

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



AUG.

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



**TROUBLE
IS MY
BUSINESS**

A DALMAS NOVELETTE

by **RAYMOND
CHANDLER**

**LAUGHTER
IN HELL**

by **D. I. CHAMPION**

**O. B. MYERS
HUGH B. CAVE**

A RACE WILLIAMS NOVEL

by **CARROLL JOHN DALY**



ATHLETE'S FOOT

**Send Coupon
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According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

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Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

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CITY..... STATE.....

THE SEPTEMBER THRILL DOCKET

MR. MADDOX, that bland Buddha of the bookie tribe, follows the bangtails as they race down the stretch on a *Saratoga Slayride* in the next issue of *DIME DETECTIVE*. T. T. Flynn has crashed through with another complete novel-length thriller — laid against the background of the East's most-famous track this time — and there's not a dull moment in it from the first paragraph to the last. Even if you never saw a horse race, never laid a dime on the favorite, don't know the difference between a tote board and a tout, you can't help but be a Flynn-fan when you read his latest murder masterpiece. Maddox loses his luck — that diamond headlight that gleams from his little finger when he's in the dough — in the first chapter, and not till the final murder in the last, when he teams up with the law to crack down on a counterfeiting horse-doctor who tried to run in a ringer on the favorite does he get it back. It's as fast as Man O' War, as smooth as a colt's satin skin, tight as a Garrison finish for plot, and exciting as ten Kentucky Derbies rolled into one. You'd better be there when the barrier goes up with your money down on Maddox!

And Frederick C. Davis brings back that ace crime-commentator of the ether waves, Keyhole Kerry, in *Poison on Her Lips*, twenty thousand odd words of lightning-fast detective fiction that'll keep you racing till you've scanned the last one. Kerry, thorn in the flesh of the police department and bad-boy of the De-Luxe Lax program, tears the bail-bond racket wide open this time and wagers suicide against murder in a mad gamble with a missing girl witness who has stymied all the forces of the law from proceeding with the investigation by threatening to kill herself if the police even try to find her hiding place. Kerry ferrets her out and at her bedside, with poison on her lips, he — But wait till next month for the smashing dénouement.

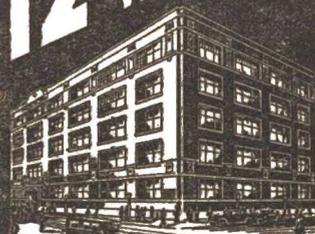
Then there are yarns by Jan Dana — an Acme Insurance Op Story — Cornell Woolrich and others. The **SEPTEMBER** issue will be out **AUGUST 4th!**

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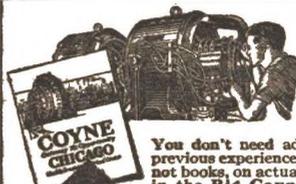


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10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 31

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A SMASHING COMPLETE RACE WILLIAMS NOVEL

Knot the noose that dangles from a

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2—THRILL-PACKED MIDNIGHT MURDER NOVELETTES—2

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AND—

We want to know if you are

Ready for the Rackets.....A Department 3 & 126
In this revealing series giving the lowdown on currently popular swindle-schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win \$5.00 at the same time.

Now's the time to catch a preview of

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Some of the sure-fire hits scheduled for production in the next DIME DETECTIVE.

Cover—"Paralyzed With Fear She Let the Tray Drop".....
From *Fire and Ice*.

Black-and-White Illustrations by John Flemming Gould

Watch for the September Issue

On the Newsstands August 4th

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Ready For The Rackets

A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a foreknowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in telling us your own personal experiences with chiselers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publish—withholding your names, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Racket Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y.

TWO or three issues ago we asked for reports on rackets which had been operated or might be expected to crop up at either of the two great expositions which are attracting millions of people to California and New York this summer. Policing at both fairs has been remarkably effective to date, so far as we have been able to learn, and we have yet to receive our first first-hand communication exposing any con-game or petty gyp set-up. Here follow, however, two interesting letters which we are glad to publish regarding chisel schemes which were prevalent at prior fairs. Forewarned is forearmed indeed, as one of our correspondents says. Watch for a recurrence of these gyps and let us know promptly if you discover them in operation.

Washington, D. C.,
April 28, 1939.

The Racket Editor,
Dime Detective Magazine,
205 E. 42nd St.,
New York, N. Y.

Dear Sir:

In the May issue of your magazine you request information of rackets being worked at the fairs.

While what I have to relate applied to the Chicago Exposition, I have no doubt the same bunch will attempt to operate at New York and San Francisco, and the procedure "took me" as well as a number of my friends.

Outside of the gates of the fair grounds, desks and tables were set up for the purpose of selling to visitors a beautifully illustrated (in colors) section of a local newspaper, containing a wonderful collection of views of the fair. The cost was 5 cents per copy including mailing charges. You either wrote

(Continued on page 126)

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"Yes, Mr. Moore,
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And our M & M their
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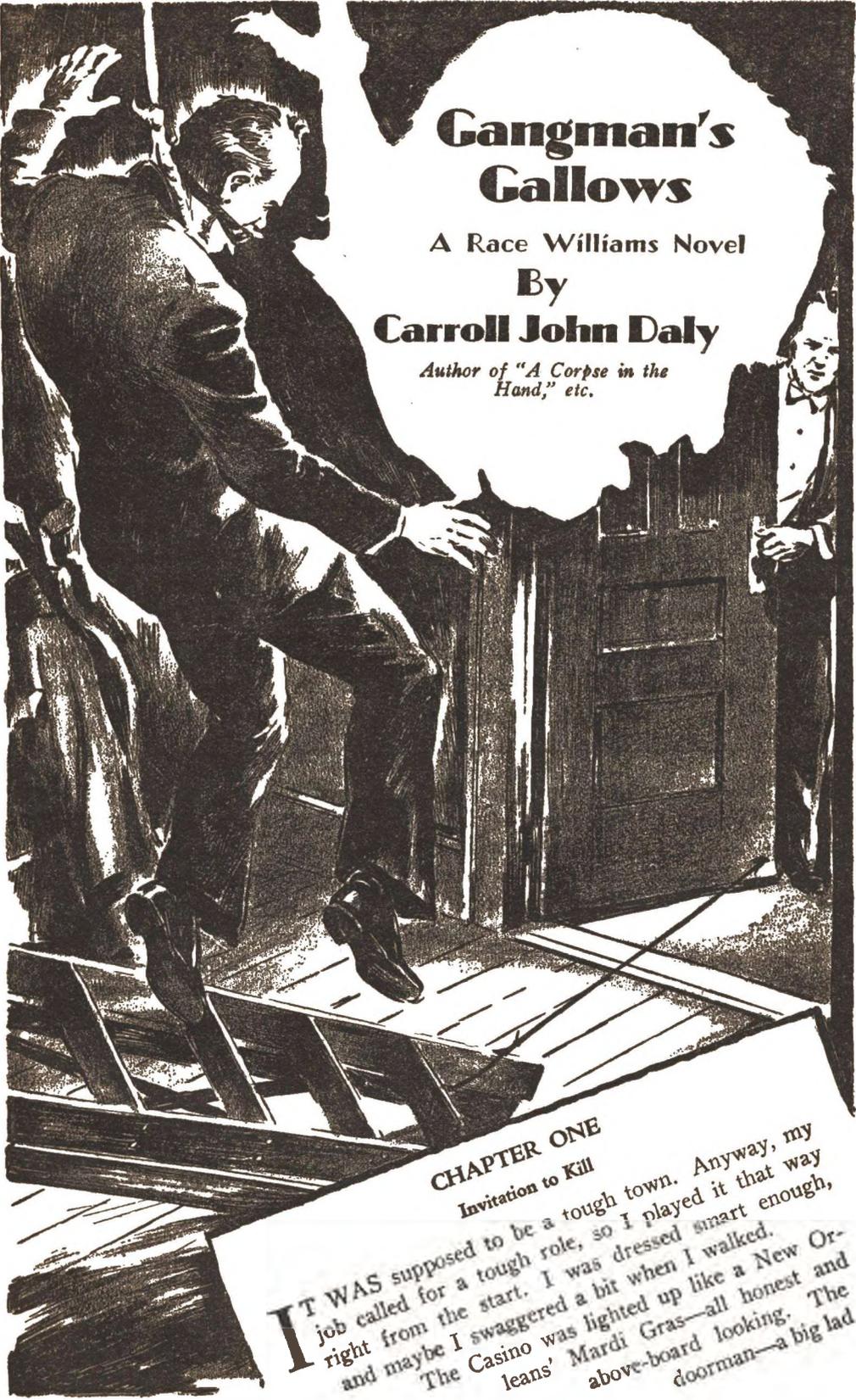
whiskies—the kind of whiskey we think is best of all!

M & M has been famous down in Kentucky for more than 60 years! Get acquainted with its grand old-fashioned flavor today! Ask for it at your favorite bar or package store.

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Long on Quality—Short on Price!

*A blend of straight whiskies—90 proof. Every drop is whiskey.
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Gangman's Gallows

A Race Williams Novel

By
Carroll John Daly

*Author of "A Corpse in the
Hand," etc.*

CHAPTER ONE

Invitation to Kill

IT WAS supposed to be a tough town. Anyway, my job called for a tough role, so I played it that way right from the start. I was dressed smart enough, and maybe I swaggered a bit when I walked. The Casino was lighted up like a New Orleans' Mardi Gras—all honest and above-board looking. The doorman—a big lad

who looked more like a general than any real general could possibly look—stretched his hand out in front of me.

"Where's your invitation?" he chirped. "It's special tonight."

I slapped a ten-spot into his hand, and said: "That's my invitation."

He looked at the ten a while, hesitated, then turned quickly and opened the door wide.

Lights, music, respectability—if stiff shirts make it so—entertainment, if you can stand for a "great discovery" brought

"Nor me yours," I gave it to him straight. "But I don't squawk all over the place about it."

It didn't throw him. He just stood there—his right hand on my shoulder. "So it's like that," he said.

"Just like that."

I thought we were at a dead-end street—but no. He lowered his voice slightly, said, "Go peacefully to the door and leave," and when I didn't move, and when he couldn't drag me from the bar with the attempted nonchalance of his great

It was O. K. with Latimer and his Casino mob when that hard-as-nails dick broke up the two o'clock floor show by kidnaping the star performer just as she was due to go into her routine. If the masked dancer couldn't be there to take her bow while the band played there was a spot she could use on another program—a toe-dance at the end of a hangman's noose ought to panic even the most critical audience, and Williams could applaud or hiss the performance, whichever he chose, when the curtain fell.

from Brooklyn, who was trying to tear the house down. The bar was cut off from the long hall and the main room by a huge partition that looked like a green cardboard sea. I went to the bar and leaned against it.

I saw the pompous little duck who filled the description I had received of the proprietor. He nudged a big hulk who followed me.

I knew the racket and braced myself for it. It came—a heavy hand upon my shoulder which was supposed to swing me around. "Supposed to" was right. My body didn't budge. I turned my head slowly and he spoke. His voice was high-pitched for so big a man, and I marked him as a former whiskey tenor in a cheap joint until someone noticed his strength. He said, as he looked down at me, for I was leaning on the bar: "I don't remember seeing your face before."

strength, he tried: "That would be better than being thrown into the alley."

I SWUNG then and straightened. His hand went off my shoulder and he staggered back. No one had seen the knee I stuck in his stomach. Not even Squeak Voice himself saw it—though he felt it.

I didn't give him a chance for a comeback. I did my talking first. I said, "Put your hand on me again, and I'll spray all your teeth down your throat," and to drive my meaning home with a meat ax, I added: "Don't kid yourself about being tough, Charlie—you're small-town stuff to me."

His face changed colors like a kaleidoscope—blotches of purple and yellow, pink and white, all at once. Sure it was in his heart to jump me. It was in his heart to slip a blackjack from his sleeve and let me have it, too. I won't say he was afraid

—maybe just puzzled. Besides, a couple of stuffed shirts at the bar were beginning to notice—just listlessly. This time he squawked his words with a rattle like a bird who had a mouth full of buckshot.

"Tough boy." He glared at me. He half turned and nodded. Two bruisers got up from a table near the bar. They wore tux, but you can't dress up a gorilla, even in a circus, and make a man out of him. These lads were gorillas. I pressed my back against the bar. The pompous duck left a party he was speaking to—came half around the edge of the imitation green sea.

I said, loud enough for him to hear: "Two aren't enough, Charlie—you're in for a surprise."

Charlie didn't speak. The two men were leisurely coming toward me when the owner came up, stood right in front of me.

He said: "I am Mr. Alfred Latimer, the manager. We do not wish your presence here. You are at liberty to leave quickly and quietly."

"Thanks." I took in the little crops of hair scattered over his head like a desert growth. "I'm not going."

Very white teeth showed. Mr. Latimer smiled and said: "We dislike scenes, but they do occur, even in such a refined atmosphere as the Casino's, with people of your type." His voice grew slightly sarcastic. "You may be a very rough man indeed—but there are twenty men here to eject you, and just behind the bar—another room—an alley. They might not be too kind to you after—" His shoulders moved up and down. "It is not for me to know what happens in an alley, but I recall a truculent gentleman—bigger and stronger than you. I forget if he recovered. Now will you go? Speak up, my man, before I order you thrown from the place."

His eyes flashed. Mine didn't. I stared straight at him, raised my right hand and

unbuttoned my jacket. I leaned slightly forward so for a moment he got the flash of the two guns—one under each arm. Then I spoke my piece.

I said simply: "When you put Race Williams out of a rat trap like this, you'll put him out in a cloud of smoke."

THE threat and the guns got him—but I like to think it was the name that got him more than either. Yep—seven hundred miles away from New York as the crow and air-liners fly, and he knew my name.

"Race Williams," he said, and again, "Race Williams."

I'm quick to take advantage of a point, and I took advantage of it then. There was a hardness in my voice when I said: "Chase the drunk-tosser away and we'll talk. Come on—before I take your place apart."

He stood there for a long moment before he waved the boys aside and motioned me to a table. Motioning me to a table was on the level—the waving the boys aside was strictly a gesture—they had already started to sidle down the bar.

When we were seated he leaned across the table, spoke. "Mr. Williams, I have heard of you. If you have come from New York to play a bit, we welcome you. But your methods are so—"

"Mr. Latimer," I cut in, "we won't beat around the cuspidors. Do you know why I'm here?"

"I might guess if I desired." And after a pause, "Suppose you tell me."

"Fair enough," I agreed. "You won't question the fact that upstairs you run the biggest gambling house in town. You won't deny that Harvey Price has been a prisoner in your place for the past three days. Frankly, I am employed by his uncle, Duncan Price, to bring him home, tonight. His father is outside in a car. It's kidnaping, of course."

LATIMER spread his hands far apart, said: "Then why not the police? Surely a man so prominent—so well known and influential as Duncan Price—could get any judge to sign a search warrant. Why not have the place raided again? If he were here, the police would find him. Or is that the reason there has been no police raid?"

"There would have been a police raid tonight—but I prevented it. I know the scandal and all that—but Mr. Duncan Price was quite willing to face it!"

"Really?" Thick eyebrows went up and down. "And why, Mr. Williams, did you object to the police?"

"Business only," I told him. "I earn my money by keeping the police away."

"I appreciate your frankness, Mr. Williams—and in return will be quite frank with you. Mr. Harvey Price is here. He has gambled and is in debt to the house six thousand dollars. He is staying here as my guest until he can raise the money."

I gave Mr. Latimer a shock then. I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out the bills and slapped them on the table—twelve five-hundred-dollar bank notes.

"That's for his I.O.U.'s," I told him. "Produce the paper and the boy."

He set his teeth grimly and said: "He can't leave tonight. He will accept no money from his uncle, and—"

"What do you mean?" I leaned on the table now. "You're peddling his I.O.U.'s about town—with the wrong people."

"The right people would pay more."

I gave him a laugh. "You're lucky to get your money at all. Everyone knows Harvey Price. He's no good. Why not take the dough? His I.O.U.'s are worth nothing."

"Indeed? I know someone to whom they are worth a great deal. Those I.O.U.'s will be paid in full tonight. They will never appear to blacken the fair name"—a chuckle there—"of young Har-

vey Price or his Uncle Duncan. It's a gala night. People have been admitted by invitation only—and because of the respectability and high social standing of our guests this evening the suggestion was made that you, simply as a strange face, should depart. I am sorry I cannot do business with you but you may stay and see the new star of the Casino. She un-masks at two o'clock exactly." He came to his feet. "For your own peace of mind, Harvey Price will have paid his debt, and be free to leave here—in the morning."

I grabbed at Latimer's arm, pulled him back to his chair, said: "Harvey's father is waiting outside to take the boy out of town. I must deliver him before one o'clock. Come, Latimer. Quit making faces. Bring down that boy—or I'll go up and get him."

