It had a long, narrow lobby hung with pictures of Yosemite, the redwood forests and Half Moon Bay, and it rose narrowly in a quiet street near the St. Francis and Union Square. The man at the desk was old, neat, with a polished bald head, oval-shaped spectacles and a sweeping gray mustache, not a hair of which was out of place. The hotel was not stuffy. It was merely quiet, proper and successful, catering more to the residential trade than to the transient.

Cardigan punched open the single swing-door and came in with a blast of chill, damp wind. His big feet smacked the lozenge-shaped tiles as he headed for the desk singing, "Ta-ra-da-boom-de-ay, ta-ra-da-boom-de-ay," in a low, good-humored voice. He bore down on the desk, a large, bulky man in a battered old fedora; a shaggy ulster with one lapel turned up and the other turned down.

Reaching the desk, he scooped up one of the two house phones and said expansively to the aged clerk: "Good evening, Mr. Birdsong. Think it'll stop raining?"

MR. BIRDSONG didn't like noisy people, he said fretfully, "It always has stopped, Mr. Cardigan," and petulantly turned a ledger page.

Cardigan laughed, said: "I guess that puts me in my place. Well, sir—" He broke off to say into the transmitter, "Miss Seaward, please." Waiting, he tapped his foot; then, "Pat? . . . This is your favorite detective. . . I want you to come down. . . . Why? A little job on which your sweetness and light are needed, sugar. Right away. . . Of course I'm downstairs."

He hung up, planked down the instrument and rolled off to the corner of the lobby, where he flopped into a large leather chair and shot his legs out straight. He lit a long, black cigar and was just getting into it when Pat came out of the elevator. She carried a small umbrella and looked very smart in black hat, a three-quarter-length, black lapin coat and black patent-leather pumps. Cardigan rose out of the chair, pushing with his hands.

"I was just about to jump into the tub," Pat said.

"Every time I call up, you're either jumping in a tub or out of one. Don't you ever just sit—and maybe knit?"

"I can't knit."

"You'd be a swell one to live with, either jumping in a tub or jumping out of one. Learn knitting."

"Thank God I only work for you; that's enough."

They were on their way to the door and he said: "There's not much to this job, Patsy I just need you to put on a sob act." He held open the swing-door and followed her out into the street. "Hey, taxi," he yelled.

They climbed in and he gave an address and sat back with his cigar, as the cab headed off through the afternoon drizzle.

"Sob act?" Pat said.

"Sort of. This afternoon a man by the name of Martin Strang walks into the office. He's from Denver and he's worth dough. Well, he's looking for a young fellow by the name of Husted Hull, who happens to be his nephew. Martin Strang's sister married Burton Hull and old Burton Hull died two months ago in Colorado Springs. Hull's wife died four years ago.

"They've been trying for two months to get Husted Hull to come back to Denver for the reading of his old man's will. But the lad won't come back. It seems he's been knocking around the West ever since his mother died. She left him a thousand bucks a month and he had a falling out with his old man. When the old man died he stipulated that his son Husted must be present at the reading of the will. Well, they wrote and wrote, and Martin Strang wrote, but the only reply they got was a telegram that said, 'Go stand on your head.'

"So Strang came out. He has no idea where Husted Hull lives. The lawyers who send the thousand a month regularly said he's been in San Francisco for three months but the only address is 'General Delivery.' He's lived in Seattle, San Diego, Los Angeles, and so on, but he's always had his mail sent care of General Delivery. Strang said he married about three years ago, about a year after he left home.

He said then, I'm told, that he'd never have anything to do with his old man or any other member of the family. Strang came to me and asked me to locate him and make an appointment for them at my office."

"And you located him?"

Cardigan slapped his knee. "I located him. Did you expect the old master wouldn't? First I called up all the hotels. No luck. Then I tried the telephone company—information. No luck. Then I tried the banks. One bank has a depositor named Husted Hull. I went down and spoke with the manager, laid my cards on the table, and got Hull's address. We're going there now."

"It seems rather futile, doesn't it?"

"Maybe not. This Strang looks to me like a decent old bird. He doesn't care about what he'll get out of it. He's got plenty himself. Soon as he left I called our Denver office on long-distance and they shot back an A-one report on him. He's sore—sore because his nephew's taking this attitude. I guess young Hull was the black sheep, though his mother loved him and left him that thousand a month. If we can get him and Strang together, it may be different. Do you get the set-up now?"

THE cab drew to the curb and Cardigan, saying, "Guess this is it," climbed out into the cold, San Francisco rain. Pat followed and looked up at a four-story building while Cardigan paid the driver. They walked into a glass vestibule, on one wall of which was a series of brass buttons with names beneath. Cardigan pressed one of these and listened. The inner door clicked open and he grabbed Pat's arm and walked her into the hallway. They climbed a narrow stairway to the first landing, which had a door on either side. There were no name plates, but in a moment they heard the click of heels upstairs and they climbed the second staircase. Now they heard laughter, voices, a radio playing. A girl was standing on the second landing.

"Mrs. Hull?" Cardigan asked.

"Yes?" she said politely, with an inquisitive twist of her pretty head.

"Is Mr. Hull in?"

"Yes—yes, of course. Won't you . . ?" She motioned to the open door.

The apartment foyer was small, with two high-backed chairs standing against the wall. The radio and the voices were beyond.

Cardigan was saying: "This is Miss Seaward, Mrs. Hull. My name's Cardigan. I guess you're busy, but if your husband'd just step out here."

She smiled. "I'll get him."

As she said this, a tall, yellow-haired young man came into the foyer from the inner corridor. A slab of hair lay down over one eyebrow and he held a highball in his hand.

Mrs. Hull took hold of his arm. "Dear, these people—Mr. Cardigan—"

Hull cut in with, "What do you want?" He was looking at Cardigan with pale eyes that suddenly burned with anger, and his hand shook, spilling some of the highball.

"Hughie," his wife said in a plaintive little voice. "Please, Hughie."

"Leggo," he snapped, ripped free of her hand. And again to Cardigan, "Well, what do you want?"

Cardigan stood on wide-planted feet. "Mr. Hull, take it easy."

The anger paused for a moment in Hull's eyes, then receded gradually. He dropped his gaze, jerked it around the small room, shrugged. "I'm sorry," he said.

Cardigan said: "Your uncle's in town."

Hull looked up, scowling. "What does he want?"

Pat stepped forward. "Mr. Hull, he wants you to go back to Denver with him. You must know all the details. He came all the way to San Francisco, just to talk with you, face to face. Why don't you see him? Why don't you?"

Hull looked at her vaguely. "See him?"

"Yes—please."

"No!" Hull snapped, his cheeks reddening. "They've written and written and written and they can all go hang on a limb. I want nothing to do with them. To hell with them. They all panned me when I was a kid. I was the black sheep—to all but my mother; and when she died, I skinned out."

Pat said: "But I understand the will can't be read until you're present. Your father made that stipulation."

"I know, I know!" Hull cried. "He wanted to leave me ten cents or something. He wanted me to sit there while my cousins and uncle and aunts and whatnot got big money and I got—ten cents. Do you think I'll give them that satisfaction? No!"

Cardigan said, "Suppose you're right," in a blunt, man-to-man voice. "Suppose you're right, Mr. Hull. Suppose you are the black sheep. What of it? I was one myself. But why not show them you've got the guts to go back there and take it on the button?"

Hull was pretty drunk. He laughed. "Nothing doing. I'm getting a thousand a month from my mother's estate. That made them sore. Why, do you know what?" he demanded, his hand shaking, spilling some more of the drink. "Even if that old man of mine left me all he had, I wouldn't take it. Do you call that guts, Mr. Cardigan?"

His wife took hold of his arm again. "Hughie, dear, why don't you go back? It won't take long and then they won't bother you any more?"

He set his thin, pale jaw. "No, Bernice—no!"

"Hughie, please!"

"No, I tell you!" he cried, pulling free. He leveled an arm at Cardigan. "You go back to my uncle and tell him that if he puts his face inside my door I'll punch it off. Tell him that!" He swung around on his heel and plunged out of sight.

Cardigan went after him, saw his heels going in through a doorway, followed him into a large living room noisy with talk and radio music. Two girls and two men were in the room. All were pretty high. A little brunette yelped: "O-o-o-o, look at the great big nice man!"

A fat youth stumbled toward Cardigan with a glass and a bottle. "Have a drink, podner."

"Excuse me—"

"Come on, have a drink t' the last round-up or something."

Cardigan brushed him aside, bent on cornering Hull, who was at the other side of the room mixing another highball. Hull turned as Cardigan came up.

"Listen, Mr. Hull," Cardigan said. "Let's talk sense—"

Hull's eyes seemed to bloat with fresh anger. "I told you, didn't I? Will you please get the hell out of here!"

The little brunette got between them and raised her arms. "Dance with me, big man?" she cooed to Cardigan.

Cardigan picked her up and stood her aside, then took hold of Hull's lapel. "It's only reasonable, Mr. Hull—"

Hull flung his hand away. "You could talk all night and you'd still get the same answer. I'll not give those people the satisfaction of razzing me when the will is read. Now please beat it out of here!"

A big young fellow spun Cardigan around, looked at him and punched him on the jaw. Cardigan wound up on a divan. Bernice Hull ran in and cried: "Stop!"

The big young fellow said: "He insulted Josephine."

The little brunette was crying in a corner.

Cardigan got up and said: "I'd better go, Mrs. Hull."

She seemed to be the only one who was sober. She looked red and embarrassed.

As Cardigan started off, the big young fellow gripped him by the wrist, twisted his arm behind his back. "Say, 'Uncle,'" he said.

"Ralph, stop!" Bernice Hull pleaded.

Cardigan corkscrewed out of the grip, wrenched clear and left the big young fellow standing stupidly alone. "It's all right, Mrs. Hull," he said. "Boys will be boys."

He ducked into the corridor, reached the foyer and found Pat waiting patiently.

Bernice Hull came running after him, saying: "I'm so sorry, so sorry." Her eyes pleaded with him. "I've begged him to go back, but Husted's so stubborn when he wants to be." Tears were almost in her eyes. "Please forgive us."

Pat said graciously: "Oh, there's nothing to forgive, Mrs. Hull."

Cardigan said: "If your husband changes his mind, I'm at the Cosmos Detective Agency, on Market Street. Or he can call his uncle, Mr. Strang, at the Hotel Farago."

They went downstairs and stood on the sidewalk, looking for a cab. The late afternoon was gray, drab, wet. Fog seemed to smoke sluggishly through the drizzle, and the tops of the taller buildings appeared to be afloat in the thick pall.

Cardigan held Pat's umbrella, a small thing with a short handle, but presently she grabbed it from him, saying: "If you don't mind, I'll hold it myself, because when you hold it, it does neither of us any good. A person would think you were waving a flag. Mrs. Hull's nice, isn't she?"

"She's a pip. But that husband of hers, he looks to me like the wrong end of an accident."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Report to Martin Strang and bail out. I should get into this family dog-fight? Ixnay. I did what I was hired to do. I located Husted Hull and called on him and please keep that damned umbrella out of my ear."

CHAPTER TWO

The Law Chisels In

WHEN Pat walked in the agency office next morning Cardigan was slipping the telephone receiver slowly back into the hook. A deep furrow lay crookedly across his forehead, his brows were bent and there was a sharp, compressed look in his eyes. He set the telephone down more quietly than he was accustomed to doing things and stared intently at it.

He said, more to himself than to Pat: "I don't like that."

"What's the matter, chief?" she asked anxiously.

He made a ball of his fist, laid it on the desk. "Maybe nothing. Maybe—" he rose out of his swivel chair—"lots."

"But—"

He cut in: "The manager of the Hotel Farago just called up—Ben Tremaine. When Martin Strang asked him if he knew of a good, reliable detective agency, Tremaine recommended us." He pointed to the telephone. "That was Tremaine just called up. He said Strang's bed hadn't been slept in last night."

"But maybe—"

Cardigan jabbed her with a dark look. "Maybe what?"

"Maybe he—well—didn't feel like sleeping last night."

"There was a standing order for breakfast to be brought up to his room each morning at eight. When the waiter came with it this morning, Strang wasn't there. Under the door there was a bill of fare that is passed around, slipped under the doors, each evening at five thirty"

His lips tightened and he scowled steadily across the room and his fist thumped the desk slowly, rhythmically.

He said: "When we stopped by to see Strang yesterday at four thirty, after that goofy interview with Hull, you remember Strang got sore. Can you blame him? He said he would go around and see Hull himself. I advised him not to. I said Hull would likely take a sock at him. Strang struck me as the kind of guy who wasn't especially afraid of a sock on the jaw. You saw him. He looked like a guy could handle himself, even though he's fifty."

Pat sat down on the edge of a chair, her eyes wide. "Do you think he went?"

Cardigan was terse, clipped. "You hang around here till I get back." He crossed to the clothes-tree, slapped on his misshapen, faded fedora, banged his arms into the sleeves of his shabby, shaggy ulster.

"Wait," said Pat.

She got up and went over and pulled the back of his collar from beneath his coat, plucked off a few stray threads.

He said, "Thanks, Pats," and left the office. He walked down to the dim old lobby, reached the street and stood there for a moment, his forehead still wrinkled, a little knot of muscle at either corner of his mouth. The morning was clear, bright with sunlight, windy. The wind tussled with his hat and overcoat and whipped sheets of discarded newspapers crazily in the air, or skated them wildly along the pavement. He saw a cab idling along and hailed it, climbed in.

FIFTEEN minutes later he got out in front of the familiar four-storied building. It was a neat street, sharply graded. He paid the driver and rocked into the lobby, pushed the brass button he had pushed the night before, and waited, nibbling on his lip. He pressed the button again, waited another minute, and when there was no answer he pushed the button marked *Janitor*. In a few minutes a small, withered little man opened the door.

Cardigan said: "I can't seem to raise the Hull apartment."

"Maybe they ain't in."

"I think they are. Or I think there's something wrong."

Cardigan showed his identification. "I called on these people last night. Will you come up with me and bring a key?"

"But—"

"Why kill time? If you don't want to let me in, say so, and I'll ring the police."

The man dropped his eyes. "I'll get a key."

He disappeared down the lower hall and when he came back again he was carrying a bunch of keys. Cardigan followed him up two flights of stairs, and the man spent a full minute ringing the apartment bell. Finally, but reluctantly, he inserted a key and opened the door. Cardigan thrust past him, paused in the foyer to listen, heard nothing.

The man stammered, "Whuh—what makes you think—"

"Quiet," Cardigan muttered.

He pushed on into the corridor, looked in the living room. The shades were drawn and a light was burning. He pulled up the shades. He turned and the small man was in his way. Preoccupied, Cardigan brushed him aside, went down the corridor. The small dining room was empty also. The bedroom was empty. Cardigan's scowl deepened and he looked

in all the closets, in the bathroom, the kitchenette.

The small man's timid voice said: "What's the matter?"

Cardigan swiveled. "When these people moved in, did they have much baggage?"

"Only suitcases, I think."

"Well, they've scrammed."

"But they just paid a month's rent. Their month ain't up until—"

Cardigan left him and made another tour of the rooms. He emptied several waste baskets, examined their contents, but found nothing of importance. He pulled out the divan cushions and the cushions of two armchairs, replaced them and stood for a moment with his fists planted on his hips and one side of his mouth sucked inward.

Then he said: "Well, that's that."

"That's—uh—what?" asked the small man.

Cardigan looked through him, said, "Thanks for letting me in," and strode out.

WHEN he blew back into his office, his coat tails flying, Pat turned from the window to say, "Well?"

Cardigan said: "I went there half expecting to find Martin Strang a corpse. Well, I didn't." He scaled his hat across the office and hooked it neatly on a prong of the clothes-tree.

Pat let out a sigh. "Well, thank the Lord for that."

"Don't be in a hurry to thank the Lord, kid. The Hulls have scrammed, bag and baggage. On the way back here I stopped at the Farago Hotel and had a talk with Ben Tremaine. No sign of Martin Strang yet, and no word from him. Tremaine's worried."

"What are you going to do?"

"There's only one thing I can do. Call in the cops. If I let this slide and slide, I'll get in Dutch. Strang's been away from his hotel all night. It's as plain as the nose on your face that something's happened to him. Get me headquarters and ask for McGovern."

"Oh, why McGovern, chief? You know you two always bicker."

"The hell with that. If I got somebody else, Mac'd horn in anyhow."

Pat was reaching for the phone when the outer door opened slowly and Bernice Hull came in. Cardigan put out a hand, said to Pat: "Hold it."

In a louder voice he said: "Good morning, Mrs. Hull."

She looked very small and pretty in a dark cloth coat with a stand-up fur collar. Her smile was wan, a little rueful, as she came into the inner office. Pat stood with her hand still on the telephone and Cardigan, puzzled, said: "I didn't expect to see you, Mrs. Hull."

She dropped her eyes. "I don't suppose I should be here, but I came around anyway. I wanted to see you and I thought —well—I thought perhaps I could see Husted's uncle, too. I forgot what hotel you said he was staying at. But, please," she went on, "don't ever tell Husted about it."

"Why the sudden fade-away from the apartment?"

"Well, you see, Mr. Cardigan, Husted was very worked up last evening. After those people left, he stormed up and down and said he was going to move to a hotel. He said he wouldn't meet his uncle and he said he didn't want to have him coming around. I tried to quiet him and then I walked around the corner to a store and got some things for dinner. But when I came back, Husted was still worked up—and packing. He was determined to move to a hotel, so he wouldn't be bothered. So"—she shrugged —"what could I do?"

"And where are you living now?"

"At the Norman Hotel, in Bush Street."

Cardigan looked at Pat and Pat looked at Cardigan.

Bernice Hull colored a little. "It probably seems foolish, my coming around here, and I know Husted would be angry if he knew it, but—well—I was so embarrassed last night. And I would like to meet his uncle. I do really want Hughie to go back to Denver, but he is stubborn."

CARDIGAN sat on his desk, folded his arms and bent a shrewd stare on the young woman. "I'd like you to meet Martin Strang, too. I think you'd like him and I think he'd like you. But I don't know where he is."

Bernice Hull looked quizzically at him. "But I thought you said yesterday—"

"I said he was stopping at the Hotel Farago. But since last evening he hasn't been stopping there. He's disappeared. His baggage is there, but he isn't."

Her eyes grew very round, her manner was more puzzled than ever. "But where could he have gone?"

"Mrs. Hull, I'd like to know myself."

"Oh, how awful, how terrible!" She looked hopelessly from Cardigan to Pat.

Cardigan's low voice said: "I was just about to phone the police."

Bernice Hull nodded. "But, of course —you'd have to," she cried, in an anxious voice. "He may have been beaten by robbers and left in some vacant lot. Maybe if I told Husted this—then maybe he'd relent and help you find him."

Cardigan smiled. "I don't think his help would do much good. This is a job for the police. I'd supposed maybe Mr. Strang'd gone to your apartment last evening."

"Well, he may have—after we'd gone."

Cardigan said: "Best thing for you to do, Mrs. Hull, is go back to your hotel and say nothing. A cop'll be around before the day's over, just as a matter of routine. If you tell your husband Mr. Strang's gone, he'll want to know where you found it out and when you tell him he may go into another of his Hollywood tempers."

She nodded agreement, then said: "I'll see you later, I hope. I hope I haven't been a nuisance." She smiled sweetly at Cardigan, at Pat; and Cardigan saw her to the door.

When he came back, he said: "What do you think of her now?"

Pat was definite. "I think she's a very fine girl and I feel sorry for her with a husband like Husted Hull."

Cardigan lit a butt, snapped a jet of smoke from one side of his mouth. "Either she's God's most kind and innocent creature or she's a swell actress."

"Oh, nonsense! Are you beginning to doubt her?"

"She just seems too good to be true, but I hope I'm wrong."

"Oh, you give me a pain, chief."

"Hell, you should be a missionary's secretary." He nodded to the telephone. "Get McGovern on the wire."

She was reaching for the instrument when the outer office door banged open and Sergeant McGovern, plain clothed, with a derby riding cockily over one eyebrow, strode in. Behind him strode Martin Strang, tall, white-faced, in his eyes a cold blue anger. Detective Hunerkopf came last, closing the door, removing his hat and looking very fat and placid and benign. One of McGovern's hard, keen eyes was narrowed down and there was a tight, sardonic twist to his mouth.

"Fast one, eh?" he chopped off sarcastically.

Cardigan hung his thumbs in his lower vest pockets and said to Pat: "Look, the trapeze act is in again."

Pat eyed him with a look that was half

angry, half pleading. She knew that something had gone awfully wrong and she did not want Cardigan to aggravate McGovern's already angry mood.

McGovern came right up to Cardigan and planted an index finger hard against the topmost button of Cardigan's vest. "You," said McGovern, "will have to think up some speedy answers, sonny boy."

HUNERKOPF was bowing to Pat and holding his hat off, an inch above his head. "It's always a pleasure kind of to see you, Miss Seaward. I always says to Mac, to Mac I says—"

"Shut up, August!" McGovern growled.

Martin Strang remained in the background, his fists clenched at his sides, his lips locked tightly, though words of wrath ached behind them.

McGovern used his index finger again. "You, Cardigan—"

"Lay off the prologue," Cardigan said; he pushed McGovern out of the way and went across the room to face Strang. "What's the trouble, Mr. Strang?"

Strang muttered passionately, "*You* are asking *me?*"

"Yeah, I'm asking you."

Strang's eyes burned on Cardigan. "I was always chary of detective agencies. I should have known. But I at least thought that the manager of a reputable hotel, when he recommended you—"

Cardigan was blunt without being insolent. "Suppose before you go into that, Mr. Strang, you give me an idea about what I've done."

"Done! You sent me into a trap!"

"I didn't send you anywhere."

"You told me my nephew and his wife lived in Apartment Thirty-two, third floor, at—at that address—Leeward House."

"That's right."

"Well, sir," Martin Strang went on thickly, angrily, "I went there last evening, at about six. I knocked. A small, dapper man opened the door and I asked for Husted Hull. He said to step in. I did. When I stepped in, he closed the door. Then he drew a gun on me. A large, thick-set, oldish man joined him. They took me out, put me in a car, blindfolded me and drove me somewhere where they held me prisoner all night."

McGovern horned in, "Now the fast answers, Cardigan."

Cardigan said to Strang: "When did they let you go?"

"Let me go! They didn't let me go. I worked free of my bonds in the dark and when, this morning, one of them came in with a flashlight to look at me, I knocked him over and ran out. I went directly to the police, who returned with me to the house, but no one was there by that time."

"Make 'em fast, old sock!" McGovern chuckled.

Cardigan swiveled. "Fat-head, what are you trying to do—say I planted a couple of muggs there to kidnap Mr. Strang?"

"Suppose I said I wouldn't be surprised?"

"I'd say you were actually as thick as you look."

McGovern's bony dark face grew darker. "Watch your tongue, sonny boy!"

"Watch yours!" Cardigan ripped back at him. "You're hired by this city to do police work and not to plagiarize the funny papers."

"Now, now, Mr. Cardigan," Hunerkopf said placidly, "don't let us get all hot and bothered."

"You stay out of this!" McGovern barked.

Hunerkopf sighed and leaned back dolefully in a chair.

"But why," said Pat, "must everyone get angry?"

"And you stay out of it, too," Cardigan told her.

Martin Strang said: "I didn't come here to listen to a lot of bickering. I came to procure results."

Pat laughed ironically. "You certainly had a headstart when you brought Mr. McGovern along."

"Young lady," said McGovern, glaring at her, "I don't have to stand any lip from you!"

She flared: "And you don't have to come in here with your atrociously bad manners, Mr. Know-it-all!"

"Ha, ha, ha," chortled Hunerkopf, wagging his big head.

"August!" McGovern thundered. "You wait for me outside!"

Hunerkopf left the office, sighing, wagging his head.

McGOVERN'S hard, steely gaze swept back to Cardigan and he said in a low, tight voice: "Now, we'll get down to business."

"Business with you meaning that you're going to stand there and steam off, and after it goes on a while I'm going to get sore and take a poke at you."

"Why," demanded McGovern, "did you tell Mr. Strang his nephew was there when he wasn't?"

"I told Mr. Strang his nephew was there because, you dope, he was there."

"Why wasn't he there when Mr. Strang went there?"

"I guess he didn't want to be bothered, so he up and moved."

"Why," McGovern drove on, "did two mugs turn up there and take Mr. Strang and make him a prisoner?"

"Now we're both in virgin territory, Mac. I don't know. I haven't the slightest idea."

Strang said in a loud, accusing voice: "You were the only one in this city who knew I was a wealthy man. You made up that story about finding my nephew. You so worded your report that I would go to that address myself determined to talk with my nephew. You were smart enough not to urge me to go."

"You should write, Mr. Strang. Your imagination's the nuts."

"You will please keep your insolence to yourself."

"Oh, I'm supposed to stand here and take a lot of crap from you and hang my head. Is that it? I didn't ask you for that job. You came to me and I located your nephew and you paid me fifty bucks."

"And you laid that trap!"

Cardigan held out his fist toward Pat. "Hold this, Pats, before it reverts to type."

McGovern jumped in front of him, grabbed his arm. "I can take care of that part of it," he growled darkly.

Cardigan's eyes were beginning to look windy. He gave one vicious wrench of his body, without moving his feet. McGovern stopped against the wall, making a picture of Jack Johnson rattle. McGovern started for his blackjack. Cardigan laid his hand on a rectangular slab of glass, six inches long, two inches thick, which he used for a paperweight.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said Martin Strang, not afraid, merely irritated.

Cardigan and McGovern eyed each other stonily for half a minute, and then they relaxed.

Cardigan said to Strang: "I'll get your nephew. If I have to drag him bodily, I'll get him and bring him to you and show you that I did find him, I did talk with him."

"Like hell you will!" McGovern barked.

"But that seems fair enough," Strang said.

McGovern towered. "Mr. Strang, you don't know this potato the way I know him."

"Some day, Mac," Cardigan said, "you're going to make one too many cracks against this agency and just for the fun of it I'm going to sue you. I can prove I saw Husted Hull yesterday afternoon. I'm going to prove it. Now you get the lead out of your pants and scram out of here. You're a carbuncle on the heel of prosperity and besides your face reminds me of calf's liver, which I've always hated."

McGovern looked at Strang. "See! See what I have to take?"

Strang remained neutral, saying: "I'll be at my hotel, the Farago." Then he looked levelly at Cardigan. "You will produce Husted Hull or I'll have a warrant sworn out for your arrest and"—he nodded toward Pat—"the young lady's." He looked at his watch. "I'll give you three hours." He turned and left the office, a fine figure of a man.

McGovern followed, but stopped in the doorway to say, with his tongue in his cheek: "This is one time an ace up your sleeve won't do you any good, sonny boy."

"Roll your hoop, Mac."

"I'm a tough case, hanh?"

"Yeah, a tough case of dandruff."

"Yah!"

Cardigan said to Pat: "I'll bet it wags its ears, too."

Hunerkopf looked in, his hat held an inch above his head. "Good day, Miss Seaward. Good day, Mr. Cardigan. If you're interested, I know where you can buy a whole lug of oranges dirt cheap. Best thing in the world for an acid condition."

"Goom-bye, Augie," Cardigan chuckled.

When the law had gone, Pat said: "Mr. Hunerkopf's a nice old man."

"He's human, anyhow. But don't let that simple manner of his kid you. I often think that behind the scenes it's Hunerkopf that gets the ideas and Mac the promotions. Though Mac's a good cop, too."

"You'd never think you thought that, when you're together."

"Do I ever throw bouquets at anybody? One thing I hate, I hate this back-slapping you see so much. Mac'd jail me in a minute if he thought he could. He'd send me up for a stretch. All in sport, see?"

Pat didn't. She sighed. "You're hopeless."

He took a shot of Bourbon from the neck of a dark amber-colored bottle and smacked a cork back in with the heel of his hand. "Hang around, Pats. The old man is going out to get Exhibit A."

CHAPTER THREE

Two Guys

CARDIGAN went along Market to Taylor and up Taylor to Bush. He swung into the severe, modernistic lobby of the Norman Hotel and went directly to one of the writing rooms, where he sat down, thrust a blank sheet of paper into a hotel envelope and addressed the envelope to Husted Hull. He did not want to arouse the hotel's curiosity by asking point blank for the number of the Hull room. He carried the letter to the desk and said: "Will you please put this in Mr. Hull's box?"

"Certainly," said the young, affable clerk.

Cardigan watched him turn and slip the envelope into one of the pigeon holes. He saw that it was numbered 407 and he was on his way toward the elevator bank by the time the clerk faced front again. Entering a waiting car, he was lifted to the fourth floor. His big feet swung down a wide, airy corridor, and he knocked on the door numbered 407.

Bernice Hull opened it and Cardigan

said: "How do you do, Mrs. Hull."

"Oh, Mr. Cardigan," she said brightly, as though she had not seen him a short time before. "Do come in."

Cardigan pushed into a large living room and saw Hull standing with his back to a window. He was holding a highball in his hand and he did not seem pleased.

"Well, so you're back again. How did you find out I'd moved here?"

"Just cruised around the hotels and asked the desk clerks."

Hull made an angry sound in his throat and strode into the bedroom. Bernice went after him and Cardigan heard her urging him to come back to the living room. He did not come and presently Cardigan strolled over and leaned in the bedroom doorway. Hull was sitting on one of the twin beds, taking a long pull at his drink and looking mutinously over the rim of the glass.

"I wish," he said, "you would please stop pestering me. I told you once that I won't see him and that goes. And the more you go on pestering me, the stubborner I'm going to get. Let him go hang his head somewhere. Let them all hang their heads somewhere. This is one time I can get back at them and, boy, I'm going to get back at them."

Cardigan said: "Mr. Hull, give your ears a chance. Personally, I don't give a hoot how you get back at your uncle, but this is different. You see, I'm in a spot now. Your uncle doesn't believe I found you. He doesn't believe I interviewed you. He thinks it was a gag."

Hull stood up. "Swell! Have a drink."

"Uh-uh," Cardigan grunted, shaking his head. "You see, Mr. Hull, after you moved from that apartment last evening, your uncle went there, steamed up, I suppose, to see you."

Hull laughed gleefully. "Swell! I guess I lighted out just in time. Boy, that's a good one! Ha-ha!"

Cardigan was very grave. "No," he said. "The joke is on me."

He explained briefly what had happened.

Hull squinted intently. "You must be crazy!" he said.

"I am not crazy. I have to produce you, to satisfy your uncle and the police. I'm in a spot. If I can't produce you, I'll be arrested."

Bernice gripped her husband's arm. "You'll have to go, Hughie! You must go!"

HULL glared at Cardigan. "It's a trick," he said angrily. "I don't believe he was waylaid. I don't believe it at all. It's just a trick—to get me to see him. He knows that if he gets me in front of him, I'll listen to reason—and I'm not going to do that." He laughed ironically. "You're pretty smart, Mr. Cardigan, but the gag doesn't work." He shook a forefinger violently up and down. "Those people are going to pay for the way they treated me when I was a kid!"

Cardigan folded his arms, looked very grave. "It's no gag, Mr. Hull. I'm in a spot, I tell you. Your uncle believes I tricked him and he's got the cops believing it, too. If it wasn't for that, I'd not be bothering you. But"—he made a gesture—"get your hat and coat."

Hull shook his head. "Don't you believe it. I know a gag when I see it. My mind's made up."

Cardigan smiled coolly. "You're going, Mr. Hull."

Hull scooped up the telephone, said into the mouthpiece: "Send up the house officer—immediately!" He hung up, smiled. "After all, Mr. Cardigan, you've no authority—"

"Why, you dirty rat! For two cents, I'd—"

"Oh, please, please," whimpered Bernice Hull.

Hull said: "Maybe you'd rather go now, instead of being thrown out."

"I'll go now, bright boy. But I'll be back."

Cardigan spun on his heel, strode from the apartment. He stood for a few moments in the lobby, taking quick, irritable puffs at a cigarette. His eyes settled on a pair of large, highly polished black shoes, traveled up a pair of stout legs to a newspaper behind which a man sat. He strolled over and said in a low voice: "Just like an ostrich, Augie."

Hunerkopf lowered the newspaper. "Why, if it ain't Mr. Cardigan! I always said, it's a small world—"

"You couldn't possibly by any chance have tailed me here, could you?"

"Who, me?" said Hunerkopf, rising and looking very hurt and then saying in an injured tone, "I just like to sit here a lot. I like the atmosphere, kind of. It takes me out of my work."

"There's one thing I like about you, Augie. You're twice the liar I am. Come on outside."

The lumpy detective trailed Cardigan to the sidewalk and they crossed the street and entered a lunch-and-soda fountain.

"Ah," said Hunerkopf, rubbing his hands, "I see they got baked apple on the menu. Good for the system. Join me in a baked apple and we'll—"

"Wait a minute. For once, Augie, keep your mind off your stomach. You'll die of too much health, some day. Listen now—"

"Well, can't I listen while I eat a baked apple? Then we'll be killing two stones with one bird."

Cardigan sighed. "O. K., Augie—O. K."

While Hunerkopf gouged out a tremendous baked apple, Cardigan talked and kept watching the hotel entrance across the street. He wound up by saying: "Will you? You wouldn't want to see me get tossed in jail, would you?"

"Well, no. Trouble with jails, Mr. Cardigan—well, I wrote a long letter to a newspaper once, kind of urging all jails to feed their inmates more fruit—"

"There he comes now. Pay up and—"

"Gosh, I just remembered I ain't got nothing smaller than a twenty."

"You're no dummy," Cardigan said, and paid.

THEY walked across the street just as Hull and his wife were climbing into a cab. A porter had already stowed their baggage in front. He was about to close the door when Hunerkopf took it away from him, lifted his hat and said into the cab: "Good day. I'm Hunerkopf from the cops."

He climbed in and Cardigan followed, pulling out one of the extra seats. Hunerkopf planted himself between Hull and Bernice. Hull tried to get up, his face white with anger.

"*Sh,* Mr. Hull," Hunerkopf said. And to the driver, "Drive down to Market Street. What's the number, Mr. Cardigan?"

Cardigan gave the address of the agency.

"You can't do this!" Hull cried.

"You wouldn't be nice," Cardigan said, "so this is my come-back."

Hunerkopf tried to make polite conversation with Bernice. "Do you like San Francisco, Mrs. Hull?"

She was troubled, confused. "Y-yes—of course."

"Do you, Mr. Hull?"

"I tell you, I'm not going!"

The cab was speeding.

Hunerkopf patted Hull's knee. "You should take life a little easy, Mr. Hull, like it was a bowl of cherries. Take my partner, Mr. McGovern. He don't. And look at him. Dyspepsia half the time."

He drew a package from his pocket. "Have a fig?"

"To hell with your figs!"

"You, Mrs. Hull?"

"N-no, thank you."

Hull yelled: "Stop this cab!"

The driver braked.

Hunerkopf said: "Driver, you stop where I told you to."

It was a short ride and presently the cab pulled up in front of the agency building. They all got out.

Hull was angry and touchy, and when they walked into the office he spun and said: "By God, I'll have you arrested for this! Why don't you spend your time finding criminals instead of picking on honest citizens?"

Hunerkopf held his hat an inch above his head. "We meet again, Miss Seaward."

And Cardigan said: "Pat, phone Mr. Strang and tell him to come right over."

She telephoned.

"Now phone McGovern and tell him, too. I'll show these guys if I'm a bum."

Hull began pacing up and down the inner office. His wife sat troubled in a chair, her anxious eyes following him. Hunerkopf spread himself complacently in a chair and chewed on figs. Cardigan leaned by the window and looked down into Market Street. Ten minutes later he said: "Here comes Mr. Strang now."

CARDIGAN saw Strang step out of a taxi, pay up, and he saw the taxi start off. Strang started for the building entrance but was accosted by two men. The hair on Cardigan's nape stiffened. He saw Strang turn and move across the street, the two men flanking him.

Cardigan spun, yelled: "Come on, Augie! Pat, stay here with them! Augie, snap on it!"

Cardigan sailed out of the office, plunged down the hallway, down the stairs, out into the street. He caught a glimpse of a sedan whipping away from the opposite curb. He caught a glimpse of Strang in back. Hunerkopf came piling out.

"Hey!" Cardigan yelled. He raised his gun and took a shot at a tire, but the car was already speeding and he missed.

Hunerkopf jumped to the footboard of a parked roadster in which a man sat. "Chase that car," he said.

"Who are you?"

Hunerkopf showed his badge.

The man shook his head. "Not me." He climbed out. "Try it yourself."

"I'll drive," Cardigan snapped, jumping in behind the wheel.

Hunerkopf crashed into the seat beside him. "What?"

"Strang."

"What about him?"

"Two guys."

"Oh."

Cardigan swung the car about in the center of the street and opened it up. It was a fast job. Hunerkopf had his gun out. He pushed up the windshield a bit, but the wind forced it shut again. "They're making a left," he said.

Cardigan screeched the tires on the next left, then made a right turn into Mission Street. "They're heading places," he said.

The sedan was doing about sixty, whipping and roaring through scattered traffic on a busy street. Traffic cops blew whistles. Hunerkopf leaned out to wave at the traffic cops. "Hello, Emil!" he yelled. "Hello, Vincent!"

"Never mind your pals," Cardigan said. "Keep your eyes on that sedan while I watch the traffic. If we ever hit anything, we'll land in San Mateo county. This car can step, but they forgot to put brakes on it."

"Ain't that something?"

"That sedan's no cripple, either."

"They're cutting through Eleventh."

Cardigan followed the sedan through Eleventh, through Division and out Portero. "They're heading for the Bayshore highway," he yelled.

In a few minutes they struck the Bayshore road, a fast speedway running south along the tidelands. Cardigan slammed the accelerator pedal against the floorboards. He could do no more. Hunerkopf looked at the speedometer.

"We're doing eighty-two. Did you ever have a blow-out?"

"Why bring that up?"

"I did, once. It's a experience, it is—Look, ain't we sort of gaining, sort of?"

"Inching."

Crash!

The glass windguard on Cardigan's side shattered.

"They like me, Augie—"

Crash!

The one on Hunerkopf's side vanished.

THEY slid deep into the seats. Another shot drilled the windshield and carried away the rear-view mirror.

"I always wanted to buy a little farm and retire," Hunerkopf said.

A fourth bullet shattered the left cowl light. The roadster was gaining.

"In five minutes," Cardigan shouted, "we'll be on 'em."

"Or else, Mr. Cardigan. I'd like to take some pot shots at them tires, but if I blow one that car'll land over on the S. P. tracks and Mr. Strang—"

"There goes the other cowl light. Who the hell got me into this?"

Hunerkopf said: "Here goes."

Left-handed, he fired, emptying his gun. In a moment spots of moisture began to sprinkle the windshield.

"I got it," Hunerkopf said. "I put holes in their gas tank." He reloaded his gun.

Three minutes later the sedan swung from the road onto a large cindered space in front of a gas station. Dust and cinders flew as the wheels were locked. Cardigan braked and slid the roadster into the dust, and cinders peppered the windshield. Two men jumped out of the sedan, knocked over a man standing alongside a touring car and jumped in.

The roadster's brakes were bad. Cardigan swerved to miss the sedan but the roadster slammed head-on into the rear of the touring car and pushed the touring car up between two gas pumps. The two men leaped out, spun with drawn guns. The roadster's windshield was smashed by the gunfire as Cardigan and Hunerkopf fell out. Hunerkopf fired from a kneeling position. The smaller of the two men fell down, his feet kicking up cinders. The other galloped off, with Cardigan after him. Cardigan fired one shot above his head, another at his feet.

"Dope!" he yelled. "Stop!"

The big man held up his hands, stopped and turned around, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his breath pumping loudly from his open mouth.

"Drop the rod behind you," Cardigan said.

The man dropped it.

Cardigan picked it up, kicked the man in the seat of the pants and said: "Now walk back."

By this time the small man was standing up.

Hunerkopf said: "I hardly even hit him."

Mr. Strang was walking toward them, his face gray, grim. "By Judas Priest, Mr. Cardigan," he said, "I was ready to swear you'd got me into another trap!"

"Yeah? Well, let me tell you something, Mr. Strang. For that lousy fifty bucks you gave me, you're sure getting service. Climb in the roadster. We'll lock these bad boys in the rumble and take you back to my office. Your nephew's there and—frankly—I wouldn't mind if you popped him in the snout."

CHAPTER FOUR

Red Hot

BERNICE HULL was crying. She sat in the swivel chair at Cardigan's desk her arms on the desk, her face buried in her arms. The sobs that wrenched muffled into her arms also made her shoulders convulse. Pat, grave-faced, stood beside her, patting the convulsive shoulders.

She said to McGovern: "Every time you walk in here, something happens. You're like a bull in a China shop."

McGovern rubbed his knuckles. "I take a lot of horsing from that boss of yours, Miss Seaward, but I don't take it from a perfect stranger. If you don't like it, you can lump it."

Hull sat slumped on a chair, a welt on his chin, his head groggy, his eyes a little glazed. McGovern had smacked him.

McGovern looked reproachfully at Pat. "I walk in here. I find you holding a gun on this bird Hull—"

"It was for his own good," she blazed back. "And besides, Cardigan told me to keep him here."

McGovern yelled: "He was insolent!"

"You're just angry," Pat said, "because Cardigan proved what he said he would prove. You're cantankerous—"

"Young woman!" McGovern roared.

The outer door opened and Cardigan swung in, his battered hat crushed low on his forehead, his overcoat buttoned wrong and his tie over one shoulder.

"Hi, gang," he said.

Hunerkopf came in next, hauling the two manacled men and looking very placid fat and self-satisfied. He raised his hat an inch above his head.

"Miss Seaward—"

Cardigan lit a butt. "What's the matter with Hull?"

Pat said: "Oh, Mr. McGovern hit him."

"Where's that Mr. Strang?" McGovern barked darkly.

"Be up in a minute, Mac," Cardigan said. "All the excitement upset his stomach. Then Augie gave him a fig and that made him worse, so he stopped downstairs in the drug store to get a sedative."

"Who are these two guys?"

"We'll probably get around to that later. They snatched Mr. Strang right in front downstairs, as he was getting out of a cab. Augie and I shooed after them. They won't talk, but probably your records at headquarters will."

"Oh, they won't talk!" exploded McGovern. He spun on the smaller of the two men. "Who are you?"

"Who are you?"

"Oh, insolent, eh?"

"Sure."

"Why, you little punk, you—"

"Mac," said Hunerkopf, raising a hand. "Remember, there's ladies present. Besides, you always get indigestion when—"

"Hands up, everybody!" Hull was on his feet, a gun gripped in his hand.

"Oh, I never knew he had a gun!" Pat cried.

"I'm going out," Hull said in a shaky voice. "Get out of my way. Get out of my way!"

"Hughie!" cried Bernice, horrified.

"Drop that, you fool!" Cardigan snarled.

Hull's face was dead white. "Get out of—"

"Hughie!"

Bernice jumped up, her eyes wide and stricken. "Oh, dear God, Hughie, don't—"

He snapped: "Get back, Bernice!"

"But, dear, dear—"

His left hand struck her down.

Strang came walking in saying: "Well, I feel much better—"

"Look out!" Pat cried.

Strang's face froze.

McGovern made a dive for his service gun and at the same time took a lunge toward the window. Hull pivoted. Cardigan fired twice through his pocket and both shots made but one hole in Hull's side. Bernice screamed and Hull crashed to the floor and McGovern yelled: "Sweet work, Cardigan!"

Bernice ran across the office and fell on her husband, screaming again. "Oh, Hughie, Hughie. . . !"

Cardigan pulled his gun out of his pocket, fanned it up and down. Deep wrinkles were on his forehead. He made a face as though a bad taste were in his mouth. He grimaced.

He muttered: "I hated to do that." Then he looked up at Strang. "Well, there's your nephew, Mr. Strang."

Strang pointed. "That man," he said, "is not my nephew."

"What?" McGovern exploded.

"That—man—is—not—Husted Hull."

Bernice looked up, her face anguished, wet with tears. "What are you saying?" she cried passionately.

A tight, breathless silence fell upon the office, and then there came the low groans of Hull. Bernice broke into fresh tears and bent over him, cradling his head in her arms.

"What is this, what is this?" she cried. "What are they saying, saying, *saying?*"

Strang said to Cardigan: "You have been deluded, Mr. Cardigan."

Cardigan's face was dull red, a humid wrath moved far back in his eyes. He spun and took three strides and grabbed the smaller of the two manacled men by the throat.

"Spill it!" he rasped.

"Look out—"

"Spill it! What's the hook-up here?"

"Ugh—look out—"

"Spill it! Where's Husted Hull?"

"D-dead—"

"Where?"

"I—don't—ugh—know—"

"When was he killed?"

"Ouch—over three years ago—somewhere—south—"

Cardigan swung away from him. "Mrs. Hull!"

"Yes?" she said weakly, sitting on the floor now, with her husband resting back against her breast.

HIS face looked ghostly, his eyes were haggard. He said: "It's no use. I killed him over three years ago. I met him in Caliente and we chummed together, took a little shack up the Coast. I got to know all about him, his family, all the details. I knew he got a thousand a month from his mother's estate. I knew he never saw them and they never saw him. I'm good at forgery. I was able to copy his signature. I—once—back East—did a little time for forgery. So we went out fishing one night and I clipped him and tied an anchor with a steel cable to him and threw him over. The rest was easy. No one knew us around there—it was a lonely spot. I just picked up and left, taking all his things and mine. I sent a wire to the law firm that sent him his money regularly, giving a change of address. I went to Seattle and became Husted Hull and got the monthly checks and no one ever found out. I met and married Bernice—as Husted Hull.

"Last week I met Proctor." He pointed to the smaller of the two men. "I'd known him in prison back East. He wanted to come around to our apartment. I had to tell him I was married and living as Husted Hull. He was broke. I had to give him some money. He saw I was living well and wanted to know my racket. I refused. Then he said I'd have to tell him or else. So I told him. He wanted a cut monthly of five hundred. What could I do?

"Then you came. I was scared stiff

at first—but then I saw you couldn't have known the real Husted Hull. I was desperate. I knew the uncle'd run across me. I called Proctor up while Bernice was out to the store. I said I was moving to a new hotel. I explained what had happened and said that if I stayed at the same address Strang might show up and then I'd lose out and so would he, on the split. He said all right. So Bernice and I moved.

"Proctor must have come to the apartment after we'd left. Let himself in with a master key and waited for Strang. You can see it was a snatch. He knew I couldn't say anything. He knew—he had me—where he—he—he. . . ."

His head fell forward.

Strang murmured in a low, passionate voice: "Good . . . Lord!"

Bernice fainted and fell to one side on the floor. Pat ran to her. Now Pat was crying: "Oh, you poor, poor girl—you poor, poor thing."

Cardigan said bitterly: "There's life on the button for you."

Hunerkopf touched one of his eyes. "Yes, me, I always wanted a little farm—Can I do anything to help. Miss Seaward?"

McGovern was on his knees. He said: "Well, he's dead."

"It was either you or him," muttered Cardigan.

McGovern stood up, said in a low voice: "Thanks, kid. You're pretty good."

"Oh, I'm not so good. There I had a red-hot killer under my nose all along and didn't know it."

"Well, yes, you were pretty dumb about that."

Cardigan glared. "Oh, yeah! I suppose you would have known right off the bat!"

"Sure."

"Yes, you would have! Why, everyone knows you won that sergeant's badge at a raffle."

McGovern glared. "Now, look here, Cardigan—"

Pat was standing now and glaring crimson-faced at both of them. "Oh, you idiots!" she cried. "You awful, awful idiots!"

McGovern grimaced bitterly and held a hand against his chest. "My indigestion again," he croaked. "My—"

"See?" said Hunerkopf, pointing a broad index finger. "See?"

Cardigan was lifting up Bernice and saying in a low, muffled voice: "Come on, little girl. It's tough. Cripes, but it's tough."

Egan cringed back, face filled with terror.

SWEEP-STAKES

by Maxwell Hawkins

Author of "Duchess of Death," etc.

It was a swell idea—counterfeiting tickets for the biggest lottery in the world—and Newark Ned Egan was just the guy to put it across. He'd be easy to double-cross on the profit end afterwards, too, thought Sure-thing Murphy when he hired the little engraver. What he didn't guess was that a double-cross can be a boomerang—and turn any big-money race into a weepstakes.

NEWARK NED EGAN was short and painfully thin, with shoulders so rounded he appeared to be hunchbacked. His scraggly, white hair hung in damp strands down over his forehead. His skin was only a shade less white than his hair, the result of years of confinement behind prison walls.

But the eyes that blinked through his steel-rimmed spectacles glowed with a feverish light. They were fixed now on a beefy man in a heavy ulster, who towered over him.

"Can you do it?"

The beefy man spoke around the end of a cigar, which his hairy-fingered hand slowly rotated in the middle of his thick lips. While he waited for an answer, he withdrew the cigar, puffed his ruddy cheeks out like carnival balloons and ex-

haled the accumulated smoke in a series of gray balls.

"Yes," Egan replied, speaking with quiet confidence. "Making the plates will be easy for me."

"And print the books? Bind 'em?"

"Yes."

"Good!" the beefy man grunted. "How long'll it take?"

"A week—maybe more."

"How much?"

Newark Ned Egan didn't answer at once. He smiled, as if to himself. A quiet, dreamy sort of smile. But finally, he spoke.

"Five thousand dollars. I've got to have five thousand dollars."

The beefy man whistled softly. "That's a lot of dough."

"To me—yes. But not to you."

For a short while, the beefy man seemed to hesitate. He pulled thoughtfully on his cigar, squinted at a corner of the ceiling, and eventually brought his glance back to the ashen face of the little man in front of him.

"If you turn out a good job, that'll be O. K.," he said. There was a crafty sparkle in his piggish eyes. "Do you know Benny Considine?"

Egan frowned. "Benny Considine—the one they call the killer?"

"Yeah."

"I know him."

"That's good. Benny'll call for the stuff in a week." The beefy man turned to go, but Egan stopped him.

"Just a minute, Murphy! I've got to have some money, now."

"What's the idea?"

"You forget I just got out of stir. I'm flat, and this job'll take some cash for expenses. I'll have to get a small press, tools, paper stock. A lot of things."

Reluctantly, the big Murphy drew forth a roll of bills. "How much?"

"Well, a thousand at least," Egan said.

Wetting his broad thumb, Murphy counted off the money slowly and handed it to Egan. "Benny'll be around in a week," he repeated, "and be sure you give us a good job."

When the door had closed, Egan stood for a long time examining an object which he held in his hand, an object which Murphy had given him only a short while before.

It was a small book with tan, pasteboard covers. Inside were ten oblong tickets, fastened at a perforated line to counterfoils, which were bound to the covers. The tickets were elaborately covered with engraved scrollwork, and each bore a serial number.

It was a book of tickets for the Emerald Isle Sweepstakes.

Absent-mindedly, Egan slipped it into his pocket. "I'll do it this time. I've got to have the money," he mumbled to himself. "But it'll be the last job I ever touch."

HIS porcine eyes half closed, Murphy sat in the dining room of his penthouse apartment and looked out the window, beyond the terrace, letting his gaze dwell for a long moment on the serrated skyline of the city.

His huge body, clad in a brilliant, blue silk bathrobe, bulked larger than ever. Below his ruddy cheeks, his jowls also were blue from his morning shave. He removed his glance from the panorama of rooftops and brought it to rest almost caressingly on the big diamond, glittering in the hair on the back of his thick finger.

"What do you think of the set-up, Benny?" he asked.

Benny Considine dropped his skinny elbows on the table which was still littered with dirty breakfast dishes, and regarded the beefy Murphy with undisguised admiration.

"It's a honey! No wonder they call you Sure-thing."

Murphy grinned faintly. It was true. He was known as "Sure-thing" Murphy. But he was no more an Irishman than was Joe Kalipoulos, who shined his custom-made shoes every afternoon. Like Joe, he was a Greek, and in the old days on the lower East Side, he had answered to a long Greek surname—when there was anybody around who could pronounce it.

But when he had migrated into the neighborhood where Broadway and Seventh Avenue cross, forming Times Square in the lower triangle of the X, and Longacre Square in the upper, he had abandoned his patronym for the shorter Gaelic designation.

The Sure-thing was fastened on him later, much later. After he had become renowned among those who court the Goddess of Chance as a gambler who always called the turn. He had an unsavory, but unproved reputation as a fixer of fights, a framer of horse races, and it was even said, although not to his face, that he had tried to rig the Lipton Cup Race.

On rare occasions, Sure-thing Murphy strayed from his regular occupation of gambling to take a fling at other shifty but profitable ventures. And it was on these occasions that he allied himself with the sleek and murderous Benny Considine.

"How did you happen to think of this gag?" Benny asked.

Murphy reached out and picked up a booklet with tan covers from the table. It was a duplicate of the one he had given Newark Ned Egan. Flipping back one of the covers, he looked at the tickets with a faint smile.

"I heard that Newark Ned — the smoothest counterfeiter who ever gave the federal boys headaches—was finishing his stretch at Leavenworth. That gave me the idea. I got in touch with Steve the Greek, out in Chicago, and told him I could get hold of all the counterfeit sweepstake tickets he could use. Phonies that would fool anybody."

"And he fell for it."

"He's buying ten thousand books—a hundred thousand tickets," Murphy nodded.

"What's our cut?"

"Forty grand, when we turn over the stuff."

Benny's eyes sparkled. "Any angles?" he asked.

"Only one. We've got to prove that the tickets are right, can be shoved. But I know exactly how to take care of that."

Benny Considine's unblinking, reptilian eyes studied Sure-thing Murphy's bland, close-shaven face. "Steve the Greek's got a tough mob working with him," he said. "We've got to watch our step."

Murphy knocked the ash from his cigar onto the thick carpet. "What do you think I cut you in on this for?" he asked. "I've heard it said you were sort of tough yourself."

"Tough enough to handle any of those mugs," Benny nodded. Then he suddenly asked: "What does Egan get for makin' these tickets?"

"He thinks," Murphy said meaningly, "that he's going to get five thousand dollars. I've given him a grand for expenses. But here's where you come in—" He leaned over the table and instinctively lowered his voice.

THE contrast between Newark Ned Egan and Benny Considine was striking. The old counterfeiter, stooped, white-haired and shabbily clothed; the youthful gunman, slender and erect, his hair black and oily, his clothes expensive and form-fitting.

"You got 'em done?" Benny asked.

Egan peered through his steel-rimmed

spectacles and bobbed his head up and down on its corded neck. Then he pointed to a packing case in one corner of the bleak room.

"Ten thousand books, just like Murphy said. It was a hard job with that small press, and I had to bind them by hand. That's why it took me so long."

Benny didn't reply. Instead, he walked to the packing case and pushed back one of the loose boards on top. Picking up a bundle of the tan-covered booklets, he flipped the pages.

"They don't look bad," he grunted finally.

Egan shuffled to his side. "It's good work," he said with a touch of pride. "I never did any better in the old days. Serial numbers—everything perfect. I tried hard on them, because"—Egan hesitated, a dreamy expression in his deep-set eyes —"because that's the last plate I'm ever going to scratch!"

"Huh?"

"I'm through with the racket, Benny. I'm going straight. I wouldn't even have taken this job for you and Murphy, but Uncle Sam don't provide you with any income when he turns you out of the big house."

"Uh-huh."

Benny was busy comparing the counterfeit booklets with a genuine one he had pulled from his coat. His sallow face rippled into a smirk of satisfaction. The doddering old Egan was right. It was a swell job. An expert would have a hard time detecting any flaws.

A sudden fit of coughing racked Egan's emaciated frame. When he had recovered from it, he looked at Benny with a wan smile.

"Hear that?"

"What?"

"That cough. I'm not going to last long, Benny. Maybe a few months, maybe a few years. And I want to spend my last days in peace. That's the only reason I took on this job."

"Oh, yeah!"

Benny didn't seem to be interested. He was bending over the case and removing one after another of the bundle of counterfeit tickets. From each bundle, he drew a single booklet. In its place, he put a different one, which he took out of his pocket. The substitutions were genuine sweepstake books, and each bore on the edge of its cover a tiny nick, scarcely noticeable.

"I'm going to take the money I get from you and buy myself a little place in the country," Egan was saying. "Somewhere on Long Island, I guess. Raise a truck garden, maybe have a few chickens. So I can forget all those years behind the walls—" He broke off, looked sharply at the box, then at Benny. "What're you doing?"

Benny whirled. "None of your damn business!"

Egan recoiled. But immediately a mollifying smile appeared on his parchment face. "Salting them with real books, eh, Benny? That's smart. You're a smart fellow, Benny."

"I ain't no sucker."

"No, you're no sucker. I used to think I was pretty smart, too. But a fellow ain't smart when he's crooked. It took me sixty years and five stretches to learn that. But I know it now."

Two angry red spots flamed in Benny's cheeks. "Shut up, you damned old preacher!" He gave a disdainful snort. "That's good! Newark Ned Egan turned preacher. Geez!" He took a step forward. "Why, I've a good notion to bat you silly, you old fool!"

EGAN raised his hands defensively, hobbled backward. "Don't—don't hit me!" he exclaimed. "Don't pay any attention to me, Benny. I'm getting old.

That's the way you get when you're old. Foolish, I guess you smart, young fellows figure it is."

For a moment, Benny stood with arms akimbo and glared at the stooped figure of the old engraver. Then he gave his narrow shoulders a contemptuous twitch, walked to the door and flung it open.

"Come on up here, you guys!" he barked.

He stood then, beside the door till two men appeared, men with shifty eyes and a swaggering way of walking.

"Take that down and put it in the car," Benny ordered, pointing to the packing box. "Don't spill anything out of it."

The box of counterfeit sweepstake tickets was heavy, but Benny lent a hand and after much tugging and grunting, the two men started down the stairs with it. Egan watched the proceedings in silence, a strange glow in his deep eyes, his white brows drawn together in a worried frown. He moved slowly over to Benny, who was following the progress of the box toward the front door, and touched him timidly on the arm.

"Don't forget," Egan said.

Benny shook the old man's arm off impatiently. He pulled a cigarette from a pack, lit it and snapped the burned match into the corner. Then he looked narrowly at Egan through the cloud of smoke that was spurting from his lips.

"Forget what?"

"The rest of my money. You remember—I'm to get five thousand for this job. That's what I told Murphy, and he agreed."

"Listen! Murphy give you a grand, didn't he? When he made the deal with you?" Benny's tone was harsh.

"Yes. And now I want the balance. Four thousand."

Benny sneered and repeated more belligerently. "Murphy give you a grand!"

"But, Benny," Egan protested, rubbing his hands nervously together. "I had to spend almost all of that for the press, and all the things to make those tickets."

"So what?" Benny stuck his chin out. "Well, get this! You ain't gonna get no more dough out of us!"

Egan stiffened, made a pitiful effort to square his stooped back. There was an angry glitter in his eyes now. He clenched his hands, pressed them against his bony sides.

"That's it!" he cried shrilly. "You're going to cross me up!" His voice rose in a squeaking crescendo. "My God, Benny, don't do that. I've got to have that money! I've been counting on it I need it to—"

He didn't finish. Benny had pounced upon him, seized his hunched shoulders, and was shaking him till his words rattled in his scrawny throat. Suddenly Benny released his grip, and Egan cringed back, his face filled with terror. When Benny spoke, his voice was grim and deadly.

"You been paid! That's final, see?" A flat blue automatic was clutched in the hand he drew from his pocket. He jabbed it viciously into the old man's ribs. "And if you open your mouth, I'll rub you out sure as hell. One squawk—and you get it!"

He didn't give Egan a chance to say a thing. His open left hand moved forward till the palm was against the old engraver's face. With a sudden shove, he sent him spinning into the corner, where he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

As Benny hastened down the stairs, he muttered to himself: "Murphy had the right dope. No use giving that old bum four grand."

SURE-THING Murphy was wearing dinner clothes. In the starched bosom of his dress shirt, studs of black pearl glowed dully. In his buttonhole was a gardenia. His face had been massaged into a rosy hue, which shaded off into

the gunmetal color of his closely shaved and sagging jowls. He made a prosperous, imposing figure.

Benny Considine, the killer, was also wearing a tuxedo. It was streamlined, and flared in unexpected places. He looked like a tailor's futuristic dream of a well-dressed man. Crossing his patent-leathered feet with fastidious care, Benny leaned back in his chair.

"Who's this guy we're waiting for? What d'you know about him?" he asked.

Murphy paused in his majestic pacing of the living room of his apartment for a moment.

"He's one of Steve's mob. Name's Aragomas."

"Greek, huh?"

"Sounds like it."

"What was the matter with Steve?"

"I don't know," Murphy shrugged. "All he said was that he couldn't get away from Chi right now, and was sending this Aragomas to close the deal." He handed Benny a yellow envelope. "Here's the wire I got from him."

Benny pulled out the single sheet and read—

CANT LEAVE CHICAGO NOW STOP AM SENDING MY PARTNER ARAGOMAS TO GET STUFF AND PAY OFF IF HE THINKS IT IS OK STOP HE WILL MEET YOU AT YOUR PLACE WEDNESDAY NIGHT AT EIGHT

STEVE KALAS

As he studied the message for a few moments, Benny ran a gentle, thoughtful hand over his glistening hair. Finally, he squinted up at Murphy.

"You and him been writin'?"

"Yeah," Murphy nodded. "I've written him two or three times to keep the deal hot, while Egan was making the tickets."

"Maybe, we'd better wait and deal with Steve himself," Benny suggested.

Murphy gave a disdainful shrug. "What's the difference. Just so we get our money."

"You can't trust them Greeks," Benny muttered darkly.

Murphy stiffened suddenly, shot a quick, suspicious glance at the lounging Benny. But Benny was staring at the telegram in his hand, a frown on his face, and gradually Murphy smiled. It was a quiet enigmatic smile.

"You're right," he said softly. "You can't trust Greeks."

Somewhere in the back of the apartment a buzzer sounded.

Murphy swung about, glided to the chair in which Benny was sitting. His movements were swift, almost lithe, and surprising in one of his huge bulk.

"That's probably him now," he said. His voice was guarded, but emphatic. "You let me run this show and don't try any rough stuff, unless I give you the office."

Murphy moved quickly away, and when a white-coated Chinese houseboy appeared in the door a moment later, he was gazing idly out the window.

The servant was followed by a short, but sturdily built man. A man with black, waving hair and dark, gray eyes set beneath slanting brows. As he stepped briskly into the living room, he smiled and displayed even and rather large teeth.

"Good evening, gentlemen!" he said. His shrewd glance flitted from Murphy to Benny Considine and then back to Murphy. "I'm Aragomas. Hope I didn't keep you waiting."

Murphy held out his hand cordially. "Glad to meet you," he boomed. "That's Benny Considine, my partner," he added, making a flourishing gesture toward Benny.

Benny pulled himself leisurely out of his chair. His unblinking eyes appraised Aragomas with a cool thoroughness that

was little less than insolent. But Aragomas appeared not to notice. He shook hands.

"How are you?"

"Guess we might as well get right down to business," Murphy said. "Benny, get some of the books to show Mr. Aragomas."