"You must be mad!" Latimer gasped.

"Why not? There's a thousand dollars in it for me." And when he bit at his lip and put his hand in his pocket, I added: "An honest thousand dollars—the only kind of money I take."

Latimer said: "The district attorney is out front—several of his most trusted detectives are with him. You know the political set-up. The mayor is there and—"

I cut in: "Sure—and the sheriff—and Senator Rhoden. You have something up your sleeve all right, Friend and foe alike are at your tables tonight. And Senator Rhoden is the man who will supersede your friend the district attorney as soon as the governor acts. I may raise some hell—I may spoil your special show—but I'll get that boy."

"Impossible—my help—those men you saw—and others. Williams, you talk like a fool, and I understood you were a clear-thinking, determined man." And slowly, "The reform newspaper published an article that men were killed in the gaming rooms above and their bodies taken to the outskirts of the city. It's a hundred to one against you."

"O. K." I was on my feet talking to him now. "A hundred to one. You're a gambler, Mr. Latimer," and I suddenly slapped the six grand into his hand. "There's even money that I take the boy out before one o'clock. Cover it!"

It got him. He went through all the expressions of an amateur actor who has forgotten his lines. Money talks. It talked to him. For the first time he was doubtful of himself—of me—of the whole business. He was a gambler—I had offered what he no longer felt was easy money. His eyes did tricks again but he finally shoved the money back into my hand.

Just before he left me, he said, and his voice choked slightly: "I never bet in my own establishment. Sit down, Mr. Williams. I would like you to talk to Mr. Malcom Brickner."

I sat down.

Mr. Malcom Brickner was the district attorney.

FOR a few minutes I had a chance to think back. I was a fool to be sitting there threatening the entire district attorney's staff as well as Latimer, who was supposed to run the D.A. and the whole town, for that matter. This town was on fire. The commissioner of police was on the level—so were some of the cops—though most of them didn't know where they stood. It was a political upheaval, and with the mayor in with the D.A., things were rough going all around.

But look at my position—I had been paid by Duncan Price, who wanted to drive all the crooks out of that town, if he had to spend every nickel he had. And he had plenty. At first he was a laugh—then he hired outside dicks, became a nuisance before the D.A. got onto himself and bought off most of them—maybe killed some. But Duncan Price had gathered his information—and Duncan Price had gotten a paper behind him—and Duncan Price had made such a squawk that

the governor had to listen, and was now about ready to step.

The crooks, like all crooks, had made their mistake. Duncan Price's car was machine-gunned. A pineapple was tossed through his front window. His daughter's life had been threatened—and all the trimmings gangsters use on one another had been worked on Duncan Price, the town's big name.

Yes—that was where the boys made their mistake. Racketeers are used to the law of the night—the law of the gun—the law of violence and sudden death. They respect that law and fear it. But Duncan Price was not used to having pineapples tossed into his living-room—nor having his car explode in his face—nor threats against his daughter.

It didn't strike him with fear—at least the kind of fear the D.A. and his crook crowd expected. It surprised him—stunned him, and shocked him. He didn't believe such things could happen to a man of his position, his dignity. No, damn it, he didn't even believe it could happen after it had happened.

At all events, he went personally on the stump to clean up the town. He made speeches, he shook his fist—and he put up money. Duncan Price's single-handed crusade against his home town even made the front pages of the New York papers and jarred the governor of his own state smack out of his chair.

I remembered my first words with Duncan Price. He was a little man with a finely chiseled but determined face. He had walked up and down the room with jerky steps.

"It's a rotten town, Williams, but it's my town. Understand, if they can threaten Duncan Price—throw bombs at my house—no man is safe. I'm after them now if I have to indict the whole damned Grand Jury because most of them have been planted there by this Malcom Brickner. Why, I helped Brickner get his

start. Understand, for once in your life you're not telling others—you're not telling me, that you may have to shoot someone to death to protect your life. My money is standing behind you—my name is standing behind you, and behind my name stands the governor of the state. If you were to shoot to death the district attorney himself, nothing could be done about it. I have evidence that this Alfred Latimer, owner of the Casino, has strangled people with wire right in his own establishment. At least twenty bodies of men and women—yes, one a young girl—have been found in different parts of the city—their necks twisted and broken. You say you are able to protect your own life. Other detectives I have used have said that—and have died."

I shrugged a shoulder and grinned. "That's O. K.," I said. "Meet violence with violence. That's the way I like to play." And being a careful man, I added: "You're sure of the governor?"

"Absolutely." He nodded emphatically. "He hasn't wanted to interfere so near the election. They want things rough—they want things tough. So I brought you here from New York. I have them on the run. I expect the governor to act any hour now—day or night. I'm pushing him damned hard to appoint Senator Rhoden as special prosecutor."

He showed me a picture of his daughter Dorothy, a pretty, slim bit of a girl, with dark hair and bangs—a profile like her father's, and eyes that— But he was talking.

"I am no blue-nose with a high hat, as some of these crooks have pictured me. Dorothy's a concert singer—sings at the Fenimore Hotel occasionally—just down the block from the Casino. A decent, respectable place. Latimer even had the gall to ask her to sing in the Casino. As I said about Brickner, the district attorney, I'd stand behind you if you shot him straight—"

And my thoughts vanished—my mind jumped back to the Casino. Malcom Brickner was entering the bar, walking straight toward my table.

HE WAS tall, handsome—an open, honest face—bright blue eyes—eyes that were capable of a direct look. They were steady as he smiled, pulled up a chair, sat down and extended his hand.

"I am Malcom Brickner, the district attorney, Mr. Williams. I've heard a lot about you." And after a pleasant laugh, "You've heard a lot about me, too. I hope you won't refuse to shake hands with me."

I gripped his hand and said: "I'm not fussy. I shook hands once with a lad who killed his mother and father with a meat ax."

Brickner bit his lip. I read his mind like an open book. He was thinking how easy it would have been before to raise his hand and clap me in the cooler to be forgotten. But he smiled, showed great white teeth, and said: "I'm afraid Mr. Price has been a little hard on me. Given time I'll clean this city up in my own way—and thoroughly."

"There were two attempts on Mr. Price's life," I said simply.

"Good God—Duncan Price can't think I had the least suspicion that such a thing was going to happen! No matter what he has said about me—I'll find those men and see that they are punished. Lord, man—Duncan Price put me where I am today!"

"And he'll put you where you're going," I said solemnly, and wiped the smile off his face as if I'd run a vacuum cleaner over it.

He didn't speak. He couldn't. And I think for the moment the smell of burning flesh was in his nostrils. Then he said: "To the point, Mr. Williams. I'm here to convince you that it would be foolhardy to try and get Harvey Price

out of here tonight. Besides, he wouldn't go with you."

Get the wording. Not, "I'm here to order you," nor even here to "tell" you—just the word "convince." I liked that. I was holding the cards then.

I said: "If he won't go with me, I'll drag him out."

That got Brickner. His mouth remained partly open and his teeth smiled—but his eyes didn't. They had turned a misty sort of blue—with a couple of single points of lead back in the center of them.

He choked before he spoke, said: "Why not watch the entertainment, Mr. Williams? It will interest you. In half an hour I will come to your table. If you still wish to take Harvey Price with you I will see that you go above and speak with him."

"Thank you."

I came to my feet and followed him around the screen to the great curtains that gave on the main room. The curtains parted immediately and stepping aside for me to enter, Brickner said to the headwaiter: "Mr. Latimer's guest—see that he has the best table."

"But, sir—Mr. Brickner, sir—every table is occupied. There—well—I might move the young Grants and their friends—they never spend much—but their names, you know, lend prestige to the place."

I said: "Don't move them—you need all the prestige you can get here."

The headwaiter didn't get it. Brickner frowned, tried to smile, and said: "You may take Mr. Williams to my table." He stretched his head and looked into the room. "I see the young lady is alone—you will introduce Mr. Williams. She will understand and see that he is properly taken care of."

So I went down the room in style. It was a mixed crowd. The fast set and I guess some society folks—but the fast set

were not cutting up tonight. The only way you could tell the gambling crowd and their like was because of their superior poise and ease. The society people had an air of having come up an alley to hear a dirty joke and were surprised to find how many people they knew had come also. It was a queer set-up and no mistake. Something strange was in the wind.

The girl at the table looked very young and certainly was very beautiful. Perhaps the most beautiful woman I have ever looked at—and I have looked at plenty. Certainly she was the most dangerous woman I ever met. Yep—I rocked back on my heels as the headwaiter did his stuff.

He said: "Miss Drummond, may I present Mr. Williams? Miss Florence Drummond, sir. Mr. Brickner sent him over, Miss—" He bowed and was gone.

I stood there as the girl raised her head, extended one of those snake-like arms and gripped my sleeve.

"I didn't quite get the name," she said. "You look so dumb standing there like that. Surely you can't be *The* Mr. Williams—Race Williams? Won't you sit down?"

CHAPTER TWO

The Girl With the Criminal Mind

I LOOKED dumb all right—standing or sitting—and you'd look dumb too. Florence Drummond—the Flame—called the Girl with the Criminal Mind. No one knew her better than I did. I had worked with her and worked against her. We had played and we had fought—and perhaps we had loved. If you don't know her, you ought to. The finest girl you ever met—at times. Then again—the woman of the night—cruel, vicious. Sometimes you could read it in her eyes as the hard lines marred her almost childlike face. Now

she was the young girl drawing you to her with her youthful beauty. Tomorrow? Perhaps a gun in your stomach.

I sat down, lifted her hand, noted the ice on her fingers—the bracelet about her wrist—a hand that seldom wore jewelry.

"Well, Florence," I said, "it was a knockout to meet you here. The first bout is yours. I hope you haven't sold out for a mess of diamonds." And when she laughed, a laugh that reached only a table or two, for we were off from the other people and close to the heavy drapes that gave on a side promenade, I added: "We've seen a lot together one way or the other, so I'm warning you. The racket is dead. Malcom Brickner won't lay any more diamond bracelets. For old times' sake—get moving. I won't be crossed, and I'm on the kill."

Her eyes sparkled. She said: "The same old Race—thinks pretty well of himself and doesn't care who knows it. Don't you wonder why I'm here?"

"No," I told her. "I'm giving you a break—skip the town."

"I might"—she leaned across the table—"give you the same advice. I know why you're here—a one-man racket buster. Duncan Price hired you in. It's open season for shooting and no game laws. The job was made for you—but not for you to do alone. They never suspected Price was bringing you into town—thought you were just another private dick." She paused a moment, placed her cigarette in a holder and let me light it, then said easily: "If you go upstairs tonight they plan to kill you."

"Is that so?" I lit a butt of my own now. "What's the lay here, Florence? Who's behind the show? Rhoden or the D.A.?" And, when she didn't answer, "Or neither one of them?"

She was startled—sat up straight—brushed the ashes off her evening gown. "What do you mean—neither one of them?"

I started to tell her I had an idea that an outside ring might be running things, but I didn't. The Flame had been startled at my question—and the Flame was not one to startle easily—in fact, not one to be startled if a bomb was chucked on the table. And I got a thought, too—one that startled *me*. Nothing impossible. The Flame had been big time—she had controlled big men. Why not? Hell, I told myself, I didn't believe it, but just the same, the thought was there. Was the Flame behind the whole racket now? Giving it the benefit of her mind, her criminal mind?

The Flame said: "So you're not interested why I came here—how I got here." She gripped my hand. "Maybe I love you still, Race—maybe I heard six months ago that you were coming—and planted myself here to help you. What would you say to that?"

"I'd say that was damned white of you, Florence." I laid the sarcasm on heavy. "You see, I only knew yesterday that I was coming."

"Well"—she didn't even redden—"you were always slow to grasp things, Race. I had a dream six months back I could help you, and that you would come here. How's that?"

"Did you dream the rings on your fingers?"

She just threw back her head and laughed. "No—they're real. My job is to entertain you. Let me entertain you with how I got an in here. It will amuse you, at least."

I COULD listen to that, and did. Her thin red lips quivered with mirth. "Six months or so ago when I was but a mere child," she started, "I discovered that my face and my figure and perhaps my brains would help me seek honest employment. So I came to this wicked, wicked, city. With me I brought a couple of Chicago gamblers—at least they were

from Chicago, and they did gamble. The boys who have taken over the town put greed before common sense. With every percentage in their favor, the wheels and dice tables are crooked."

"It cost those gamblers some money to get you in, eh? They got rooked."

"As I said, Race, they weren't exactly gamblers. They chucked a few thousand dollars away—sized up the place—then knocked it over one night for twenty grand. Time: Four minutes and thirty-seven seconds. It was a surprise to Latimer and his friends."

"And you—didn't Latimer or Brickner suspect you?"

"Of course, but I stayed at the best hotel. Brickner came to threaten—remained to make love. Oh—he's not a fool for women—not Brickner. I talked business, too. I told him if he squawked I'd notify every crook and murderer back in New York to come down and make easy money. But mostly I convinced him that I'd be an asset, not a liability—and I furnished him with a few good references—which wasn't hard."

I NODDED at that one. There were few big criminals who didn't know the Flame and fewer still who wouldn't take advice from her.

"Of course, Race," she went on, "it would be silly for you to pretend not to know me—and almost suicide for me to pretend not to know you. Are we to be enemies or friends?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you get out—let me handle things. I'll do you a good turn. Harvey Price will go free before morning—and without spending a cent."

"I know that," I told her. "I'm here to see that he does."

"Race"—she grabbed my wrist now—"these men are far more desperate than those you have handled in New York. They are not so clever—so suave. They

were drunk with power, took what they wanted. Hoodlums went through the streets beating small shop owners. A respectable citizen was attacked. There would have been another attempt on his life—only—only—"

"Only you prevented it," I helped her out.

She didn't deny that. She said quite frankly, but after a pause: "Yes—I prevented that."

"It was bad business—you told them that." I was thinking again. Had the Flame flashed back to the past, taken control as she always took control?

"Yes, I told them that," she said. "Vice and graft and murder must be played within their own vicious little circle."

She was right, of course, I said. "And now?"

"Now they're drunk with desperation. If the governor has Senator Rhoden take Brickner's place—it's the end. Tonight is the gang's last chance. There is one thing no public-minded citizen—no, not even Duncan Price—can shake off, and that's public ridicule."

"But his nephew won't—"

Her eyes moved, and my mouth closed tight. I turned, looked at the man standing by the table. He was a swarthy, dark-haired, greasy sort of chap, who never should have worn a dress suit until they buried him.

The Flame said: "Hello, Harry—this is Race Williams. You've heard of him. Race—Harry Largo. Race and I were good friends in New York—once."

"That so?" Harry took himself very seriously. "I have heard of him—and you. Has Brickner?"

The Flame looked at those mean little eyes for a long time. She didn't speak at once. She just slipped the diamond bracelet from her wrist and shoved it into his hand. Then she spoke.

"Harry's a wise man, Race. I like him.

He's smart, like you, Race. . . . Give that trinket to your girl, Harry."

Harry said: "Oh— not smart like Mr. Williams." He leaned down and digging a finger against my chest said: "A knife in the back does as much damage as a bullet through the front."

NICE boy, Harry. I gave him a second look—noticed his ugly grin and also the finger that was still against my chest. I toyed leisurely with my fork—then moved my hand quickly. Harry hadn't seen that trick before, but he stifled his scream of pain and I damn near wrapped that silver fork about his fingers. I didn't mind the glare in his eyes.

I said, "It's the front, Harry"—and coming to my feet—"I got a girl, too, Harry. A nice girl." I leaned across the table. "Give me that trinket—or I'll push the fork through your throat."

Harry was tough. Harry was a bad guy. Harry liked to stick knives in guy's backs. But Harry had a little common sense. He handed me that bracelet, scowled and left. There wasn't a peep out of him.

The Flame said, as I tossed the bracelet to her: "What's come over you, Race? I know you never avoided trouble—even looked for it—but tonight—"

"I am playing a part," I told her. "I want them to be sure who they are dealing with. Harry, I understand, is their rottenest killer—a lad with a knife. I think if I shot Harry it would be a good idea."

"You'll only make them more desperate, Race. You would have been dead now—if—well—Latimer let himself in for it. He—" She stopped. We both turned.

A curly-haired lad whose pan was corrugated with hard living was announcing from the center of the room. He was talking about talent and he was talking about Alfred Latimer and Latimer was smiling in the spotlight.

Curly-head was saying: "Tonight, in

keeping with our policy, we are introducing a little lady, known to you all—a concert singer of great promise. She will sing for you the more popular songs of the day—dance for you the more popular dances. And she will dance masked—masked until two o'clock—when she will give her final performance—of such exquisite beauty and magnetism that it will hold you spellbound. At that time she will remove her mask and startle you all with her radiance and prominence. The price we paid for this single performance is enormous. But we give our patrons only the best. And now may I introduce some of our guests—our honored guests of the evening. First, Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Holliday Johnson."