Benny walked to the yellow pine packing case, which was resting on the floor against one wall of the living room. He pushed back one of the top boards and began to fumble around with the bundles of counterfeit sweepstakes tickets. Presently, he returned, carrying some six or eight of the tan booklets, which he handed over to the man called Aragomas.

WHILE Murphy and Benny looked on with assumed casualness, Aragomas examined them. He smiled in a peculiar sort of way, and finally bobbed his head up and down. "They look good," he said.

"They are good," Murphy replied.

"They'd fool me," Aragomas admitted. "But, of course—" He didn't finish, just left his sentence dangling and turned his attention once more to the tan-backed booklets in his hand.

Benny sprayed a mouthful of cigarette smoke through his teeth and demanded: "What's the matter with 'em?" He looked at the tan covers, his sharp eyes noting the tiny nicks in their edges. Then he glanced at Murphy and nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Nothing—nothing, that I can see," Aragomas said hastily. "They look like they were done by a man who knew his business. But Steve gave me orders to be sure that they'd get by. We're laying out a lot of dough on this racket."

"Oh, not so much," Murphy said deprecatingly. "Only forty grand. You'll take in about two hundred thousand on them. We're only asking what we figure we ought to have coming to us."

"You'll get all that's coming to you," Aragomas replied.

Murphy looked relieved. "We're on the up-and-up on this deal. We want you and Steve one hundred percent satisfied. I'll tell you what we'll let you do."

He paused impressively, and Aragomas waited with an expression of curiosity for him to continue. Benny kept his eyes fixed on the pointed toes of the patent-leather shoes.

"You just take those books you have there—and give 'em a try out," Murphy concluded.

"What's the angle?"

"No angle. We know they're O. K. Nobody can tell 'em from the real sweepstakes tickets."

Aragomas considered. Gradually a sly smile touched his slightly parted lips, and showed his white teeth.

"How would it be," he asked, "if I filled out the tickets in one of these books, and mailed the stubs into headquarters? To Ireland?"

Murphy exchanged glances with Benny. Then Murphy said: "It'll take quite a long while to get an answer back, won't it?"

"Only two or three weeks. They send out the acknowledgments promptly." His smile widened. "You understand, Steve insists that these tickets have to be right."

"You ain't asking much," Benny sneered. "You want tickets that'll even fool the guys who're putting out the real ones."

"That's what you promised in the letters Steve got from you," Aragomas said evenly.

Before Benny could reply, Murphy shot him a warning glance. "Mr. Aragomas," Murphy said suavely, "you're dealing with two men who are straight shooters. When we promised those tickets would fool anybody, we meant it. You send the stubs from all those books you're holding right

into headquarters in Ireland. And as soon as you get the acknowledgments, we'll take our forty grand, and you can have the rest of the tickets."

"That sounds reasonable."

A few minutes later, when the man from Chicago had taken his departure, Benny muttered: "I don't like the way he's stallin' off."

"Well," Murphy said, "you can't blame him much. Forty thousand's a hunk of dough these days. But I had a hunch something like this might come up. That's why I had you salt the phonys with real books."

"That was a smart play," Benny admitted grudgingly. "But if that guy tries anything funny, I'm gonna show him how we handle those Chicago mugs."

Sure-thing Murphy took two quick steps, and his hand closed about Benny's skinny arm. "Listen," he rasped, "we ain't going to have any trigger work this deal."

"O. K." Benny grumbled. "But I'm tellin' you! You can't trust Greeks!"

Murphy looked at him long and steadily. "Sometime they fool you," he said.

THREE WEEKS had passed when Sure-thing Murphy, Benny Considine and Aragomas again met in the big gambler's penthouse apartment The yellow packing case with its neat bundles of counterfeit sweeptakes tickets still rested on the floor against the wall.

Benny was the first to speak, coming directly to the point. "You found 'em O. K., huh?"

Aragomas smiled. "Good enough for us."

"I was sure you would,'" Murphy said unctuously. "They were made by the best plate scratcher that ever lived."

"Let's get this thing cleaned up," Benny snapped "There's the rest of them tickets. All you got to do is kick in with the forty grand, and then they're all yours."

Ignoring Benny, Aragomas turned to Sure-thing Murphy. "I've brought a couple of men along with me to carry that case out. Mind if I have them come in?"

"Like hell!" Benny stepped between Aragomas and the door. His hand was inside his coat. "You don't bring nobody in here to lay a finger on that box till we see the dough. You think we're saps?"'

"What's the idea?"

Murphy's face was bland. "Sounds like Benny was anxious to see some cash."

"That's it. Cash in advance!" Benny exclaimed. "I don't trust no Greek."

At that, Aragomas, instead of taking offense lifted his head and gave voice to a hearty laugh. He seemed to be highly amused by Benny's words. His attitude gave both Murphy and Benny a feeling of uneasiness. There was something very disconcerting in the way Aragomas' steady eyes rested first on one and then the other.

"All right, boys," Aragomas chuckled. "We'll have the pay-off right here and now."

He sauntered across the room and pulled a chair out from a table. Coolly, he sat down, then waited while Murphy and Benny followed his example and took seats opposite him. The big gambler and his gunman partner appeared somewhat reassured. Aragomas began to talk.

"You're asking for a lot of money for a pile of junk," he said softly. "But Steve seems to think he knows what he's doing."

"Sure Steve does," Benny snarled. "Come on. Let's get this over with!"

"All right, my boy," Aragomas replied. He put his hand into his coat pocket. "It's over with now!"

His hand came out with serpentine smoothness and speed. Benny Considine and Murphy found themselves staring into the muzzle of a deadly looking pistol.

"Put 'em up—high!" Aragomas commanded.

Sure-thing Murphy's thick lips parted, he exhaled heavily, and his usually ruddy cheeks turned pasty. Benny, however, jerked out a curse. He brought his knees against the under side of the table in a sudden movement, at the same time dropping sideways from his chair to the floor.

The table top cracked against Aragomas' arm only a fraction of a second before he squeezed the trigger. But it was soon enough to cause the bullet to rip harmlessly into the wall near the ceiling. Almost immediately, Aragomas, his balance upset by the recoil and the overturning table went sprawling.

BENNY'S automatic roared twice. But the table between, shielded Aragomas from his vision and Benny fired too high. The slugs tore through the mahogany without finding their target.

Big Murphy, terrified into rigidity, sat bolt upright in his chair as the bullets sang past. His fat cheeks sagged, making his piggy eyes wide and staring, glazed with the fear of death. He forced his mouth open to scream, but the words were drowned in another blast of gunfire. Aragomas had cut loose at Benny, wiggling over the floor toward a heavy overstuffed sofa.

Benny gave a sharp cry, reached the sofa, hurled himself frantically behind it.

And then in the doorway, two men appeared. Each was gripping a gun. The sofa protected Benny from Aragomas' weapon, but on his flank he was fully exposed to the men in the door.

"Don't move!"

The command came gruffly from one of the newcomers. Benny and Murphy obeyed it implicitly. But Aragomas, a dry smile on his face, scrambled up.

"Hello, boys," he exclaimed cheerily.

"You hurt?" one of the men in the doorway asked.

"Not a scratch," Aragomas murmured. "But I think our friend behind the sofa got a lead kiss."

They dragged Benny Considine, the killer, from his temporary refuge. A splotch of red on one of his pants legs was rapidly growing larger, and after they'd removed a second gun from his waistband, they let him sit on the sofa. He glared at Aragomas.

"A hi-jack, huh?" he snarled. "You cheap mugs wouldn't pay for something you figured you could steal."

Big Murphy, the man who was famous for his oily tongue, seemed to have difficulty in speaking. When he found his voice, it has lost its confident assurance.

"Shut up, Benny," he whined. Then to Aragomas: "Y-you win. Take 'em and get out."

Aragomas chuckled. "You've got me wrong, Murphy. If I'd wanted those tickets, I'd have taken them—three weeks ago. But what I wanted then was a little more time to work up my case against you two sharpshooters. You gave it to me, when you offered to let me mail those sweepstakes stubs to headquarters."

"Wh-what?"

Benny stuck his chin out, stared at Aragomas. "Say, ain't you from Steve the Greek's mob?" he blurted out.

"No," Aragomas replied. "I'm from Uncle Sam the American's mob. But some of our boys have been reading Steve the Greek's mail, in connection with a little income-tax matter. That's how we stumbled on your game—"

With a snarl like a trapped animal, Benny turned on Sure-thing Murphy. "You big slob! Didn't I tell you not to trust them Greeks?"

Aragomas gave a brief laugh. "That's right, eh Murphy? Sure-thing Murphy alias Pete Constantinos! The Greek who passed himself off as an Irishman."

Murphy winced, then scowled at Aragomas.

"I don't know whether it's a case of Greek meeting Greek, or Irishman meeting Irishman," Aragomas grinned.

"You Greek rat!" Benny exploded.

Aragomas shrugged. "No, no, Benny. Not a Greek. Just an Irishman who passed himself off as a Greek. I told you you got me wrong. Just spell Aragomas backwards. What do you get? Sam O'Gara—Department of Justice! Come on. We're going places!"

THE BREATH of Spring was in the air the day the jailor announced to Benny Considine and Sure-thing Murphy, born Pete Constantinos, that a visitor had come to see them.

It had taken almost three months to reach their case on a crowded docket. But when it was finally reached, the jury had decided with amazing alacrity that what Benny and Murphy needed was a vacation in Atlanta. And in another hour, they would be on their way.

"Fancy seeing you here?" a chuckling voice said.

Benny peered sourly through the bars of his cell; from the adjoining cage Sure-thing Murphy also stared at the speaker.

"What the hell do you want?" Murphy growled.

Benny grew pale with rage. "You've got a nerve coming here, you dirty double-crossing squealer," he snarled.

The little man, whom the jailor had escorted in, straightened his stooped back.

"No, Benny, I didn't squeal. When Sam O'Gara located me, he had all the dope already. He knew more than I did."

"Well, by God, I'm going to squeal on you!" Murphy shouted. "You'll be with us, Egan!"

Newark Ned Egan shook his white head. "I don't think so, Murphy. You see, Sam O'Gara and I are sort of old friends. He helped me get my last rap. When we'd talked it over, Sam decided that I hadn't broken any law. Seeing as how sweepstake tickets are illegal anyway, I hadn't done anything in copying a few of them. Besides," he added softly, "Sam understands that I'm going straight now."

Murphy's mouth fell open, but he made no reply as Egan continued.

"But that's not why I came to see you—and wish you luck."

Something in the old man's voice, some hint of irony, caught Murphy's attention.

"What're you talking about?"

"I just wanted you to know that we're all square now."

"Huh?"

"Yes. You can forget about the four grand you owe me. I don't need it and—well, Murphy, it's getting close to spring. I'll be able to plant that truck garden I told Benny about, almost any day now."

Benny pushed his face close to the bars. "Have you gone nuts?" he demanded.

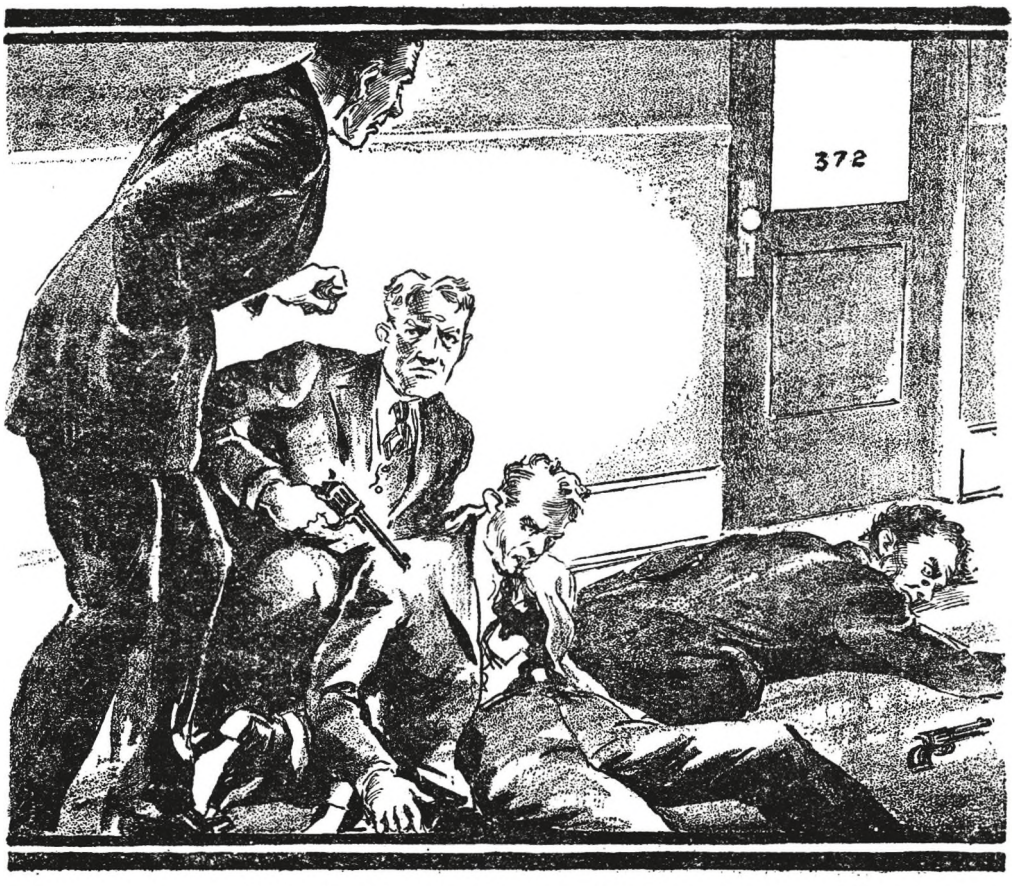
"Not at all," Egan replied. He drew a folded newspaper from his pocket and handed it to Benny, first pointing out with his finger a paragraph in a story on the front page. Wondering, Benny read—

> . . . Among the winners in the Emerald Isle Sweepstakes was Edwin Egan, of 1733 Bleecker Street. Egan, a former convict and notorious counterfeiter, was holder of a ticket on Square Deal, which placed second. He will receive approximately $47,000.

Slowly, silently, Benny passed the newspaper through the bars to Murphy. He seemed, for once in his life, to be stricken dumb. Murphy read the paragraph, and when he had finished, he hurled the paper viciously to the cell floor.

"You—you won forty-seven grand!" he spluttered.

"Right!" Egan said with an odd smile. "I won it on the ticket you gave me to copy for the counterfeits."



"Hell! I tried to give him a break," Olson said.

When Blyer and Olson took the case it looked like a simple divorce for one, instead of

CURTAINS FOR FIVE

by R. D. Torrey

Author of "A Death in the Family," etc.

BLEYER said: "Just a minute, Mrs. Kargen!" to the woman across the desk from him, then called: "Miss Jorgenson!" through the open door to the outer office. When a blond girl came to the door he asked: "You raise him?"

The blond girl said: "He's on his way."

Bleyer said: "Fine!" and after the blond girl had stared at the woman at the desk for a moment, went out, he said: "He'll be here right away."

The woman shrugged trim, tailored shoulders, said: "I'll wait then." Her voice suggested she wasn't used to waiting. She looked at Bleyer for a moment, opened a brown cloth handbag that matched her jacket, reached inside it without taking her eyes from Bleyer's and took out a man's flat billfold. She reached inside this, still without looking away, and took out three yellow bills. She held them across the desk, said: "For a retainer."

Bleyer waved them back, said: "We're not retained yet!" in a short voice. His dark face looked angry and he drummed on the desk with his fingertips as he added: "I've got a partner to consider or I'd tell you now that we won't be."

The woman shrugged again, looked down at the desk and spread the money out across in front of her. She said: "I didn't know private detectives were so—careful."

She accented "careful" and Bleyer said impatiently: "Now I've explained that. We'll go for some things and leave some things alone and this looks like one we leave alone. We've just started in and we got a license to lose and a fee ain't worth taking a chance on." He looked at the money, saw the small *100's* in the corners of the bills, added: "But we'll see what Mr. Olson thinks," a little hastily. He looked up as he heard a door in the outer office slam, said: "Here he is now," and to the man that came in, "Oley, this is Mrs. Kargen. Mrs. Kargen, this is Mr. Olson, my partner."

OLSON was short, blond, almost pudgy, wore a constant smile that fitted his china-blue eyes. He said: "Meetcha!" with a bow, saw the money on the desk and opened his eyes wide. He sat down at the end of the desk, said: "Ingrid said you wanted me in a hurry!" and looked again at the three bills that fronted Mrs. Kargen.

Bleyer said: "Maybe, Mrs. Kargen, it would be better if you told this to Mr. Olson. We had decided not to accept divorce cases but it depends entirely upon what Mr. Olson decides about it." He looked at the money in turn.

The woman turned to Olson, smiled confidently, said: "It's really simple. I'm married."

She paused a moment and Olson said: "Yes'm!"

"My husband, for this past year, has been away from home a good many times without any explanation. I think he's—" She hesitated again.

Olson, still looking at the money, supplied: "Cutting corners!" in a helpful voice.

"Yes, that's it. Exactly."

"And you want us to find out and prove it to you?"

"Yes."

"Prove it to you or to a court?"

She hesitated and Bleyer broke in with: "I told Mrs. Kargen, Oley, about our rule for divorce cases. I explained to her what we'd do and what we wouldn't."

The woman said: "Understand, Mr. Olson, it isn't a question of having to manufacture evidence. If I wasn't sure in my own mind I wouldn't ask for proof. I've got to have proof."

Olson asked: "But Mrs. Kargen! Why be so insistent on us taking this?"

"My husband has a violent temper and I'm afraid that when he finds out I'm having him followed . . . I'm afraid of him. He's—well, I'd rather have someone I can depend on, is all."

"You mean he's liable to get tough?"

"He's liable to do anything. This last year he's not been himself. He even carries a gun all the time."

"Why don't you get out?"

She said: "I'm afraid to." Olson looked at her and she hesitated, shrugged sharply and said: "I might as well show you so you'll believe me," in a resigned voice. She stood up, took the brown jacket off and showed both arms covered with greenish-black bruises. She redonned the jacket, said: "My back is worse," very simply. "I told him I was going to leave him and he—objected. He swore to me there is no other woman, but there must be."

Olson looked from her to the money on the desk, said to Bleyer: "Well, we might as well take it." Then he asked: "Where do you live?" and when she told

him: "Nine Twenty-six El Cerrito Avenue," he made a note of it on a desk pad.

She said: "I didn't tell you before, but he's an amateur aviator. He goes in his plane to meet this girl so she must live out of town." Her voice was suddenly vicious.

Olson looked up sharply, asked: "What was the secret about that?"

She caught herself, answered him with, "I thought that might make it harder to follow him and that it might influence you not to take the case."

Olson grunted, asked: "Where's he keep the plane?"

"Glendale Airport. I followed him once but he went away in the plane and I couldn't follow that." She stood up and Bleyer went to the door with her.

"Shall we mail you the reports?" he asked.

"It would be better if I stopped here after them."

Bleyer said: "You're probably right. Wait about a week." He watched her go down the corridor with an ugly dissatisfied look on his face, swung back into the office and saw Olson showing the blond girl the three hundred-dollar bills and said: "Damn it, Swedes! This is dynamite."

OLSON said: "The money's good and we need it." He waved one of the bills in the air, said: "Rent!" waved another, said: "Groceries!" waved the last and said: "And liquor!"

Bleyer reached out and took the last, said: "No liquor. Won't you ever learn?" and to the girl, "Wha'd you think of her, Ingie?"

Ingie said: "In the first place I'm a Dane not a Swede!" and thoughtfully, "She's about thirty-three—maybe thirty-five. She's harder than nails. She used to be a swell-looking gal and can still get by. She's got at least five hundred dollars' worth of clothes on her back so she's got money. That's all."

Bleyer said: "No, it ain't! You should put in that she's lying by the clock, but I don't know where. If she's so damn scared of her old man, she'd get the hell out where he couldn't find her instead of getting evidence for a divorce. For that matter, she could get it on cruelty right now. Her whole story's screwy."

Ingrid Jorgenson said: "It's you that's screwy!" in a scornful voice. "All's the matter with her is that she's nerts over her papa and she's hoping to find out he's chiseling and praying to God she won't. She's so jealous she's about half crazy."

Olson said: "Why'd she pick us?" and Bleyer handed him a printed card that read, *Los Angeles Police Department*, and in the corner, *Lieutenant-Detective Paul Kowalski*. The card was scrawled across in ink with Kowalski's signature and Olson said: "That's a good Pole. Always gives a pal a break! Did I ever tell you about the time me and him went to pinch—"

Bleyer said: "You have! Suppose you give your old pal a ring and see what he knows about this. I got a hunch."

He listened to Olson talk to Kowalski, said irritably when this was over: "Then all he knows about her is that he found a stolen car for her once, and that when she asked him to recommend someone he picked us. He don't know anything about her. I'm scared of this and I don't know why."

"We still need the money. This may be all right."

"Yes, it may."

The blond girl said: "Just a big scaredey cat, eh?"

Bleyer looked over, saw her sitting on the desk and swinging her feet. He said impatiently: "Who asked you in this, Ingrid?"

The blond girl smiled, showing very

even white teeth, said: "Miss Jorgenson to you, mugg! Does pay day come out of the three hundred? I missed last month and I eat, too."

Bleyer grinned back reluctantly, wadded up and tossed her the bill he had taken from Olson and said: "You get Oley's whisky money, Miss Jorgenson!"

She caught it, said: "And a very good thing, too." She smiled nicely again, said: "I'll take you both to lunch!" and started to put the bill in her purse.

Bleyer grunted to Olson: "Damn this weakness of mine for Swedes." He looked at the girl, added: "But what a pretty Swede!"

The girl looked up, said: "Dane, honey, and you know it."

Bleyer grinned at Olson, spread his hands, told her: "Well—Dane, then."

LEAVING Olson to watch Kargen's house, Bleyer made inquiries at the Glendale Airport. He learned that Kargen's ship was a low-winged monoplane, heavily powered and painted a dark gray, almost a black. Casual questioning told him Kargen was tall and dark and heavy and possessed of a notorious temper.

The attendant he was talking to volunteered: "Mr. Kargen, he takes that ship out all hours of the day and night, and the Lord knows where he goes. He never says." Bleyer made his eyes blank and vacant and the man went on with, "And always by himself. He acts like he's got to get someplace right then and there."

Bleyer looked sly, offered: "Maybe he's got some gal on the string in some other town." He nudged the attendant in the ribs with his elbow. "Maybe he's married and can only get away at odd times."

The attendant said: "Well, maybe!" in a doubtful voice and Bleyer turned the conversation away from Kargen.

Bleyer hung around the main part of the afternoon, succeeding in buying the man several glasses of beer during the course of it, and was on hand with him in the status of an old and valued friend when a heavy coupé drove up.

The attendant said: "Here's Kargen now."

Bleyer saw the battered roadster he and Olson jointly owned stop a half block down the parking space, and wandered over to Kargen's plane with the attendant as it was run out of the hangar. He heard Kargen's curt, "Is it filled up?" and the answering, "Yes sir!" Then casually he moved away and met Olson by the car and told him: "We can't do anything here because they don't know where he goes. I've figured how to find out, though." He drew a list of towns from his pocket, with the plane's license number, said: "You can get Kowalski to make a few asks for you, can't you? He can find out if the plane lands in any of these where we can't."

Olson agreed this was likely and they drove back to the Central Station, found Kowalski, and after overruling a few objections persuaded him to send inquiries to all the landing fields within a radius of two hundred miles. With Kowalski's promise to call them as soon as he had any information they drove back to their office.

Ingrid Jorgenson met them as they came in, said: "Well, thank the Lord! All afternoon I've been trying to find you. Mrs. Kargen called and wants either one of you—the first one to come in—to call her. She's called four times."

Bleyer grunted: "Get her, hunh?" and when the girl got the number, said: "Mrs. Kargen! This is Otto Bleyer." He listened a moment, said: "But why did. . . ." listened a moment more and slammed the phone down. He turned to Olson, said: "This gets me," in a puzzled voice. "She says drop the whole thing."

Olson said: "Drop the whole thing!" and gloomily, "The first case and the first

dough we get our hands on in a month and more."

"She says keep the dough."

"Then we win." Olson brightened.

Bleyer's dark face was mystified. "And after her being so hot for us to take it. Did she say anything to you, Ing, about why she changed her mind?"

The blonde said: "She did not. I told you she was half crazy and jealous. Her old man probably called her 'honey' by mistake so she changed her mind."

Bleyer said: "Well, we make the difference between the three hundred and the wires we sent so we should fret. She probably told him she hired us and he talked her, or scared her, out of it."

Olson grunted: "Well, that's that. Let's the three of us go in the inside office and play some pinochle while we wait for another customer with three hundred bucks. Ingie's got some dough to play for now and we might as well get it."

WHEN two hours later the door to the anteroom slammed, Ingrid had just melded a run of trumps and a hundred aces. She said: "And a club marriage makes two-seventy. Somebody *would* come in when I've got the best hand I've had yet!"

She went to the outer room, closing the door after her, and Olson said: "If this hand's the best yet, it's a pip. I'm four and a half in now," in a sorrowful voice.

Bleyer held up his hand for silence and they heard heavy feet tramp through the outer room, saw the door open and frame a man. The blond girl was hanging to his arm and they heard her say: "But maybe they don't want to see *you!*"

Olson laughed and said: "It's all right, Ingie! This is Paul Kowalski."

Ingrid gave Kowalski's arm a jerk, snapped: "Is that any reason he can walk past me like that?"

Kowalski ignored her, blurted out: "I told you! I told you guys I didn't want in on that wire deal."

Both Bleyer and Olson stared at him and Ingrid dropped his arm as he went on with, "I'll go before the board for this."

Bleyer asked: "What's happened?"

Kowalski sat on the desk, mopped his forehead with his sleeve and said: "Plenty. And then some. A guy delivering groceries reported a stiff in the alley back of the nine-hundred block on El Cerrito and the homicide boys go out and find it's Kargen's chauffeur. That's all. They'll be looking for Kargen and find out I sent those wires and that'll fix me up."

Bleyer asked: "How?"

Kowalski snapped: "I'm not supposed to be digging up stuff for you guys. I signed those wires as if I was on a case. I get private information on the strength of my badge and pass it on to you."

Bleyer argued: "But you didn't get us anything yet!"

"What difference does that make? I signed the wires."

"I guess that's right."

"Sure, it's right. All you ever did is work for agencies. Ain't I right, Oley?"

Olson said: "You are. Anybody know about the wires yet?"

"No. They'll find out as soon as they begin to check up on Kargen."

"Have they talked to Mrs. Kargen yet?"

"They're all up there."

"You get us in and we'll get Mrs. Kargen to back up a yarn that'll clear you. If she claims she was sick and just *had* to get hold of her old man and asked you to do it for her you'll get over. Your story is that you knew you shouldn't do it but you was sorry for her and couldn't see any harm. It'll only mean a reprimand."

Bleyer looked bewildered, asked: "But what difference does it make whether he did it for her or for us?" Olson snapped:

"Just our license. That's all. It's a damn sight different doing a favor for someone with an address on El Cerrito than it is helping out two private detectives on their first case. They'll take our ticket if they catch us off side and they'll suspend Kowalski for playing on our team." He grabbed Kowalski by the shoulder, said: "Come on! I know what I'm doing!" and started for the door. He said to the girl: "If anybody calls, tell 'em we'll be back pretty soon."

"O. K. What about my four and a half?"

"Damn your four and a half." And to Bleyer, "Come on, Otto."

"Shall I tell 'em where you're gone?"

"Tell 'em you don't know."

The blond girl watched them go through the door, turned and stared at Bleyer's desk, still littered with the pinochle deck. She stuck out her lower lip, said: "I know where you *can* go and your four and a half with you." She went to the desk, picked up her discarded hand, said: "I'll never get another one like that!" in a mournful voice.

NINE TWENTY-SIX El Cerrito Avenue had three police cars, one morgue wagon, and at least fifty other parked cars in the street before it. The drivers of these last, attracted by the sight of police cars and the possibility of witnessing a raid, had practically blocked the street in front of the house and Olson, swinging the roadster close to the clustered cars was waved back by a uniformed man who was trying to clear the tangle. Olson grunted to Kowalski: "Do your stuff!" and the uniformed man, seeing Kowalski's badge, grudgingly allowed them to park.

Kowalski got out, asked: "Who's on it?" and the policeman growled: "Casey and Loward!" Kowalski said: "Thanks!" and Olson explained to Bleyer: "If you don't know it, one's a good Joe and the other's a heel. I know Loward too damn well. Did I ever tell you about when me and Shorty Collins was on—"

Bleyer said: "You have! We going to have trouble getting to talk to Mrs. Kargen?"

"Dunno. If only Loward wasn't. . ."

They came to the door of the house and Kowalski took them past the guard on the door and just inside they met a tall, very thin, man.

Olson said: "Hi, Loward!" and the thin man smiled unpleasantly, asked: "And what's a private shamus doing on a homicide case? Riddle me that."

Olson said: "We got a client here. Any harm in seeing a client."

Loward saw Kowalski behind Olson and lost the smile. He said: "And have you got a client here too? Or are you just along for the ride?" He said to Olson: "Out and stay out!" and to Kowalski: "If you're still on car recovery you don't belong here. Play around me and you'll hear me meauw later on, where it'll do some good." He turned and said to another man who came into the hall: "We got company, Pat."

Casey was as tall as Loward but at least twice as heavy. His nose had been broken and set crookedly and this gave his face a pleasant leer when he smiled. He smiled now, said: "What the hell, Lowey! What skin off your neck is it if Kowalski wants to come and see real detectives work. He wants to learn something." He grinned at Kowalski, shook hands with Olson and, when Olson introduced Bleyer, said: "Glad to know Oley's partner. I've known Oley a long time. You know he rated second man on the pistol team and they brought us plenty of medals."

Bleyer said: "Yeah, I've heard that. Several times."

Casey laughed and patted Olson on the shoulder and said: "Just an artist with a gun!"

Loward growled: "He may be an artist

but is that any reason we should let him talk to Mrs. Kargen?"

Casey turned on him, asked: "Why not? What's the harm?"

Loward muttered something and went out the door and Casey said: "Poor Lowey! He hates Olson's guts and he hates private agencies and he don't think a hell of a lot of me."

Olson said: "Listen Pat! Is Mrs. Kargen in on this?" in a serious voice.

Casey reached up and fumbled his nose, looked sidewise, asked: "Is she? You'd know more'n we do." He gave his nose a vicious yank and admitted: "Until we find out something to go on, we don't know who's in it. Her old man may be able to tell us something and we're going—" He saw the slight grin on Olson's face and stopped.

Olson said: "We looked for him a while ourselves, if that's what you mean." He turned, saw that Loward was out the door, said softly: "If you'll keep that heel of a Loward out of it and see that you and Kowalski split the credit I'll give you a tip."

"Go on."

"Stake out the Glendale Airport. That's your only chance. Get it?"

Casey leered and said: "Thanks, Oley! I'll remember this."

He followed Loward out the door and Olson told Bleyer: "He hates Loward's guts but he's got to work with him. He's boss of the pair else we wouldn't be here." He saw a maid down the hall, called: "Hey, sister!" and when the maid stopped, told her: "We want to see Mrs. Kargen."

The maid looked doubtful and said: "I don't know," and Olson nudged Kowalski.

Kowalski pulled his badge from his pocket, said: "I'm sorry but it's important."

They followed the girl to a library, waited a few moments and when Mrs. Kargen came in explained the purpose of the visit.

She said: "Why surely. I'll tell the same story you gentlemen tell." Olson, at her side, caught the jerk of her head and leaving Bleyer and Kowalski followed her to the other side of the room. She said: "I didn't want Mr. Kowalski to hear this. Can I see you tomorrow? At your office?"

"We'll be there, one of us, all day. Why not have Kowalski hear it?"

She hesitated for a moment, said: "Just a notion. Will anyone stop me?"

"Why should they?"

"Well—with the chauffeur being killed."

"We told the man in charge you were our client. You might be followed but it won't mean anything."

She said: "Some time tomorrow then!"

They drove the relieved Kowalski back to the Central Station and went back to their now closed office. Bleyer unlocked the door and when they went in Olson saw a note lying on the typewriter, said: "I guess somebody must've called." He picked up the note, read it and grinned: "Our Ingie's mad!"

He read aloud: "Oley. It's still four and a half you owe me in spite of the rush act. You'd make *me* pay."

Bleyer said: "You'd think she was a Yid instead of a Swede!"

Olson corrected him, said: "Dane, Otto. She says so herself."

MRS. KARGEN came in the office at twelve the next day. She hurried in, glancing behind her, pulled back a heavy veil, and Olson said: "If anybody's following you that ain't going to help a bit. Did your husband get back?"

He motioned to a chair and she sat down, said: "No. I knew he wouldn't. That's why I wanted to see you—that is, about him." She looked around the office questioningly.

Olson said: "They've gone to lunch on

my four and a half," in a sour voice.

She looked blank and he said hastily: "Office politics! Just what is it?"

"It's about my husband again."

"Why all the hush stuff about coming up here?"

"I don't want anybody to know you're working for me."

"I didn't know we were. You called that off."

She said: "I know the police think my husband killed the chauffeur. Don't they?" Olson shrugged, didn't answer for a moment, and she insisted: "Don't they?"

He said: "Very likely they do now. I don't know as I'd blame 'em. The plane he went away in hasn't landed at any field within four hundred miles of here, as near as can be found out."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Kowalski just called me. They figure he landed on the Mexican side of the border but there's not much chance of finding out where."

The woman watched Olson's face as she said: "But he couldn't have killed Jerry. I saw Jerry after he left."

"Jerry?"

"The chauffeur." She caught Olson's smile, said: "I really did." Her eyes were anxious, worried.

Olson said: "I don't doubt it but if it comes to a trial a jury will." He asked: "Who do you think did do it?" and believed her when she said: "I don't know. I didn't sleep last night trying to think who would have."

"What do you want of us?"

"I want you to find out who did it."

"Why? You're in the clear. This beats divorcing your husband. It's less trouble for you."

She looked down at her hands, twisted a handkerchief between them, said: "I know that," very low. "I've changed my mind about that. I don't want to divorce"—she started to cry—"him."

Olson turned his light blue eyes to the ceiling, whistled softly, said: "Well, you ain't divorced him yet so why cry about it. What made you think he wouldn't be home last night?"

"He never comes home the same night he goes away like that."

"If he's heard about this, he won't be home for some time. Even if he is innocent."

"I know he's innocent."

Olson stared at her, said: "What if he ain't? If he did it and we find it out, it ain't going to make any difference whether we're working for you or not. You realize you're taking a chance when you start this, don't you?"

"I'm not. You forget I saw Jerry after he left. I know that."

Olson shrugged, said: "It's going to cost dough. People that kill other people in alleys are bad people to play around with."

"I've got money. How much will it be?"

"That depends on how long it takes. If there's trouble"—he shrugged again, watched her face—"it'll be plenty."

"You've got to find out. No matter what it costs."

They heard the door in the outer office open and Ingrid called: "Your four and a half went—" Then they saw her in the open door. She said: "Oh excuse me," went to one side and they heard her whisper to Bleyer.

He came in, stood just inside the door, said: "Hello, Mrs. Kargen—" and they heard Ingrid scream, shortly, harshly. At the sound Bleyer swung. As he faced the outer office they saw an arm shove him in the chest as he was off balance. He stumbled backward and Olson came to his feet and jerked at the gun under his arm, and at the same time another man took Bleyer's place in the door, a man who held a short black automatic in his left hand. The man moved the muzzle of the gun, said: *"Unh!"* and Olson jerked his hands

up. The man said: "O. K., Joe! Come on in!" and stepped clear of the door.

Ingrid backed in followed by another man who held his hand in his side coat pocket. Ingrid turned her head, said to Olson: "We never saw them come in. They must have followed us in the door—"

THE man with his hand in his pocket had a smooth, very pale face. His eyes seemed everywhere in the room, flashing from Olson to Bleyer to Mrs. Kargen, and to Ingrid. He said: "Shut up, tart!" in a very soft voice and she glanced at Olson and Olson nodded his head. The man said: "Over against the wall!" in the same smooth voice, moved his coat pocket in the direction of the wall across from the desk and Olson and she backed over there. She stood straight against it with her hands at her sides. Her hands were clenched so the knuckles showed white, she looked more angry than afraid.

Mrs. Kargen stood up. She wore a surprised look, said to Olson: "Why, what is—"

The pale man said: "You too!" and she stopped, stood still and looked at him. He took a step forward and slapped her across the face with his right hand, the blow sounding loud in the quiet room. He said: "Jump!" But he didn't raise his voice; it still held the same soft tone.

She moved to the wall beside Ingrid, felt of her cheek, said: "Well. . ." in a startled, still unfrightened way.

Ingrid said: "Ain't this a bang!"

The man said to Olson: "You too!" and to Bleyer: "Line up!"

Olson saw the man at the side of the door swing the automatic his way, saw the pale man's eyes tighten. He said: "Yes you bet!" and moved to the wall and stood by Mrs. Kargen, and at the same time Bleyer lined up alongside of Ingrid.

The pale man said: "Very pretty picture!" stood in front of them with his head on one side studying them.

Olson said: "What's the idea?"

The pale man said: "Shut up and listen!" He moved his coat pocket toward Mrs. Kargen, said: "She's poor pipples to play with. Get it!"

Olson snapped: "And why?"

The man said: "I say so, that's why!" He said to the man at the door: "Shake 'em down, Andy."

Andy came over, the gun still in his hand. His hair was flaming red at the edge of his soft hat, his eyes wore a queer unfocused look. He took a gun from under Olson's coat, patted Bleyer all over in search of one, said to the pale man: "Ix-nay gun." He turned again, jammed the muzzle of the gun he still held into Bleyer's stomach so hard Bleyer bent double, said: "Where's your gun, stupid!"

Bleyer gasped: "Got none on me!" and the pale man said: "Now, Andy!" reprovingly. Then, "Look in the desk!"

Andy dug in it and found a heavy gun wrapped around in a shoulder harness and put it under his coat along with the one he had taken from Olson. He sat down on the desk with his own gun holding on the line of prisoners and the pale man said to Olson: "So lay off! You fool with this gal and it'll be just too bad."

The red-head asked: "What she want? You to find out where her old man is?" The pupils of his eyes were so wide they seemed to focus on all four against the wall at the same time.

Olson jerked his head to the side, snarled: "Ask her, you high——!" and the red-head said: "I will, ——!" He used the same name Olson had called him, accenting it, slid off the desk over to Olson and raised the gun in his hand and slammed the muzzle into Olson's cheek. Olson had tipped his head to one side as the blow fell but the muzzle caught him on the cheek bone and he went to his knees, blood welling from a two-inch gash under his eye.

The red-head said: "Crack wise on that!"

Olson looked up at him, said: "I'll remember that and your ugly face!" The man raised the gun again and Ingrid felt Bleyer tense at her side, cry out: "No! Otto!"

The pale man said: "That's plenty, Andy! You're higher than a kite!" He didn't raise his voice but Andy let his gun drop and stood back. The pale man said: "You get the idea, boys. Just lay off." He spoke to Mrs. Kargen, said: "And you, lady, you lay off too. Just say that your old man killed the guy and leave it at that. You're giving him a break when you do." He said to the red-head: "O. K., Andy. Let's go."

The red-head said: "O. K., pal!" and the other man said: "Don't chase us out of here unless you want trouble, boys. We got guns and you ain't." He looked at Olson who was wavering to his feet, said: "I'm sorry about that!" in an apologetic voice. "Andy gets screwy when he's high."

Olson muttered something under his breath and the red-head said sharply: "What's that?"

The pale man said: "Now Andy! We'll be going!" in the same quiet voice and the red-head stopped and turned to the door and the other man followed him, backing out. He said again: "Don't follow us, boys!"

THEY heard the outside door slam and, with the noise, Olson jumped for the closet. He dragged out a handbag, jammed it open and took out a long-barreled pistol.

Bleyer said: "Oley! That's a twenty-two. Leave 'em go." He caught Olson by the shoulder and Olson jerked free, ran through the door into the outer room and to the hall. Bleyer reached the phone on the desk just as Ingrid screamed and he snapped out: "Quiet!"

They heard Olson call out: "Andy!" and Bleyer dropped the phone, said: "Oh God!" started toward the door. When he got to it he heard the roar of a heavy gun, then the lighter crack of the target pistol. In the second it took him to get across the outer office he heard two more heavy reports and then again the lighter gun. He got to the hall and saw Olson running down the hall toward two figures on the floor, raced after him, and saw him suddenly stop and shoot again. He came up to him as Olson stood over the two men.

The red-head was lying on his stomach with his face turned enough to show a small hole just at the side of the bridge of his nose. His eyes were open but had lost their unfocused look and were vague and blurred. Bleyer saw this, saw the pale man lying across the red-head's legs, saw the pale man jerk slightly and try to raise himself to his elbow. Olson kicked the gun from his hand, bent and lifted him by the shoulders and the man said: "Ugh! Ugh!" and choked. He tried to speak again and his throat filled with blood that gushed from his mouth and over his chin and shirt front. He slumped in Olson's arms and Olson let him down on the red-head. He looked up at Bleyer, said: "Hell! I tried to give him a break." He poked the red-head, said: "When Andy turned around and cut loose I was all set and I took him in the face. Then this guy started shooting and I popped him in the leg but he wasn't satisfied." He appealed: "You saw him start to get up."

Bleyer said: "You damn fool! Start out after two guys like that with a twenty-two target pistol."

Olson looked a little bewildered, argued: "But a little slug'll stop 'em just as well as a big one if it's put in the right place. I was all set and—" He stopped, said: "Well, see!" triumphantly and pointed to the two men on the floor.

Bleyer said: "Oh Lord!" He looked around, saw office doors opening on the

hall with scared faces peering out. "Well, it might make us an ad for more business."

They heard a voice quaver: "H-h-has anybody c-c-called the p-police?" heard someone say: "Yes!" and Bleyer said to Olson: "You better go back to the office and take a good big snort and straighten out the women. I'll stay here till the law comes and bring 'em in. Tell Mrs. Kargen to tell just what happened and not to try to stall."

Olson nodded. "This is no time to make up yarns!" He stared down at the two men on the floor, then pushed through the gathering crowd and went back to the office. He frowned at Mrs. Kargen, said: "When they talk to you, just tell the truth!" And to Ingrid's excited questioning: "Never got touched. I was standing still, see, and all set. They were just turning around and couldn't connect."

Mrs. Kargen asked: "Is he dead?" and he snapped: "They're both dead!" and turned to the desk and reached in it for a bottle. He heard a bump, turned and saw Ingrid on the floor and said to Mrs. Kargen: "Get me a glass of water."

He took the bottle and held Ingrid's head from the floor, and when Mrs. Kargen handed him the water dashed it in the blond girl's face. He poured a drink into the glass and when she fluttered her eyelids and made protesting motions he held the whiskey to her lips and she drank, gagged, and sat up.

She said: "I'm all right now," then felt of her face and said: "My God! My make-up!"

Olson grinned at Mrs. Kargen who seemed entirely unexcited, said: "She's O. K. now." Still holding Ingrid close to him he reached down and poured another drink, offered it to Mrs. Kargen and, when she shook her head, drank it himself.

Ingrid said: "That water act was lousy," and started to get to her feet.

He asked: "What in the devil was the matter with you?"

She said: "You said they were both dead, didn't you? And that you weren't hit." He said: "Yes!" in a puzzled voice and she said tartly: "Well! I was thinking you were maybe shot. I was really hoping."

Olson shook his head, said: "What a girl! Us Swedes!"

She started to speak and he altered it hastily to: "I mean us Swedes and Danes!"

THERE was no action for three full days. A coroner's jury brought in a verdict of justifiable homicide over the death of the two men. Kowalski reported no progress in the search for Kargen. A check-up of the past of both the two men killed in the hall, and the chauffeur, revealed nothing, and the few discreet inquiries Bleyer and Olson made about Mr. and Mrs. Kargen ended in blind alleys. They were both in the office when Mrs. Kargen came in hurriedly.

She said: "I've got news!" in a hasty, excited voice, sat down and continued with, "I've heard from my husband. Just today."

Bleyer asked: "How?"

She looked suspiciously at him, said: "The police are looking for him. Will you promise not to tell."

Bleyer nodded and she said: "It was through a friend. Another flyer. A friend of Mr. Kargen's. He called me and asked me to meet him and I did and he told me he had a letter from Jack. Jack wants me to meet him."

"You going to."

She nodded.

"Who's this friend?"

"His name is Arthur Truax. He lives at the Clinton Hotel." She hesitated, confessed: "I've never liked him. I've never thought he was as good a friend of Jack's as Jack thinks he is."

"Why that?"

"Well he—well, you know. When Jack isn't around. And then he calls me all the time when Jack is out of town."

"Whyn't you tell Jack this?"

"He'd kill him. He's got a terrible temper."

"You told us that. Do you believe this Truax now?"

"Why yes. He says Jack knows the police are looking for him and can't come and get me himself. I'm to go in the plane and meet him with Arthur."

Olson got up and walked back and forth across the office. He stopped in front of Mrs. Kargen, said: "Are you telling the truth?"

She said: "Why yes!" stiffened, got to her feet, started to speak but Olson stared at her, snapped: "If you are, somebody else ain't. This letter was to Truax, you say. Not to you?"

"Why no. Arthur read it to me."

"Then you didn't even see it. You don't know whether it was from your husband or not."

She looked troubled, said: "Why no. But then he couldn't write me. The police would get the letter and find where he was." She brightened, said: "Don't you think that's it?"

Olson said seriously: "I don't. Listen! There's been three men killed now, all of them over some deal that you don't know about. You've played ball with us and we believe you when you say you saw the chauffeur that was killed, after your husband had left. See! Where you meeting this husband of yours."

She looked doubtful, undecided, and Olson said: "We haven't let you down yet. We'll keep it quiet. It's just protection for you."

"I'm supposed to go with Arthur and meet him about twenty miles east of a place called Trona. It's over in the desert. Jack explained where."

Bleyer said bluntly: "I think you're crazy if you go but you'll go just the same."

She smiled, said: "Yes, I will." Then, "Has anything happened?"

"Not a thing. These things take time."

"Unless you find out who did it and clear my husband we'll lose everything we've got here. We'll never be able to come back, and we own the house and some other property."

Olson said: "We'll keep at it. If worse comes to worse, he can give somebody a fake bill of sale and get his dough out when the stuff is sold." He walked to the door with her, said: "Now don't worry! Something'll break soon. You keep in touch with us, Mrs. Kargen," and went back into the office.

He mopped his forehead, said to the blond girl and Bleyer: "When she comes busting in like that, I thought sure as hell she was going to take us off the case again. She seems to have a yen for that old man of hers. Ingie, I guess you were right.

The blond girl sniffed and said: "I'm always right."

OLSON put his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone, said to Bleyer: "Oh God!" and to the phone: "Yes Paul . . . wherebouts . . . Clinton Hotel on East Main . . . I get that . . . Yeah!" He listened a moment more, slammed the receiver down, said: "Mrs. Kargen got stabbed to death in the Clinton Hotel. They found her about an hour ago all whittled up. Kowalski called the minute he found it out."

"They get this Truax?"

"Hell no, they've got nobody. The room was registered under some phony name. When she told us I knew it was a phony."

"Shall we call Casey and tell him about Truax?"

Olson said harshly: "Why? We're still working for her. We still got part of her dough we ain't earned. We'll get him

ourselves." He jammed his hat on, snapped: "We'll pick him at the airport. If he's gone, it'll be time to tell Casey."

He slammed out of the office with Bleyer hard at his heels and the blond girl watched them leave, her face worried, and reached for the telephone.

She thought a moment, said: "I'd better not. If they should call this Casey and find I'd already done it they"—she stuck out her lower lip—"*would* raise hell."

AT THE airport, Bleyer picked the same attendant he had made friends with while waiting for Kargen, showed him his badge and a five-dollar bill, asked: "Arthur Truax. Is his plane still here?"

The man said: "Yeah, but not for long." He pointed down the runway, said: "That's it, the cabin job warming up there. The guy that's fooling around the motor is Truax."

He took the bill and Bleyer said: "Walk down that way easy with us then. We don't want him to think we want him at all."

They walked together to within fifty feet of the plane and Bleyer said: "O. K., keed, and thanks!" He jerked his head backward and the man stopped and stared after them as they walked toward the plane, looked down at the bill in his hand and shrugged his shoulders and started back.

Bleyer said: "Let's go!" slipped his gun free from the holster under his coat and, when the man by the plane turned and stared at them, snapped: "O. K., Truax. We're going to take a trip."

Truax said: "What's the idea?"

Bleyer cleared the gun, held it so the muzzle showed, said: "Get it." Truax said: "No!" and Bleyer told him: "It's either make a trip or go back to town and see whether the clerk at the Clinton recognizes you as the man that rented the room Mrs. Kargen was killed in. D'ya get that."

Truax motioned toward the cabin of the ship and Bleyer said: "You first!" and followed him in with the gun jammed against his back.

Truax said: "Where you want to go?"

Olson, following Bleyer in, said: "We won't take you out of your way. Twenty miles east of Trona to meet Kargen."

Truax asked: "You federals?"

Bleyer caught Olson's wink, said: "What do you care. Get going."

Truax settled into the control seat and Bleyer told him: "We been through that country in a car so don't make any mistakes." He grinned at Olson as the plane roared into life, said from the side of his mouth: "Just like shooting fish!"

TRONA, approximately one hundred and fifty miles away in an airline, took them an hour and half to reach. Ten minutes later Bleyer pushed his gun into Truax's back, shouted: "You know where to land. Don't make any mistakes." Truax shouted something back, lost some altitude and a moment later waved his hand and pointed. They started to settle and Bleyer saw Kargen's plane on the ground, saw a figure standing beside it. He pointed this out to Olson and Olson grinned, shouted: "Won't he be surprised!"

They landed a hundred yards away and Truax taxied closer until Bleyer reached past him and turned the ignition switch. He said: "End of the line!" and motioned with the gun and Truax climbed sullenly out.

As Bleyer followed him he growled: "I don't get this. Making me bring you out here!"

Bleyer grinned: "That's right, guy! Make up a story and stick to it."

Kargen's plane had the prop ticking over, with Kargen still standing at the side and a few feet from the cockpit. He saw Olson follow Truax and Bleyer from Truax's plane and started for his own ship and Olson called: "Hold tight!" and jerked his gun from under his coat. He

called again: "Stay there!" and Kargen stopped and watched them come up.

He saw the gun in Bleyer's hand, looked from this to Truax, snapped out: "So I'm the goat, huh!"

Truax said: "Wait Jack! Don't fly off the handle. I couldn't. . ." As he spoke he came closer to Kargen and Kargen took a step forward, slammed him with his right fist and Truax went down to the sand.

Olson said: "Hold it!" and swung the gun toward Kargen.

Kargen stood back, said: "The dirty double-crossing rat!"

Truax got to his feet as Bleyer said: "He's more than that, Kargen!" and when Kargen looked away from Truax and at him, Bleyer told him: "He had a room at the Clinton Hotel. An hour before we started for here your wife was found there all cut up with a knife. Get the picture!" He stepped close to Kargen as he spoke, saw Kargen's face tighten, said: "Get it!"

Kargen said: "Dead?" and when Bleyer nodded, Kargen looked back at Truax, took a step that way.

Bleyer said: "Easy! It's all under control!"

Kargen said: "The ——!" in a choked, sick voice.

Bleyer said: "We thought maybe you got him to do it. This was one way to find out."

Kargen kept his eyes turned toward Truax and Bleyer stepped between them, said: "He'll hang for it if he did it."

Kargen said: "I guess so!" in the same odd voice.

Bleyer said: "And now, what's in that plane?"

Kargen waved his hand, said: "Make a look!"

Bleyer said: "No, you look." He waved his gun toward the cockpit, ordered: "Just unload and we'll take a look."

Kargen stepped up onto the plane and Bleyer stood to one side with Olson, watched him toss a small handbag out on the sand. Kargen straightened and Bleyer asked: "That all?"

Kargen said: "Not quite!" bent again into the cockpit and Bleyer caught the flash of light in his hand as he straightened and called harshly: "Drop it!"

He swung up his gun as Kargen turned but Kargen fired point blank at Truax when he was but half around, and, as Truax pitched forward on his face, shot again.

Olson shouted: "Drop it!"

Kargen looked down at Truax, said: "I might as well!"

Bleyer kicked the gun to one side and motioned Kargen down, turned and saw Olson on his knees by Truax.

Kargen asked: "Did I?"

Olson looked up from Truax, said: "You did!"

CASEY stared at Olson, said: "Then you didn't really know what was going on until it was all over."

Olson explained: "Come right down to it, we don't know now. That is, everything. All we know for sure is that Kargen was running dope and aliens and what have you, and meeting Truax on the desert where they'd reship. They got away from any spotters on the other side that way. That's all we know for sure. Kargen wasn't here during the fireworks and everybody that was here is dead and can't talk. All we can do is guess."

"It sounds reasonable."

Bleyer said: "It's the only way it can be. The two guys that Oley killed with the pop gun were the distributors. Kargen's chauffeur was in it and must've jammed with them and got himself killed. Then after *they* got killed, Truax was the only one left and he figured he'd cross Kargen all the way around. I don't doubt a bit he was planning on killing Kargen when he met him out there, but of course we

stopped that when we went along."

Casey said slowly: "I get all that but what about Mrs. Kargen. Why'd Truax kill her?"

"We thought first that maybe Kargen was to blame for that. We knew she was dingy about him and we thought he might be trying to get rid of her so's he could pick some other gal. See, we didn't know the dope angle until Truax cracked about whether we were federals. Kargen was just as crazy about her as she was about him though. We figure now that Truax thought she knew about the dope and might squawk. Either that or he killed her because she wouldn't run away with him. He was dingy about her himself, so my guess is the last. We'll never know."

Casey stood up, said: "He must've been crazy about her to bust Truax the way you say he did. The whole thing fits all right. I put out that Kowalski was helping me on the whole thing and we're aces now. You ought to hear Loward cry. You'd think his throat was cut." He said to Olson: "Just what in the devil is he sore at you about? He won't tell me."

"I beat him out of his place on the pistol team when I was on the force. He's never got over it."

Bleyer laughed and said: "And neither has Oley!"

They walked to the door with Casey and when he had gone, Bleyer said: "That's that. I guess we really closed that case." He said to the blonde: "And what do you think of the bosses now?"

Ingrid Jorgenson said: "What I always thought. Two muggs."

"Now Swede!"

"Dane to you!"

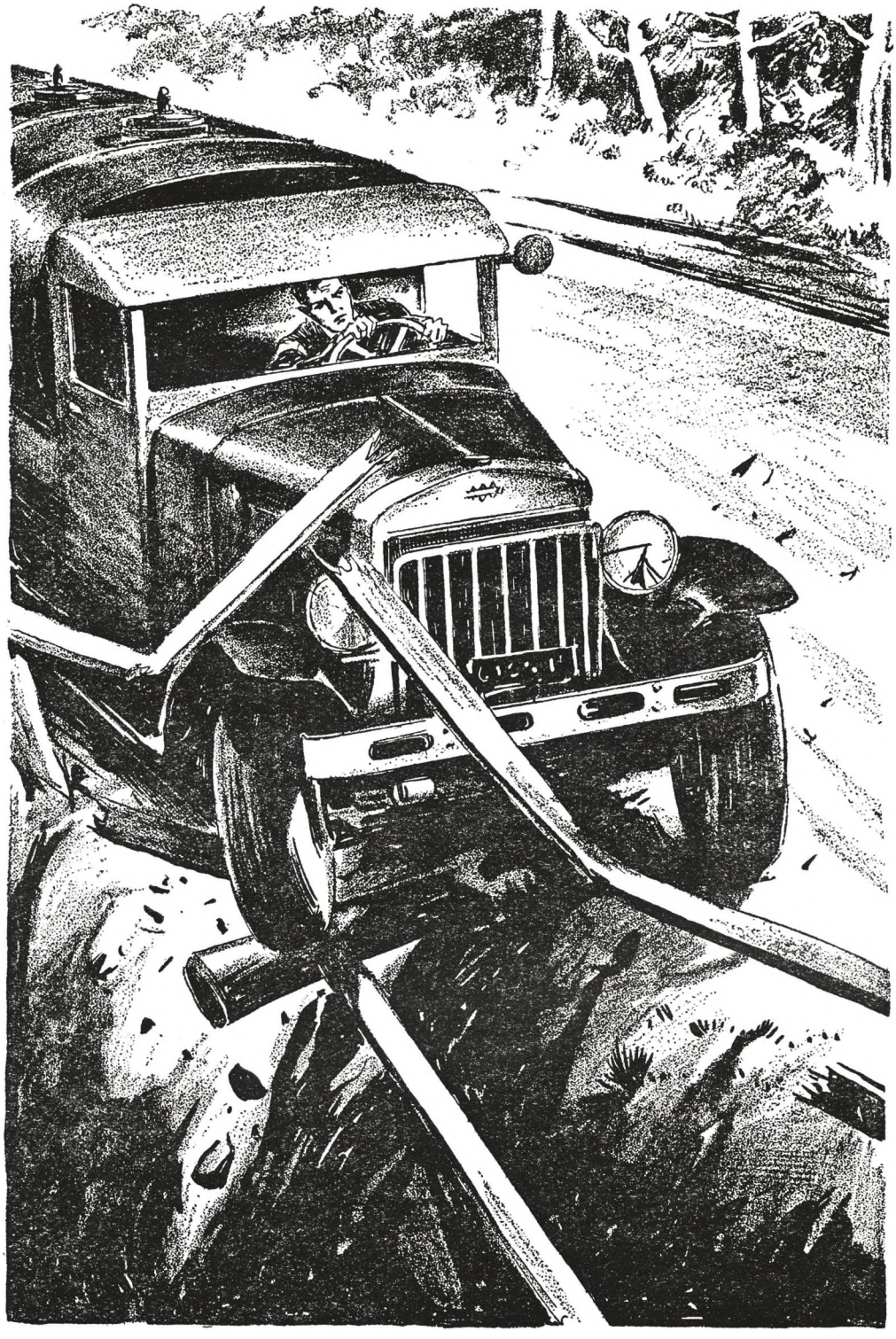
Olson said: "You can go home if you want. One of us'll be here if the phone rings."

She looked at her watch, said: "Three o'clock!" to herself, then, "If you're both still pinochle players and if Oley's got as much as four and a half why—" She stopped, waved her hand toward the inner room.

Bleyer nodded and Olson said: "I'm one of the best, and I have."

She jammed the cover over her typewriter and started toward the other room but stopped and turned around. She said cautiously: "Is it cash?"

TWENTY STEPS



TO DOOM

by **Oscar Schisgall**

Author of "The Floating Graveyard," etc.

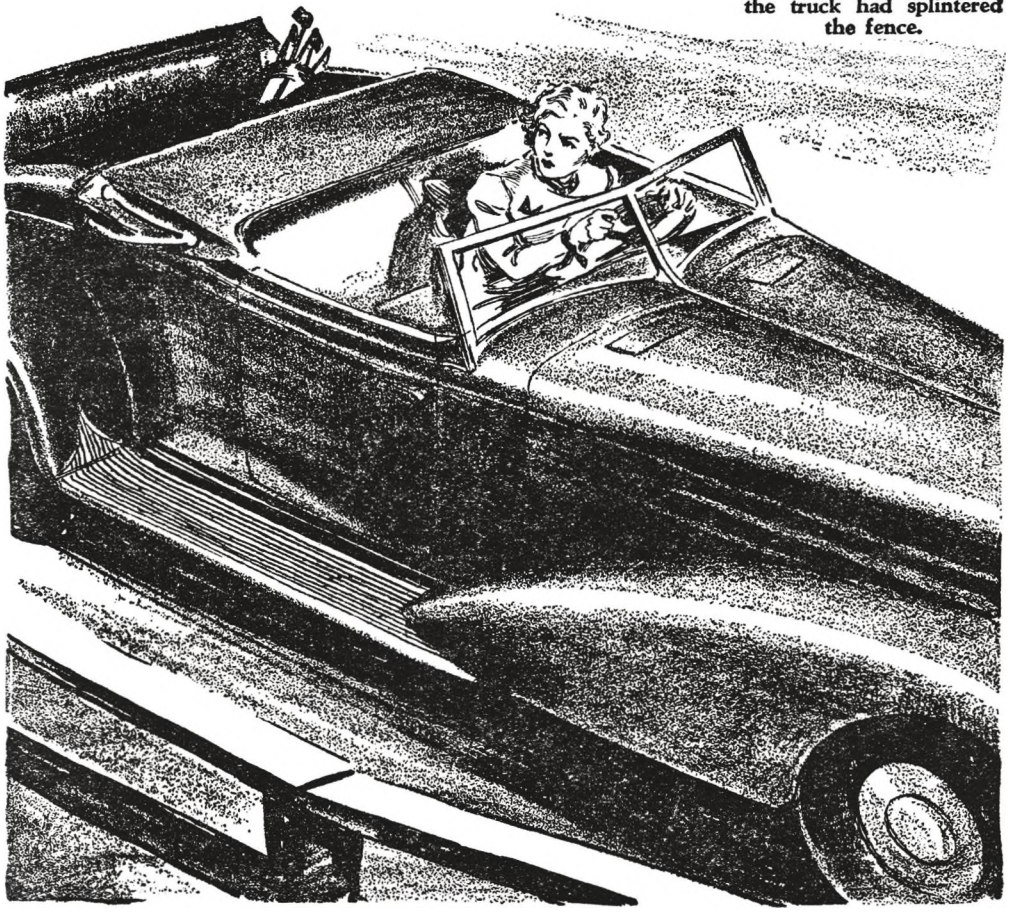
When Clark started out to deliver that empty oil-truck to its new owner he thought the job would be easy. But even the simplest task can turn into a complicated one when murder steps up to take a hand—particularly when it's murder in the person of a blue-eyed blond baby with big ideas.

CHAPTER ONE

Thousand-Gallon Terror

THIS fellow Reuter hired me on Monday afternoon, and Tuesday morning, when I showed up for the job, he was standing on the sidewalk outside the garage, grinning like a full moon. There was a cigar in his mouth, and his derby was pushed far back on his head. One hand was jingling change in his pocket, while the other lay on a fender of the big, red oil truck.

"Morning, Clark!" he greeted me. "Right on time, eh?"



The next thing I knew, the truck had splintered the fence.

"You said eight o'clock, Mr. Reuter."

"That's right." He took the cigar from his fat face and waved it at the truck. It was a tank on wheels; one of those blood-colored thousand-gallon giants. There wasn't any lettering on it yet; the thing was brand new. "Here's the baby," Reuter said with the sort of proud chuckle you usually get from a father. "You drive her to Syracuse and turn her over to Mr. William Gavery. You'll find the registration card and all the rest in the pocket next to the seat. I'm mailing him the bill of sale."