The room lights went out and a splash from the spotlight hit the table nearest us. An old toad and her husband turned red as a couple of beats—deadbeats.

I heard the woman say: "But I wanted to know if it was true. You heard what that 'Snooper' said over the radio."

So it went on. A few stood up and took a bow. The district attorney entered the back and smiled. The mayor even nodded his approval. Senator Rhoden took it without change of expression. He sat at a table with a bright-looking young man. His bulgy shirt gleamed in the light, but his hard stern face remained the same. You only needed one look at that face to know that it was going to be tough sledding for the boys if he took over. I guess Latimer and the D.A. figured the same, for he didn't get the light for long. The sheriff simply turned his head and spoke to a judge who was with him.

It was the Flame who gave me the low-down on the "notables." But when I asked her what the idea of their being there was, she just shook her head and said: "It's simply to show the respectability of the place—to the respectable people. Senator Rhoden will go anywhere to learn something. They can't faze him."

THE show was on. Lights, music—and the girl was there. It was a hood rather than a mask that she wore. It was tied under her chin and pulled tightly about her head. Only the holes for her eyes showed—though I think there was a black, loosely knitted place over her mouth and nose to facilitate her breathing.

Anyway, the effect of the "mask" on her singing was not so hot. If Latimer paid real dough for that voice, he'd been stuck. Her dancing was better—especially when she tossed off the black cape and her shapely figure showed.

I leaned over to the Flame and whispered: "Reminds me of the night at the fancy-dress ball—when you and I were working a stunt together. She's built like you, Florence. What's the fuss for? She isn't much."

But she got a big hand when the crowd should have been hollering for their money back. I got up and stepping through the heavy drapes to the left of the table, went to the back of the room and mingled with the folks who had come from the bar and were standing in the back. The big curtains there were pushed aside so all might see.

I heard a young bloke say: "By God, it's true, Genevieve. It's she, all right."

"Know her by her legs, eh?" the half-drunk girl giggled.

"Legs—" the man said. "That's the first time anyone ever saw Dorothy Price's legs. What a joke—for dough, too. The papers will laugh Duncan Price right out of town. I didn't believe it—"

And that was all. I was strutting straight between the tables now. Straight toward the Flame. She saw me, too—raised her eyes and held them on me. I won't say she lost her nerve. I don't believe that the Flame knew fear. But anyway she came to her feet—hit for those curtains I had passed through a few minutes before—and I was after her. Yep—after her and had her—caught by the arm

as she started toward the performer's entrance.

"Rotten, eh?" I swung her around. "So that's the racket. Don't tell me. I know. It's Dorothy Price and she's paying off the boy's I.O.U.'s. She's been lied to. Well—" I jerked Florence to me—half raised her hand—remembered suddenly just who the Flame was and stood dead in my tracks. She had jammed a .38 so deep into my ribs that I could hear them crack.

"By God!" she cried. "No one—not even you—can talk to me like that and maul me around." No slip of a girl now—no innocent twist to her lips and child-like sparkle in her eyes. She was the girl of the night now.

That's right. My part called for a tough role. I was tough. I am tough. But no one ever understood the Flame. I'm fast and can grab guns out of poor weak women's hands as quick as the next fellow. But the Flame was a horse of seven other colors. If she was in the mood—and certainly she seemed to be—she'd scatter me all over the curtains.

I backed away—and so would you.

The Flame said: "I ought to empty the cannon into you—but you'll be killed above anyway. Besides, the boys would laugh themselves to death if Race Williams was knocked over by a girl. So I'll give you a break for a favor—a little favor."

"Yeah—" was the best I could say. "What favor?"

"Harry Largo knows too much and may talk too soon. Just shoot him to death for me."

She was gone like that—through a door toward the front of the house. Me, I turned and faced the district attorney. Maybe he saw the play. Maybe he didn't. He wanted to talk but I beat him to it. I took out my anger on him. I snapped: "Take me to Harvey Price or I'll blast this joint apart."



He whitened, hesitated, smiled.
"Come," he said. "I'll take you to
Harvey Price."

CHAPTER THREE

Headless Harry

WE walked clean back around the room past the thick, ceiling-high drapes that were now pulled back and into the folds of which a dozen men could have hidden.

But they weren't hidden there, for I

A statue leaped out of one of those niches and a knife that seemed to be twenty feet long swept the ceiling.



Brickner said: "We might as well convince Williams we're on the level. We'll take him to Harvey Price."

Latimer came out of his chair. "The private entrance, Brickner?" There was a question in his voice, a question which he answered himself with, "Yes—it must be the private entrance."

"Private or public suits me," I told them.

watched pretty closely. So down a long corridor, a turn to the right, and into Alfred Latimer's private office. Brickner opened the door, locked it after us. Latimer sat there behind a huge desk. There was an elk's head above an open fire—some golf sticks, a tennis racquet and fishing tackle in the corner. The chairs were large and soft. Latimer enjoyed his private office.

Latimer went straight to a closed door, opened it with a key from his pocket and when Brickner had entered, I followed. Latimer snapped on a light. It was a small, closet-like room. There was a high stepladder against the wall. Plainly I could see the trapdoor above. A heavy steel ring was screwed in the bottom of it. Latimer put the ladder beneath the trap, climbed up the ladder. I smiled at

Brickner when he waved me to precede him. Without a word he went first.

Latimer reached the top of the ladder, stretched up and pushed at the trap. It opened as if on hinges. Narrow stairs slipped down close to the top of the ladder. We all three climbed up and the trap closed. Another door and we were in a dim hall.

I said to Latimer: "What was the iron ring for?"

He turned and looked at me in the dimness. "The ring?" he said slowly. "Oh—I use that for hanging things, Mr. Williams—just hanging things."

I guess I got the point and suppose I should have shuddered, but I didn't. I felt something in my stomach, though. Well—maybe I was wrong—maybe Latimer should have shuddered.

Something was in the wind. Either these men intended to kill me and didn't want anyone else in on the know, or they intended to let me take Harvey Price away so I would be gone, too—and Dorothy Price could do her great unmasking—ruin her own reputation and make her father the laughing stock of the community.

I didn't tip my hand that I knew about the girl. I just followed the two men until Latimer threw open two great doors. Then he switched on lights. I saw a big room lit as dimly as the hall.

I won't go into the decorations except to say that they were gaudy—and expensive. Life-size statues stood in majestic dignity along the walls. If this was the main gambling-room there was nothing to show it. A few ordinary tables, long ones that might be used for private dinner parties, and chairs placed about the entire room, their backs against the walls.

Latimer pointed to a small door far down at the end, which stood out fairly well in a brighter dimness.

"Harvey Price," he said. "Two rooms and a bath. Come and talk with him."

Certainly these boys did everything to kill suspicion. Latimer was walking beside me when Brickner told him I preferred to follow. So we went down along that right wall, Latimer and Brickner just ahead of me. I didn't pull a gun but I kept my eyes peeled back over my shoulder. I was wondering if a gunshot could be heard below, and if some lad lay by a hole in a distant corner of the room and would pop me off.

But Brickner and Latimer should know their way about. If the guy missed or didn't make the shot fatal, I'd get both of them. Maybe they didn't know.

I said: "If someone takes a shot at me, why you'll both—both—"

And it happened. A statue shot out of one of those niches. Understand, I didn't see it—just saw the shadow of it—saw the shadow of a knife—a knife that seemed to be twenty feet long sweeping across the wall and ceiling.

NO, I didn't see the man who jumped until I had dropped to one knee, reached, grabbed, drawn and fired. Just my right arm crossed to prevent that lunging steel which was no longer a shadow from burying itself a foot in my chest. My left hand flashed up and the story was ended. His face was almost against my gun when I closed my finger and blasted away. Blasted was right. The face was gone then—gone forever.

Only a body hurtled backward from the terrific impact of my forty-four—only the dull thud of that headless killer—and the jingle of steel upon wood.

A dead silence as heavy feet stopped walking. A deader silence as both those men turned around. Terror crept over Latimer's face as he looked at that faceless body. He gasped and sputtered. Peculiarly, Brickner took it better. There was fear in his face, I guess. Why wouldn't there be? But he said: "What—who was it?"

Latimer gasped: "Largo — Harry Largo."

And the D.A. said: "Williams—Williams—why did you do that?"

"I just wanted to do a lady a favor," I told him, and before they could get over the shock, "Come on—Harvey Price."

You see, it wasn't so much overcaution that saved my life. It was that they were overanxious. I hadn't seen the man posing as a statue, and might not have seen him in a brighter light. The dimness helped me. His jumping body became a gigantic monster against that light.

They led me to Harvey Price without any more argument. They didn't say much, either. Latimer whispered to the D.A. and I think he said: "It doesn't matter much—she wouldn't break her word—not her."

We opened the door at the end, entered a narrow hall, opened another door and there he was. Yes, I knew him from his uncle's description. It was Harvey Price all right, and he was sprawled all over a desk writing notes or something. There were bottles and glasses on the table.

Brickner said: "Harry, this is Mr. Williams. He has been sent by your uncle to take you away. You may do as you wish. Mr. Williams, you may use the side exit. Harvey will show it to you. Is that all?"

What a hopeless three words they were. The town was in a pretty mess when you killed a friend of the D.A. and he wanted to know if that was all.

"That is all," I echoed. "I feel very humble and must apologize for such a messy job. As a rule—but I hope to show you more of my work—rather neater—and more finesse. I pride myself on it."

The D.A. tried twice to talk. Finally he said: "God in Heaven, Mr. Williams! You don't think I had anything to do with that attack on you?"

"Of course not—don't be silly." I closed the door as the two of them left.

I FACED Harvey Price. Harvey Price—less it should have been, for when Harvey, the pasty-faced sot, heard I had come from his uncle he put up one terrible squawk. But I wasn't going to slap Harvey down, at least not yet. I'd listen to his indignant speeches for a while—try to find some clue in Harvey's whisky-soaked brains, if any, to the truth of Dorothy Price's appearance at the Casino.

Harvey Price's father didn't have much money. He was running around on what his uncle gave him—and he had begun to consider it hush money—hush for his own activities. His description? Well, he was thirty and he was drunk. He stood up behind the desk—leaned on it and pointed a finger at me.

"So you're the guy, eh? The guy my father told me my Uncle Duncan was getting to make me behave. They must have laughed themselves sick—Brickner and Latimer."

"They're laughing yet," I told him. "I put on a funny show for them outside. So you got into trouble and your cousin Dorothy is dancing here tonight to get you out of it—those I.O.U.'s."

He took a laugh at that—sneered. "Those I.O.U.s.—she gave them her word—and she tore them up."

My hands were itching to stretch out and grab him by the throat. But I hung onto myself. There was something too fishy about the whole thing. Common sense was hitting me. Dorothy Price was a bright girl—why would she betray her father because of this alcoholic lug's reputation?

Oh, I know people have gone a long way to save someone's reputation. But you can't save something a guy hasn't got. You just looked at this soak and knew that nothing except murder would surprise his best friend.

"So she's dancing for you—disgracing herself and her father for you. For your I.O.U.'s."

"Me? My I.O.U.'s? What the hell do I care about scraps of paper? I wouldn't pay the dirty so-and-so's anyway. What could they do? What can they do?" And with a drunken wave of his hand that almost spilled him, "Hell—she's dancing tonight to save her father from disgrace. I just told her where her father stood and she could do as she damn pleased. I'm no blackmailer—not me. I could have shaken Uncle Duncan down for hundreds, thousands, but me, I didn't want his dirty money. He's a big shot—a puritan—a church man—a leading citizen—and secretly meeting the most notorious woman in town."

"What do you mean?" I got a jolt.

"Pictures of him — of her — together, meeting at a little cabin back in the mountains—a little ranch he bought cheap—and had no use for. Yeah—no decent use for. I got one of the pictures myself. I kept it to mail to him."

I gave him a drink and took one myself. Maybe he didn't need it—but I did. I tried to keep my voice indifferent as I said: "So Brickner let Dorothy tear up those pictures on her promise to dance. Where did you fit?"

"Where did I fit? Dorothy's a bright girl. She wanted to be sure she had all the pictures—every negative—to destroy in her dressing-room tonight. She wanted to know that they were not fakes—so—so—" He leaned for the bottle again. His fish-like eyes blinked and for a moment the film broke. He finished the drink, stiffened slightly and said: "So I told her."

"How did you know?" I fired it at him quickly.

"I'm a bright boy," he said. "That's how I know." He shook his head viciously, glared at me. "I've talked too much—but you won't repeat it—yet."

He was a big man, perhaps six feet three, and weighed over two hundred pounds. His hands were large and hard,

though his face was flabby. I guess he was still a strong man. A strong body can stand a lot of abuse up to thirty.

Harvey Price walked pretty well as he came around the desk toward me. His knuckled right fist was closed and raised. His fish-like eyes swam in drunken rage. He had come half out of his talking drunk and was belligerent. Yes—he was a big man. But me—I know my job. Guns or fists, it's all the same to me.

I WATCHED him carefully. Some drunks suddenly take on great strength. Then he let the blow fly. It was a round-house, all right, smack for my chin. I didn't paste him. I just pulled my head back and let it go by. He spun like a whirling dervish and crashed to the floor.

"Quit your kidding, Harvey." I helped him to his feet. "Why clown around?"

He was dazed and stupid and still belligerent in a sullen sort of way, but he wouldn't talk. He started drinking again and got off on another subject and finally put his hand in his left trouser pocket, felt around a bit and, pulling out a bunch of bills, tossed them on the table.

"For you, boy," he said. "Forget what I said. I was talking through my hat."

"Sure, sure." I stared at those bills—three or four hundred dollars. Then I got my bright idea. I thought I could sober him up. I said: "You're stubborn and I'm stubborn—that's the way to be. I want you to tell me something. You won't. To hell with it, you say. To hell with it, I say. Do you know Harry? Headless Harry Largo?"

"Headless Largo? All afraid of Harry, but not me. I ain't afraid of anyone—not Harry."

"And why should you be?" I opened the door. "Come on out in the main room. I want to show you the joke I played on Harry."

He was leery about it but he let me

take his arm and lead him out the door and down toward the light. At sight of the body Harvey Price staggered all right. But he wasn't drunk any more. I think he went cold sober—just like that. His words were thick—but not entirely from liquor.

"That—that—what's that?" he choked.

"Harry Largo," I told him. "He was a stubborn guy like you and me. I asked him a question and he didn't answer it—so I shot his head off." And grabbing his arm, "Come on, Harvey—how could you assure Dorothy Price that she had all the negatives?"

And the words came out of his mouth slow and distinct and without a moment's hesitation. He said: "Because I took the pictures."

He put his hand inside his jacket pocket, pulled out a small picture, postcard size. "The most notorious woman in town," he said. "God, what a death!"

I was looking at a girl and a man. The man was handing her something. I recognized Duncan Price all right, but not the girl at first—nor what the man was handing her.

When I lifted a magnifying glass from the desk and looked at the picture through it I saw that he was handing her money. And then I saw her face. Oh—I guessed it, and you guessed it, although I tried to pretend I didn't. "The most notorious woman in town." The Flame—Florence Drummond—the Girl with the Criminal Mind.

After I got over that one, I said: "Some mess." I looked straight at him. "Hell, man, your uncle would have given you more money than these birds did. Why didn't you come to me? I'd have fixed the payoff without your uncle knowing."

"But I want him to know." Harvey was on his feet again, the fish-like look in his eyes. "He caused me to come here. I had the pictures in my pocket. I went straight to him. I never asked for a cent.

He said I was rotten—a disgrace to his name. And hell—hell—well, if he wanted a real disgrace to his name, I'd give him one that would make the name of Harvey Price forgotten in town. That's why I laughed at the I.O.U.'s—those pictures were worth plenty."

"And Dorothy has torn up all the pictures?"

He looked up at the clock. "She must have. She went out on the floor once masked. She gave her word to go on the second time at two o'clock unmasked. Sometime between those two periods the pictures would be given to her to destroy. She swore on oath to go through with it. She wouldn't break her word. Not Dorothy—the little fool."

"You'd break yours, I suppose," I couldn't help saying.

"In a second, with those crooks."

I didn't sneer. After all, he was right of course. We're all built different. I made my name good with crooks, murderers and cops by never breaking my word to any of them. But just the same, he was right.

NO—I didn't have to drag Harvey Price from the Casino. I just had to help him a bit when we passed Headless Harry. I didn't joke then or threaten. I knew he had received big money to betray his own family. I knew he had sold out his uncle and his uncle's cause, and the innocent victim, Dorothy, but I led him to the side door—out onto the street and to his father's car. There was a great clock in a church steeple. It was exactly one A.M. Funny that. I had forgotten all about the hour—yet I was right on time.

I heard the gruff voice of Harvey's father, and back of it a woman's voice.

"My boy—my poor boy—and when we are so much in need."