I glanced the truck over from bumper to bumper. It was the biggest thing I'd ever undertaken to drive. Then, because Reuter was watching me closely, I smiled.

"A sweet baby, all right," I conceded. "Not that it's any of my business, but I've been trying to figure out why a guy in Syracuse should buy a truck in New York. What's the matter with the Syracuse agencies?"

"Nothing," laughed Mr. Reuter. "Except they didn't want to loosen up with the money. This Gavery has an old truck he's turning in. I offered him two hundred dollars more on allowance than he could raise in his home town. So we landed the sale—that's all."

"You want me to drive his old truck back to New York?"

"Sure. He'll turn her over to you."

I didn't ask any more questions. While Reuter took out his wallet and counted bills into my hand, I told myself the less thinking I did, the better off everybody would be. What if I didn't like Reuter's greasy looks? What if I didn't understand why he was hiring a new man, practically unknown to him, to drive this locomotive to Syracuse? The point was he'd promised seventy-five bucks for the job, besides expenses. That's a lot when you've been out of work four months.

So I said good-by to him—he even shook hands with me—and started. From the corner I looked back over my shoulder. He'd been alone a moment ago. Now three other fellows who looked like gorillas had come out of the garage and were standing around him. They all kept grinning at the truck.

I frowned and thought, "Maybe I am getting mixed up in something phony. But what the hell? Seventy-five bucks is seventy-five bucks."

NOTHING happened for two hours, till I got to a spot just above Briarcliff. The road curves a lot up there, and there's a white fence along the right of it. On the other side of the fence there's a steep, fifty-foot drop. I was thinking about how grand everything around me looked in the summer sunshine, when a horn tooted behind me. It was one of those musical horns that sounds like a cornet solo.

Well, I pulled over to the right, alongside of the fence, and kept going.

A green roadster started to pass me on the left; only it didn't quite pass. It slowed, and for about fifty yards it rolled along by my side. That puzzled me.

A woman was driving the thing and I don't mind admitting she was one of the best looking girls I've ever seen. Her car was a dazzling sixteen cylinder thing, all green and chromium, and she fitted into it perfectly. She peered at me steadily, searchingly. That made me stare. I could have bet I was riding next to a millionaire's daughter. She was wearing white golf clothes, and a bag of golf sticks jutted out of her rumble seat.

Just as I began to grin and call out something, she turned her head and jammed down her accelerator. Her car whizzed ahead. But instead of passing straight on, she deliberately cut to the right, and swung in front of me!

I yelled, jammed on the brakes and jerked my wheel a little to the right. If I hadn't there would have been a crash.

The next thing I knew, the radiator of the oil truck had splintered the white fence. The brakes couldn't do a thing. It was like a nightmare. As the big tank started to plunge over the cliff, I had some wild idea about opening the door and jumping. But it was too late for that.

My ears were filled with a terrible roaring, screeching, pounding. The whole world was rolling over and over. As the truck went down, I must have bounced around like ice in a cocktail shaker. Then there was a final crack like an explosion—and everything turned black.

I CAME to in an ambulance that was bowling along at more than fifty an hour. Its siren wailed in my ears, so that I winced. When my wits returned and I could look around clearly, I found a white-clad, young doctor sitting next to me. He was watching my face anxiously. At his side sat a state trooper, as handsome as a musical-comedy hero. And on the back running board stood a regular cop, swaying like a puppet on strings.

"Well," I said, "some fun, hey?"

My voice sounded so croaky and weak that I couldn't recognize it. There were aches all over my body, but the worst of them was a kind of pang that stabbed my right side twice a second. The young doctor shook his head.

"Better not try to talk now," he said.

"Hell," I answered, "if I don't, I'll feel dead."

The state trooper bent toward me and asked in a low tone: "How did it happen, buddy?"

"How? Ask the woman."

"The woman?" He looked surprised. "What woman?"

"Didn't you get her? The dame in the green car?"

"We didn't get anybody. What—"

"Damn her!" I groaned, shutting my eyes. "She didn't even have the decency to stop!"

After a while I told them what had happened. The trooper, with his brows arched over astonished eyes, wrote it all down in a little book. From what he said to the doctor, I gathered the woman had kept right on going after the crash. Nobody had seen her car around the wreck.

"Listen, buddy," the trooper whispered; he seemed pretty tense just then, and his face was close to mine. "Are you accusing that woman of forcing you off the road deliberately?"

"You heard me," I said.

"That's a pretty serious charge, you know."

"Yes? Well, maybe I'm no gentleman. But that was the most deliberate thing I ever saw! She took a good look at me, and then she swung over in front of the truck."

"Know her? Ever see her before?"

"No."

"Well, could you identify her?"

"You bet I could!" I said. "I looked into her face plenty. Just find her and see if I can't!"

After that the trooper turned away and talked for a while with the cop on the back step. I couldn't hear them, but they both seemed excited. I had a talk with the doctor, and he said that aside from my being bruised up plenty, one of my ribs was fractured. That accounted for the sharp pain in the side.

"Still," he assured me, "you're mighty lucky. You looked like a goner when they dragged you out."

Then, of a sudden, the state trooper swung back to me. He bent low again, and his eyes were burning in a strange way as he asked very softly: "Listen buddy, for whom were you driving that truck?"

"Fellow named Reuter," I answered.

"Where was it going?"

"To a party named Gavery in Syracuse. Why?"

Instead of answering, the trooper

looked at me queerly for a moment. Finally he said: "What were you supposed to be hauling to Syracuse?"

"Hauling? Nothing. Just delivering a new truck."

"Oh, yes?"

The way he said it, the crooked little smile that twisted his lips, everything about him, in fact, told me something was wrong. I jerked my head up a few inches and demanded: "What's the matter? Don't you believe me?"

"What I believe," he said drily, "won't make a bit of difference. It's what the judge and jury will say."

"Wha-at?"

He smiled again in a manner that killed all his handsomeness. "If you want to play innocent, that's all right with me. It's your funeral."

I lifted my head so high that the doctor forced me down. My eyes must have been round, and my voice suddenly went hoarse. "What the devil are you talking about?" I shot out. "What's happened?"

"Nothing much. Only the phony back door in that tank broke open in the crash. I'm not an appraiser, but I'll bet there was twenty grand worth of furs in that truck!"

THEY kept me in a private room in the White Plains hospital. For two days a detective came in and out every couple of hours. Sometimes he'd sit there reading for what seemed years. Maybe they figured I'd open up and tell something about those furs in the tank.

From what the detective let drop, I learned the stuff had been identified as loot stolen from a loft on West Fortieth Street, a week ago. He wasn't a bad fellow, this copper; big, ruddy and cheerful. But he certainly tried hard to drag information out of me.

Finally I groaned: "Gee, why don't you leave me alone? I tell you I don't know anything about a fur robbery. I'm getting sick of being pumped like this. Am I under arrest, or what?"

"Well," he said gently, with a shrug, "you're going to be arraigned as soon as you're able to move out of here."

"Arraigned for what?"

"Complicity in grand larceny, for one thing. And maybe for murder."

"Murder!"

"Yep. They shot the watchman the night they robbed that loft. He's pretty sick. If he dies, it'll be murder. If he stays alive—well, you're in a bad spot any way you look at it."

Believe me, that was a shock. Nobody had told me anything about a watchman having been shot. I lay there, staring at the white wall. What a mess this was turning out to be!

"Why," I flung out at last, "don't they try to get hold of this guy Reuter? He's the only one I can steer you to."

"Nobody ever heard of him."

"Why, at the garage—"

"Sure, you told us all about that," the detective cut in. "All they know at the garage is that a fat feller who called himself Willard kept a new oil truck in the place overnight. He took it out in the morning, and they charged him two bucks. That's where *his* trail ends."

"How about tracing a license? The car was registered—"

"Don't kid yourself. The registry and the license plates were fakes. That oil truck was bought a month ago by a guy named Hammer, over in Brooklyn. And Hammer turns out to be a fake, too—unknown at any address we could find."

Well, things were getting better and better. As I saw it now, I'd been used as a catspaw. I was the sap they hired to drive a truckful of stolen furs to Syracuse. Now that my end of it had been smashed, Reuter and his crowd had disappeared. They were leaving me to face a jury alone. Probably they were all reading the papers and laughing.

I lay there swearing myself into a fever.

At noon the detective lifted his feet off the windowsill and drifted out to find a bite of free lunch. He'd been gone only five minutes when the nurse came in and spoke to me.

"Mr. Clark, there's a lady and gentleman here to see you," she said.

"What is this—a new gag? I don't know anybody in this part of the world."

"They didn't give their names. But the doctor said it would be all right for them to come in."

I couldn't help smiling bitterly. "I get it," I said. "This is another one of their tricks to get me to talk. All right, I'll play with the cops. Send them in."

So I watched the door, planning what I'd tell this couple. But the moment they entered, everything was blasted out of my mind. I recognized her at once. She was the girl who'd been driving the green roadster!

CHAPTER TWO

The Girl of the Green Roadster

THE girl sat down beside the bed, nervously, while the man with her closed the door. I felt I ought to hate her, but she was so beautiful with that golden hair and those blue eyes, so slim and elegant in her sport suit, and so scared, that I simply couldn't work up the hate. I stared at her. Then I swung my eyes to the man.

He was about thirty-five, dark, slender, and dressed in belted brown tweeds that screamed Fifth Avenue. His shoes were tan and white and he carried a Panama. I can't stand fellows who oil their hair, and this one was no exception. From the start I disliked him.

When he'd closed the door and we were alone, the woman leaned toward me. Her eyes became anxious. She whispered: "Do—do you know me, Mr. Clark?"

"If you mean do I recognize you, the answer is yes. I've got a broken rib that jumped up when you walked in."

"I'm sorry—"

"That helps a lot."

The man came over to the bed. He held his hat and frowned down at me.

"Look here, Clark," he said abruptly, in a low, quick voice. "We'd better get down to business at once. I don't know how long we can count on being alone."

"What business have we got?" I asked. "Besides, who are you?"

"I—I'm Roland Welling," he said, hesitating. "This is my sister, Miss Ann Welling."

"Well, that's that."

"I'll be brief and frank," he went on stiffly. "The other day, after the accident—"

"Oh," I interrupted sarcastically, "so it was an accident, was it? That's news!"

The girl flushed. She seemed about to talk, but her brother cut in and took the lead. "We needn't discuss opinions now. The point is this. My sister had a flat tire about a mile from the spot where you went off the road. She couldn't fix it herself, and so she bumped her way to a service station. When the tire was fixed, she had nothing smaller than a twenty-dollar bill. The man couldn't give her change, nor could he get any at the moment. He's a half mile from his nearest neighbor. So—it was only a dollar fifty she owed him—he asked her to drop by again, or send him the money. Meanwhile, however, he jotted down her license number."

I grinned tightly. "I get it, Mr. Welling. The cops started looking for the green roadster and they got the number from that service station."

"Exactly!"

"Am I supposed to cry over your sister's hard luck?"

The girl's hand flew to my arm. Her fingers were trembling as she squeezed my wrist. Deep in her eyes I saw a kind of fear that made me stare.

"Please!" she whispered. "You don't understand. I don't want to be identified with this dreadful thing!"

"What thing?" I challenged.

"I mean—"

"My sister means this," snapped the man. "There might have been more than one green roadster on that road. You're the only one who can identify her. And without that identification, there's no case of—er—reckless driving against her. And we—well, Mr. Clark, you're not a rich man, are you?"

I didn't say anything. I just lay there, watching him and listening. After a moment he smiled; a thin, hard smile that gave me a chill.

"In court," he said quietly, "they'll ask you to identify my sister. If you swear positively she was not the one who caused the accident— How does a thousand dollars in cash sound to you, Clark?"

"Come again!"

"Make it two thousand, payable the day you exonerate her. That fair enough?"

FOR a while I looked at him in silence. They both seemed to be hanging over me breathlessly. Then I said: "Mister, even if you made it ten thousand, my answer would still be the same. The hell with you!"

The girl gasped, clutched at me, went pallid. The man seized the brass end of the bed and scowled.

"Why should I exonerate her?" I demanded. "She deliberately forced me into an accident that almost killed me. The result is I'm not only busted up in a hospital, but I'm in a rotten jam with the law. They think I'm part of the gang that stole those furs. If you want to buy me out of this mess—well, I don't see how money can do it!"

"But listen—" she began frantically.

I snapped: "Why did you shove me off the road? Tell me that, and maybe we can talk business!"

"It was an accident. I didn't realize—"

"Boloney!"

"Look here," Roland Welling interrupted. There was a new terseness in his voice, and his eyes narrowed, even glittered. "You are in a jam, Clark. The only hope you've got is to hire a good lawyer who'll talk you out of trouble. That'll take money. I'm offering you two thousand, which may be the means of keeping you out of jail. Why don't you consider it that way?"

Well, that was a new way of looking at it. It stopped me. I'd been wondering how I could get anybody to defend me. I mean, the kind of smart lawyer I'd probably need; not a youngster, like some judge would assign to the case. So I frowned down at the foot of the bed and thought.

Then the detective came back.

He opened the door, scowled in at the Wellings, and turned his eyes to me. "Didn't know you were entertaining," he said, as if I'd insulted him.

The girl at once rose, fidgeting nervously with her purse. Her brother swallowed uneasily and backed away from the bed. He looked at me and said quickly: "I—I'll drop in to see you again, Clark. Just remember you can count on us for any help you need."

"Sure," I said. "I'll think it over. Come in again."

After they were gone, the detective tried to pump me. He sat down, an unlit cigar between his fingers. He grinned as if I were an old friend.

"That was the woman they got in connection with the accident, wasn't it?" he said. "I know. Ann Welling. I was at the station house when she denied everything."

I said: "Yes?"

"Yeah. What are you going to do about her?"

"Listen," I told him dryly. "Drop around when the judge questions me. You'll hear all about it then."

That was all I would tell him. He talked on, but I hardly listened. I scowled at the wall and wondered. Why had Ann Welling forced that oil truck off the road? And why were she and her brother willing to pay two thousand dollars to keep her name out of the mess?

Of course, I didn't get far along that line. Presently, the detective tired of questioning me without results and picked up a magazine. He was still reading when the nurse brought in a lean little man with a mole on his nose.

He was a stranger to me. He had a horrible grin, and his dark skin was so badly creased it seemed to be made of dirty carboard. When he took off his hat, he revealed a high, bald skull, wet with perspiration.

"Hello, Clark," he said. "I'm your lawyer."

I blinked at him. "Huh?"

Then the thin man—he wore a wrinkled, black suit that bore the stains of several meals—turned to the detective.

"You know me, don't you?" he asked amiably.

"Sure, Mr. Wintz."

"Well, I'm taking this case. Good publicity, even if there isn't any money. You don't mind if I talk to my client alone? It's my privilege, you know."

The detective said: "Sure. That's all right with me." He rose, winked at me, and went out of the room. He was very careful to close the door. As soon as he had disappeared, the lawyer leaned over me and started whispering.

"Talk soft, Clark. That wise dick will be listening out there!"

"What kind of a stunt is this?" I demanded. "Who the hell ever said you were my lawyer?"

He shot a swift glance at the door over his shoulder. He even went to put his ear against it; returned with a funny, pigeon-toed walk. Then he bent closer to me and dropped into my ear: "My name is Murray Wintz. Don't ask too many questions and don't be a fool. I'm going to handle everything for you. Just do what I tell you the way I tell you."

"But—"

"I'll let you in on this much, so you know where we stand. Reuter hired me!"

THAT took my breath away. I gaped at him, and he grinned as if he were enjoying my surprise. He even chuckled and his hand patted my shoulder.

"You've got friends, Clark," he assured me. "You've got plenty of good friends."

"This," I managed at last, "is getting interesting. Tell me some more."

He sat down, cast another quick look at the door, then went on in whispers. "You just stick to your original story, Clark, and they can't do a thing to you!"

"That isn't what the cops tell me!"

"Oh, to hell with them! They're trying to scare information out of you. You listen to me."

I said: "Go ahead."

"As I got your story from what you told them, it's this. Monday afternoon you were sitting in an employment agency on Lexington Avenue on the chance that a call for a chauffeur would come in. This man Reuter showed up. He looked you over, talked to you, read your references, and questioned you plenty. In the end he offered you seventy-five bucks to drive a truck to Syracuse. Right?"

"Perfect. Go on."

"All you know is, you picked up the truck Tuesday morning in front of the garage. You never looked inside the tank; never questioned Reuter. That's your story. If you stick to it, I'll have you

out—on bail, maybe, but out—before they can even put you in!"

"From where I am," I said dryly, "it looks as if Reuter is mighty anxious to get me out."

"Why shouldn't he be? He got you in."

"Where is he?"

"I told you not to ask too many questions. What you don't know you can't tell."

I considered a while, nodding, then asked: "What about this Welling woman? Where does she fit in?"

At that Winntz displayed his first frown. For a moment he tugged at his chin, thinking. He seemed annoyed. "I hear she came to see you," he muttered testily. "What did she try to do, buy you off?"

"Put it that way, yes."

Wintz massaged his chin again, then suddenly shrugged. He said on a harsh note: "Why worry about her? Ann Welling's case won't come up for two weeks. By that time you'll be out of the state."

I almost sat up in my astonishment. "Who'll be out of the state?" I exclaimed. "What for?"

Murray Wintz's smile became placating, soothing. He pushed me back to the pillow and made a curious clucking sound with his tongue.

"Don't get excited," he begged softly. "Use your head, Clark. Why do you imagine Reuter is paying me good money to get you out of this jam? He wants you to beat it as far from New York as you can. He doesn't want you hanging around in case anybody ever asks you to—identify him."

"Oh," I said quietly.

"You'll go, won't you?"

"Suppose I don't? What can Reuter do about it?"

Wintz leaned so far back in his chair that it tilted with him. He shoved his thumbs into the armholes of his vest and grinned at me in an almost paternal way. That gray face of his looked like dirty, wrinkled parchment.

"Clark, my boy," he whispered gently, "you'd be surprised at what Reuter can do. As your lawyer, I advise you to accept his terms. You want to live to be a happy old man, don't you?"

"Oh, so it's that way, eh?"

Wintz slowly nodded. "Yep, it's that way. Shall I tell Reuter you agreed?"

I flung back thickly: "You can tell Reuter to go to the devil! I'm not in his crowd, and nobody can pin anything on me. If I decide to stay in New York, I'll stay. Right now the idea of jumping bail doesn't appeal to me at all. And if you don't want to defend my case on my terms, you can beat it. I'm not scared. I'll get along!"

Murray Wintz studied me thoughtfully for a while, still smiling as he rocked back and forth on the chair. Finally he sighed and shook his bald head.

"You're a foolish boy, Clark, a very foolish boy."

THE funny part of it, though, was that Murray Wintz did handle my case. And on my own terms. What's more, he turned out to be a shrewd, hard-fighting lawyer. I learned he'd saved many a man from the chair, and hundreds from jail. When at last they dismissed me from the hospital—five days after the wreck—he accompanied me while detectives led me to a judge. All I had to do was plead not guilty to complicity in the fur robbery. Wintz did all the rest of the talking.

He argued that the State had no proof of my complicity. It was basing its case on one bit of circumstantial evidence: my driving the oil truck. He had the woman who ran the employment agency testify that I'd met Reuter only the day before the wreck, in her office. He had my letters of reference from former employ-

ers, showing I'd been a chauffeur here and there for the past two years, from the time I was twenty-one till I was twenty-three. He put up a damned good defense all around.

Before I knew it, he was leading me down the court-house steps into the sunshine, grinning, holding my arm, and telling me I was free to go; but that the authorities expected me to be on hand for identifying Reuter if ever he was found. His car, a glistening black limousine, was waiting at the curb, and he pushed me into it.

"Well, that's that," he chuckled as we rolled away. He took a panatella from his vest pocket, bit off its end, and lit it. As he tossed the match out of the window, he said: "Now let's go see what New York's like."

For a while I didn't talk; just stared ahead and tried to think straight. I was still feeling pretty weak. My sides were taped and bound so tightly that it felt as if I were wearing a corset.

"I've got to be back in White Plains next Tuesday," I muttered. "They want me to identify Ann Welling."

Wintz nodded. He smiled at the tip of his cigar a few seconds, then said: "Clark, I've got five hundred dollars—Reuter's money—that tells me you'll take a train out of New York tonight or tomorrow morning. How about it?"

I told him flatly: "No!"

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not one of Reuter's crooks, and I don't see why I should act like one. It'll look like hell to the cops if I skip town now. I'll just be giving myself another black eye. Why the devil should I do it? I've got nothing to be afraid of—nothing to run away from."

Wintz didn't argue. He simply sighed, stared out of the window, and mumbled: "All right, Clark. Have it your own way. You're old enough to know what you're doing."

I said: "Listen. Don't think I'm not grateful for the way you helped me, Mr. Wintz. I—"

"Forget it. I was paid plenty. Only remember this"—he looked at me in a queer, narrow way—"I warned you against staying in New York. If you change your mind and decide to go tomorrow, drop into my office. The five hundred will be waiting for you, in cash!"

At that I couldn't keep back a harsh little laugh.

"Five hundred doesn't interest me at all, Mr. Wintz. Why, I can raise two thousand, maybe more, just by playing along with Ann Welling!"

"Oh, can you?" He flicked ashes through the window. "She and her brother haven't been to see you since that day, have they?"

"Well, no—"

"Think that one over," he advised slowly. "Think it over carefully, Clark. Then just blow a good-by kiss to that dream of two thousand!"

CHAPTER THREE

Lead Shower

FIVE minutes after Murray Wintz dropped me at Seventh Avenue and Twenty-eighth Street, I knew I was being shadowed. It just happened, that while I walked away I glanced back at the corner. The lawyer's car had already whizzed off, but a taxi was at the spot, depositing a thin, gray-dressed fellow who must have been in his late forties. I remembered noticing him around the steps of the White Plains court. I'd been watching everybody there, wondering if there were any newspaper photographers waiting for me.

This lean fellow paid the driver quickly and ducked into the door of a store. I could see him peeping out at me as I went west on Twenty-eighth Street. And I couldn't help grinning.

The thing didn't worry me. It simply indicated why the police hadn't been too eager to throw me into jail. I decided they'd wanted me to be free. They'd probably tag me day after day now, in the hope that eventually I'd connect with Reuter and lead them straight to the fur-robbing crowd.

Well, if the police wanted to trail me, that was all right. I didn't mind. A shadow could be a sort of bodyguard, too, in an emergency.

I WENT back to Mrs. Farrar's brownstone front, where I'd had a four-dollar-per-week room, and where I'd left whatever clothes I owned. Just before she answered my ring, I glanced toward Seventh Avenue. The thin fellow in gray was on the other side of the street, apparently hunting for a house number. I gave him another grin. Maybe the sap thought he was fooling me.

Then Mrs. Farrar opened the door.

She kind of recoiled as if I were a ghost. She was a stout, middle-aged woman, her hair turning gray. We'd always got along well enough, but now I could see she wasn't any too delighted to have me back. Her eyes became round and anxious, and her fingers began fussing with her apron.

"I—I was wondering if you'd come back here," she stammered after a few preliminary greetings, which were choppy and nervous. "I didn't know what to think—"

"Mind if I keep the old room?" I cut in on her queries.

"Well, I don't know, Mr. Clark. I don't know what to say. I don't want any excitement in the house."

"Why should there be excitement?" I argued. "As far as I'm concerned, nobody's going to bother us."

"But they—they've been in and out all week!" she said.

"Who?"

"The police. Detectives. I had to let them search your room, Mr. Clark. I just had to!"

"That's all right," I told her tightly, after a pause. "They couldn't have found anything, anyway. I guess it was just part of their job checking up on me."

"I read all about it in the papers," she whispered. "Are you—under arrest?"

"Hell, no!" I snapped. "I'm free as a bird."

Then I had the good sense to dig into my pocket. The money Reuter had given me was still there. When I paid Mrs. Farrar the back rent I owed and added two weeks' pay in advance, she brightened like the sun coming through storm clouds. She even looked me over from head to foot, with a mother's interest, and said: "I hope you're feeling all better now, Mr. Clark."

"So-so."

"Your room is ready for you."

Before going up, I sent a last glance through the glass of the door. Across the street, next to an ice-wagon, stood the thin fellow in gray. He was peering anxiously at the upper windows of Mrs. Farrar's house.

I shook my head, smiled, and went upstairs to my small back room. It felt fine, coming home. A kind of weariness flowed out of my bones. I threw off some of my clothes, dropped to the bed, and tried to figure out just where and how I stood in this little old world. Lying there with my hands clasped under my head, I got to thinking about Ann and Roland Welling, about Reuter, about Murray Wintz; and that was the way I fell asleep.

It was dark when I awoke. Maybe I'd have slept right through the night. But toward eight o'clock in the evening Mrs. Farrar roused me by knocking at the door.

"There's a phone call for you, Mr. Clark," she said.

I asked: "Who is it?"

"I don't know," she answered. "The lady wouldn't give me her name."

IT WAS Ann Welling, all right. When I stood in the dark lower hall, listening to her quick voice, I knew she was as nervous as she'd been that day in the hospital. Her words came in low, staccato spurts.

"I called because I've got to see you, Mr. Clark!"

I said quietly: "Yes?"

"Can you come over here tonight? Now?"

"Come where?"

"To my—my apartment." She gave me an address, of all places, on Park Avenue. "Please!" she rushed on, pleading. "It's terrifically important."

"Not to me," I said.

"But to me." There was a desperate pause. "You've got to come, Mr. Clark—unless you'd rather have me come to your place. But I really think we can talk much better here."

I argued: "What's there to talk about, anyhow?"

"Well, you remember the offer my brother made you. That, for one thing!"

"Listen," I said. "I'll do what I think best about that. I'm not forgetting you almost killed me on that road. My rib still hurts. You can't expect me to hop to attention every time you call 'Boy'."

"Oh, Mr. Clark, please," she moaned. "I told you how sorry I felt about the accident. Won't you come here now? If I could only talk to you."

Well, I thought it over while she kept on begging and finally decided to go. As far as I could see, there was nothing to lose. I still wanted to know why she had shoved me off that road; and this seemed a good chance to get the answer. So finally I told her: "All right, Miss Welling. I guess you can look for me in an hour or so."

Her soft, "Oh, thank you!" sounded like a prayer.

But I didn't see Ann Welling in an hour, or even in two hours. Because after I went upstairs and dressed, plenty of unexpected things happened.

When I came down the steps, Mrs. Farrar was just closing up the parlor on the lower floor. We exchanged nods and smiles, and I opened the front door to go out. There was a black coupé parked across the street. The only reason I noticed it immediately was that I peered around for a glimpse of the thin man in gray. He wasn't in sight, and my eyes fell on the car.

Its window was open and two men were in the thing. One held the wheel and the other suddenly pointed something straight up at me. Whatever he held, glinted like metal in the darkness. I didn't stop to figure it out. With a gasp I jumped back instinctively and smashed the door closed. And believe me, I didn't spring back a second too soon!

Out in the street there were four quick cracks.

I saw red flame jet through the window of the coupé. As I fell back against the wall, the glass panel of the door seemed to explode. It burst in a hundred flying fragments, shattered by bullets!

Behind me, Mrs. Farrar screamed.

I glared at her, thinking she'd been hit. But she was all right. Just scared white and cringing back in terror, her hands shaking against her cheeks, her eyes round.

"Get away from the door," I said hoarsely.

She stumbled off mechanically, crying a hysterical, "What is it? What is it?"

Then there was a new roar in the street.

I looked out through the broken door and saw the coupé speeding away crazily. Its lights were extinguished, so there was no chance to reading the license plate.

I yanked the door open and dashed out on the street steps. I guess my eyes were blazing, and I breathed as if I'd run ten miles.

The coupé was just spinning around the corner into Eighth Avenue. It disappeared before I was halfway down the steps. With a curse that must have frozen Mrs. Farrar, I stared about for a cop. There wasn't a single uniform on the block. I even hunted for the man in gray, thinking he'd be a detective and of some use.

But he wasn't around, either.

And then, as I stood there in the darkness, the truth crashed upon me like thunder. It made me catch my breath and grab at the iron banister.

That fellow in gray hadn't been a detective at all! He must have been one of Reuter's men!

All of a sudden I saw the thing clear as I saw my own hand. That man had trailed me to make certain of where I intended to live. Then his crowd had posted somebody at the door to wait for me and let me have it. That was it! This had happened because I'd refused to skip out of New York.

I cursed harder than ever.

In the door behind me, Mrs. Farrar was chattering like a scared monkey. Her eyes were on fire, and her hands were tearing at each other. I'll bet her knees were quivering, too. I turned to her and snapped: "For God's sake, cut it out! Nobody's hurt."

She didn't seem to hear me. She just kept on wailing: "I knew something like th-this would happen. The m-minute you came back, I knew there was going to be trouble!"

"Well, you won't get any more," I flung at her furiously. "Not on account of me, anyhow. I'm packing and moving out of here right now, before they try this again!"

Well, there was so much commotion in the street by this time, so many heads poking out of windows and so many yells, that pretty soon a cop came running up the sidewalk from Seventh Avenue. That was only the beginning. Within five minutes there was a mob in front of the house. Somebody must have telephoned for help, for two police flivvers came howling up to the place, bringing more uniformed men. And a couple of detectives materialized out of nothing. I wouldn't have been surprised to see the reserves charge into the scene.

Those boys must have been reading about the case in the papers, because when they learned who I was and what had happened, they gathered around me like flies buzzing on a sticky cake. You could almost see them licking their lips, rubbing their hands. I'll swear every one of them smelled good publicity and possible promotion in this mess.

The way they questioned Mrs. Farrar and me was ridiculous. The same thing over and over again. Then as if that wasn't enough, they finally dragged me to the police station and made me repeat the whole story to the desk sergeant till I was sick of hearing myself tell it.

MEANWHILE, over on Park Avenue, Ann Welling must have been wondering plenty. I learned, later, that she'd called Mrs. Farrar's place again.

Anyhow, the desk sergeant kept me in front of him, while he leaned forward like a gargoyle, a pen in his hand, and put me through his idea of a cross-examination. I had nothing to hide. I even told him I felt certain Reuter was behind the attack.

"What makes you say that?" he shot at me.

"My lawyer, Murray Wintz, warned me Reuter might try a stunt like this."

"How did Wintz know?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

The desk sergeant flung down his pen

and promptly took me at my word. He got Murray Wintz's home on the phone and found the lawyer there. The conversation lasted about five minutes; then the sergeant hung up in disgust.

"He claims he hasn't seen Reuter. Doesn't even know who the man is."

"Oh, yes?" I said, pretty sarcastically. But the tone was lost on the sergeant. He went on.

"All he admits is that when he undertook to handle your case, somebody called him on the phone one night, gave the name of Reuter, and advised him to send his client out of town. That's all he can tell us."

Well, it was almost ten o'clock, and I felt fed up with the whole business. You'd imagine, the way they were hanging on to me, that I was responsible for the shooting. In the end, however, they had to let me go.

"I'll send two of the boys to see you home," said the sergeant, crisply. "And we'll keep men posted at Mrs. Farrar's house through the night."

"Only I won't be there," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not staying where that bunch of gunmen can put their hands on me any time they feel like it. I'm moving out to safer quarters."

That's what I did, too—though, of course, one of the detectives came along to see where I decided to park. By ten-thirty, I had a room in the Y. M. C. A. on Twenty-third Street. The dick didn't object when I registered as Henry Briggs. He knew it was so people wouldn't stare at me and ask fool questions.

I'd hardly got settled in my new room, however, when I suddenly remembered Ann Welling.

I looked at a clock. It was ten forty-five. I hesitated, wondering if it was too late to keep the appointment. But I was feeling too excited to go to bed. So I went out, blew myself to a taxi, and gave the driver her Park Avenue address.

"What the hell," I thought grimly. "Might as well make a regular night of it."

And then, as the cab continued up Fifth Avenue, I began to see that I couldn't keep out of this mess. If I didn't help the police to get Reuter—by digging up information wherever possible—Reuter would probably end up by getting me!

I thought of Ann Welling and told myself that was as good a place as any to start asking questions. And after her, Murray Wintz!

CHAPTER FOUR

Penthouse

MISS WELLING openen the door for me herself. When I entered that duplex apartment, it was like walking into a magazine picture, or a scene in a movie. The whole place was done in sharp, modern style. The drawing room was all black, white and chromium, illumined by invisible lights. A wide circular staircase, with a chromium banister, led to the upper floor.

But the most theatrical thing in the apartment was Ann Welling, herself.

She wore a blue-green gown which, by contrast, made her golden hair shine dazzlingly. She had everything you'd look for in the front row of a Ziegfeld chorus. And yet, at that moment, I didn't think she was beautiful. No, I changed my mind about her on the spot. She looked curiously hard, almost bitter; and her pallor made her make-up seem ghastly.

"I know why you're late," she said heavily. "I called you again." She sank wearily into a chair. "It must have been pretty hard for you."

"Well, I didn't get much fun out of it," I told her dryly. I threw my hat to a table and turned to her. "What was

it you wanted me for? You sounded excited when you phoned."

"I was excited. I still am."

"So what?"

She hesitated, staring uncertainly at the floor. Her fingers began to twist the green gown at her knee. I endured the silence as long as possible, and then I told her thickly, with slow emphasis: "Suppose I tell you what *I* think."

She snapped up her head, startled. "What do you mean?"

"I think you phoned me just to get me out of the house, so those boys in the coupé could get a shot of me. They got tired waiting while I slept, so they asked you for help. And you came across with the phone call."

Well, her face went dead white first, then suddenly blazed scarlet. She half rose, but fell back as if her legs had buckled under her.

"That's a terrible thing to say!" she gasped.

"Yes? It was a terrible thing to do!"

"I never—"

"What's the use of lying? Your face gives you away. You're mixed up with Reuter some way, though I don't know how, yet. But I intend to find out—in self-defense!"

"For God's sake, Mr. Clark! I never—"

Then her wide blue eyes plunged beyond me. I turned quickly and saw her brother Roland. He was coming down the circular stairs, a frown on his dark, too handsome face. His hands were shoved deep in his jacket pockets. I had the queer, chilling premonition that a trap was closing on me.

"Hello, Clark," he said quietly.

I muttered a cautious, "Hello."

"That was a pretty rotten thing you just said to my sister. I heard it."

"It was meant to be heard."

He stopped on the bottom step, his eyes fastened coldly on mine. "You're wrong about the call. We had only one reason in phoning you tonight, and that was to renew the offer of two thousand dollars. You can still have it if you agree not to identify Ann as the woman who drove the green roadster."

"That's mighty generous of you," I answered, my eyes wavering between his face and his pockets. "But before I could give you an answer, I'd have to understand why Miss Welling forced the oil truck off the road."

"We've already told you it was an accident."

I shook my head. "Sorry. I know what I know."

"You seem pretty sure," he snapped, his voice hardening, "of lots of things."

"If it were an ordinary accident, you wouldn't be offering two thousand dollars to squash it. And Miss Welling wouldn't be so scared. She knows as well as I do, that she deliberately forced me off that road. The thing will require plenty of explanation in court."

Then, in spite of myself, I smiled bitterly. "Funny, isn't it how many people are scared into doing strange things just because the cops let me off. Some try to push me out of New York, some try to murder me, and you try to bribe me into perjury."

SUDDENLY the girl jumped up behind me. The movement was so abrupt that I whirled around with a start. She stood flushed, her eyes flashing, her fist pounding the back of a chair. She had lost her temper, that was clear enough. And now she cried in a hoarse, infuriated voice: "The only thing you suffered was a broken rib. We're offering you two thousand dollars for that cracked rib. And let me tell you, you're a fool if you don't accept it!"

Her voice, in the outburst, sounded so alcoholic and cheap that I stared at her. She certainly didn't impress me as a millionaire's daughter now—no, sir! Just

a golden-haired doll in a green dress, with too much make-up on a pretty face. I drew a deep breath and said: "Maybe I am a fool."

"You mean," she cried aghast, "you won't take the money?"

"Not till I understand why you wanted to wreck the truck and what connection you have with Reuter. I'm not going into this blind—maybe to let myself in for a lot more trouble with the police. I've been burned once, Miss Welling, and now I'm afraid of fire."

And then, before she could answer, a metallic, derisive voice behind me said: "My, my, Clark—you're certainly developing a lot of curiosity."

I spun around, gaping at the door, and almost fell off my feet. A fat, thin-haired man stood grinning on the threshold, his fingers rolling a cigar between his thick lips. He nodded, and the sight of him sent a storm through me.

It was Reuter!

THE greasy little man looked at Ann Welling sidewise. His nasty grin continued to twist his lips, and the derision never left his voice. "Well, sweetheart," he said, "you're sure trying a lot of things on your own hook, aren't you?"

I couldn't help glancing at her. She'd gone absolutely colorless with rage, and her voice was choked.

"How—how did you get in here?" she gasped.

"Why, I was given the key."

"You—"

By that time, though, I'd seen enough. The very sight of Reuter set free a tornado in my chest, inflamed my eyes, made me feel drunk. I forgot my cracked rib and stepped up close to him. Maybe I grinned, too, just then.

"Reuter," I whispered, "you're the one man in the world I've been aching to see."

"What for?" he asked, innocently.

"First you use me as a catspaw, with that load of stolen furs. Then you sic your boys on me with bullets and pretty near blast my life out."

"Well—" He took the cigar from his lips and shrugged as if the whole thing were unimportant. "You had ample warning to get out of town, didn't you? Is it my fault you refused?"

That got me. This fellow not even denying he'd tried to have me murdered! All of a sudden I saw blood. I hauled back my fist and let him have it. It was a perfect smack, caught him flush on the mouth. He dropped the cigar, rolled up his eyes, and went somersaulting back over one of those modern chairs. He crashed over twice and finally ended up in a huddle against the wall.

Maybe Ann Welling screamed. I don't know. I wasn't paying any attention to her or Roland. My only wish was to plant another solid crash on Reuter's anatomy, and I went after him.

But Roland Welling charged into the trouble, too.

I heard him coming and turned quickly. He had snatched an automatic out of his pocket.

Not that I was surprised. I'd known the thing was there. What got me was that he was bringing the gun down through a whizzing arc straight at my head.

I cried, "Damn you!" and jumped for him. I'd have handled him, too despite the bad rib. But that little hell-cat, Ann Welling, flung herself at me. She grabbed my arm as it rose. I tried to shake her away while Roland missed his first swing at my head, but she hung on like a drowning woman. Then her brother brought the gun down again.

This time he caught me on the side of the head.

Something banged in my brain. As I

pitched to the floor, I saw all kinds of crazy lights.

I didn't pass out immediately. I must have lain there a few seconds, writhing and struggling to get to my feet. My ears were filled with voices.

Reuter was roaring something about killing me. Ann was crying desperately: "Put that gun away, you fool. Put it away, I tell you! Do you want cops up here?"

And Roland was grating: "The idiot. What the hell does he think he's doing?"

Then one of them kicked me. I don't know if it was Roland or Reuter. The toe of his shoe banged viciously against the back of my head. I sprawled like a felled ox—and for a while that was all I knew.

WHEN I regained my senses, I had the eery sensation of being locked up in a coffin. I lay hunched in absolute blackness, the kind of blackness that makes you feel blind. My wrists were tied behind my back, and my ankles were bound together. There was perspiration all over my body; I was soaked in it. A whole dictionary of curses was struggling to explode from my throat.

After a while I understood where they'd put me. This was a clothes closet. When I moved my head, I brushed hanging garments.

Well, I decided I couldn't do much good by squirming around until I'd recovered some strength. The place was stifling, and I had to gasp in every breath. So I forced myself to lie quiet and wait for a time.

That was when I heard their voices.

They seemed to be miles away, for the words were muffled. If they hadn't suddenly begun to yell at each other in anger, I'd probably have caught nothing at all. But they began to let themselves go hoarsely, and I heard Ann Welling fling out in strident fury.

"What do you think I am, anyhow, an old glove? Do you think I can be thrown aside whenever a man thinks he's had enough of me? Not on your life!"

"But listen here—" from Reuter.

"Listen, nothing. I've heard enough. Nobody can treat *me* like that. I just won't stand for it!"

"Hell," he cried, "for two years you've had everything you wanted. A Park Avenue apartment—a car—servants—clothes, and money."

"What of it? Does that mean I can be dropped just like that? Not me, mister!"

"So just to get even you followed that truck and wrecked it, did you?" Reuter tore out savagely. "You ruin a racket that's bringing a man a hundred grand a year just to—"

"For the love of heaven!" Roland Welling suddenly yelled, louder than both of them. "Shut up, will you! Does the whole world have to know? You'll have the neighbors in here if you keep this fool thing going."

That ended it for a while. All I caught was a distant rumble of voices, with no words standing out clearly. I relaxed and thought fast. Things were beginning to shape up into a pretty clear pattern now!

Here was Ann Welling, whose life had been made pleasant for a few years by a generous benefactor. Her good, gentleman friend had been making a fortune by shipping stolen goods out of New York, probably in trucks; and she'd known his racket. When the gentleman suddenly dropped her and decided to stop paying her bills, she went wild. Wanted to hit back at him. Saw a way of ending his racket and maybe throwing him into the hands of the police without in any way implicating herself. The cheap revenge of a cheap woman. So she trailed the oil truck that day and—

Yes, I began to see things clearly!

By that time, also, I felt strong enough to try wriggling out of the cords which bound me. Believe me, I saw a glimpse of paradise when I discovered, after some ten minutes of desperate tugging, that there was a half-inch slack in the bonds around my wrists. They hadn't been too careful in trussing me. Maybe they figured my being unconscious and the locked closet would be enough to keep me quiet. Or possibly, they'd just been too excited to take any pains with the job.

Anyhow, within fifteen minutes I worked my hands free. My head thumped with pain, and even my rib was bothering me again. But by the time I had freed my ankles, I was ready for action.

I groped up for the doorknob, found it, and discovered I was imprisoned, all right. The door was locked. That made me scowl, made me stop to think. Suppose I attempted to smash the door down. No. The noise would bring Reuter and Roland Welling at once, and they had at least one automatic between them. I couldn't buck against the gun.

WHILE I hesitated, sitting there in absolute darkness, somebody entered the room beyond the door. Sharp heels clicked back and forth on the floor. Someone was pacing the chamber nervously, angrily. It was Ann Welling, I guessed. A man wouldn't take such short, quick, clicking steps. Suddenly I heard her voice call out with the same accents of fury.

"What do you expect me to do with him?"

"Oh, leave him there," came Reuter's answer.

"I can't keep him in my closet forever. And I'm not letting you do anything to him in my apartment. I've got troubles enough right now."

"Just leave him there till I send up some of the boys. They'll handle him."

"Well, make it snappy!"

Then there was silence again, except for those clicking heels. After a while that sound stopped, but I could still hear occasional rustlings which told me Ann Welling was still in the room. So I remained motionless, trying to decide on the best thing to do. Whatever it was, I'd have to do it soon! I couldn't just wait until Reuter sent some of his *boys* to *handle* me.

Some ten or fifteen minutes passed quietly, though they seemed like so many hours. I had cautiously risen to my feet and was groping about in the closet for something that might be used as a weapon. The only solid thing I could grasp was a clothes-hanger. It was hardly worth taking. I cursed softly, searched my pockets. Nothing like a weapon there, either; not even a pen-knife.

Well, I was just resigning myself to the clothes-hanger when—a scream tore through the apartment.

It was the most horrible sound I'd ever heard. Something like the crazy screech of a peacock. It ripped into me like a knife, left me rigid and breathless. I guessed immediately that it came from Ann Welling. A man could never produce such a sound.

After that single shriek, there was a terrible hush.

I don't know how long I stood there, in blackness, with sweat pouring down my body, and all my nerves ajitter. All I know is that suddenly I couldn't bear it any longer. I grabbed the clothes-hanger, lifted my right foot, and rammed it furiously at the door.

I did it twice, three times. My rib sent a pang of protest through me at every kick.

On the fourth crash the door burst open.

I plunged out into a bedroom, the

clothes-hanger still in my grip. The first thing I saw was an insane-looking dishevelled man racing straight at me, his eyes blazing and his face pallid. He had his arm lifted as if to hurl something at me. Then I realized it was my own reflection in a ceiling-high mirror on the other side of the room.

That was almost funny. I turned away from the mirror dizzily, my eyes dazzled by the lights.

There was nobody in this bedroom. Moreover, I couldn't hear anyone coming, either—though the closet door had made quite a crash when it flew open. So I drew a heavy breath, held the clothes-hanger tighter, and started toward the door.

From inside the room I could see the top landing of the circular stairway. Evidently they had carried me upstairs while I was unconscious. Well, that didn't matter now. The only thing that puzzled me was the fact that nobody was coming up those steps to point a gun at me.

I went out of the room, started down the stairs, and abruptly halted. What I saw left me standing there in a kind of paralysis, my nerves freezing.

Ann Welling was sprawled halfway down the staircase. Her feet were up, her head was down, and her chest was a hideous welter of blood!

She'd been stabbed straight to the heart. Her very limpness told me, even before I plunged down to her, that she was dead!

CHAPTER FIVE

Twenty Steps to Doom

THAT girl was dead, all right! I knelt down beside her, tried to find a pulse-beat in her wrist. But it was useless. She must have died the instant the blade stabbed her.

I crouched there, sweating more than ever. Only it wasn't because of the heat now. Inside of me there was a raging fever. I looked past her body, and for the first time became aware of the footprints on the stairs. Footprints that were as clear as a billboard, because somebody had stepped into Ann Welling's blood!

The marks led down the steps. Instinctively I rose, the clothes-hanger still in my hand, and followed them. My nerves were throbbing crazily now. My hair dangled into my eyes, and I shoved it back impatiently.

Funny thing about those footprints; the heels labeled them as a man's, and yet they were made by shoes as small as a woman's. There was one on every step. As they neared the bottom, however, they became indistinct. They disappeared altogether in the thickness of the drawing-room rug.

I stopped down there, staring around wildly. What had become of Roland, of Reuter?

I ran through the three rooms on the lower floor, but there was no sign of them. Apparently I was alone with the dead woman. When I returned to the foot of the stairs and looked up at her, a shudder went through me.

Well, there was only one thing to do then, and I did it. I went to a telephone in the corner of the room and called police headquarters.

The officer to whom I reported the murder took it as calmly as if it were a weather report. He made me repeat the address slowly while he jotted it down, then asked: "Who's this talking?"

I told him my name. He must have recognized it but even that didn't affect the evenness of his voice.

"You're on the premises now?" he asked.

"Yes!"

"Alone?"

"Yes!"

"And you say you don't know who killed her?"

"No, I don't."

"All right. Our men will be there in a few minutes. Stay where you are, Mr. Clark."

When I put down the telephone, I spied a bottle and some glasses in a corner. Believe me, I needed a drink. My nerves were quivering, my head pounded, and even my rib was making itself felt. I poured myself two stiff glasses of Scotch. After I'd swallowed them, things steadied slightly. My mind began to click along logically again; and as I stared up at the body of Ann Welling, a sudden new idea seized me.

I darted back to the telephone, hunted up Murray Wintz's number in the book. When I finally got him on the wire and told him who I was, he snapped: "What's the idea of dragging me out of bed? Do you realize what time it is?"

"To hell with the time," I said. "Ann Welling is dead. She's just been murdered!"

That stopped him. There was a moment of stunned silence. Then he let out a soft, "Wha-at?"

I REPORTED as much as I knew about the thing. Talked quickly in syllables that tumbled over one another in their hurry to be spoken. I couldn't help keeping one eye on the body of Ann Welling, and my heart was still thudding pretty fast. When I finished, I shot out: "You're my lawyer, aren't you?"

"Why?" he snapped.

"Because if you are I want you to get over here as soon as you can. I'll need plenty of advice."

"Advice? What for?"

"They may try to pin this thing on me!"

Wintz snorted. "Don't be a fool! They've got no evidence against you, except that you're there. The fact that you phoned headquarters will help you."

"How about the broken closet door?" I flung back.

"Eh?"

"Listen, Wintz, I was a prisoner in this apartment. I broke out of a closet when only Ann Welling was in the place to guard me. It's going to look as if she tried to stop me and I stabbed her. Phoning headquarters—hell, they'll think that was my way of covering up!"

Again Murray Wintz was silent for a moment. Then he rapped out choppily: "All right, Clark. I'll be right over. Don't say anything to the cops till I get there. We can fix this up. As far as you know, that girl was murdered by either Reuter or her brother Roland. Or better yet, you don't know anything!"

I said: "Fine. I'll be waiting for you."

Wondering how long it would be before the police arrived, I went back to the stairs and peered carefully at those bloody footprints. There was something about them—

A key scraped in the outer door.

The click affected me like a gun-shot. I started violently, looked around, and sprang toward a corner. By pressing back, I was out of sight of anyone entering the room. There I remained rigid, watching. The door opened, closed. There were quick steps in the foyer.

Roland Welling entered.

When he saw his sister's body on the stairs, he stopped dead. His face went yellow; his eyes bulged. A hoarse, inarticulate gasp broke from him, and he lunged crazily across the room, up the steps. He dropped to his knees and grabbed the girl's shoulders, shook her wildly.

"Ann!" he cried. "Ann!"

Maybe I made an inadvertant sound, because he heard me and spun around. The instant he spied me, a husky ejacu-

lation exploded from him. He jumped down the stairs, his hand diving into his pocket for the automatic.

This time, however, I was a little quicker than he. I reached him just as he started to raise the weapon, and my fist smashed squarely on his chin. Roland crashed on the stairs. While he floundered, I caught the automatic, wrenched it out of his grasp. By the time he sat up, he was blinking into its muzzle.

"You—you dirty killer," he yelled.

"Shut up!" I snapped. "I didn't kill her!"

"You—"

"I was in that closet when she got it. I heard her scream. The police are on the way here now."

"The police?" At that he sprang to his feet and stood gripping the chromium banister. He looked as white as the corpse, and he swayed drunkenly. "Who—who sent for police? You?"

"Certainly. Who else?"

"Who killed her?" wildly.

"Your guess is as good as mine. What became of Reuter?"

"He went home," gasped Roland. "He—why, I went out of here with him myself!"

"Where did you leave him?"

"At the corner. He took a cab."

"Well, maybe he—"

But I stopped. That was when the doorbell rang, long and hard. I called out a question, and a deep voice answered: "Police! Open up!"

FIRST came two uniformed cops who had responded to a radio call. Within five minutes half a dozen detectives crowded into the place; they were under the orders of a big, white-haired, beefy-faced fellow they called Captain Ryan. Then the medical examiner arrived with his assistant. More uniformed men arrived. An ambulance surgeon, photographers from headquarters with their cameras, even a couple of reporters who'd squeezed in on their nerve. The result was that within fifteen minutes that apartment looked like a ballroom on New Year's Eve, and Roland and I were just part of the mob.

Well, we stood around while Captain Ryan went through his routine over the body.

Roland, sunk in a chair, looked like the ghost of his former self. He was haggard, his oily hair crawling all over his forehead. Dark rings had appeared under his eyes, and his lips were twitching, quivering. I almost pitied him. Once in a while he glanced at me; but his expression never changed.

At last Captain Ryan and two other detectives took us into the kitchen, where we had privacy. The captain settled his weight on the table, pushed back his felt hat, and peered narrowly from Roland to me.

"All right," he said quietly. "Now let's have it. You first, Clark. What do you know?"

Right then and there I forgot Murray Wintz's advice and told everything I had to tell. Why not? I figured the truth couldn't harm me.

The captain pricked up his ears like a startled horse. When I finished he was all but goggling. He took the hat off his white hair, put it down on the table beside him, and said: "So you're the Clark who was mixed up in that White Plains business."

"That's right."

"And you claim this guy Reuter—the same one who hired you to drive the truck—was in this apartment tonight?"

I nodded.

"You think he murdered Ann Welling?"

"I didn't say that, Captain," I answered quickly. "I'm just telling you the things I know."

"Sure, sure. That's all right." With

his eyes glistening in a peculiar way, Captain Ryan fixed his attention on Roland. He said softly: "Now let's have your side of it, Welling. Just what do you know?"

"Nothing," Roland replied quickly. He was frowning at the floor. "Only that when I left here, Ann was alone in the apartment with this fellow Clark. When I came back, he was in the room with her, and she was—dead."

I couldn't resist an ugly grin at the implication. Captain Ryan glanced at me and shook his head.

Turning back to Roland, he went on: "Suppose you explain the rest of it, now."

"What rest?" sharply.

"Why you locked this man Clark in a closet after knocking him out with your gun."

Roland Welling hesitated. He stood leaning against the refrigerator, pushing his fingers back through his disheveled, black hair. A few seconds passed in silence. Then, with a jerk of his whole body, he straightened.

"Look here, Captain," he forced out desperately. "I don't have to talk now, do I? I'm entitled to get my lawyer's advice before I say anything!"

"Sure you are," Ryan gently agreed. "If you want to keep your mouth shut now, that's your business."

"Well, I—"

"Only," the captain continued in that same low tone, "it seems to me that if *my* sister had been murdered, I'd rip heaven and hell apart to see her murderer burn. If you're the kind of guy who'd rather see him go free, why, that's up to you. I'm not going to argue the point."

THAT got under Roland's skin. He cursed, he shoved his hands into his pockets and began striding up and down the kitchen like a madman in a cell. His scowl was fastened on the floor. You could see he was being torn between his feelings for Ann and a fear of getting himself into trouble. The rest of us waited without speaking; just watching him. But in the end Captain Ryan suggested: "Suppose you tell us where we can find this man Reuter."

"I don't know!" Roland rapped out harshly.

"Oh, say—"

"I don't, I tell you! Since that White Plains mess, he's cleared out of his flat. He used to be over on Madison, but he got out, and I didn't even ask him where he was living. That's the truth, so help me!"

Then I had a sudden, wild idea. It must have been shining in my eyes when I grabbed the captain's arm.

"Listen," I said quickly, "that fellow Reuter promised to send a few of his boys for me tonight. Maybe he'll even come back with them himself. If—if you could clear away the parade of police cars from the street downstairs, so they don't frighten that gang off, maybe you can nab the whole mob when they arrive. See what I mean?"

Captain Ryan saw, all right. He slid off the table as if the wood had begun to burn under him, snatched up his hat. His eyes, too, were bright.

"That's an idea, Clark!" he agreed at once. "Not bad. We'll see what we can do."

As he strode out of the kitchen, leaving us with the other two detectives, Roland looked like a trapped animal. I've never seen anybody quite so scared, so desperate. He was breathing hard. He stood rigid, his fists clenching and opening at his sides. You could see him gulp. But not a sound came from him. Maybe he couldn't speak just then.

In a few minutes Captain Ryan returned, brisk and pleased with himself.

"There won't be a police car or a policeman in sight down in the street," he declared. "I'll have half a dozen men

posted in the cellar, near the service entrance, and another half dozen in the front hall, behind the elevator. If your friends show up, Welling, we'll have plenty of excitement in the building."

Then the captain glanced at me and nodded back toward the door. He said: "Murray Wintz is out there. Claims he's your lawyer and you sent for him."

I straightened with a snap. "Right, Captain," I answered. "Mind if I have him in here? I'm going to need him."

"What for?"

I couldn't resist a tight grin. "I've got an idea someone's in a jam and I don't want it to be me."

SO they brought Murray Wintz into the kitchen. He was still the same unprepossessing figure, with foodstains on his wrinkled suit, with a face like dirty parchment, and a high, bald skull. The moment he entered, he tried to take charge of the situation. With hardly a glance at me, he snapped to Ryan: "Now look here, Captain, my client, Mr. Clark, isn't going on record with any statements until—"

"Your client," the captain dryly interrupted, "has told us plenty already."

Wintz looked at me in surprise. "Did you?"

"Well, I told what happened here, as I know it. Sure. Why not? It can't get me into trouble."

"Hell!" exclaimed Wintz in angry disgust. "Then what did you have to drag me out of bed for? If you felt you didn't need any advice of counsel—"

"I didn't call you for advice," I said.

"What then?"

"I just wanted to get you here."

"Huh?" startled. "What?"

Then I turned to Captain Ryan, who looked a little puzzled, himself. I said: "Captain, I'm not trying to play detective. Only I've got a couple of ideas, and maybe if you'd let me tell them as I see them—"

"Go ahead," muttered Ryan, with a nod.

Murray Wintz was staring. Roland Welling seemed as terrified as ever. They all watched me. But I spoke straight to the big Captain Ryan.

"From what I told you before," I said, "I guess certain things are pretty clear, aren't they? First, Ann Welling was being supported here by a man who suddenly grew tired of her and tried to drop her. She knew this fellow was the head of a racket which was earning him a hundred thousand dollars a year. So, to get square with him, she wrecked one of his trucks, figuring the publicity would ruin his whole game and maybe land him in jail. The only thing that went wrong with her scheme was that her car was identified by a fellow at a service station. That threatened to implicate her; threatened to bring out the fact that she'd known about the fur-stealing game for a long time. She might even be arrested for complicity."

"So what?" asked Ryan.

"Because I happened to be the only one who could identify her and Reuter, they did their best to squash me."

"Go on."

I sent a quick glance from Roland Welling to Murray Wintz, then drove on.

"What we don't yet know for certain is—*who* was the man who supported Ann Welling in this apartment? Reuter? No, I don't think so. When he walked in here tonight, Ann Welling didn't understand how he'd gotten the key to the door. He said it had been given to him. I figured, then, that it must have been given to him by the man who originally had access to this place. It looked like Reuter was only the go-between, coming to find out what

Ann Welling intended to do about the whole mess."

"Listen," Roland cried harshly. "Who the hell cares what this man thinks?"

"Well, I do, for one," Captain Ryan answered quietly. He nodded to me. "Keep right on talking, Clark."

"The way I see it," I continued, "Ann Welling didn't give Reuter any satisfaction. Maybe she even threatened to make the whole fur-stealing racket crash with her if she got into trouble. So when Reuter left here, he carried that message to the party most interested. And that gentlemen, seeing only one sure way of making Ann keep her mouth shut, came here and stabbed her to death. If you want to know who he is, those bloody footprints will tell you half the story, Captain. I guess you can get the other half by comparing them with the pigeon-toed little feet of this lawyer of mine, Murray Wintz—guessed it the minute he walked in."

WELL, for a moment that kitchen was as hushed as the inside of a tomb. We all looked down at Wintz's funny little feet, as small as a woman's. It was my memory of them which had made me put two and two together in the first place. Wintz himself gaped down at his shoes, as if he'd never noticed them before; then fell back a couple of steps, only to be stopped by the bulk of a detective. His face had turned ashen.

I started to say something about his living only a few blocks away, so that he could have got home in plenty of time to receive my phone call. But I never finished saying it. Because at that moment hell broke loose.

Roland Welling suddenly screamed: "You—you dirty, double-crossing killer!"

Before anybody could stop him, he flew across the room and started crashing his fists into Wintz's face. It took Captain Ryan and another detective to drag him back and pinion him, panting like a dog, against the refrigerator.

Men came running in from the drawing room to crowd the door. They stared. Two policemen, at a sign from Ryan, seized Wintz's arms. But Roland Welling didn't seem to see or hear anything at all. He was sobbing like a baby. Words gushed from him hysterically as he shouted to the captain: "I'll see him burn for this even if I have to go to jail myself! The dirty—"

Ryan cut in sharply: "You corroborate what Clark said?"

"Yes, I do! Every word of it is true. Wintz thought he was smart, but—I'll show him how damned smart he was. He was supposed to be a clever criminal lawyer, and he met plenty of criminals, all right. Worked them up into a gang that made him rich. Reuter was only his agent—"

"Captain!"

The sharp interruption came from somebody outside the kitchen door.

"What's the matter out there?"

"We just nabbed four men coming up the service entrance. One of them is a fat guy who fits the description of Reuter perfectly. They're out here now!"

Yes, sir, they'd caught the whole gang.

I'll never forget the expression on Murray Wintz's face when at last he was taken out of the kitchen and allowed to stare at his footprints on the steps. It was such a twisted, crazy look that it seemed almost pathetic. He gazed at the spot where the body had been, too. By that time it had been moved to a bed on the upper floor. Then he shook his head wearily.

Captain Ryan said: "Wintz, when you went up those steps to kill her, you were walking up to—doom."

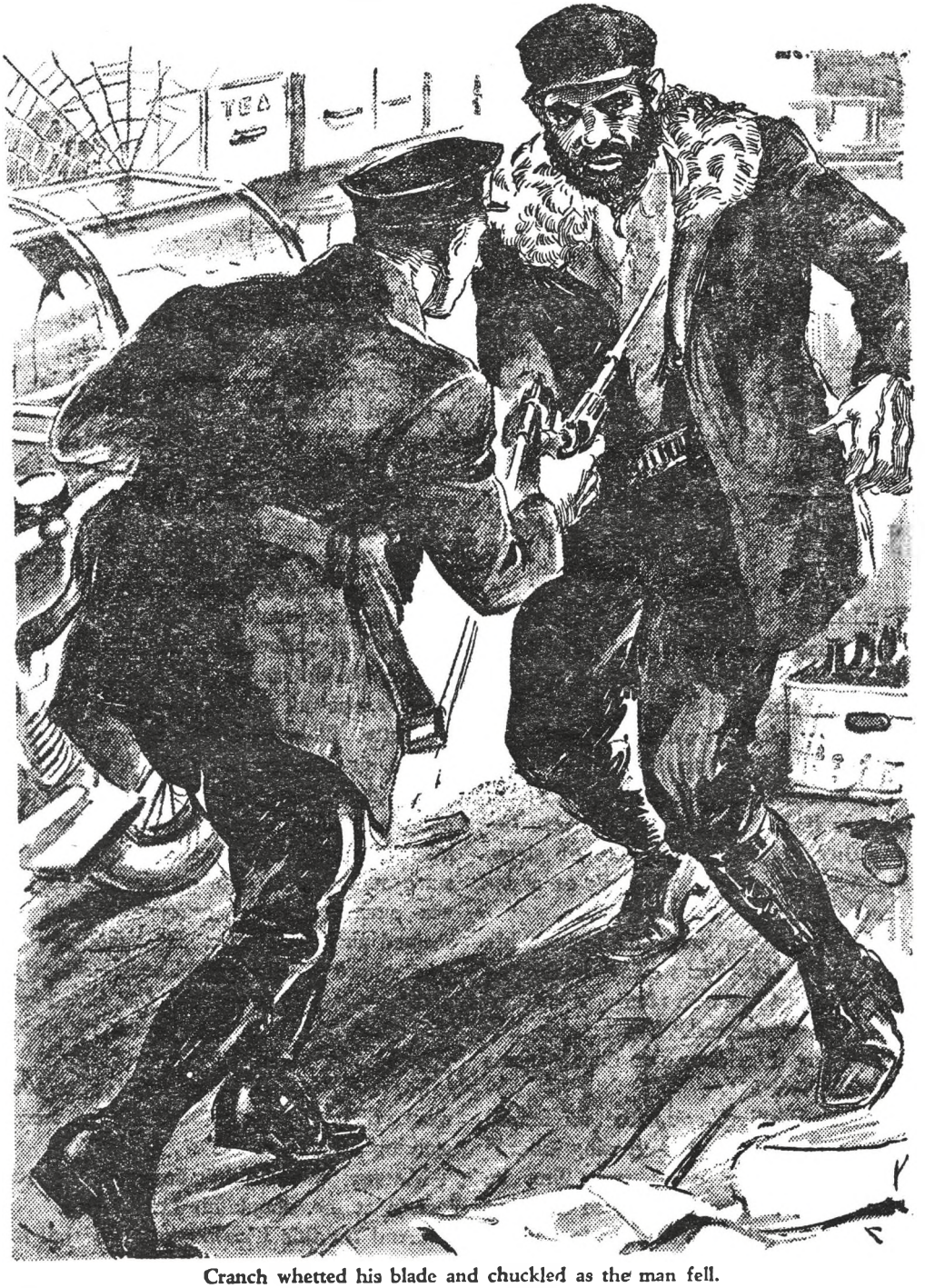
Murray Wintz didn't answer. He just looked at me, shook his head sadly.