I leaped in and said, as they drove away: "Not poor, madame. Your son's pockets are lined with gold."

Then I walked over to the shadow in the car across the street. It was my boy Jerry—a lad whom I picked up in the underworld when he was a kid. He'd been working for me ever since.

"Jerry," I said. "There will be a stage door—a rear entrance someplace, where the help and entertainers must—"

"An alley," Jerry cut in. "Right across the street—about fifty feet down from where you came out. Waiters and cuties. Not much light, but some of them come out to smoke at the edge and they don't bother to dress much and—"

"And you keep your eye on that alley. A girl will come out soon. She'll either run straight to your car—or I'll toss her into your car. Anyway, she won't be tough to handle. Take her to our bungalow, and don't let her leave. I'll probably hop in the car and come with you, but in case I don't, hang on to her tight—understand?"

"Hell—is she tough?"

"No, but she's clever. Don't let her talk you out of leaving."

"Not me—not me. No woman could ever handle me."

"No." I was sarcastic. "But if this woman 'handles' you, I'll manhandle you."

"Is that all?"

"Yeah—except if I don't come along I'll telephone to see if things broke right. Stay by the phone, and be polite to this girl."

"Rich, eh?"

"Money has nothing to do with it, Jerry."

"But she's rich."

I wasn't going to argue with him any longer.

"Yeah," I said, "she's rich."

I saw Jerry's stupid nod of understanding as if it were true that I take no pride in my work but think only of dough.

Then I turned and stepped back into the Casino.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Girl in the Hood

THE Flame was not around when I hit the bar, pulled up a chair and sat down. She had not been in the main dining-room. People were dancing now. I could see around the edge of the green sea—little groups of people were chewing the fat. All types of faces—some honest, open—some hard—and the "good" people of the town.

I heard a big man with a heavy ribbon attached to his eyeglasses, say: "Nonsense—sheer nonsense. I feel like a fool here."

Another man was shrugging his shoulders and saying to his companions: "If it's true, we should know it and see it. Duncan Price is a hard man. Understand, I'm saying nothing against his—"

And so on even to the jolly little stout citizen who put it pretty straight. "The young people wanted to come—it was free—and you only know your town by seeing what's going on in it."

As for me, I waited until Latimer got mixing with the crowd, who either fell all over him or cut him dead. They'd eat his food, drink his wine, see his scandal—but damned if they'd speak to the man.

Then my moment came. It was where the curtains were drawn back, and I stepped from my seat and dragged the cigarette girl back into the folds with me so suddenly that she didn't even gasp.

"Quiet!" I steadied her tray, pushed a ten-spot into her hand, and spoke rapidly. "I want to get back and see the new star without anyone's knowing it."

"No—no—I can't," she half cried out.

"Listen, kid." I clapped a hand over her mouth and held her tightly. "I picked you out because you were young and your face isn't hard. This dump will close in a day or two. Get out of it. Here's a hundred bucks—two hundred—look—"

"I could go back home — I could — I can't—I can't."

I guess there was fear in her face, even if I couldn't see it. But I had the dough out, and my hand was off her mouth, and I was talking fast.

"That's two hundred and ten dollars, cash, you have now. That's for trying. There will be two hundred more for success. I just want to reach her dressing-room." And when she didn't speak, "Is there anyone guarding her?"

"No, but there's one man outside the door."

"Get the man away. Take me around there."

The girl said: "Her door's locked."

"I'll open that."

"The key's on the inside. She won't open it to anyone. I don't know—I don't understand—"

"You don't have to know—don't have to understand. I'll get in."

"They know you're here—they're afraid of you, I think. No—I—" She gripped the money suddenly, said: "Wait here in the crowd. I'll try."

I thought I was double-crossed. Time was passing. Then the girl made good in a surprising way. She was fully dressed in evening clothes when I saw her again. Evening wrap and all. She worked fast, too. In and out of hallways—she was all business now—just her voice trembled a bit.

"That's her dressing-room door there. They go onto the little stage through another door. There will be no one in front of her door for fifteen minutes. The girls use this hall to go in and out. There's the door to the alley and the street down those stairs."

"So she could open her door and walk right out."

"Yes—why not?"

"Don't you know who she is?"

"I can guess," the girl said.

"And she won't leave?"

The girl's lips curled. "Why should she leave? She's being paid plenty, I'll bet. Well—there's the door—give me the money."

I knelt quickly and looked in the key-hole. The end of the key showed plainly in the lock—an ordinary door key. I took a grin and straightening, gave the girl the money, put both hands on her shoulders, said: "You wouldn't give me the double-cross, would you, kid? And if you did—"

The girl gave me a shock. She stood on her toes suddenly and kissed me. Then she was gone—hurrying down those steps. I'm no mind reader, but I had a feeling that she was on her way back to the farm.

I GOT down to business—unclipped the narrow leather set of tools from my inside pocket—drew out long, strong, steel tweezers and went to work.

There was no noise. The tweezers gripped the end of the key when I shoved them into the key-hole. A tight grip and I spun the key in the lock just as if it were on my side of the door. The girl was on her feet—the hood tightly about her head. But I wasn't watching her—I got the smell of burning film, spotted the ash in the big tray.

I wasn't there to argue with the girl, to break down resistance to that oath, to make her listen to how much better it was to save her father from disgrace than herself or his cause. I smiled as I walked over toward her, toward the hood she gripped with her little hands as she stared at me through the slits.

I said easily: "I'm Race Williams, Miss Price. I want to congratulate you on your noble spirit. Your father above you—your oath above your father. Why—"

And I did it. Just jumped her fast, slammed a hand across her mouth, twisted my coat about her body, and tucking her up under my arm made for the door. If she wanted to break her pretty legs going down those stairs, that was her

business. You see, after I whirled her through that door, I had only one arm and hand for her—and that was on her throat.

Jerry was certainly on the job. He swung the car up, tossed open the door and I threw her in. I started to climb in after her—stopped and slammed the car door. Without a word, Jerry slipped the car from the curb. And without another word, a car behind Jerry's also slipped from the curb. I recognized the driver. It was the big palooka who had first threatened to toss me from the Casino.

It was quick work and nice work on my part. There were two men in the front of that touring car. None in the back—until I stepped in, looked over the front seat and saw the Tommy gun. The play was easy enough to see. Someone had spotted me talking to Jerry—and the death car was there waiting to blast our car when I got in it. The only trouble was I got out of my car and into theirs too fast.

Charlie meant well. He had the machine gun in his hand, but the sudden jerk had made him awkward. I just leaned over, and said: "Put the Tommy gun down, Charlie—or I'll make a telescope out of your head."

"You—Williams—who sent you?"

"Headless Harry," I told him, and to the driver, "Straight ahead, brother. That car you're following doesn't need any trailer."

Jerry turned the corner.

What a night! Murderers, crooks, grafters, gamblers, politicians—why they were all like children at play. For once I had been sent down to a paradise of crime. There was no law—just the threat and the will to kill.

But Duncan Price and the friendly and honest police commissioner had tipped me off just what police precincts could be counted on, and I drove the boys to one of them, where the sergeant booked and

held them on the charge of reckless driving. I didn't want them going back to break the sad news to Latimer that his star attraction had been kidnaped.

That was that. A quarter to two and my work was done. At least for that night. But I'd ring up Duncan Price. He might be worried about his girl not coming home. I found a drug store—started to call Duncan Price and gave Jerry a buzz instead. If he couldn't handle the girl himself, why I'd go over and give him some aid in bringing her home.

I called the number and got Jerry.

"Nice work, boy," I started—and stopped. And then exploded. I said: "What the hell do you mean, she stuck a gun in your side? Not that kid! But—but—"

I slammed down the receiver and looked at the clock on the wall. It was ten minutes of two. Dorothy Price was to go on at two o'clock. And Jerry had told me she had stuck a gun in his back, whacked him on the head with it—and when he came around, she was gone.

Lies? Maybe. But one thing was certain. The girl had vanished. Where? It seemed silly, but I believed it all right. The girl had gone back to the Casino to make good her word—do her dance—and unmask before crooks, murderers, and friends—yes, friends—the damned hypocrites.

Five seconds later I was offering a taxi driver a five-dollar bill to make the Casino in nothing flat. And what's more—it looked like he'd do it.

I SWUNG from the cab and let go for the main door. I was too late. The girl was dancing but she still wore the hood. It was tough to get through the crowd. Even the bartender was there. Of course, I worked my way through—elbowing left and right and threatening anyone who threatened me. One guy who wanted to fight it out in the center of the

mob never knew how he went down.

I got through, got right to the thick silken curtain before which Latimer was standing. His face was still white, and I noticed that he divided his attention between the hooded dancer and the man—yes, the little stocky, gray-haired man who stood there leaning on his cane. You couldn't mistake him. It was Duncan Price himself. He was staring straight at the girl. And me with just a single thought. Boy! Could that girl dance! She didn't appear worried now. She was whirling faster and faster as she tossed off bits of her clothing. This girl had talent, real talent. Certainly she was making good to Latimer and Brickner. She was giving them their money's worth.

The music crashed to the close—the girl came gracefully down to the edge of the steps—one foot behind her as she leaned forward and buried her face above a slender knee.

There was a hush. Then the fatal strike of a clock. Just two—just two o'clock.

Quiet? Why you could have heard a bead drop from a chorine's headdress. The girl grabbed off her hood and came to her feet.

There was a sort of choking intake of breath. That's right. The girl was not Dorothy Price—she was Florence Drummond—the Flame.

Too much is enough. Three times now she had turned up to knock me cold.

THE applause came then. What's more, I led it. Then I stopped. The Flame faded to the back. A maid slipped a long coat over her white shoulders. Then she ran to the edge of the stage—jumped down onto the dance floor—sped across it between the tables—came straight to me, and grabbing me by the arm, pulled me over to a table close to Senator Rhoden's.

I didn't think. I couldn't think. Somehow, I knew the Flame had taken the girl's place. Somehow, I knew that Lati-

mer was surprised. But good or bad—or why she did it, I didn't know.

Then I saw Malcom Brickner. He was standing by the senator's side. He was muttering "Not going, Senator? Not going?"

The senator turned very slowly. "I have wasted my entire evening. You brought me here with the promise of opening my eyes to the truth about—about something which seemed very mysterious. I was a fool to waste an evening. Just what was the purpose?"

"Why—" Malcom Brickner's face was a pleasant sight to me. Disappointment—confusion—yes, and rage, was there—buried beneath the surface fairly well. "Don't you understand, Senator? Why Mr. Duncan Price was here—was here a minute ago?"

The senator puffed up like a pouter pigeon, said: "Mr. Duncan Price brought me a letter and a document from the governor of our state. I have been named special prosecutor as of midnight—er—" he consulted his watch—"midnight last night. You seem surprised."

"I am." Malcom Brickner was telling the truth all right. "I had heard no such thing—had no idea of such a thing."

"Not even a rumor, eh?" If the senator meant to put levity into his words, it was not in his voice nor in his eyes. "Well—you will receive notice in the morning, no doubt. Good-evening, sir. I shall call at your office at seven thirty this morning. I am sure I can count on your cooperation in every way."

"Seven thirty?" The D.A.'s eyes widened. "Why, it's past two o'clock now."

"Seven thirty," the senator said again. "Because I have wasted the public's time and money tonight is no reason why I should sleep away more of it. I always begin work at seven thirty. Good-night, sir."

And the senator was gone.

"You'd better fly back to town, Flor-

ence," I said. "I don't get the whole show. I'm rather thick that way. You did the girl a good turn. Do you know about the pictures?" And when the smile went off her face and she put her cigarette out on the tray, "Did Latimer or Brickner send you—or was it your own idea to shake the old boy down later? Did you know that they had pictures of Duncan Price and you?"

"Hell!" she flashed back at me. "So that's what the kid burned. I—" She bit at her lip, and I saw Brickner walking toward our table after seeing Senator Rhoden to the door. Then the Flame said: "Boy, do you grab up your women and treat them rough! Jerry was surprised when I stuck the gun into his side," And before I could answer, "Hello, Malcom. Sit down."

So I had tossed Jerry a wildcat instead of a helpless child!

Malcom Brickner leaned on the table. "What the hell did you do, Florence? By God, I'll—"

"Easy, Malcom." She jerked her head toward me, lit another cigarette and blew smoke in Brickner's face. "Race Williams grabbed off your prize act. Her hood and costume were left behind. It was too late to hear you and Latimer cry about it—so I did the dance to save your face."

BBRICKNER tried to hold himself in. He was young—he was strong—or he would have had a stroke. He killed me—cut my body up in little pieces and chucked my heart in my face—all in one single look. Then he spoke to the Flame.

"I'm sorry, Florence. I'll need a good friend now. No one knows better than you that they are trying to frame me." And turning to me, "Come, Williams, I'd like to talk to you in the bar. All hell will break loose tonight." He placed his arm about the Flame and said in a low voice: "I can always trust you, Florence."

She put those great glims on him. Glims that had ruined many men. "You can always trust me, Malcom," she said. "Always."

As for me, as I followed Malcom Brickner to the bar—well, somehow I thought that both of them had lied.

At the bar, he said to me: "I don't imagine, Mr. Williams, that you would shoot me to death before all these people—and I don't imagine you would permit yourself to be jockeyed into any unfavorable situation here tonight. I am no longer the district attorney. The morning editions will carry that word. So—from twelve on last night my responsibility ended. If all hell breaks loose now, I cannot be blamed for it. I would like you to call up Mr. Duncan Price. I would like you to tell him that without my stern hand, my stern orders, our fair city will be a shambles before dawn. Tell him he must bring to me all the evidence he has collected. Yes, the Flame told me he had it."

"I'll tell him when I see him."

"No, Mr. Williams, that will not help Duncan Price and his daughter, or prevent sudden death in the city, for the truth is that you will never see him again. Oh, you can leave here when you please. But you will never reach your residence alive. It's not one man—but hundreds."

He was suave again now. And what's more, he wasn't talking through his hat. He was a desperate man. He hadn't expected the thing to come on him so soon. And neither had I. Duncan Price had worked it wrong, of course. Duncan Price knew Brickner's men, Latimer's hoodlums, and everyone of them should have been covered—arrested—as soon as Brickner was superseded by Senator Rhoden. Now—Brickner was right. He could turn hell loose in the city and not be blamed for it. He might perhaps win praise, for preserving order with an iron hand for so long.

But maybe my advice would still cover that—and there was the phone at the end of the bar.

Brickner handed it to me and said: "You probably know his private number. I don't telephone him often."

The idea was not a bad one as Brickner saw it. A death car—maybe two. Even I could not avoid that with my popguns against machine guns. But Brickner was a fool. I could have called the police commissioner and gotten a police escort of a dozen motor cycles. Still, that wasn't my way. What a laugh it would give the boys back in New York if they ever heard that Race Williams had asked for a police escort because he was threatened by a lousy two-timing, murdering ex-servant of the people!

I picked up the phone and called my own number. I said: "Listen, Jerry. Bring the car down and plant it smack in front of the Casino, even if you have to clean the fenders off every high-priced jalopy there. Oh, and Jerry, toss a couple of Tommy guns in the back. Hell—of course I'll handle both of them. Set them up on the racks on both doors."

That was all. I turned to Brickner. "Well," I said, "that about covers the whole show. Now if Miss Drummond—" I turned back. The Flame was gone, and so was Alfred Latimer.

A funny feeling that. I had intended to take the Flame with me, as a hostage to my safety, I told myself, but that wasn't true. Somehow I was thinking of her safety. Why? I don't know why. It was a long time since I had held the Flame in my arms. I took a laugh. I had held her only an hour or so ago, even if I didn't mean to.

THE Casino was thinning out now and I thinned with the crowd. I stood there in the doorway until Jerry came. I want to tell you, some chauffeurs had heart disease about their highly polished

expensive paint-jobs when Jerry took his U-turn and jammed the car right in front of the door.

I spotted the gunman as I moved toward the car. I watched him move, too. He was as well dressed or better than anyone in the crowd. Carried himself with the easy assurance of a gentleman that knew his way about. Only his eyes gave him away. Under the bright lights he watched me and the car, and his easy gait when he started to walk was timed nicely for us to reach the door of the car together. Horns were tooting—lights were blinking on and off—cops were clearing the streets. It would be simple to get a man there on the street, and move on unsuspected.

We reached the car almost together. His hand went up under his coat and his shifty eyes for a single second covered his getaway. In that second I let him have it. Simple? Of course it was simple. Simple for me, not for him.

I stuck my left elbow into his side. His head came down, and as he started to double up, I half swung my body so others wouldn't see, and chopped a right to his chin.

A cop was two feet from me when the would-be killer went down. Even the cop didn't see the play.

I said in my best Park Avenue manner, "Disgusting how some people can't handle their liquor," and climbed into the car.

Jerry said: "What was that talk about tossing machine guns into the car and racking them up on the door? I didn't have any machine guns."

"You didn't have, Jerry?" I leaned back against the cushion. "Well, Jerry, it's not what you have in life that counts, but what people think you have."

And I was right—for we drove straight to Duncan Price's house without even a car coming near us. Jerry was trying to explain things during the ride.

"Hell, boss," he said, "you never told me you were going to toss a rattler into the car. I tell you, she didn't give me any pretty smile. I didn't fall for her—and I wasn't just dumb. I took the car up a couple of blocks—treated her real tough. I told her if she made even a peep I'd pull to the curb, tie her up like a sack of potatoes and open her head with a wrench—did it through the side of my mouth like a tough gangster, too."

"Then what?" I didn't tell Jerry the truth. "The poor little girl half fainted and sent you into a drug store for some smelling salts?"

Jerry gasped. "Not that dame. I never seen nor heard them come any tougher. When I half turned to look at her she pasted my face around with the nose of a gun and said: 'Pull to the curb before I blast all your teeth down your throat!'"

But I wasn't listening to Jerry now. Things were certainly mixed up. And the Flame—she wasn't so bad. I don't mean about her being a criminal. That part I could understand—with her. But she had given the kid a break on the dancing angle. Certainly if Brickner and Latimer knew the truth it would be curtains. And where was Dorothy Price? Home, of course. Or was she? Was the Flame playing a deeper game than any of us thought?

Cars now — inconspicuous cars — on side-streets—parked in driveways of private homes. I nodded at that. They were there on my orders. I pulled up before Duncan Price's door—hopped from the car and went straight up the steps.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Promise to Dance

TWO detectives came out of the darkness, dropped back, and the door opened. The commissioner of police was there, half a dozen or more first-grade

detectives, several lieutenants, three or four captains, a couple of inspectors.

The commissioner took me aside.

I said: "Well, the governor came clean. Harvey Price is out of the dump. The expected scandal, whatever it was, didn't go through. Duncan Price has a list of these crooks. You know where they are going to be tonight."

"He knows."

"It's the same thing," I snapped in. "But what you don't know is why they have been gathered together at these different points each night lately. You were waiting for the governor to act. Then you were to strike—hit all these hide-outs simultaneously. Why do you think all these crooks are congregated together in different parts of the city?"

"I never understood that. Duncan Price doesn't understand that."

"They are congregated together for the same reason you have your men ready. You want to crash down on them—lock them up. Price has collected the evidence. We'll indict half the Grand Jury, impanel a new one, and the big clean-up will be over almost before it starts. That's our end. Now look at Brickner's end of it. They expected the governor would act just as much as you did. So they have their hoodlums ready. Tonight they'll wreck the city, then scatter. Don't you get the point? The dirty newspaper that has backed Brickner and his crooked crowd already has the headlines in print. *Brickner Tossed Out By Politics*. And all about the hard-driving criminals hating Brickner—Brickner feared by all the criminals. His heavy hand is stayed by the governor's act, and the criminals held in check by his hand alone break loose. Don't you see? They'll even say the crooks of the city helped get Brickner out. You've got to strike first. Why haven't you?"

The commissioner bit his lip. "Something has gone wrong. Something has

happened to Duncan Price. He's not the same. He—he—God, man, he acts as if he hasn't got the evidence—hasn't got the list of places at which the crooks were ordered to congregate."

"What do you mean, Price hasn't got that list? And if he hasn't, he's got evidence enough to roast Brickner, Latimer and a dozen or more of the leaders."

"I don't know," the commissioner said helplessly. "I was just an ordinary citizen elected to a job that I have found difficult. You go and see Duncan Price—if he'll let you in the room." He pointed to the study door.

I rapped. No answer. The commissioner said: "He won't let anyone in."

I gave the door a pound that rattled the cement ceiling.

I got an answer. It was: "Stay out!"

"This is Race Williams, Mr. Price," and he muttered something about not caring. I gave it to him straight. "I want in. If you don't unlock the door—why, I'll bring the door in with me."

The door opened and I went in. I knew what a fiery dominating man he was, so I got my talk in first.

"What's all this rot?" I started and stopped dead. He simply locked the door behind me and went slowly back to the chair by the fire. He looked ten years older since I had seen him an hour before.

He said simply: "Latimer just called a couple of minutes ago. They're going to kill my child."

"She's not home, then—" I started and stopped. It sounded stupid. It was stupid. Plain facts, those. A plain truth, too. Before they were only playing at being tough because no one opposed them. They didn't know how to take me. Desperation is a terrible thing in the mind of a man who has gone to murder. I opened my mouth to tell him they wouldn't dare. But I didn't tell him that. I didn't lie to him. I said: "What do they want? The raid called off?"

"No—no—they don't know about that. They want all the evidence I have against them. What do you—what shall I do?"

I BIT my lip. I didn't like it. But there was only one answer. I gave it to him, though it hurt.

"The city didn't hire me. You hired me to protect your best interests. You brought me in at the end so that bodily harm or disgrace would not strike your family. It's for you to say."

He hesitated a long moment and then produced a paper from his pocket and handed it to me.

"That's the list of the street corners they are waiting on. The garages they are ready to leave—to strike the city with terror—kill and maim innocent people. I have been well informed. It is to be a night of terror. Take it—talk to the commissioner. Advise him—then come back to me. It may take their minds off my daughter."

I went out into the hall and talked to the commissioner. He didn't quite understand it as I gave it to him. I hate murderers. I hate criminals—I hate woman-killers. I did talk to his men—those he had there—and there were a dozen or more of them.

I said: "Boys, you're the police of this city—hired to protect the citizens. Most of you want to do it. You've been afraid. Not physically afraid, but afraid of your jobs—afraid of the future of your wives and families, or those dependent on you. It must have burned inside your guts to have to take the guff from rats you knew were killers—see them walk the streets sneering at you after you had made an arrest. To find yourself demoted—walking beats in the outskirts until Commissioner Walker here came in.

"Tonight you have orders to get certain men. The list is here in my hand. These men are armed and awaiting orders to go out and terrorize the entire town.

They have always had first crack at you. Tonight you have first crack at them. This city has been robbed plenty. It can't afford the cost of lengthy trials. To convict a man it costs thousands of dollars—to bury him, five bucks. There's no fooling tonight. Either dead cops or dead murderers. The commissioner stands behind you. Senator Rhoden stands behind him and the governor of the state stands behind the senator. I want to see you all decorated for bravery under fire—not have your wives receive medals. So that's how it is. All hell is to break loose in the city tonight. Go out and break it."

An inspector had taken my list—was calling out addresses—giving sharp, quick orders that men were answering eagerly. They were good men. They had had their first real order in years that they understood.

I went back into the library, said to Price: "Give me Alfred Latimer's private phone number—you know, the one you had tapped."

"He's changed it—I can't get it now. The law's against wire-tapping and—"

The headquarters operator had the number for me in about five seconds. I called it.

After a moment, Latimer whispered: "Who is it?"

I said: "It's your Uncle Race—Headless Harry's friend."

That didn't throw him. He chuckled back into the phone. Things were different now.

HE said: "Come on down and kid us some more, boy. That was a funny one about Harry, but I got a little joke that will split your sides. Price's daughter promised to dance for us—she's going to keep her promise. She'll do the dance on the end of a rope. I'll leave her body for Duncan Price. Something to remember us by if he ever catches up with us. Like the idea?"

I bit my lip, said: "Let me have it all."

"All—it's simple. We just found out from Florence Drummond that Duncan Price wants to spring a big surprise. That he has kept his evidence against me and Brickner and the Flame private from everyone. Bring that evidence down and you can have his daughter."

I said: "Hold the wire." I set down the hand piece and went over to Duncan Price. He looked like a broken man when I first told him what they wanted. But he pepped up considerably when I told him: "I don't believe in high-minded stuff, Mr. Price. I don't believe you have the right to sacrifice your daughter. I'll take a chance but not commit suicide."

"But—there's Latimer. He killed a young girl—killed her horribly—a girl I had planted in his office—tortured her to get information from her. I have her ante-mortem statement—and facts she gathered. I didn't bring it before the Grand Jury because the Grand Jury was packed by the district attorney. Must he go unpunished and—"

I swallowed the curse and said: "She was a paid detective like me—like the others you hired, and they died. That won't save your daughter."

He went to his safe and opened it. He had affidavits, statements, plenty of stuff. I took it all in a briefcase. It filled it.

Duncan Price said, but his voice was weak and his words not convincing: "Could I betray my fellow-citizens? Besides, Latimer may be bluffing."

"Latimer's a rat. A cornered rat." I gave him the truth. "He's got nothing left but vengeance. There has never been a state law passed that can fry a man more than once. He'll kill your daughter."

After all, I was telling him what he wanted to hear. He paid me. I didn't go into his picture business with the Flame, his own actions with "the most notorious woman in town." But I did say: "There

is no evidence about Miss Florence Drummond. How come?"

"There is no evidence against her," he snapped.

"There was, and you destroyed it. Is that correct?"

"You must be—" he paused. "I tell you there was no evidence against that woman."

So the old bird liked the Flame! Well—who didn't? Of course she had given him a line about herself. Friendless in the hands of criminals—and he had told her how he was going to wipe them out—about the evidence, perhaps. Maybe she had taken him over. She had taken many men over—big men—influential men—fooled top politicians, top criminals, but looking at the stocky little figure of Duncan Price it was hard to believe he had been taken in.

I said: "How did you get such complete evidence as this?"

"Detectives—"

"They must have been damn good." I eyed him.

"They were paid enough—or rather the one was. I'll admit I got far more than I expected."

The phone was buzzing. He looked at it helplessly, said: "Mr. Williams, I place everything in your hands."

"Fine," I nodded, and picked up the hand phone, said: "O.K., Latimer, I'm coming down. You know me and should know my record over the years. Every other crook does. You produce the girl and you get the evidence. Don't try to play smart."

And after listening to him for a minute I took a laugh when I answered his question if I'd be armed. I said: "Don't kid me. I'll be sporting two rods—and itching to use them. You've got the cards—at least one card in the little lady. Play your hand straight and you have no worries. Half-hour hell! I'll be there in ten minutes."

CHAPTER SIX

The Trap Is Sprung

JERRY drove hard and I made it in nine. Far distant I heard the scream of a siren and the noise of guns. The boys must have started out pretty fast. We ran straight to the Casino, dashed over one block, turned the corner where the yawning doors of a dark garage faced us and drove right down past the now darkened main door to the Casino.

That is, Jerry went straight down the street. I slipped open the door fifty feet before we reached the entrance—caught my balance as my moving feet hit the sidewalk and kept running right up to the husky brute of a lad who was waiting there.

I don't know if he was there to bring me straight to Latimer or if he was supposed to shoot me down. Anyway, my mad jump from that car pounded me against his chest before he knew just what was happening.

I said: "I'm Race Williams—got a date with Latimer."

Then, in the moonlight, I recognized him as one of the bad boys who had sidled down the bar toward me—and sidled back again. He had a face on him that was built to frighten children but he didn't take me for any child. He looked rather confused.

"You remember me," I went on. If Latimer thinks he's got anything up his sleeve and this is a trap for me, it's your own hard luck—not mine."

"Why?" was the best he could do.

"Because," I told him, "when the trap is sprung you'll be right ahead of me—and I'll make a hole in your back big enough to climb in and hide."

"There might be a hundred people here for all you know, and the first one might kill you."

"O. K., buddy. There will be only

ninety-nine when you're dead. But if you want to die for dear old Latimer, it's up to you."

He grew suddenly mild, gentle and friendly. "You've got things wrong, Race," he said. "I don't know the play, but Latimer is expecting you—glad to see you and—God, what's *that*?"

And "that" was the screeching of tires—the swing of a car around the corner and the flash and roar of riot and machine guns smack into the darkened garage I had just passed.

"It sounds," I said, "like the police. And it sounds like they're having target practice."

"Gawd," he said. Then "Gawd" again as he ran his sleeve across his wet forehead. "Jake Waters and some of the boys were in a car right in that garage entrance."

"'Were' is correct," I told him. "Now take me to Latimer."

He moved quickly to the door. His hands were fumbling for the lock. His voice shook when he spoke. "The police—they never did anything like that before."

"They're learning." I put it like a college professor. "A dead cop is never any good to anyone—least of all himself. That goes for crooks, too."

"I thought things were all right." He almost chewed his tongue off to get the words out.

"They are—but it depends on your point of view. The cops are shooting first tonight. We've had quite a laugh over it."

He mumbled something and let me into the Casino. Dark curtains a couple of feet from the door deadened all light from the street. I knew that after I passed through the curtains and saw in the dim light the green sea—the lights beyond—the bar in a dull glow—and straight ahead of me the little hall which led to that private office.

"Latimer's in there," Scare-face said. "Go ahead."

"Where's your manners?" I gave it to him lightly. "Age before beauty. Lead the way."

"Hell," he straightened. "I'm only twenty-four."

I didn't try and make him happy. "Something tells me you're going to die sooner than I am—lead the way."

"Latimer's all right—he's all right—anyway, why play me? I'm only the guy who takes orders."

"You won't take orders any more if things are wrong. You'll be too dead."

THE staccato notes of machine guns came faintly to us from behind the heavy doors of the Casino. I stuck my hand in my pocket. He licked at dry lips.

"Latimer is in his office right there." He pointed to the door. "Everything is above-board. You're to walk in and make a deal. That's all I know."

"The girl?"

There was genuine surprise in his face. "What girl?"

I took a long look at him. He was no actor—except a bad actor. I nodded at that. I guess Brickner and Latimer had decided to deal the boys out on the girl question—and I didn't blame them.

"O. K.," I nodded. "You're just a young man who got in with bad company." I leaned forward quickly and snapped the gun from under his arm. "Here's your break. Take a powder on the gang. The racket has blown!"

He looked at me a long time. There was not much hesitation on his face when he said: "Thanks for the tip, buddy." And as the distant ping of shots came, he shuddered—pointed to the door—turned and was gone.

I walked straight up to the door—knocked. Latimer's voice was clear and friendly. "Williams," he called out. "Open the door and come right in."

I stiffened. Latimer had not been cheerful or pleasant before. A trap? Of

course I expected one. I couldn't see the sense in it, yet I suspected one. He knew my word would be good. He knew I knew his wouldn't. He hated my guts for the way he had been handled by me. Vengeance—the lust to kill—all might be there. Maybe he valued my death above all things except one thing—and that one thing was his life.

I turned the knob and opened the door a crack. "That's it, Williams," he said. "I'm in a hurry to get this over. I'm sitting behind my desk unarmed. You can see the whole room. So open the door slowly and be sure I'm willing to do things your way."

I asked: "You're alone?"

Latimer's voice was clean-cut, honest. Too honest. "I'm alone—just open the door slowly."

"Slowly"—that was my cue. I pushed the door open about ten inches—raised my right foot—let it go against hard wood. Did that door smack back against the wall and tear itself off at the hinges? It did not. It went halfway, stopped. Then swung back as I stepped into the room.

Latimer sat behind a desk unarmed. His face did more tricks than Ferdinand the Bull's. His eyes were bulging and I followed his glance. The man lay where the door crashed back. He had a gun in one hand and a blackjack in the other. Nice idea—to crack me down as I came in—or just shoot me in the back. Simply a murderer's choice.

"So you'd put the finger on me, Latimer? Smart guy, eh?"

Latimer never batted an eye. I didn't like the way he looked. I didn't like the bulging eyes—the steadiness of them—nor the way he leaned on the desk. But what I didn't like most was the different picture I got of that private office. The ventilating system, perhaps? A ventilating system that was not there before. Little open squares like windows along the wall. I didn't see the faces. I didn't see the

guns. But I felt the eyes—or, more truthfully—I felt the guns that those eyes followed. Latimer had read too many books. Four men were covering me with guns.

A little melodramatic, you think. Well, melodrama or no, lead kills just the same.

I never let on I had spotted those little squares in the wall. I just figured I could take no position that would protect me from them. Latimer tried to attract my attention. He spoke quickly.

"Just a bodyguard, Williams. You're rather a rough fellow. Now—let me have the evidence, and I'll see that Dorothy Price goes home."

FOR a moment my stomach dropped. Was the girl dead? There is just one rule of the underworld. If kidnaping with physical harm to the victim means a death sentence, it's better and much easier to handle a body than a live girl. A body will never come out of the grave and identify you in court.

I was covered from several good angles. I could turn, of course, and put a bullet in one square, or even two, where the men watched. But I couldn't get them all before one got me. It was a rather elaborate trap, but then traps are educational. A lad always learns something when he walks into one. And I'm a lad who admits he has plenty to learn.

I walked easily toward Latimer and the desk he sat behind. I watched his hands as they stayed on it. Other eyes watched me.

Latimer said: "You've got the evidence with you? Your word is good."