"And for this I kept you out of jail in White Plains!" he said bitterly.

HOUSE of DREAD

by Allan Vaughan Elston

Author of "Winking Death," etc.



Cranch whetted his blade and chuckled as the man fell.

Blizzard-bound in the house of Cranch, that one-eyed monster in the wheel chair, they waited—four lone travelers—while death crept through the storm on blanketing drifts of white. Then came the law in the person of Ranger DeHaan—only to shoot what must have been the wrong man while the real killer lurked chuckling, waiting to collect his sixty-grand loot-stake.

CHAPTER ONE

Any Port in a Storm

THE tall, square house loomed grotesquely by the road. Because of its forbidding blackness Lee Latham could see it plain enough, even through the densely falling snow. It was, he knew, made of round, black boulders each about a foot thick, which, topped by an eaveless tar roof, gave to the structure an aspect peculiarly uninviting. And worse than the house itself was the master thereof, the one-eyed cripple, Cranch.

Lee shuddered when he thought of Cranch.

"One peach of a place to get stalled for the night!" he complained.

For he could hardly doubt that he would be tied up overnight at the house looming ahead. His coupé was plowing in low gear through snow already running-board deep. Snow was still falling and was beginning to drift. Towns, Lee Latham knew, were few and far apart. Between Denver and Texas there was hardly another stretch of highway as desolate as this Kim cut-off.

HIS car, pushing snow ahead of it, now balked to a stop. Lee backed ten feet in his ruts, his motor roaring; then he plunged forward and gained twenty. Lee knew he would be doing well if he got as far as that bleak house which loomed only four hundred yards ahead. Certainly he would get no further tonight.

Now he veered slightly to the left in order to miss an abandoned Ford sedan. It stood empty at the roadside, hub-deep in snow. Lee assumed that its driver, having deserted it, had walked on to the Cranch store.

After another ten minutes of gruelling grind, Lee himself stopped in front of the store. It was utterly desolate, isolated by wide reaches of range in all directions. A lonely and unpainted gasoline pump reminded Lee Latham that it was for a filling of gas that he had stopped here, last month, on his way north. Engine trouble had cursed him for the next fifty miles. "Your tank's got more water than gas, mister," was the final diagnosis of a mechanic. "Filled up at Cranch's, did you? Well, no wonder!"

Shutting off his motor now, Lee sized up the place with growing distaste. He frowned at the sign over the door.

JESSE CRANCH
STAPLES & TOBACCO
ROOMS—$1.00

Lee disembarked. Dragging his suitcase and floundering through knee-deep snow, he made his way to the door. Entering, he saw an interior unspeakably squalid. A litter of trash was everywhere. Flies swarmed. Cheap merchandise, mostly canned food, lined the walls on rickety shelves, while a counter was crowded with all manner of unsorted remnants. There was a cracked showcase containing tobacco and candy, and from this cobwebs reared in stringy strands to the rafters. A dozen cases of unwashed soda-pop bottles contributed to the stale, sticky odor of the room.

Stairs ascended at one end. Lee presumed that above were rooms rentable by transients unfortunate enough to be marooned at this ill-favored place.

Beside a coal stove at the center of the store room sat Cranch. He was a hopeless cripple, paralyzed from the hips down. To any other man in like condition would have gone the sincere pity of Lee Latham. Cranch, though, was almost inhumanly repellant. At sight of him, Lee could feel only revulsion. As he sat there in his wheel chair, the man's stunted legs dangled grotesquely. Lee hardly noted them, for it was the evil and utterly loathsome face of Cranch that compelled all of his attention. The skin of the man's face was withered, pitted, and had the blackness of a burned hide. The skin of the hands, too, whether by disease or fire, was black. Yet the man was a Nordic, for his shock of hair was yellow and his single eye was blue. The other eye was missing. Its socket was like a deep cave in his head. His head was too big and his arms were too long, his lips bestial. A cunning, baleful grin played constantly on his face.

He gave a malicious, cackling chuckle as Lee entered, as though delighting in the distress which was forcing a traveler to stop at this house.

"Got a room for the night?" Lee inquired shortly.

"Four altogether, and only one spoke for," Cranch cackled. Then his oversize head turned to the right and he leered toward the darkest and deepest corner of the room.

Quite to his amazement, Lee saw a young girl sitting forlornly on a bench. Evidently she had just arrived, for she still wore an outer coat to which flakes of snow were clinging. Immediately Lee guessed that she was the owner of the stranded Ford sedan. His second guess was that she would rather have been bogged at any point on the highway than at this ill-smelling shop of Cranch's.

Her eyes now met his with an expression of relief. They were dark, long-lashed eyes in an uncommonly pretty face.

"Hello there!" Lee greeted. "That your car up the road?" His freckled grin was so engaging that she couldn't possibly take offense.

She nodded ruefully. In a moment she asked: "Have you got chains?"

"Nope," Lee answered. "Chains wouldn't do much good. It's the deep drifts that stop you."

"Have you got anti-freeze?" she inquired.

"No such luck. Have you?"

"Alcohol," she said. "If you don't want your car frozen solid you'd better drain it."

"Right," Lee agreed, and ducked out into the storm.

HE HAD just opened his petcock when he noticed a buckboard approaching from the south. The going was heavy. Nevertheless a stout team of bays was making progress. The wind was with them. Horses, Lee knew, will make headway on a snowbound road long after automobiles fail—especially if the animals are moving toward home stalls.

"Hey there!" Lee shouted. He ran out into the road and flagged the buckboard to a halt; otherwise it would have passed without stopping. The drivers face was so swathed against the cold that only a small circle around his eyes showed. These eyes scowled annoyedly at Latham.

"What about hauling me to Trinchera, mister?' Lee asked. "There's a girl stranded here, and she might want to go, too."

Trinchera was north, whereas Lee was traveling south. Presumably the young lady was also traveling south, because her sedan was pointed that way. Still, it would be better to go fifteen miles in the wrong direction than spend the night here at Cranch's.

"I ain't haulin' nobody nowhere," the teamster said. "Giddap!'

The bays floundered forward through the snow, northbound. At the same time Lee saw a speck far north on the road, approaching. After a moment he identified it as a truck.

Next to a team, Lee thought, it takes a truck to fight deep snow. This one came on south slowly; after a while it met and passed the northbound buckboard. Lee stood knee-deep in snow watching the approach of the truck. It was moving in jerks, backing a bit, then charging forward for short gains. Here, almost certainly, was another vehicle which would tie up at Cranchs for the night.

"Looks like were going to have a full house," Lee said to the girl when he went inside. He told her about the truck, adding: "I tried to book us for a buckboard ride, but there was nothing doing. Going far?"

"To Plum Valley," she said. "I teach school near Trinchera and was driving forty miles home for the week-end."

Lee in turn explained that he had gone up to Pueblo to accept a newspaper job, that the paper had folded up after the

first issue, and that he was now wending his way sadly home to Oklahoma. The girl's name, he discovered, was Fay Wright.

Dusk was falling gloomily. Cranch rolled his wheel chair over to the counter and lighted an oil lamp. Then he wheeled to the stove and, without moving from his chair, fueled it with more coal. His arms were long, strong, dexterous. But the thing which impressed, was that everlasting grin of malice on his black and pitted face. His single eye now darted from Lee to the girl, then back to Lee Latham, greedily, as though appraising what he might get out of them. "Hands on your pocketbook," a Kim garageman had warned Lee, "if you ever have to stop at Cranch's. That guy would rob the fillings from a dead man's teeth."

FROM the north window Lee saw that the truck was just pulling in. It was driven by a bearded and booted giant wearing a sheepskin coat. Coming along a few hundred yards in the wake of the truck was a coupé, the latter making headway by virtue of the broad tracks left by the tires of the truck.

A minute later the truck driver stalked into the store. As his hulk towered in the doorway, Cranch hailed him with a gleeful, malevolent greeting.

"Any port in a storm, eh, Skinner? Folks, meet Skinner Scanlon. Been butcherin' any beef lately, Skinner?"

The last question was derisive and drew a flush from the truckman. Lee caught a glimpse of a gun belt under the sheepskin coat. Cranch in his turn had plucked a hone from a pocket on the left arm of the wheel chair and a long-bladed knife from a sheath on the other. He began honing the edge of the blade, his head wagging, the evil grin expanding until it seemed to bloat his face.

"What about puttin' the truck in the barn?" Scanlon growled.

"She won't go through the barn door," Cranch cackled, evidently delighted to hand out the bad news. "Load of beef, is it?"

At that moment the door opened and in came the driver of the coupé which had followed in the wake of the truck. This man seemed to be a well-dressed urbanite, a ruddy, mustached man of about fifty. His face was shaped like an owl's and he wore black-rimmed glasses. Just now he set down a grip and a sample case to remove these glasses and wipe ice from them. The sample case gave Lee the idea of a traveling salesman.

"Got a room?" he inquired of Cranch.

"You just fill me up, Mr. Schofield," Cranch said. "And you can pay for it with a carton of cigarettes." Evidently Mr. Schofield was in the habit of selling merchandise to Cranch.

The truckman went out to drain the radiator of his truck.

"Who is he?" the latest arrival asked Cranch.

"He skins beef for a living," Cranch explained, winking his eye. "Passes here once a week with sixteen quarters. Always carries four honest hides to prove he butchered his own stuff, too."

This time Cranch's sly wink was directed at Lee Latham. By it Lee understood that Scanlon was a petty rustler. The modern type who butchers in the dark of night on the open range, skins the kill on the spot, and quarters it, leaving the offal to coyotes while he trucks off with the beef.

Lee stoked his pipe and was fumbling for a match when the latest comer moved over and held a light for him. "A pretty dive, this, what?" he offered with a grimace. "And say, it looks like we got plenty tough company." He spoke in a low voice, so that Cranch would not hear him, and addressed Lee and Miss Wright jointly.

"Ever stop here over night?" Lee asked him.

"I did. Just once," the drummer said. "And once you get upstairs, it ain't as bad as you think. Cranch can't get upstairs himself. He keeps a Mexican boy to take care of the beds, and the boy does a fair job of it."

Schofield's line, Lee learned, was tobacco.

Suddenly Skinner Scanlon came in and asked Cranch: "Who's 'at comin' on a motor-bike?"

"How would I know?" Cranch countered.

Lee went to the north window and peered out. The gloom was so deep that he could not make out the character of the one who approached. It seemed, though, that someone was walking in a rut left by the truck and was pushing a motor-cycle.

A minute later this latest arrival entered the store. He brought in with him a cold and useless motor-cycle. He was leather-coated and in uniform. The letters *C. S. P.* on his cap and repeated on the lapels of his coat announced to Lee that he was a member of the Colorado State Police.

AS SOON as he had leaned the motor-cycle against the store wall, he stood and stared at the company from under bushy black brows. His stare was keen and definitely an appraising one, Lee thought. The appraisal lingered longest upon Scanlon. His leather coat hung open, exposing a belt and pistol. A ranger on some particularly grim duty! thought Lee Latham.

"I'm DeHaan of the state police," the man said tersely, his stern gaze now shifting to Cranch. Cranch sat in his wheel chair grinning malevolently and all the while honing the knife.

"Anybody pass here in the last two hours?" DeHaan asked.

"Sure," Cranch shrilled. "Abe Peters passed here in a buckboard in the last hour."

"The buckboard went north," DeHaan agreed. "But did anybody pass going south?"

Cranch wagged his great head in a negative. "Four people headed south tried to pass. But they didn't pass. They all four got hung up right here."

"Humph!" DeHaan's eyes moved from one to another of the four who had become stranded at this store. Then, "You got a telephone?" he snapped at Cranch.

"Nope. Nearest phone is over at Branson."

"What about a horse, then? I got to phone a report from Branson."

"A shooting?" the paralytic asked eagerly. Bad news always warmed his face to a glow.

"A stealing," DeHaan corrected. "I'll receipt for the horse and send it back after the storm. But first, what about a frisk?"

Cranch rubbed his blackened hands gleefully. "Ha! A frisk? You mean you admit you don't have a search warrant? But you know somebody who came south in the last two hours made a stealing? That it?"

"That's the size of it," DeHaan asserted bluntly. "Innocent baggage won't object to being searched without a warrant."

Latham, Schofield and Miss Wright had each brought in baggage. But if Skinner Scanlon had any, it was still out in his truck.

"What did somebody get away with?" Lee asked.

"Sixty thousand," DeHaan told him. "In thousands and centuries, so it's not a very big package. Who got here first?"

"I arrived first," Fay Wright said as DeHaan produced a notebook and pencil.

"When, miss?"

"At four o'clock."

"About three miles before you got here, did you see a coupé overturned in the ditch?"

"Yes. I thought it was an old wreck. It was covered with snow."

"You didn't stop?"

"No."

"You saw no sign of life around there?"

"No. Do you mean somebody was actually in that wreck, hurt?"

DEHAAN nodded grimly. "The coupé," he said, "skidded off the fill and turned over only a few minutes before you passed, miss. The driver was a messenger named Drexel, bound for a bank in Springfield with sixty thousand in cash. It was in a satchel on the seat right by him. The turnover stunned Drexel. Hour and a half later I came by on a motor-cycle. Drexel was just coming to his senses. The bag had been slashed open with a knife and the money was gone. While he was telling me that, the buckboard teamster, Peters, came by, headed north. I made Peters haul Drexel on to Trinchera with him, while I came this way after the thief."

"This way?" The challenge came shrilly from Cranch. "Why this way?"

"Because if anyone had gone the other way in about that time, I'd have passed him myself," DeHaan said.

Cranch leered cunningly toward Scanlon. That peddler of illicit beef was patently the most logical suspect in the room. Amost certainly the thief had been traveling south, because Lee himself had passed no northbound traveler since leaving Trinchera.

"Who got here next after the lady?" DeHaan proceeded.

"I did," Lee said. "I got here at about four fifteen."

"Name and occupation?"

Lee gave the information and DeHaan entered it in the notebook. DeHaan then turned back to Fay Wright and secured the same data. He took both her home address and the location of the rural school at which she was employed.

"Out of the corner of my eye I saw the wreck as I passed it," Lee volunteered, "Like Miss Wright, I thought it was empty."

"Me, I didn't even see it," Schofield offered. "I could only see through a small arc of glass, and straight ahead. The rest of my windshield was frosted white."

"You got here right after Latham?"

"No. This truck driver was ahead of me."

"You were within sight of him three miles north of here?"

"No," Schofield said. "I'd been following in his ruts a long while, but I didn't come in sight of him until I was within half a mile of this store."

DeHaan took down Schofield's name and address, then turned toward Scanlon. "Your name, address and business?" he inquired briskly.

"Who wants to know?" Scanlon snarled. His right hand swept back under the skirt of the sheepskin coat, a gesture to which DeHaan took quick exception. For his order popped like a whip.

"Take your hand off that rod!" DeHaan advanced a step toward Scanlon.

"Who says so?" Scanlon flushed livid. His hand remained under the coat skirt.

"The State of Colorado says so," DeHaan told him.

"Yeah?" And then Skinner Scanlon amazed Lee by whipping out a revolver. In the same flash of time out came DeHaan's. Then shots—two of them. Cranch screamed a shrill cheer, echoed by a cry of horror from Fay Wright. Lee saw the two men still standing there, face to face, legs spread apart, staring.

Only DeHaan remained standing.

Scanlon, in a moment, pitched forward at full length to the floor.

CHAPTER TWO

The Crippled Ghoul

DEHAAN'S face was bloodless as he turned toward Latham and Schofield. His voice freighted with regret, he said: "I didn't want to do that. But he gave me no choice. It was shoot or be shot. But anyway it solves the mystery. I guess we'll find the sixty thousand in the lining of his sheepskin coat."

"Sure you will!" crowed Cranch. He seemed delighted, morbidly exultant at the scene of death enacted before his eye. "Sure you will. If they was that much money layin' around loose, you can bet Skinner got it."

Fay Wright averted her face. But Lee saw DeHaan stoop beside the prone man and begin a search. "Will you give me a hand?" he called to the room in general.

Only Schofield responded. Though shocked white, he went forward to help DeHaan. Fay Wright backed as far from the grisly scene as she could, and Lee Latham stood beside her. In a little while DeHaan looked up and reported: "He's dead. The bullet went through his heart. The money, though, is not on him."

"It must be out on his truck," Schofield suggested.

Cranch wheeled his chair to the casualty and gave it a ghoulish inspection. In unholy glee he rubbed his hands one through the other and cackled: "You sure made a clean job of it, ranger. Nothin' else you could do, either. And yeh, it's a safe bet you'll find that money on his truck."

"I think," Fay whispered to Lee, "I'd better have some fresh air."

He saw she was deathly sick. So he took her arm and steered her outside. It was almost pitch dark and still snowing. But the blanket of deep white was a welcome change from the scene of violence in the store.

"I've a notion to start walking toward Trinchera," Fay said.

"I've the same notion," Lee admitted. "But we'd freeze. It's fifteen miles, and nobody could make it afoot in this storm. Besides, until they find the money the ranger probably won't let anybody leave."

"Not let us leave?" she wondered. "But we know now that it was the truck driver who did it!"

"We think he did," Lee corrected. "But maybe not. He's a beef snatcher with no doubt plenty else on his conscience. So when this ranger threatens to search him and take his gun, maybe Scanlon just lost his head. Crooks, I've heard, are just naturally quick on the trigger. Hello, let's stop here and investigate the barn."

They had been circling the house, plowing through sixteen inches of snow. Through the curtain of falling flakes a horse shed now loomed before them. Looking in, they found it odiferously uninviting. Of two stalls, one was empty. The other contained a rangy mare. Only one saddle was in evidence.

"The ranger'll take charge of the one available mount," Lee predicted.

They waded back to the rear of the stone house. There was a back door, and also outside steps leading to a landing at the rear of the second floor.

"We might go up and look the place over," Lee suggested.

Fay Wright shivered. Then with her arm in Lee's she went with him up those ramshackle exterior steps. They passed through a door giving from the landing to the second-floor hall. In turn the hall opened on four bedrooms. The doors of these were ajar, exposing empty interiors.

They looked in at each room. Each was

frugally furnished with a bed, blankets, a chair, washstand and dresser. Each had a roomy closet. Nor were the quarters as untidy as the store downstairs, which caused Lee to recall Schofield's reference to a Mexican *mozo,* or house boy. Cranch, a wheel-chair paralytic, would not be able to ascend the stairs. His own domain was therefore limited to the lower floor. Thus the upper floor would reflect the character and cleanliness of the absent *mozo,* rather than the slovenliness of Cranch.

The rear right one was the cleanest and was even equipped with fresh-laundered sheets. Also, in addition to the key lock, it had a stout bolt on the inside of the door.

"You'd better book this one," Lee said. The girl, though with a grimace of distaste, nodded.

They went down by the exterior steps and around to the front. Entering the store, they were just in time to see DeHaan and Schofield disappearing up the interior stairway. Cranch sat in his wheel chair giving shrill directions. Fay Wright, having glimpsed the heavy burden borne by DeHaan and the drummer, shivered; her hand tightened on Lee's arm. Each understood that they were taking the dead man to one of the upstairs rooms.

Lee himself followed for a purpose; and in the upper hall he maneuvered the company to the front left room. Thus he contrived to house the corpse as far from Fay's selected room as possible.

TWO hours later he was playing checkers with the girl by the stove. DeHaan had commandeered the mare and gone off through the storm, cutting directly across the range toward Branson. His instructions were that no one should leave until his return, or until a properly constituted county authority had arrived to ask questions.

"Funny he didn't find that money on the beef truck!" Cranch shrilled. He was hunched forward in his wheel chair, his single eye casting baleful speculation first at Schofield, then at Lee Latham. Also he was picking his teeth after a tin-can supper.

The messiness of that repast had failed to attract his guests, who had accepted only coffee. This Fay Wright had boiled on the store stove. The Mexican house boy, it developed, had ridden to town ahorse on an errand before the storm began. The boy would attempt no return tonight, Cranch said.

"Chances are," Schofield offered, looking shrewdly over his glasses at Cranch, "that Scanlon stashed the money before he got here. The ranger said it was three miles from the wreck here, didn't he? Well, chances are Scanlon hid the money somewhere in those three miles, maybe in a culvert." Schofield, who was sitting as close to the lamp as he could get, resumed his reading of a magazine.

Lee Latham fretfully watched Fay jump his king. Then he offered: "What I don't understand is—why did the thief think it was worth while searching the wreck for money?"

"DeHaan explained that while you and Miss Wright were outside," Schofield said. "The money bag was on the seat beside the unconscious messenger, and there was a short chain and wristlet fixed to the handle of the satchel. That was so the messenger could snap the wristlet on his wrist if he wanted to."

Lee nodded. The chain was a dead giveaway, he realized, since only money bags have chains. At any rate the suggestion would have been sufficient to inspire the vandal into slashing the satchell open with his knife.

And the vandal was doubtless Scanlon. Not certainly though, Lee thought. For others had also passed the wreck.

First Fay Wright; then Lee himself; then Scanlon; then Schofield.

Who else? No one, unless someone had crossed the road there on foot. That, in this storm, was highly improbable. There was no gate in the fences lining the highway there. Nor any house within miles. A vast empire of pasture owned by a single cattle company extended along the road on both sides for a full township.

Certainly no northbound traveler had passed during the period in which Drexel was unconscious. And the southbound passers-by were all here in this store! Which meant, Lee concluded, that the thief was either Schofield or Scanlon.

Everything was against Scanlon except that his searched person and truck had failed to yield the loot. Nothing weighed against Schofield except opportunity and the fact that his baggage had not been searched. DeHaan, Lee recalled, had suggested a general search of baggage. But before anyone could answer had come the sudden showdown with Scanlon.

Thus the baggage of Schofield, of Miss Wright and of Lee himself had not been searched. The baggage of each guest was now upstairs in the properly assigned room. The girl had the rear right, Lee the rear left, Schofield the front right, while the corpse of Scanlon was stored in the front left. Cranch, being incompetent to mount stairs, had his quarters at the rear of the lower floor.

AT NINE o'clock Cranch withdrew from his guests, leering a final grin at them and then wheeling out through a door at the rear of the store room. Half an hour later Schofield laid aside his magazine, yawned, said good night and went upstairs.

Lee and Fay Wright played two more games. Lee then went to the front door and looked out. A three-foot wall of drift tumbled in upon him. The night was still a moving picture of white, fluttering flakes.

"We might as well be marooned on an island," Lee said wryly. "We'll be buried alive before morning."

When he rejoined Fay she gave an uneasy look over her shoulder toward the rear and whispered: "I wouldn't mind it so much if it wasn't for him. He gives me the creeps."

"Well, it's a cinch he can't wheel that chair up those steep steps!" Lee said.

"That," she said, "is the only reason why I don't sit right here all night."

Lee nodded sympathetically. As a choice between two evils, it wasn't strange that she should elect to share the upper floor with a corpse rather than share the lower floor with Cranch.

Cranch had retired without making any provision for lamps or lighting. But Lee, by ransacking the shelves of merchandise, now found a box of candles. He lighted two of them, handing one to Fay Wright.

Then, after blowing out the oil lamp, they went upstairs.

"Pleasant dreams, Mr. Latham."

"Good night, Miss Wright."

The girl went into the rear right room and closed the door. Lee heard her turn the key in the lock. Then he heard the brass bolt, which was perhaps a foot above the lock, slide home. Fay Wright was, therefore, doubly secured against any unwelcome intrusion.

Lee, with his candle, now entered the room across the hall. It was directly back of the one which housed the body of Skinner Scanlon. There was no connecting door. The intervening partition was bare pine boards.

Lee's room was cold and forlorn, its single redeeming feature being an abundance of bedding. So Lee, after removing only his shoes and coat, blew out the candle and turned in.

Sleep eluded him. For more than an hour he tossed fretfully. He could not crowd from his mind the robbing of Drexel or the shooting of Scanlon. Nor could he forget the malicious face of the cripple, Cranch. These three elements of the situation kept crossing and recrossing his mind, in a parade of horror.

Lee tried to think of more pleasant things. Of Fay Wright, for instance. There was a girl! Pretty as a picture. And with plenty of spunk, too, for she hadn't gone into hysterics at the shooting of Scanlon. Lee promised himself that on some sunshiny day he would return to renew an acquaintance with Fay Wright. Her home, he knew, was in Plum Valley, and her rural school was just outside of Trinchera. He knew the exact addresses, because they had cropped out in the interrogation conducted by DeHaan.

Soothed by these more pleasant thoughts, Lee Latham finally fell asleep. But once asleep, the parade of horrors returned. In his dreams he saw Drexel, the messenger, unconscious in an overturned coupé. A truck came along. Its driver, Scanlon, disembarked, slid down the embankment, peered into the wreck. He saw the unconscious man, a satchel with a chain and steel wristlet. Then, in the dream, Scanlon looted that satchel.

NOW the malignant face of Cranch merged into the dream. Lee lay abed here at this desolate house, storm-bound, and beside his bed Cranch was seated in a wheel chair. Cranch leaned forward; his long, strong arms reached for Latham; the lust of murder flashed with a livid flame from the black and pitted face—then a grip of steel was at Lee's throat. The man in the wheel chair was choking him.

It was then that Lee screamed—or thought he did. He awoke in an ague of shivering. His cheeks were clammy with cold sweat. He sat up in bed, alone in the dark room. By his wrist watch it was 3:00 A. M.

Had he really screamed. Or had the muscles of his throat been so constricted by terror that he had emitted no sound at all? He knew that one seized by nightmare often imagines a cry in fact does not audibly escape his lips.

Yet in this case the cry seemed to be actually ringing in the ears of Latham. Surely his own voice had awakened him! Or had it? Had someone else in the house cried out? Was it another's real distress, instead of his own imaginings, that had aroused him?

Lee listened attentively. He heard no sound. He arose and lit his candle, then unlocked his door. With the candle held high, and in his stocking feet, he went out into the hall. He saw nothing there. The other three doors were closed. No sound came from the room directly across from his own; he recalled with distinct relief that Fay Wright had both locked and bolted her door.

Lee also remembered that DeHaan had locked the room containing the body of Scanlon. He had taken the key with him, and had given orders that the death room be not disturbed until his own return or the arrival of county officers.

Lee presumed that the drummer, Schofield, had also locked his room, which was the front-right room of the upper-floor quadrangle. But Lee was not particularly interested in Schofield. Schofield was a man, and could take care of himself. Lee now reentered his own room, locked it, blew out the candle and went back to bed.

This time he only drowsed. When next he looked at his wrist watch it was 3:15. Ahead still lay a wearisome stretch of night. Full light, at this midwinter season, would not come until after six o'clock.

Suddenly, with a start, Lee sat straight up in bed. He stared at the far wall of his room, on which had appeared a dollar-size circle of light. As he saw it there, a chill ran down his spine. He had a feeling that someone had crept in, in spite of the locked door, and was prowling near him with a bull's-eye flash. What could that mellow circle of light be, unless cast there by the lens of a pocket flash?

But the circle of light did not play about on the wall. Thus the illusion faded. It came to Lee that the circle of light was merely a round knot hole in the pine-board partition. A light of some sort was lit in the adjoining room—the one in which lay the dead trucker, Scanlon.

Had DeHaan returned with a sheriff or coroner? What about DeHaan, anyway? Was he in there having a look at the dead man? Lee determined to have a look himself. He arose and groped for a chair. Noiselessly in his stocking feet, he carried the chair to the wall by the knot hole. That illuminated orifice was seven feet above the floor. Only by standing on the chair could Lee peer through it.

WHAT he saw chilled his blood and almost stopped the beating of his heart. In the grip of a clammy dread he stood there, peering through the knot hole. For revealed to him was a horror of deviltry not unlike that which had invaded his dream. Cranch, in his wheel chair, sat by the bed in that forward room.

How he could have arrived there was a mystery to Latham. But there he sat, in his wheel chair, and his dark face was lit with a loathsome eagerness. His single eye burned with avarice. He was leaning far forward over the bed, and his hands seemed to be gripping the dead man's throat.

The horrifying sight almost toppled Lee from the chair. It froze him to petrifaction and for a moment he couldn't think. Gradually, though, he perceived that the main motive of Cranch's invasion was not a ghoulish vengeance upon the body of Scanlon—but that a more practical villainy was afoot. It was a petty villainy, though revolting enough. Cranch was merely robbing a corpse. He was going through the pockets of Scanlon, for keys, letters, coins, scraps and trifles of all kinds.

DeHaan, Lee knew, had found nothing in Scanlon's pockets except commonplace trifles. These DeHaan had preferred to leave exactly as found, for the later inspection of sheriff and coroner.

And now Cranch was raiding those clues. Why? Lee failed to understand how they could benefit Cranch. Most of all he failed to understand how the paralytic had maneuvered his wheel chair up steep, narrow steps. Conceivably he might have crawled up the steps, dragging his useless legs by the power of his long, apelike arms. But he would have to leave the chair downstairs.

Nevertheless he had arrived here in the chair. Should Lee challenge his ghoulish prowling? Lee returned to his bed to think it over. Against the bitter cold of the room he drew blankets over himself, and lay there wondering and worrying. No, he thought, he had not been deputized to challenge Cranch. And this was Cranch's house. Cranch had more right in it than anyone else. At any rate Lee Latham was not the person to gainsay that right.

And yet—should that limb of satan be allowed to flout the specific orders of a ranger? It was a delicate point. Lee wrestled with it for perhaps fifteen minutes before it occurred to him that perhaps he'd better talk it over with Schofield. Schofield and he were on even

terms. Each was a layman, a guest here, morally responsible in equal degree, if responsibility existed at all. And maybe Schofield had a gun. Lee himself was unarmed. A gun, he reflected, would come in handy in dealing with Cranch.

Looking up now, he saw that the round circle had disappeared from his wall. It meant that Cranch, during Lee's fifteen minutes of indecision, had gone from the other room. Or at least Cranch had extinguished his light.

Lee now groped for his shoes and put them on. He also put on his coat. His overcoat and hat, he remembered, were hanging on a hook in the store below. Softly Lee now unlocked his door and stepped out into the hall.

CHAPTER THREE

House of Dread

THE hall was quite dark. Lee began tiptoeing obliquely across and toward the front of the hall with the idea of knocking at Schofield's door. He bumped against the banister of the stair well. Then a sound reached his ears. Lee stopped short in a strain of tension. The sound came from the store room below. No light glimmered from down there. Yet someone or something was moving about. Was it a rat?

It might, Lee thought, be Schofield. Unable to sleep, and too cold to sit up in his own room, Schofield might have gone down to make himself comfortable by the store stove. Lee himself had been tempted to while away the night in just that way.