"Yeah—" I nodded. "I've got the evidence for you when I get the girl. Here—" I shot my hand toward my jacket pocket—let that hand ride up again, and when it came loose, I pounded a forty-four-caliber revolver against his chest. I didn't just hold it there and talk tough, my finger tightly on the trigger. Not me. I pulled back the trigger—held the gun so

—my thumb holding the hammer so that if my thumb slipped off—or I even let go of it—or even lost the power to hold it—Latimer took lead—just above the upper part of his chest.

I said in explanation: "I want the girl."

He let me have it then, a gloat in his eyes while he talked. It faded slightly as I listened quietly. He told me about the lads covering me—five of them—and how he wanted that evidence laid on his desk—my gun dropped—or he'd order them to shoot from different angles.

"Five?" I raised my eyebrows. "Five? You fooled me there. I only counted four ventilators." Then I gave Latimer a little talk on guns—their use and their misuse.

I said: "This gun I hold close to your chest has the hammer pulled well back. I don't have to press the trigger. A good shot from one of your men—a fatal shot—and down goes the hammer and up will go Latimer. It's an awkward position in which to hold a gun. My thumb is already growing numb. Order those men to close their ventilators—fifteen seconds."

He jerked erect, said: "You die, too."

"Are you interested in my death or yours? Come on. Ten seconds are gone."

"You'll—" he stared straight at me—then almost shouted: "Hold those shots—close those ventilators!"

Latimer was a very wise man. I wasn't bluffing. I meant business. There was a single brilliant light in that room. It was in the ceiling directly over Latimer's head. I had figured nicely. I'd plug Latimer, then shoot out the light. The big boss dead, the boys would join Scare-face in a powder.

My eyes drifted slightly as each ventilator snapped closed. I nodded as I discovered the fifth one.

Latimer said: "All right—the evidence for the girl."

I said: "The girl for the evidence."

"Brickner doesn't like that. If we're picked up later, she can appear against us."

"She won't. I promise you that. Where is she?"

"There's no warrant for me yet." He straightened in his chair. "If I'm going to die, I'll die for something real—not this evidence Duncan Price has collected. I'll make his girl scream for mercy. I'll take a knife and—"

"Headless Harry was good with a knife," I reminded him.

LATIMER went into the foulest description of the abuse and torture that the girl would suffer if he didn't get the evidence first. "Duncan Price has evidence what happened to others, Williams. Wait until he sees his own girl's dead body. By God, he'll have hard work to identify her. He wants it rough—you want it rough. Well—it'll be rough enough to suit either of you. And what's more, you can't threaten me. Malcom Brickner's got her, you know. She'll ring up her father if things go wrong between you and me, Race, and he can hear her—"

Blood went up into my head—dazed my vision. But I spoke very softly. He should have been warned. I don't often speak softly. I said: "Maybe you'll tell me where she is?"

"Me?" he laughed. "You could hack me to pieces and I wouldn't tell. I'll see her—"

I swung my gun down and up and he pounced out of that chair as if someone had put a lever under his chin. He didn't get a chance to be surprised. I stepped around the desk and beat him to his knees. Then I side-swiped my gun across his face.

"God! God! What are you going to do to me?"

He looked up as he cried out.

"Cut you to pieces. It's your idea." He tried to duck the downward sweep of the gun as I turned it in my hand. Like his kind, Latimer blew too soon. Killer and torturer of women! I was mad all

right when I struck him. He was ready to talk before I was ready to listen. But I held back my flaying gun. After all, it was business with me.

He was there on his knees, this killer and torturer of women. He was screaming, too—pleading and begging: "Don't hit me again—you'll kill me and then you'll learn nothing."

He was right.

I said: "Where is she?"

He didn't hesitate. He said: "Brickner's got her up in his bungalow with the Drummond girl."

"Can you get hold of her?"

He paused for a long time.

Then he said: "No—but I can tell you how."

After that, he talked—talked long and well.

"Look," he said, "the town wants a fall guy. They won't be satisfied with all these little crooks. They won't even be satisfied with me. They'll want Brickner. Look, Williams, I'll tell you how to find her—how to get her safely from Brickner—everything for your promise—your word—that Duncan Price will let me slip out of the state. Understand, I'll turn Brickner in—I'll—can you do it? Will you do it?"

I gave it a thought, then talked to him straight. "Latimer," I said, "you could have had the evidence for the girl. But you deliver Brickner and Duncan Price's daughter—and you've got a free ticket. And there is no man anywhere I'd rather see roast."

He didn't hesitate now. He said: "I'll do it."

I didn't have to ask him things after that. He went into great detail. He sketched out the house for me. The room Brickner had the girl in—the best way to enter it. He finished with, "You're a lone worker, Williams—and aren't we all? Brickner left me here tonight—and things went wrong. I'm thinking of only one

person now—myself. Did you bring that evidence against me?"

I said: "I have the evidence against you—against Brickner. I didn't bring it in here with me. I'm not a fool. But I can lay my hands on it. Are you alone here now?"

He said that he was. The phone rang then, and I let him lift it and talk. His chest sort of fell. He dropped the instrument back in its cradle, turned to me, said: "Duncan Price, with your advice, has beaten us to it. The police seem to be themselves again." And with a resigned sort of shrug, "Forty-two of the boys have been killed—shot down before they had a chance to move."

"Only forty-two?" Maybe I wasn't oversympathetic.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Call to Kill

WE STOOD in front of the Casino. I lit a butt and finally flagged Jerry who was driving around and around with the evidence, brought him in with me. We all went back into Latimer's office and the sweat was running down his forehead. Little cubes of perspiration—ice cubes, I'll lay ten to one. His eyes bulged further and his hands began to rub together when I took the stack of papers Jerry had given me and laid them on the table there before him.

I let him look at the affidavits and different statements including the ante-mortem statement of the dead girl. Then I showed him another and his eyes fairly popped. It was a brutal statement—about as bad as I had ever read about any man—or even heard, for that matter. I remembered it pretty well.

Part of it went like this —

"Latimer took me into his office with Stevens and he tried to make Stevens

talk. But Stevens wouldn't tell where he got his information and Latimer told him to walk across the room and open the door that led to the trap and the room above. I was standing there and saw it all. Stevens opened that door—a ladder that must have been leaning against it crashed to the floor—then I saw the woman. Not all of her body—but just part of it. Later I saw all of it. She had been alive when that ladder hit the floor. But now she was dead. A heavy bit of wire was twisted about her neck. I could swear I heard her neck crack—but Stevens was right there looking into the small closet-like room. He must have seen her face—seen her die. It was his bride of one year. I never saw Stevens again—alive or dead."

The statement was signed *Johnny Weaver*.

"It's not Weaver's handwriting," Latimer gulped, and then, "Weaver couldn't have written it. He's dead—or—or"

I asked him: "Did you ever see Weaver's handwriting?" And when he shook his head mechanically, "The experts on the stand can attend to that. O. K. Throw it in the fire."

He looked at me twice—then tossed it in.

I went on; "You know my record for keeping my word. You can destroy all that evidence there. And you have my promise of no prosecution. I want to be sure that you are going to tell me the truth—and that nothing will happen to Dorothy Price."

"That's right—that's right." He wasn't waiting to examine those papers now. He was down on his knees throwing them into the fire, making them burn. It was hard for me to talk to him the way I did—but I wanted to impress upon him what a smart man I thought he was now—and later impress upon him what a smart man I was.

"You were smart, Latimer," I told him.

"That was some trick in getting rid of one enemy and impressing others with the way he died."

"It wasn't bad."

He looked at me.

"Killed many that way?" I was smiling and itching to get my fingers on his throat.

"Oh—I guess nearly a—" He stopped, looked at Jerry, realized there would be a witness, and finished: "Maybe—who knows?"

ALL murderers are proud of their work. Latimer was proud of his. He said: "Since we've nothing left in writing we can look at it the way Weaver might have imagined it."

He crossed the room then and opened the door.

The trap with the steel ring in it was far above.

"There is no door jamb," he told me. "That folding ladder there leans against the wall—supported by the door. The door opens and the ladder falls. Now, if someone were sitting on top of that ladder, bound hand and foot, and his neck attached to that steel ring by a wire, why it would be a surprise to the man on the ladder, and also to the one who opened the door. It would also have a good moral effect on the door-opener—if it happened to a friend of his who had double-crossed me."

"That's clever, damn clever, but you'd have to hide the wire away well, or someone—"

Latimer cut in with a proud little laugh.

"It might be a piece of wire like that one running from the wall plug to the lamp—which could be replaced at any-time."

"Smart—very smart." I patted him on the back, and though my voice was pleasant enough, I'd have patted him harder if I had had a knife in my hand. "Now,

Latimer, the evidence is gone. You have my promise. I want you to tell me how to reach that bungalow and save the girl—a sure way.”

“I can only tell you the best way to try—after that you’re on your own, Williams. Brickner’s fast with his gun—desperate now.”

I said: “Do the best you can. I can’t ask for more. You see our lives depend upon it.”

“Our lives?” Thick eyebrows went up. “You mean your life.”

“No—our lives, Latimer. You and I are going to work together tonight. If I die, you die.”

“Me? How?”

“On the ladder.” I gave him a real grin now—at least my teeth showed. “Yes, you’ll be sitting right on top of that ladder—inside the closet. Just your own cleverness. If I don’t call Jerry here at a certain time—then he’ll open the door. I hope that you didn’t think I was simply going to trust to your childlike honesty?”

LATIMER fairly screamed. “No—no—you can’t do that. I’ve done my part. Once the ladder is set against that door, you’ve got to be very careful how you open the door and put your foot in the crack. I tell you—no—no—” and he went wild—jumped straight at me—his huge hairy hands at the end of those long arms gripping for my throat.

Just gripping, understand. They never got there. I let my right fist come up hard then—catching him in mid-air—and bounced him back against the wall. He sat down slowly and stayed there.

“O. K., Jerry.” I pointed to the lamp wire. “Let’s do our stuff.”

Latimer had been a careful man. Those golf clubs, tennis racquets and fishing tackle looked natural enough. He could bind a victim up, yet a search of his room would never disclose anything that might

be used for the purpose of strangling or tying a man.

We had some trouble setting Latimer on top of that ladder, and twice we nearly hung him and dumped ourselves down on the floor. But he came around—saw I was determined, and assisted us all he could.

“It must be an awful death, waiting for someone to open the door,” I told him. “Now give it to me in detail if you want to live.”

He didn’t seem so frightened then as he described in more detail the house—how to reach it—the best method of approach from the back—where I would find a ladder—and exactly how the rooms were laid out—where the girl would be kept—and where Brickner would be—and he told me of the two men he had with him.

“It’s our lives, now,” he said very seriously. “Don’t forget to call that boy of yours.”

“You’ve told me everything?” I was serious, too. “Lead in my chest tonight will be just the same as if it entered yours.”

“I have left out nothing,” he said. “Just hurry—Brickner is a smart man, too.”

“Right.” I leaned over and grabbed off Jerry’s necktie—then as I swung the ladder so it held against the wall I climbed quickly up, stuck my handkerchief in between his teeth, and twisted the necktie around his face. He choked or gasped or tried to speak. It didn’t matter. I had heard enough. Time meant everything now. The bungalow was not far. I had to make it before Brickner telephoned Latimer, and not receiving an answer, suspected that something wrong was in the wind.

“What did you gag him for?” Jerry asked me. “He seemed scared to death then—seemed to want to say something. Why the gag?”

"Just a precaution. He might call for help—and what would you do? But I haven't the time to talk now. Wait for my call."

"If I don't hear from you, boss—do you really want me to open the door and let that wrapped-up bundle of grease string himself?"

"Of course not, Jerry," I said sternly. "If I don't call I'll be dead. I just want you to open the door to see if he's all right."

Jerry grinned.

"O. K.," he said. "You'll probably meet him in hell."

I was at the door with the key turned in the lock—had flung it open—turned back, when Jerry spoke. It jarred me a bit in the stomach and I wondered if my attitude toward life and death had—had possibly—

And then I read the truth in Jerry's eyes.

Sure—I can drop to a knee, draw, turn and shoot in one second—but this was split-second stuff. I saw Jerry's face and started to bend and spin when the gun roared and a bullet cut across my collar bone.

It would have gone smack into my spine if I hadn't started my drop. It wasn't that shot which sent me across the floor on my face—it was the blow on the head that followed it.

WHEN I came to I was dazed and my guns were gone. Jerry was flat on the floor and Brickner, the district attorney, was standing over me, a gun in his hand.

"Sit up!"

Malcom Brickner kicked me hard in the face a couple of times until I struggled up—sat against the wall. Jumbled thoughts were straightening out. My vision was clearing, but what I saw didn't give me any appetite.

Brickner with a gun in his hand—and

two men watching me. Two men with guns trained right on me. I should have gotten a thrill—a proud sort of thrill for the respect they paid me—but somehow I didn't.

These men were both holding Tommy guns. With my gun gone, I don't know what the hell they expected me to do about it.

Brickner raised his foot and kicked my head back hard against the wall. He said: "Williams, eh? The great Race Williams. Strutted about the damned place tonight because Senator Rhoden, the sheriff, the people—our best people—were here. Just a common gangster—that's what you were—with a chance to shoot up a place, threaten people who'd laugh at you another time—because you knew we couldn't do anything."

I said: "There's no use in kicking me around, brother. I'm the only one who can save you. I wanted to make a deal for the girl."

"What deal? What sort of a deal—once Rhoden begins to work for himself and finds how the books were falsified—complete sets removed even from police headquarters? What deal—with politicians backsliding and turning state's witnesses?"

Ablaze with hate he went on.

"The Flame, Florence Drummond." He jerked a bound girl up from behind the desk and sat her in the chair. "Harry told me that she was once in love with you. Told me before he died."

"Not Headless Harry?" I said sarcastically. "You surely couldn't have believed him?"

"I did—but I didn't need to. The Flame told me herself. She's fooled me for weeks. Money—jewels—everything she's got." He laughed hoarsely. "God, what a fool that cold-blooded woman has made of men. I never got more than a warm little hand that she must have heated

from a cigarette butt. She was keeping her body clean for a man—a man like me! The dirty little double-crosser. Yes—I accused her of once loving you—and she threw it back in my face. ‘Why once?’ was what she said. Tonight she admitted it all—admitted that she is working with you.”

I was stunned into sudden speech. “That was a lie,” I said.

“Race”—the Flame’s voice was steady as ever—“why get mixed up in an undignified argument now? You underestimated our dear Malcom. He’s only playing at being organized crime. He can’t think of a way out—so he thinks only of vengeance. Yes—I gave him a line tonight so he’d be sure to trap you here.”

“Trap me?” I said.

And the Flame smiled. It was that old, easy smile.

“We’ve been through a lot, Race. I never thought you’d be actually cornered by these mice—or undernourished rats, if you want to be kind. No business with them—no finesse. Just a riot of murder and greed—and now—nothing but vengeance.”

“That’s right,” Brickner said. “The girl’s right. I’ve got money. I’ve made arrangements to leave the country—made them over a year ago. I’m going to enjoy life—not sit and stew and break my health thinking of those who stayed behind alive—ones that should have been dead.”

“Where”—I was trying to keep things going for a while—“where is Dorothy Price?”

Brickner shot out the words in a torrent of fury.

“Ask her. Ask the Flame. We thought you took her. She said she could produce her. Latimer had the Price house watched, so we know that she didn’t go home.”

JUST one thing was hopeful about the situation. Malcom Brickner wanted to talk. And more crooks have talked themselves to death than have been betrayed in any other way. I tried to move my muscles. Not bad. I had some chance to make a fight of it if things broke right. But they couldn’t.

There was no wire to a lamp socket to pull out and plunge the room in darkness. The light came from the dome above and the switch was by the door.

And hell—I was wrong about Malcom Brickner. He didn’t want to talk any more. He wanted action.

He said: “I like to do things neat—and that’s how they’re going to be done. Personally, I don’t think the Flame has a heart, or I’d let her watch you die, Race. But I think if a man once loved the Flame and—not that I ever did.” And swinging suddenly, “We had your picture with Duncan Price. You sold out to Duncan Price, and you know how Latimer’s enemies have died, and that’s how you’ll die. Do you know about that yet, Williams?”

“Give me a cigarette and tell me about it,” I said easily.

Don’t tell me it was luck. I never play luck. I’m a guy who’s simply ready and I was ready when Malcom Brickner strode across the room. He was saying: “Well—there’s a ladder behind this door—and when Latimer wanted to know anything he—”

Malcom Brickner jerked open the door to the closet-like room. A ladder crashed to the floor. A twisted tied-up body dropped from above and spun in that open doorway. Yep—I heard it distinctly—the snapping of his neck. I saw it distinctly, too. I saw his eyes bulging with life—then they took on the filmy cover—the stony stare of death—as his neck went *Crack!*

Just like that.

Everyone in that room was thrown

but me—that is, mentally thrown. Things strike people differently. Malcom Brickner, right at the closet entrance, stepped back. The two boys with the machine gun stepped forward.

It's always the same in life.

Those who see a killing in a car or on the street, run away from it. Those in the background who didn't get the same mental shock, run toward it.

That's why I say, "mentally thrown." No luck, understand. A break for me, perhaps, but only because I took advantage of it. I came to my feet. Two steps and one dive and I had the second machine gunner down and had cracked his head open with his own Tommy gun the minute he hit the floor.

I saw the Flame's eyes shine. I heard her say as she tossed herself from the chair to the floor: "Just like old times, Race."

And it was.

The first machine gunner got the idea in a vague way because he was playing a tattoo against the wall with his gun before he was fully turned around. In fact, he never fully turned around and faced me. He was too dead for that.

I'm fast, but I'm no artillery unit. Malcom Brickner had his gun out—had it free—had a shot. A shot is right. He fired once, and that was all. I squeezed lead—and the show was over. Nothing dramatic. No hero holding his chest and giving a last message to his surviving countrymen.

He was dead five times before he hit the floor.

SIRENS screamed. Doors were battered down and I said to the Flame, "Florence." I got out my knife and cut those ropes in seconds. As Jerry climbed to his feet, "Florence, get out the back way. That's the police. Not yet." I grabbed her arm. "I've got to find Dorothy Price."

She grabbed both my shoulders and although one hurt I didn't wince. She said: "The kid is all right, Race. She's up in a dressing-room three doors down from hers. I planned that she wouldn't dance before you did—and beat you to it—and damn near didn't go on myself because of your thickheadedness."

"Florence"—I was very serious—"we were pretty close once, but that criminal mind of yours is no joke. You double-crossed Brickner and Latimer—double-crossed me, maybe—then got mixed up with Price in some way. Don't explain—you never could clear that."

"I even double-crossed myself," she said as feet were heard pounding across the outer rooms, and men were shouting. "I telephoned for the police—in case you couldn't make good."

That was that.

The cops were there then.

An inspector said: "So you practice what you preach, sir." He was a lad I had given orders to up at Duncan Price's home. "Just what happened?" And suddenly, "Ah—a catch. The most notorious woman in town. I want you, Miss—" and he clutched the Flame by the arm. "Malcom Brickner's woman."

The Flame's eyes fired for a moment. Then softened. She drew her arm sharply away, raised her right hand and smacked the inspector across the face with her open palm. The inspector's face whitened—red marks stood out plainly on it.

The Flame said: "Good-night. I shall not speak to your wife about the last time we met." And damn it, she started to walk from the room. The inspector hesitated, then reached out a hand.

"Oh—" She turned, avoided his hand. "I see I forgot something." With that she threw both arms about my neck—kissed me full upon the lips and walked out of the joint. And damn it, not a person raised a hand to stop her.

The inspector said awkwardly: "Just what happened?"

"Hell," I said, "are you blind? Latimer hung himself. The others felt so bad they shot themselves."

"Tied up like that—tied himself up like that?" The inspector was trying to place just which way the swinging head faced.

"He was a smart man," I said, and then, "Take it up with Duncan Price. Come on, Jerry."

They let us go, all right. Outside that room I stalled off a couple of more friendly officers. I wanted to take Dorothy home alone. I found her. She was crouched there in a dressing-room—ran into a closet after I had pounded the door in.

"Oh, Mr. Williams," she said when I explained I was from her father. "I thought it was that awful woman back again. She said if I answered or let anyone in she'd come back and kill me."

"What awful woman?"

"She came to my dressing-room long before I was to go on the second time. She just said to me, 'Are you determined to keep that fool word of yours?' and when I said that I was, she just opened her bag—took out a gun and jammed it into my side. 'Get going, kid,' she said. 'Your father wouldn't be found dead with me—even in a picture—and maybe I feel the same way about him.'"

I didn't say anything. I simply took the girl home.

DUNCAN PRICE explained it to me in a three-hour talk. It all boiled down to this. He had hired the Flame over six months before to gather evidence for him in the city. She set one condition—when the time came to strike, I should be called in.

I was flabbergasted, all right—nearly forgot to ask for my check—nearly but not quite.

So, after all, I had been working for the Flame without knowing it. I don't know if Duncan Price gave me secret notice, or whether the Flame had fixed it that way, but I was on the plane with her when she flew back to New York.

I said: "I'm sorry, Florence. I should have known you were straight as a die—that the old days are over—that the criminal mind is gone."

"And that I dreamed you in?"

"Sure," I grimed. "You dreamed me in—but you did a remarkably fine piece of work in collecting all that written evidence—"

"I dreamed that too."

She smiled.

"Dreamed it?"

"Yes—how would I get guys to sign all that stuff? I made it up so that Duncan Price would believe it—and get the governor to interfere. At the end I wanted you. You don't have to have evidence against dead men. One can always count on you, Race. I called. You came. You killed."

GIANT THRIFT PACK
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4 for 10¢

STAR

WORLD'S LARGEST-SELLING SINGLE EDGE BLADE

FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

TROUBLE IS MY BUSINESS

A Dalmas Novelette

By **Raymond Chandler**

Author of "Pearls Are a Nuisance," etc.



George made a movement smooth as a ripple of water and the little man crumpled.



Jerry Jeeter may have been a "scion of the upper crust" to the tabloids, but he was just so much bad news to his millionaire pappy and everyone else concerned, including the gambler on whom he'd welshed. When the redhead got her hooks in him and Dalmas was hired to pry 'em loose that hard-luck dick might have guessed he'd roll along back of the eight ball as usual, right up to the final kill.

CHAPTER ONE
To Smear a Redhead

A NNA HALSEY was about two hundred and forty pounds of middle-aged putty-faced woman in a black tailor-made suit. Her eyes were

shiny black shoe-buttons, her cheeks were as soft as suet and about the same color. She was sitting behind a black glass desk that looked like Napoleon's tomb and she was smoking a cigarette in a black holder that was not quite as long as a rolled

umbrella. She said: "I need a man."

I watched her shake ash from the cigarette to the shiny top of the desk where flakes of it curled and crawled in the draft from an open window.

"I need a man good-looking enough to pick up a dame who has a sense of class, but he's got to be tough enough to swap punches with a power shovel. I need a guy who can act like a bar lizard and backchat like Fred Allen, only better, and get hit on the head with a beer truck and think some cutie in the leg-line tapped him with a breadstick."

"It's a cinch," I said. "You need the New York Yankees, Robert Donat, and the Yacht Club Boys."

"You might do," Anna said, "cleaned up a little. Twenty bucks a day and ex's. I haven't brokered a job in years, but this one is out of my line. I'm in the smooth-angles of the detecting business and I make money without getting my can knocked off. Let's see how Gladys likes you."

She reversed the cigarette holder and tipped a key on a large black-and-chromium annunciator box. "Come in and empty Anna's ashtray, honey."

We waited.

The door opened and a tall blonde dressed better than the Duchess of Windsor strolled in.

She swayed elegantly across the room, emptied Anna's ashtray, patted her fat cheek, gave me a smooth rippling glance and went out again.

"I think she blushed," Anna said when the door closed. "I guess you still have it."

"She blushed—and I have a dinner date with Darryl Zanuck," I said. "Quit horsing around. What's the story?"

"It's to smear a girl. A redheaded number with bedroom eyes. She's shill for a gambler and she's got her hooks into a rich man's pup."

"What do I do to her?"

Anna sighed. "It's kind of a mean job, Johnny, I guess. If she's got a record of any sort, you dig it up and toss it in her face. If she hasn't, which is more likely as she comes from good people, it's kind of up to you. You get an idea once in a while, don't you?"

"I can't remember the last one I had. What gambler and what rich man?"

"Marty Estel."

I STARTED to get up from my chair, then remembered that business had been bad for a month and that I needed the money.

I sat down again.

"You might get into trouble, of course," Anna said. "I never heard of Marty bumping anybody off in the public square at high noon, but he don't play with cigar coupons."

"Trouble is my business," I said. "Twenty-five a day and a guarantee of two-fifty, if I pull the job."

"I gotta make a little something for myself," Anna whined.

"O. K. There's plenty of coolie labor around town. Nice to have seen you looking so well. So long, Anna."

I stood up this time. My life wasn't worth much, but it was worth that much. Marty Estel was supposed to be pretty tough people, with the right helpers and the right protection behind him. His place was out in West Hollywood, on the Strip. He wouldn't pull anything crude, but if he pulled at all, something would pop.

"Sit down, it's a deal," Anna sneered. "I'm a poor old broken-down woman trying to run a high-class detective agency on nothing but fat and bad health, so take my last nickel and laugh at me."

"Who's the girl?" I had sat down again.

"Her name is Harriet Huntress—a swell name for the part too. She lives in the El Milano, nineteen-hundred block on North Sycamore, very high-class.

Father went broke back in thirty-one and jumped out of his office window. Mother dead. Kid sister in boarding school back in Connecticut. That might make an angle."

"Who dug up all this?"

"The client got a bunch of photostats of notes the pup had given to Marty. Fifty grand worth. The pup—he's an adopted son to the old man—denied the notes, as kids will. So the client had the photostats experted by a guy named Arbogast, who pretends to be good at that sort of thing. He said O. K. and dug around a bit, but he's too fat to do leg-work, like me, and he's off the case now."

"But I could talk to him?"

"I don't know why not." Anna nodded several of her chins.

"This client—does he have a name?"

"Son, you have a treat coming. You can meet him in person—right now."

She tipped the key of her call-box again. "Have Mr. Jeeter come in, honey."

"That Gladys," I said, "does she have a steady?"

"You lay off Gladys!" Anna almost screamed at me. "She's worth eighteen grand a year in divorce business to me. Any guy that lays a finger on her, Johnny Dalmas, is practically cremated."

"She's got to fall some day," I said. "Why couldn't I catch her?"

The opening door stopped that.

I HADN'T seen him in the paneled reception-room, so he must have been waiting in a private office. He hadn't enjoyed it. He came in quickly, shut the door quickly, and yanked a thin octagonal platinum watch from his vest and glared at it. He was a tall white-blond type in pin-striped flannel of youthful cut. There was a small pink rosebud in his lapel. He had a keen frozen face, a little pouchy under the eyes, a little thick in the lips. He carried an ebony cane with a silver knob, wore spats and

looked a smart sixty, but I gave him close to ten years more. I didn't like him.

"Twenty-six minutes, Miss Halsey," he said icily. "My time happens to be valuable. By regarding it as valuable I have managed to make a great deal of money."

"Well, we're trying to save you some of the money," Anna drawled. She didn't like him either. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Jeeter, but you wanted to see the operative I selected and I had to send for him."

"He doesn't look the type to me," Mr. Jeeter said, giving me a nasty glance. "I think more of a gentleman—"

"You're not the Jeeter of *Tobacco Road*, are you?" I asked him.

He came slowly towards me and half lifted the stick. His icy eyes tore at me like claws. "So you insult me," he said. "Me—a man in my position."

"Now wait a minute," Anna began.

"Wait a minute nothing," I said. "This party said I was not a gentleman. Maybe that's O. K. for a man in his position, whatever it is—but a man in my position doesn't take a dirty crack from anybody. He can't afford to. Unless, of course, it wasn't intended."

Mr. Jeeter stiffened and glared at me. He took his watch out again and looked at it. "Twenty-eight minutes," he said. "I apologize, young man. I had no desire to be rude."

"That's swell," I said. "I knew you weren't the Jeeter in *Tobacco Road* all along."

That almost started him again, but he let it go. He wasn't sure how I meant it.

"A question or two while we are together," I said. "Are you willing to give this Huntress girl a little money—for expenses?"

"Not one cent," he barked. "Why should I?"

"It's got to be a sort of custom. Suppose she married him. What would he have?"

"At the moment a thousand dollars a month from a trust fund established by his mother, my late wife." He dipped his head. "When he is twenty-eight years old, far too much money."

"You can't blame the girl for trying," I said. "Not these days. How about Marty Estel? Any settlement there?"

He crumpled his gray gloves with a purple-veined hand. "The debt is uncollectable. It is a gambling debt."

Anna sighed wearily and flicked ash around on her desk.

"Sure," I said. "But gamblers can't afford to let people welsh on them. After all, if your son had won, Marty would have paid *him*."

"I'm not interested in that," the tall thin man said coldly.

"Yeah, but think of Marty sitting there with fifty grand in notes. Not worth a nickel. How will he sleep nights?"

Mr. Jeeter looked thoughtful. "You mean there is danger of violence?" he suggested, almost suavely.

"That's hard to say. He runs an exclusive place, gets a good movie crowd. He has his own reputation to think of. But he's in a racket and he knows people. Things can happen—a long way off from where Marty is. And Marty is no bathmat. He gets up and walks."

Mr. Jeeter looked at his watch again and it annoyed him. He slammed it back into his vest. "All that is your affair," he snapped. "The district attorney is a personal friend of mine. If this matter seems to be beyond your powers—"

"Yeah," I told him. "But you came slumming down our street just the same. Even if the D.A. is in your vest pocket—along with that watch."

He put his hat on, drew on one glove, tapped the edge of his shoe with his stick, walked to the door and opened it.

"I ask results and I pay for them," he said coldly. "I pay promptly. I even pay generously sometimes, although I am not considered a generous man. I think we all understand one another."

He almost winked then and went on out. The door closed softly against the cushion of air in the door-closer. I looked at Anna and grinned.

"Sweet, isn't he?" she said. "I'd like eight of him for my cocktail set."

I gouged twenty dollars out of her—for expenses.

CHAPTER TWO

The Private Fat Man

THE Arbogast I wanted was John D. Arbogast and he had an office on Sunset near Ivar. I called him up from a phone booth. The voice that answered was fat. It wheezed softly, like the voice of a man who had just won a pie-eating contest.

"Mr. John D. Arbogast?"

"Yeah."

"This is John Dalmas, a private detective working on a case you did some experting on. Party named Jeeter."

"Yeah?"

"Can I come up and talk to you about it—after I eat lunch?"

"Yeah." He hung up. I decided he was not a talkative man.

I had lunch and drove out there. It was east of Ivar, an old two-story building faced with brick which had been painted recently. The street floor was stores and a restaurant. The building entrance was the foot of a wide straight stairway to the second floor. On the directory at the bottom I read—*John D. Arbogast, Suite 212*. I went up the stairs and found myself in a wide straight hall that ran parallel with the street. A man in a smock was standing in an open doorway down to my right. He wore a round mirror strapped to his forehead and

pushed back and his face had a puzzled expression. He went back to his office and shut the door.

I went the other way, about half the distance along the hall. A door on the side away from Sunset was lettered—*John D. Arbogast, Examiner of Questioned Documents. Private Investigator. Enter.* The door opened without resistance onto a small windowless anteroom with a couple of easy chairs, some magazines, two chromium smoking-stands. There were two floor lamps and a ceiling fixture, all lighted. A door on the other side of the cheap but thick and new rug was lettered—*John D. Arbogast, Examiner of Questioned Documents. Private.*

A buzzer had rung when I opened the outer door and gone on ringing until it closed. Nothing happened. Nobody was in the waiting-room. The inner door didn't open. I went over and listened at the panel—no sound of conversation inside. I knocked. That didn't buy me anything either. I tried the knob. It turned so I opened the door and went in.

This room had two north windows, both curtained at the sides and both shut tight. There was dust on the sills. There was a desk, two filing-cases, a carpet which was just a carpet, and walls which were just walls. To the left another door with a glass panel was lettered: *John D. Arbogast. Laboratory. Private.*

I had an idea I might be able to remember the name.

THE room in which I stood was small. It seemed almost too small even for the pudgy hand that rested on the edge of the desk, motionless, holding a fat pencil like a carpenter's pencil. The hand had a wrist, hairless as a plate. A buttoned shirt-cuff, not too clean, came down out of a coat-sleeve. The rest of the sleeve dropped over the far edge of the desk out of sight. The desk was less than six

feet long, so he couldn't have been a very tall man. The hand and the ends of the sleeves were all I saw of him from where I stood. I went quietly back through the anteroom and fixed its door so that it couldn't be opened from the outside and put out the three lights and went back to the private office. I went around an end of the desk.

He was fat all right, enormously fat, fatter by far than Anna Halsey. His face, what I could see of it, looked about the size of a basket ball. It had a pleasant pinkness, even now. He was kneeling on the floor. He had his large head against the sharp inner corner of the kneehole of the desk, and his left hand was flat on the floor with a piece of yellow paper under it. The fingers were outspread as much as such fat fingers could be, and the yellow paper showed between. He looked as if he were pushing hard on the floor, but he wasn't really. What was holding him up was his own fat. His body was folded down against his enormous thighs, and the thickness and fatness of them held him that way, kneeling, poised solid. It would have taken a couple of good blocking backs to knock him over. That wasn't a very nice idea at the moment, but I had it just the same. I took time out and wiped the back of my neck, although it was not a warm day.