Now he determined to descend and find out who was in the store. He groped his way down a few steps. Then he struck a match and continued on. And somehow, as he descended, a fearful prescience came to him that the worst of this night was not yet over.

In the black shadows of his mind, anything now seemed possible. And so, with an oppressively gloomy fatalism, Lee Latham moved on down, step by step. He had found Cranch prowling like a malignant ghoul above stairs! Now what would he find below?

He had almost reached the turn which would expose him to the store room when he was startled by the stealthy closing of the store door. It was the front and exterior door, the main entrance to the house. Someone, presumably, had heard his descent—and had evaded him by a stealthy exit.

Lee went on down and reached the store floor. He struck another match. No one was in the room. It was much warmer here. In fact a few red coals still glowed in the stove. At this moment, though, Lee was mainly interested in the identity of the person who had stepped out into the snow. That person, he reasoned, could hardly be any other than Schofield. Was Schofield up to mischief? Did Schofield plan to circle the house and regain his room by the exterior steps at the rear?

From the coat rack Lee took his own hat and overcoat. He put them on, then opened the front door. Bitter cold assailed him. He paused for a moment while he put on his gloves. Snow, he found, was nearly two feet deep on the level. But it was no longer snowing. In fact the ghost of a moon was shining through clouds. But it was frightfully cold—Lee guessed about ten degrees below zero.

He saw no one out there, but he could make out the deep, fresh tracks of the person who had just evaded him. These were great gashes in the snow, rather than footprints. In order to move at all, one had veritably to kick a trench in front of him. Therefore it was easy for Lee to see that the track progressed directly

out to the center of the road. It did not stop at any of the three cars, his own, Schofield's or the truck. These vehicles stood like gaunt ghosts, almost buried in snow.

Lee now followed the track to the center of the highway. There the track turned north. Lee looked that way. With only the faintest glimmer of moonlight to guide him, he could not see more than thirty yards. But he did catch a glimpse of a retreating, overcoated figure. He had only a brief glimpse, then distance obliterated it. And then clouds obscured the moon and the night became inky black.

But Lee was sure that he had glimpsed an overcoated man with a suitcase, floundering up the road in pell-mell flight. Schofield! Lee was astounded. How far did Schofield expect to get, afoot on a night like this?

Why was Schofield taking stealthy flight at 3:40 A. M., knee-deep in snow and in sub-zero weather? It came now with a shock to Lee that, except for Scanlon's stampede to gunplay, there was no reason to think that the drummer, Schofield, hadn't stolen the sixty thousand dollars from Drexel. Schofield's baggage had not been searched by DeHaan. And if Schofield had the loot, he would be on fire to be rid of it before DeHaan's return.

THINKING it over, Lee became quite convinced that Schofield was out now on just such an errand. He was out to cache the money at a place from which he could recover it at later leisure. In a culvert—or at the base of some well-spotted telephone pole or fence post. Thus cached under two feet of snow, only Schofield would ever find it.

But what about Cranch, the body-robber? Cranch, Lee guessed, had simply erred by assuming the guilt of Scanlon. Since a search of Scanlon and his truck had failed to yield the loot, by the reasoning of Cranch, Scanlon must therefore have cached it somewhere between the wrecked coupé and the store. The very thing which Schofield was out to do now, would be assumed by Cranch as a thing already done by Scanlon.

And as to such a cache as that, hastily chosen, Scanlon might not have trusted his memory. Most likely he would have jotted down a notation of the particular culvert, post or pole used as a reference. And this Cranch, in the still darkness of night and by some mysterious means of locomotion, had gone on the errand of rifling that memorandum from the person of a corpse.

That explained Cranch. And now, thought Lee, to follow Schofield! By so doing he could see for himself as just what culvert, post or pole Schofield would hide the loot.

North along the road Lee floundered. Once he stumbled and fell headlong, fairly sinking out of sight. There would have been no easy way to keep on the road at all except for the tracks of the fugitive ahead, who in turn must have been guided in flight by the parallel fences on either side.

After plowing his way for more than three hundred yards, Lee saw a white-mantled automobile loom ahead of him. It was a stranded car, a Ford sedan. Lee recalled that the vehicle of Fay Wright had stalled here; she had been forced to leave it and go on foot to the store.

When he was quite close, Lee stopped. He could dimly make out that the person he followed was now inside that sedan. Why? To steal it? But what good would a car do Schofield on a night like this? Besides, Schofield had a car of his own.

Lee went nearer to the sedan, cautiously. The intruder, he saw, was in the tonneau and had taken up the rear cush-

ion. Did it mean that Schofield suspected Fay Wright of the Drexel thievery? And that he was now searching her car for the loot?

Absurd! Lee now moved boldly forward to challenge and rebuke Schofield. Then, when he reached the running board, his jaw dropped. For the person within the car was Fay Wright herself.

Sight of Lee standing there startled her to a cry of alarm. The cry was breathless, though, and did not carry far. Lee could see that she was pale and shaken. In fact her eyes showed panic and her face was quite bloodless. Fear, some terrible haunting fear, possessed her. Lee was astonished. She hadn't seemed at all like this last evening.

"You?" she cried, staring wildly. Her white, ungloved hand was at her throat. She swayed then, and sat down on the rear cushion which she had just replaced. Her suitcase was in the car by her. And Lee saw that her ankle-length storm coat had given him the impression of a man's ulster. On her head she wore a pull-over cap.

"Not leaving us, are you?" Lee asked with as much levity as he could muster.

Her response was what seemed to be a complete breakdown. Her shoulders shook convulsively. She sat with her head buried in her hands. Lee got in, sat down and put an arm around her, tried to console her. Immediately he sensed that something terrifying must have transpired; otherwise she wouldn't have been driven to this verge of distraction.

"That awful—Cranch!" she sobbed finally. "I woke up—and there he sat in his wheel chair, right by my bed."

The statement shocked Lee white. It seemed impossible, for he knew she had both locked and bolted her room. A duplicate key in the possession of Cranch might solve the lock, but not the bolt. Had Fay merely seen some nightmarish vision? Lee recalled his own with a shiver—that revolting illusion of Cranch sitting there by his bed.

Yet he was forced to concede that Cranch had turned up, shortly after that, by the side of an upstairs bed! That much, he knew, was no wraith of fancy. Cranch had paid a ghoulish visit to Scanlon. But surely not to Fay Wright.

"You just imagined it." Lee's arm was still around her.

"I didn't," she wailed in wild hysteria. "He was there. He had a lantern. He was sitting in his wheel chair right by my bed. He looked—like a grinning gnome. I—"

"Well?" Lee prompted gently.

"I screamed," she said, "and then fainted. When I came to my senses, he was gone."

IMPOSSIBLE, Lee thought. If she had screamed he would have heard her. Then with a shock the idea came that maybe he had heard her. Something had awakened him. He remembered a vague impression that it might have been a cry from outside instead of some dream-born outcry of his own. He recalled that he had even looked into the hall, and listened. Was it the shriek of Fay Wright which had aroused him?

Had the paralytic monster, Cranch, actually been seated by her bed? If so, no wonder she had both screamed and fainted! If she fainted, Lee, reconnoitering in the hall, would naturally have heard nothing further. In that case Cranch would merely keep quiet and wait for the alarm to subside.

How, though, had he entered through that bolted door?

"When you came to," Lee asked, "did it look as though he had searched your baggage?"

"Nothing was disturbed," she said. "The door was still locked and bolted on

the inside. The windows were locked, too. How he got in or out I can't imagine, but he was sitting right there in his chair, grinning horribly."

"And then?" Lee prompted sympathetically.

"When I came to my senses I only had one idea. To get out of the house. The only refuge was my car, so I came here."

"You decided to sit tight right here till daylight, even if you froze?" asked Lee.

She nodded, turning her white face toward him in appeal for his approval. "My feet were soaked when I got here," she said, "so I took a pair of overshoes out from under the rear seat."

The overshoes lay on the floor of the car. Lee stooped and buckled them on her feet. But touching her ankles made it clear to him that the scheme of waiting here three hours, at ten degrees below zero, was wildly impractical. The girl was wet to her knees and her legs were nearly frozen.

A hot stove, Lee reasoned, was the only insurance against pneumonia. And they'd have to be quick about it. "Come," he said, "we're going back." He took her arm and urged her from the car.

She shrank from going, but Lee insisted. He assured her she wouldn't need to go up to her room. Together they would sit in the store until morning, beside the stove.

With that assurance she consented. She alighted from the car and started back, her arm linked in Lee's. Lee carried her suitcase, or rather dragged it like a sled on the surface of the snow.

Chilled and sodden, they reached the store. Entering, Lee lit the oil lamp and then heaped coal on the embers of last evening's fire. Fay removed her wet shoes and stockings, taking dry ones from her suitcase. She put these on while Lee stoked the stove.

"He's a good sleeper, that fellow," he said half to himself.

"You mean Mr. Schofield?" she asked.

Lee nodded. But he decided not to tell her about the prowl of Cranch into a locked room directly across from Schofield's. She was getting a little of her color back; Lee didn't want her to lose it again.

By his watch it was four o'clock. They played three games of checkers, but Lee knew that neither his own mind or Fay's was on the moving of those pawns. Lee was thinking, instead, about the weird mysteries of the night. About Scanlon, Schofield, DeHaan, Drexel, Cranch. But most of all he thought about the girl who was sharing this adventure with him, who with him had been trapped overnight in this house of dread. A sense of shared peril seemed to draw them together.

"In the morning," he said suddenly, "I'll put chains on your car and see how good a snow plow it is. You say it's got anti-freeze?"

"Yes."

"We'll take a shovel along," he said cheerfully. "I'll get you to Trinchera, or Kim, or somewhere, even if I have to shovel a canal all the way there."

"Yes?" This time she smiled. All the fear was gone from her face.

IT was 5:00 A. M. when the front door opened suddenly. Lee whirled about startled. To his immense relief it was DeHaan.

The ranger almost collapsed as he entered the store room. He was numbed, caked and matted with ice. Snow was plastered over his uniform from head to foot. It was obvious that he had all but perished in the storm.

The fingers of the gloves he removed were like stiff icicles. DeHaan collapsed in a chair and held to the stove, hands which were all but frozen. "I got through,

though," he said huskily. "You two been sitting here all night?"

"No. We came down about three forty-five," Lee said.

"That drummer still around?"

"I imagine he is. Haven't seen him since bedtime," Lee answered.

It was another half hour before DeHaan was sufficiently thawed out to receive a complete report. Then Lee told him all about the strange prowlings of Cranch.

"Humph!" DeHaan muttered. "Looks like something's haywire! How could that cripple get his chair wheeled upstairs? And through a bolted door?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Lee shrugged.

"You sure you saw him in your room, miss?"

"He was there," Fay said.

"You two stay right here. I'm going for a look."

DeHaan arose grimly and went upstairs. They heard him tramp across the upper corridor and move toward the door of Fay's room. Upon taking flight from it, Fay had left the door unlocked.

"He thinks you were dreaming," Lee said. "So he's up there looking for proof. If Cranch were really there, he made some kind of forced entry; chiseled a crevice to the bolt, or something."

They waited five minutes. By then it was a quarter to six. Then Lee again heard steps in the upper hall. The steps began descending to the store room.

Instead of DeHaan, it proved to be the drummer, Schofield. Schofield's eyes seemed swollen. His unwashed face, with the overnight stubble of beard, looked haggard.

"Morning, folks," he said. "That you I heard tramping around just now, Latham?"

Lee shook his head. "It was the ranger," he said.

"The ranger?" Schofield went to a wash basin and rolled up his sleeves.

"Yes. DeHaan, the state cop. He got through to Branson and reported to the sheriff by phone. The sheriff asked him to get back over here, if he could make it, and hold the joint down until county authorities arrive."

"Which isn't likely to be before noon," Schofield growled.

"And in the meantime, you'll stay right here. All three of you." The voice was DeHaan's, and it cracked like a whip. He had just descended the stairs. His face, Lee saw was gray and grim.

"Cranch," DeHaan said, "is dead. He's been dead at least an hour and a half. There's a knife hilt-deep in his chest."

CHAPTER FOUR

Sixty Grand

LEE stood petrified. He looked at Fay. Her face was again bloodless. Schofield, his hands lathered with soap, stood gaping.

"Come, young fellow." DeHaan beckoned to Lee. When Lee went to him DeHaan said in a lower voice: "I want you to see just how Cranch got his wheel cart upstairs."

Lee followed him dumbly. When the two were upstairs, DeHaan ushered him into Fay's vacated room. Lee entered with a dire and terrible bursting within his breast. He half expected to see the stabbed body of Cranch in there. Instead, DeHaan opened the door of the roomy closet.

"See anything queer, young fellow?"

For a moment Lee saw nothing extraordinary. It seemed to be just a big, bedroom closet, bare of hangings. Then Lee noted two stout and taut vertical ropes between a pair of wall studs.

"It's really an elevator," DeHaan explained. "You could call it either an un-

dersized elevator or an oversized dumb waiter. It's just big enough for Cranch to wheel his chair in on it. Then he pulls a rope. Down he goes to a closet in his own room below. He can wheel out on to the floor of his room; then by reaching back and pulling the other rope he can send the platform up to form the floor of this upper closet."

Lee was astonished. It was all quite clear, though. Cranch, on his way to search the body of Scanlon, had passed through the room of Fay Wright. He had had not meant to frighten the girl. He had come this way merely because it was his only avenue to the second floor. Once in here, he only needed to unbolt the door from the inside.

"But wait! You haven't seen anything yet," DeHaan said. "Unless—" His eyes bored shrewdly into Lee's.

"Unless I stabbed Cranch," Lee finished for him with a shiver. "Well, I didn't. So lead on."

DeHaan ushered him into the closet. There was just room for both of them. DeHaan pulled one of the ropes and the closet floor began going down. There seemed to be nothing mechanical about it. The platform only went down in response to a continuous pull, like a dumb waiter.

It came to a stop on joists supporting the ground floor. Once more they were in a roomy, bedroom closet. DeHaan opened the door. And Lee Latham clapped up a hand to stifle his cry of horror. There sat Cranch, all bloody, upright in his wheel cart. The face was bloated, and on it was the same old malignant grin. But he was dead. A knife was hilt-deep in his breast.

It was Cranch's own knife, but Lee knew that the blow had never been self-inflicted. The blood was dry, the body cold. Death must have occurred some two hours ago.

"And whoever killed him," DeHaan said, "came down the elevator from the upper floor."

"What," Lee gasped, "makes you think that?"

"All doors and windows here," DeHaan pointed out, "are bolted on the inside."

Lee observed that such was the case. "But there was no one upstairs," he protested, "except Schofield."

"Plus you and the girl," DeHaan amended tersely.

Lee stared at him. "But that's crazy! I didn't come down here. And Miss Wright didn't. In fact it was only about fifteen minutes after I saw Cranch prowling the Scanlon room that Miss Wright left the house."

"Exactly!" DeHaan said dryly. "Which means it was only about ten minutes after Cranch returned through her room that the lady took stealthy flight."

"She didn't run away," Lee retorted. "She only went to her car."

"That's what she says," DeHaan returned colorlessly. "But after putting on those overshoes, she might have kept on going. It had quit snowing. Maybe she thought she could start her car and get clear away. Now don't get sore. The most likely culprit, of course, is Schofield."

"His motive?"

"The sixty thousand dollars. I'm going up now for a look at Schofield's baggage."

BY the strange elevator they returned to the second floor, Lee not at all reluctant to leave the gruesome figure of Cranch.

In the upper hall DeHaan said: "You go down and stay with 'em. Look wise and say nothing. If I can find any real evidence, I'm going to pinch Schofield."

Lee went down to the store room, where he joined Fay Wright and Schofield. Horror must have been still mirrored in his eyes, for Schofield said quickly: "Is it as bad as all that, Latham?"

Fay, wringing her hands in distress, wailed: "Oh, if I could only get away from this dreadful house!"

Lee stood by the stove stoking his pipe, thinking hard. Was there someone he had overlooked? What about the teamster, Peters, whose buckboard had carried Drexel to Trinchera? And what about Cranch's Mexican *mozo?* According to Cranch, the *mozo* had gone on an errand before the storm and had not returned. But they had only Cranch's word for that. And Cranch's word, Lee conceded, was worth nothing. Why wasn't it possible that the *mozo* had been back in Cranch's room all the while? During the night Cranch perhaps found the loot. Perhaps cupidity then inspired the Mexican to stab his master and make off with the money.

But both doors of Cranch's room were bolted on the inside! How then could the *mozo* have escaped? By the trick elevator, of course! The crime probably occurred while Fay and Lee were four hundred yards away at the sedan. So the *mozo* could have gone up the elevator, through the girl's vacated room, then down to the store room and out. That would have left Cranch dead in a securely bolted room.

DeHaan now came down the stairs. He stood staring quizzically at Schofield for a moment, then at Fay, then at Lee. Again he beckoned Lee to one side.

In an undertone he announced: "I've been through Schofield's baggage. Nothing there he hasn't a right to. Except a gun. And maybe he has a permit for that."

Lee offered his *mozo* theory. DeHaan seemed impressed. "It fits," he admitted. "A Mexican *peon* would be more likely to use a knife than a Yankee drummer like Schofield. For all we know the *mozo* was back in the kitchen, or somewhere around, all the time."

"Or maybe he was really off on an errand, but returned between midnight and dawn" Lee suggested.

"If so, his horse is about played out," DeHaan said. "It ought to be easy caught. I'll give myself and the horse I used another half hour rest. Then if that *mozo* left tracks away from here, I'll follow them. Right now I'll scout around the barn."

DeHaan went out on his search. It was now almost broad daylight and the sky was clear.

Fay came anxiously over to Lee. She seemed tremendously relieved when he said: "It's almost certain to be the Mexican servant Cranch spoke of."

In the corner of the store room stood a scoop shovel. Picking it up, Lee added: "What about some coffee? If you'll cook up about a gallon of it, Miss Wright, I'll earn my share by coaxing your sedan along to the house."

When Fay agreed to that, Lee went out with his shovel. After clearing the corner of the house he could see DeHaan circling the barn, his eyes scrutinizing the snow in all directions.

Lee himself waded directly up the road to the stranded sedan. There he used the scoop to dig a trench in front of each wheel. His idea was to put on the tire chains .

REMOVING the cushion from the rear seat, he found a set of chains amongst the tools. As he took these out, giving a shake to disentangle them, a light article of white cotton cloth fell at his feet. Lee picked it up. He saw that it was a lady's glove, well soiled, the kind its owner would only use in such a bothersome emergency as the changing of a tire on a dusty road. A cotton work glove, much too small for a man. Only a child or a woman could wear it.

But what startled Lee was the blood.

This white glove was stained with blood —and the blood was barely dry!

Under the spur of that find, Lee looked further. He examined all the tire-changing tools and the chains. He looked at everything under the rear seat. And at the seat itself. The latter was upholstered with leather on top and at the ends, while on the under side there was a covering of canvas.

The canvas was tacked to the frame of the seat. Three tacks at one end, Lee noted, were missing. This made in effect a pocket above the canvas and amongst the springs of the cushion. Lee inserted a hand and wrist under the canvas and groped about amid the steel, spiral coils.

What he finally brought forth was sheaves of money. One package was in thousand-dollar denominations and the others were in hundreds. It all totaled sixty thousand.

Lee could hardly believe his eyes. It left him groggy, mentally reeling with this monstrous clue to the guilt of Fay Wright. He could not conceive of her as a murderess. And yet here hidden in this car was her bloody glove and the loot! Worse, Lee with his own eyes had seen her take clandestine flight from the house at about the time of Cranch's murder, and go directly to this car. He had even seen her remove the rear cushion and replace it. Her excuse was that she had sought a pair of overshoes.

But had she? Had those overshoes really been under the seat?

Her story was that she had been awakened in the night to see Cranch by her bed in his wheel chair. Suppose that were true! But suppose it happened when Cranch was on his way from instead of on his way to the room of Scanlon's body. Thus returning, as he passed through the girl's room it might have occurred to him to have a look through her baggage. What if he had found the loot there!

As he held it in his hands, gloating, suppose the girl awakened. In a panic, she might have seized the knife from its sheath on the arm of the wheel chair, and stabbed. Then she would have noted the open closet door and the elevator. In desperation to get rid of Cranch, she herself could have pushed the chair into the closet, taken it down to the room below by the lift, returned to her own room, removed stains, if any, and then taken panicky flight.

That theory was frightful to Lee Latham. He refused to believe it. But others, he knew, would be certain to accept its clear logic. He knew that if Fay Wright were a man, he himself would accept that solution without quibble.

All thought of putting on the chains was driven from Lee's mind. What should he do with this money? He had no authority to touch it, he decided. So he put the money and the glove back in the places he had found them. Then he alighted from the car and trudged morosely to the store.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cold Gray Dawn

OUTSIDE of it, he found Schofield, who was busily engaged trying to get his own motor started. He had scraped snow from in front of the wheels and put on rear chains. He was now in the driver's seat pressing his foot on the self-starter. All the response he could evoke was a buzz. The crank case oil was too cold and stiff to permit starting the engine.

Lee paused by his fender, eyeing Schofield critically. Wasn't it possible that Schofield was guilty of the crimes, and had simply used the girl's sedan as a cache? The idea, to Lee, seemed quite plausible. Last evening DeHaan had taken down all names, addresses and occupations. Therefore everyone knew where

the girl lived and where she worked. At one of those places her car could be approached by night a week from now, or a month from now, and the loot thus recovered. That scheme would be far safer than for Schofield to try making off with it himself. He would reason that the girl's car would not be searched as thoroughly as his own, if at all. Thus he might have elected to creep to it during the night, there secreting the money. Fresh from the killing of Cranch, he might have touched a cotton glove under the seat either by accident or design.

"Thinking of leaving us, are you?" Lee challenged.

"Nope. Just thought I'd try warming up the motor," the drummer said.

Lee opened the right-hand door of the coupé to see if the man had brought his baggage out. He failed to see it.

"Who do you think knifed Cranch?" Lee asked bluntly.

Schofield buzzed his starter again impatiently. "Why, that Mex *mozo*, of course. It's a cinch now."

"What makes you think so?"

"The ranger just found his tracks. He found sign that another horse occupied the second stall for a while during the night, and was grained. And horse tracks lead off from the barn due west. It stopped snowing at three o'clock, you know?"

"Yes, I knew that," Lee said. "But how did you know it? Did some prowling about three o'clock, did you?"

Just then the motor started. It gave one cough, then stopped. Again Schofield buzzed the starter. This time the engine caught and continued to rumble truculently. Schofield coaxed it with a primer. Then faint strains of music floated to the ears of Lee Latham.

Schofield's hand touched a switch. The music stopped.

An automobile radio!

That one should be here, Lee realized, was not at all strange. He knew that a traveling salesman often installs one in his car, in order to keep himself entertained during the lonely routine of touring from town to town. Evidently the man's radio switch had been turned on when he drove up last evening in the storm. When he shut off the motor he automatically shut off the radio. On the same count the radio started this morning when Schofield started his motor.

An idea struck Lee. He looked at his watch. It was 7:12 A. M. It occurred to him that almost every radio station in the country at some time during the day gives a news broadcast. He knew that many stations give one out morning, noon and evening—especially the stations operated by the larger urban journals. Off-hand he could think of a dozen stations which broadcasted late news flashes during the quarter hour from 7:00 to 7:15 A. M.

Why not try to get something on this Drexel case? Had the bank messenger recovered, and had he made a statement?

Lee's hand darted to the same switch; after a moment of warning, the radio began again.

"What are you trying to do?" Schofield asked annoyedly.

Ignoring him, Lee turned a knob and moved the needle to the extreme left end of its arc. He heard a Fort Worth advertiser droning about the merits of a patent fertilizer. He moved the needle to the right, listened a moment, then moved the needle again.

HE TRIED station after station. Denver, Salt Lake, Dallas, San Antone. He looked at his watch. It was 7:14. Lee moved the needle to the extreme right of its arc. Pueblo! The *Pueblo Daily Chieftain* was nearing the conclusion of its 7:00 to 7:15 A. M. news reports.

Lee caught only a fragment, a final phrase or two—

"—the vehicle was stolen at Cañon City. Its license number is X-oh-oh-two-oh."

That concluded the broadcast.

"Miss Wright," Schofield said, "is boiling coffee. The ranger says he'll be off on the trail of those tracks, just as soon as he tosses down about a quart of it."

"Has he made a note of all license plates?" Lee asked.

"I suppose so."

"Let's go in and find out."

Lee moved aft and looked at Schofield's license plate. The number was not X-0020. Neither was that the number of the truck. At this distance he could not see the number on Fay Wright's sedan.

Schofield shut off his motor and followed Lee into the store. There they saw a gallon pot of coffee on the stove. DeHaan stood nearby, talking to Fay.

Parked against a wall was DeHaan's motor-cycle. Suddenly Lee's thoughts became focused on the name of a town, Cañon City. The state penitentiary, he remembered, was at Cañon City. A new idea struck him. Lee looked shrewdly at DeHaan. Especially at his uniform cap. Suddenly Lee stepped over and looked closely at the rear mud guard of the motor-cycle. A plate there bore a number. It was X-0020.

By the broadcast, this was a stolen vehicle. Stolen at Cañon City! Lee's pulses were pounding when he faced DeHaan. DeHaan was armed. Lee wasn't. But DeHaan, pleasantly engaged with the girl, did not see him as Lee advanced. Lee snatched with either hand. His right plucked DeHaan's pistol from its holster; his left snatched the uniform cap.

DeHaan whirled. The blood left his face as he stood there staring at the gun aimed at his breast by Lee Latham. His entire character was changed. His close-cropped head alone, was almost enough to convict him.

Lee tossed the cap to Fay Wright. In design it might have suited an officer of the British army—or a Colorado State policeman. The three letters on it were *C. S. P.*

"They stand for Colorado State Police," Lee said. "But they also stand for Colorado State Prison; or Colorado State Penitentiary. A Colorado State cop wouldn't be riding a stolen motor-bike—but an escaped convict would, if he could get one."

"You're talking wild!" DeHaan shouted.

"If I am," Lee challenged, "why don't you show us a badge proving you're a ranger?"

DeHaan's failure to produce a badge sealed his guilt. Lee continued.

"Skinner Scanlon, a beef-trucking rustler, in his time was probably chased by more than one state cop. Often enough to know one when he saw one. Also he knew when he didn't see one. More than that, Scanlon may have served a short stretch or two up at the state pen. In which case he knew the uniforms worn there. DeHaan evidently is a convict who overpowered some guard, changed clothes with him, escaped, stole a motor-bike in the town and headed for Mexico. When Scanlon drew his gun, it was simply to call DeHaan's bluff."

Lee wondered now why he hadn't known that from the first. Twice Scanlon had challenged DeHaan's authority by stressing the "who" in "Who wants to know?" and "Who says so?"

"You mean he's not a ranger?" Fay was asking breathlessly.

"No more than I am," Lee insisted. "He's an escaped convict scramming for Mexico. What he most needed was money. He found it at Drexel's wreck."

DEHAAN was standing there with the look of a trapped wolf. Lee backed off another pace and cocked the pistol.

"You're sure of all this?" Schofield inquired dazedly.

"All that I'm entirely sure of is that DeHaan claims to be a ranger and isn't. That ought to be enough. We don't know exactly when DeHaan decided to call himself a ranger. Probably the teamster, Peters, gave him the idea. In the driving snow all Peters could see was a uniformed man with a motor-bike and C. S. P. on his cap, alongside of a wrecked car on which a depredation had been committed. It would be just like Peters to ask, 'What happened, ranger?' And so then DeHaan decided to capitalize the illusion."

"But why?" insisted Schofield. "What was there in it for DeHaan?"

"Sixty thousand dollars. He had already rifled the satchel and pocketed the money. Drexel was coming to, so DeHaan had to think fast. His best scheme was to take the cue suggested by Peters—and be a ranger. Clothed with the authority of a ranger he could speed Peters one way with the groggy Drexel while he, DeHaan, went the other way with the loot, apparently in pursuit of a south-bound thief. Too, his masquerade as a ranger would give him authority to commandeer a horse at the first house."

It was as clear as crystal up to that point. Beyond there were a few puzzling elements, yet for these Lee could now see several reasonable explanations.

"We'll say DeHaan rode off just after sundown with the loot. He was headed for the railroad at Branson. But instead of telephoning a sheriff, he meant to catch a train for Mexico. What defeated him, probably, was the reluctance of his mount to go far from her home stall on such a night. Probably the mare circled, veering back this way. In the blinding snow, DeHaan could see nothing. He didn't know the country. But the mare did; and she veered back toward home.

"At about four A. M. a house loomed before DeHaan. It was only a shape. DeHaan, half blind, a mass of ice from head to foot and almost frozen, had no idea it was the house from which he had started. A lighted window looked good to him. He could get warmed, directions, and perhaps a fresh horse. So he knocked at the door. The door opened. And there, grinning at him from a wheel chair, sat Cranch!"

The embittered chagrin on DeHaan's face told Lee that something like that had actually transpired.

"Cranch," Lee suggested, "by then was able to guess the truth. He accused DeHaan as DeHaan warmed himself in the rear room. Maybe Cranch suggested a split of the loot. Anyway DeHaan snatched Cranch's knife and stabbed. In a panic he again fled into the storm. But the mare was played out; so DeHaan put it in a stall to be rested and grained. And the loot was getting too hot—so he cached it in the rear cushion of Miss Wright's sedan."

"Mine?" Fay's eyes stared roundly.

"It's there this minute," Lee said. "DeHaan took a chance on getting it back later. Probably he then spent the rest of the night in the barn, feeding the mare, planning a new flight by daylight. After joining us, he faked an inspection tour for no other purpose than to bolt Cranch's door from the inside."

DeHaan came at him with a flying tackle. Lee could have shot him. Instead he stepped to one side and cracked down with the gun barrel. Steel crashed on the man's skull and DeHaan landed on his chest, skidding to a stop against the counter. He lay there, groaning.

Lee asked Fay: "What about breakfast?"

Fay used DeHaan's cap to lift breakfast, a hot, black gallon of it, from the stove.

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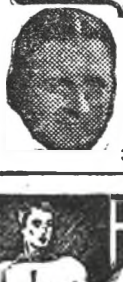

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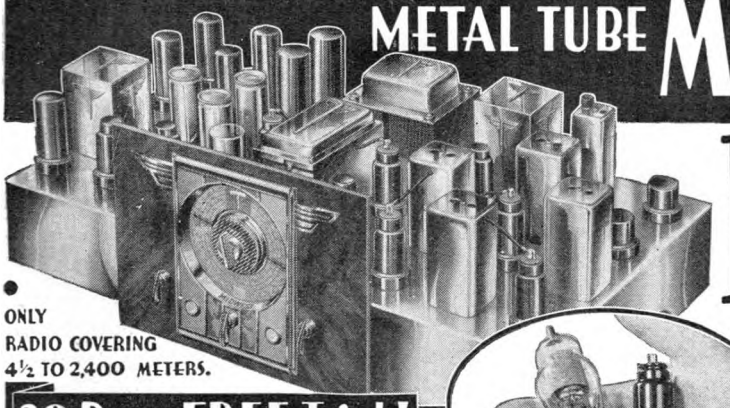

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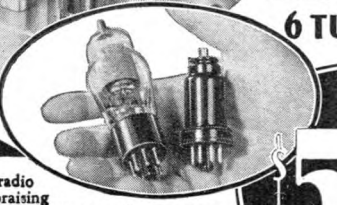

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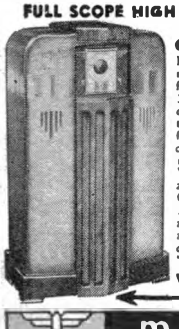

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