His hair was gray and clipped short and his neck had as many folds as a concertina. His feet were small, as the feet of fat men often are, and they were in black shiny shoes which were sideways on the carpet and close together and neat and nasty. He wore a dark suit that needed cleaning. I leaned down and buried my fingers in the bottomless fat of his neck. He had an artery in there somewhere, probably, but I couldn't find it and he didn't need it anymore anyway. Between his bloated knees on the carpet a dark stain had spread and spread—

I knelt in another place and lifted the pudgy fingers that were holding down the piece of yellow paper. They were cool, but not cold, and soft and a little sticky. The paper was from a scratch pad. It would have been very nice if it had had a message on it, but it hadn't. There were vague meaningless marks, not words, not even letters. He had tried to write something after he was shot—perhaps even thought he *was* writing something—but all he managed was some hen scratches.

He had slumped down then, still holding the paper, pinned it to the floor with his fat hand, held on to the fat pencil with his other hand, wedged his torso against his huge thighs, and so died. John D. Arbogast. Examiner of Questioned Documents. Private. Very damned private. He had said "yeah" to me three times over the phone.

And here he was.

I wiped doorknobs with my handkerchief, put off the lights in the anteroom, left the outer door so that it was locked from the outside, left the hallway, left the building and left the neighborhood. So far as I could tell nobody saw me go. So far as I could tell.

CHAPTER THREE

The Girl in 814

THE El Milano was, as Anna had told me, in the 1900 block on North Sycamore. It was most of the block. I parked fairly near the ornamental forecourt and went along to the pale blue neon sign over the entrance to the basement garage. I walked down a railed ramp into a bright space of glistening cars and cold air. A trim light-colored Negro in a spotless coverall suit with blue cuffs came out of a glass office. His black hair was as smooth as a bandleader's.

"Busy?" I asked him.

"Yes and no, sir."

"I've got a car outside that needs a dusting. About five bucks worth of dusting."

It didn't work. He wasn't the type. His chestnut eyes became thoughtful and remote. "That is a good deal of dusting, sir. May I ask if anything else would be included?"

"A little. Is Miss Harriet Huntress's car in?"

He looked. I saw him look along the glistening row at a canary-yellow convertible which was about as inconspicuous as a privy on the front lawn.

"Yes, sir. It is in."

"I'd like her apartment number and a way to get up there without going through the lobby. I'm a private detective." I showed him a buzzer. He looked at the buzzer. It failed to amuse him.

He smiled the faintest smile I ever saw. "Five dollars is nice money, sir, to a working man. It falls a little short of being nice enough to make me risk my position. About from here to Chicago short, sir. I suggest that you save your five dollars, sir, and try the customary mode of entry."

"You're quite a guy," I said. "What are you going to be when you grow up—a five-foot shelf?"

"I am already grown up, sir. I am thirty-four years old, married happily, and have two children. Good-afternoon, sir."

He turned on his heel. "Well, good-bye," I said. "And pardon my whiskey breath. I just got in from Butte."

I went back up along the ramp and wandered along the street to where I should have gone in the first place. I might have known that five bucks and a buzzer wouldn't buy me anything in a place like the El Milano.

The Negro was probably telephoning the office right now.

The building was a huge white stucco affair, Moorish in style, with great fretted lanterns in the forecourt and huge

date palms. The entrance was at the inside corner of an L, up marble steps, through an arch framed in California, or dishpan mosaic.

A doorman opened the door for me and I went in. The lobby was not quite as big as the Yankee Stadium. It was floored with a pale blue carpet with sponge rubber underneath. It was so soft it made me want to lie down and roll. I waded over to the desk and put an elbow on it and was stared at by a pale thin clerk with one of those mustaches that get stuck under your fingernail. He toyed with it and looked past my shoulder at an Ali Baba oil jar big enough to keep a tiger in.

"Miss Huntress in?"

"Who shall I announce?"

"Mr. Marty Estel."

That didn't take any better than my play in the garage. He leaned on something with his left foot. A blue-and-gilt door opened at the end of the desk and a large sandy-haired man with cigar ash on his vest came out and leaned absently on the end of the desk and stared at the Ali Baba oil jar, as if trying to make up his mind whether it was a spittoon.

The clerk raised his voice. "You are Mr. Marty Estel?"

"From him."

"Isn't that a little different? And what is your name, sir, if one may ask?"

"One may ask," I said. "One may not be told. Such are my orders. Sorry to be stubborn and all that rot."

He didn't like my manner. He didn't like anything about me. "I'm afraid I can't announce you," he said coldly. "Mr. Hawkins, might I have your advice on a matter?"

The sandy-haired man took his eyes off the oil jar and slid along the desk until he was within blackjack range of me.

"Yes, Mr. Gregory?" he yawned.

"Nuts to both of you," I said. "And that includes your lady friends."

Hawkins grinned. "Come into my office, bo. We'll kind of see if we can get you straightened out."

I FOLLOWED him into the doghole he had come out of. It was large enough for a pint-sized desk, two chairs, a knee-high cuspidor, and an open box of cigars. He placed his rear end against the desk and grinned at me sociably.

"Didn't play it very smooth, did you, bo? I'm the house man here. Spill it."

"Some days I feel like playing it smooth," I said, "and some days I feel like playing it like a waffle-iron." I got my wallet out and showed him the buzzer and the small photostat of my license behind a celluloid window.

"One of the boys, huh?" He nodded. "You ought to of asked for me in the first place."

"Sure. Only I never heard of you. I want to see this Huntress frail. She doesn't know me, but I have business with her, and it's not noisy business."

He made a yard and a half sideways and cocked his cigar in the other corner of his mouth. He looked at my right eyebrow. "What's the gag? Why try to apple-polish the dinge downstairs? You gettin' any expense money?"

"Could be."

"I'm nice people," he said. "But I gotta protect the guests."

"You're almost out of cigars," I said, looking at the ninety or so in the box. I lifted a couple, smelled them, tucked a folded ten-dollar bill below them and put them back.

"That's cute," he said. "You and me could get along. What you want done?"

"Tell her I'm from Marty Estel. She'll see me."

"It's the job if I get a kickback."

"You won't. I've got important people behind me."

"How far behind?"

I started to reach for my ten, but he pushed my hand away. "I'll take a chance," he said. He reached for his phone and asked for Suite 814 and began to hum. His humming sounded like a cow being sick. He leaned forward suddenly and his face became a honeyed smile. His voice dripped.

"Miss Huntress? This is Hawkins, the house man. Hawkins. Yeah. . . . Hawkins. Sure, you meet a lot of people, Miss Huntress. Say, there's a gentleman in my office wanting to see you with a message from Mr. Estel. We can't let him up without you say so, because he don't want to give us no name. . . . Yeah, Hawkins, the house detective, Miss Huntress. Yeah, he says you don't know him personal, but he looks O.K. to me. . . . O. K. Thanks a lot, Miss Huntress. Serve him right up."

He put the phone down and patted it gently.

"All you needed was some background music," I said.

"You can ride up," he said dreamily. He reached absently into his cigar box and removed the folded bill. "A darb," he said softly. "Every time I think of that dame I have to go out and walk around the block. Let's go."

We went out to the lobby again and Hawkins took me to the elevator and high-signed me in.

As the elevator doors closed I saw him on his way to the entrance, probably for his walk around the block.

THE elevator had a carpeted floor and mirrors and indirect lighting. It rose as softly as the mercury in a thermometer. The doors whispered open, I wandered over the moss they used for a hall carpet and came to a door marked 814. I pushed a little button beside it, chimes rang inside and the door opened.

She wore a street dress of pale green

wool and a small cockeyed hat that hung on her ear like a butterfly. Her eyes were wide-set and there was thinking room between them. Their color was lapis-lazuli blue and the color of her hair was dusky red, like a fire under control but still dangerous. She was too tall to be cute. She wore plenty of make-up in the right places and the cigarette she was poking at me had a built-on mouthpiece about three inches long. She didn't look hard, but she looked as if she had heard all the answers and remembered the ones she thought she might be able to use sometime.

She looked me over coolly. "Well, what's the message, brown-eyes?"

"I'd have to come in," I said. "I never could talk on my feet."

She laughed disinterestedly and I slid past the end of her cigarette into a long rather narrow room with plenty of nice furniture, plenty of windows, plenty of drapes, plenty of everything. A fire lazied behind a screen, a big log on top of a gas teaser. There was a silk Oriental rug in front of a nice rose davenport in front of the nice fire, and beside that there was Scotch and swish on a tabouret, ice in a bucket, everything to make a man feel at home.

"You'd better have a drink," she said. "You probably can't talk without a glass in your hand."

I sat down and reached for the Scotch. The girl sat in a deep chair and crossed her knees. I thought of Hawkins walking around the block. I could see a little something in his point of view.

"So you're from Marty Estel," she said, refusing a drink.

"Never met him."

"I had an idea to that effect. What's the racket, bum? Marty will love to hear how you used his name."

"I'm shaking in my shoes. What made you let me up?"

"Curiosity. I've been expecting lads

like you any day. I never dodge trouble. Some kind of a dick, aren't you?"

I lit a cigarette and nodded. "Private. I have a little deal to propose."

"Propose it," She yawned.

"How much will you take to lay off young Jeeter?"

She yawned again. "You interest me—so little I could hardly tell you."

"Don't scare me to death. Honest, how much are you asking? Or is that an insult?"

SHE smiled. She had a nice smile. She had lovely teeth. "I'm a bad girl now," she said. "I don't have to ask. They bring it to me, tied up with ribbon."

"The old man's a little tough. They say he draws a lot of water."

"Water doesn't cost much."

I nodded and drank some more of my drink. It was good Scotch. In fact it was perfect. "His idea is you get nothing. You get smeared. You get put in the middle. I can't see it that way."

"But you're working for him."

"Sounds funny, doesn't it? There's probably a smart way to play this, but I just can't think of it at the moment. How much would you take—or would you?"

"How about fifty grand?"

"Fifty grand for you and another fifty for Marty?"

She laughed. "Now, you ought to know Marty wouldn't like me to mix in his business. I was just thinking of my end."

She crossed her legs the other way. I put another lump of ice in my drink.

"I was thinking of five hundred," I said.

"Five hundred what?" She looked puzzled.

"Dollars—not Rolls-Royces."

She laughed heartily. "You amuse me. I ought to tell you to go to hell, but I like brown eyes. Warm brown eyes with flecks of gold in them."

"You're throwing it away. I don't have a nickel."

She smiled and fitted a fresh cigarette between her lips. I went over to light it for her. Her eyes came up and looked into mine. Hers had sparks in them.

"Maybe I have a nickel already," she said softly.

"Maybe that's why he hired the fat boy—so you couldn't make him dance." I sat down again.

"Who hired what fat boy?"

"Old Jeeter hired a fat boy named Arbogast. He was on the case before me. Didn't you know? He got bumped off this afternoon."

I said it quite casually for the shock effect, but she didn't move. The provocative smile didn't leave the corners of her lips. Her eyes didn't change. She made a dim sound with her breath.

"Does it have to have something to do with me?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know. I don't know who murdered him. It was done in his office, around noon or a little later. It may not have anything to do with the Jeeter case. But it happened pretty pat—just after I had been put on the job and before I got a chance to talk to him."

She nodded. "I see. And you think Marty does things like that. And of course you told the police?"

"Of course I did not.

"You're giving away a little weight there, brother."

"Yeah. But let's get together on a price and it had better be low. Because whatever the cops do to me they'll do plenty to Marty Estel and you when they get the story—if they get it."

"A little spot of blackmail," the girl said coolly. "I think I might call it that. Don't go too far with me, brown-eyes. By the way, do I know your name?"

"John Dalmas."

"Then listen, John. I was in the Social Register once. My family were nice people.

Old man Jeeter ruined my father—all proper and legitimate, the way that kind of heel ruins people—but he ruined him, and my father committed suicide, and my mother died and I've got a kid sister back East in school and perhaps I'm not too damn particular how I get the money to take care of her. And maybe I'm going to take care of old Jeeter one of these days, too—even if I have to marry his son to do it."

"Stepson, adopted son," I said. "No relation at all."

"It'll hurt him just as hard, brother. And the boy will have plenty of the long green in a couple of years. I could do worse—even if he does drink too much."

"You wouldn't say that in front of him, lady."

"No? Take a look behind you, gumshoe. You ought to have the wax taken out of your ears."

I stood up and turned fast. He stood about four feet from me. He had come out of some door and sneaked across the carpet and I had been too busy being clever with nothing on the ball to hear him. He was big, blond, dressed in a rough sporty suit, with a scarf and open neck shirt. He was red-faced and his eyes glittered and they were not focussing any too well. He was a bit drunk for that early in the day.

"Beat it while you can still walk," he sneered at me. "I heard it. Harry can say anything she likes about me. I like it. Dangle, before I knock your teeth down your throat!"

The girl laughed behind me. I didn't like that. I took a step towards the big blond boy. His eyes blinked. Big as he was, he was a pushover.

"Ruin him, baby," the girl said coldly behind my back. "I love to see these hard numbers bend at the knees."

I looked back at her with a leer. That was a mistake. He was wild, probably, but he could still hit a wall that didn't

jump. He hit me while I was looking back over my shoulder. It hurts to be hit that way. He hit me plenty hard, on the back end of the jawbone.

I went over sideways, tried to spread my legs, and slid on the silk rug. I did a nose dive somewhere or other and my head was not as hard as the piece of furniture it smashed into.

For a brief blurred moment I saw his red face sneering down at me in triumph. I think I was a little sorry for him—even then.

Darkness folded down and I went out.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Couple of Clowns

WHEN I came to, the light from the windows across the room was hitting me square in the eyes. The back of my head ached. I felt it and it was sticky. I moved around slowly, like a cat in a strange house, got up on my knees and reached for the bottle of Scotch on the tabouret at the end of the davenport. By some miracle I hadn't knocked it over. Falling I had hit my head on the clawlike leg of a chair. That had hurt me a lot more than young Jeeter's haymaker. I could feel the sore place on my jaw all right, but it wasn't important enough to write in my diary.

I got up on my feet, took a swig of the Scotch and looked around. There wasn't anything to see. The room was empty. It was full of silence and the memory of a nice perfume. One of those perfumes you don't notice until they are almost gone, like the last leaf on a tree. I felt my head again, touched the sticky place with my handkerchief, decided it wasn't worth yelling about, and took another drink.

I sat down with the bottle on my knees, listening to traffic noise somewhere, far off. It was a nice room. Miss Harriet Huntress was a nice girl. She knew a few wrong numbers, but who didn't? I should

criticize a little thing like that. I took another drink. The level in the bottle was a lot lower now. It was smooth and you hardly noticed it going down. It didn't take half your tonsils with it, like some of the stuff I had to drink. I took some more. My head felt all right now. I felt fine. I felt like singing the *Prologue to Pagliacci*. Yes, she was a nice girl. If she was paying her own rent, she was doing right well. I was for her. She was swell. I used some more of her Scotch.

The bottle was still half full. I shook it gently, stuffed it in my overcoat pocket, put my hat somewhere on my head and left. I made the elevator without hitting the walls on either side of the corridor, floated downstairs, strolled out into the lobby.

Hawkins, the house dick, was leaning on the end of the desk again, staring at the Ali Baba oil jar. The same clerk was nuzzling at the same itsy-bitsy mustache. I smiled at him. He smiled back. Hawkins smiled at me. I smiled back. Everybody was swell.

I made the front door the first time and gave the doorman two bits and floated down the steps and along the walk to the street and my car. The swift California twilight was falling. It was a lovely night. Venus in the west was as bright as a street lamp, as bright as life, as bright as Miss Huntress's eyes, as bright as a bottle of Scotch. That reminded me. I got the square bottle out and tapped it with discretion, corked it, and tucked it away again. There was still enough to get home on.

I crashed five red lights on the way back but my luck was in and nobody pinched me. I parked more or less in front of my apartment house and more or less near the curb. I rode up to my floor in the elevator, had a little trouble opening the doors and helped myself out with my bottle. I got the key into my door and unlocked it and stepped in-

side and found the light switch. I took a little more of my medicine before exhausting myself any further. Then I started for the kitchen to get some ice and ginger ale for a real drink.

I THOUGHT there was a funny smell in the apartment—nothing I could put a name to offhand—a sort of medicinal smell. I hadn't put it there and it hadn't been there when I went out. But I felt too well to argue about it. I started for the kitchen, got about halfway there.

They came out at me, almost side by side, from the dressing-room beside the wall bed—two of them—with guns. The tall one was grinning. He had his hat low on his forehead and he had a wedge-shaped face that ended in a point, like the bottom half of the ace of diamonds. He had dark moist eyes and a nose so bloodless that it might have been made of white wax. His gun was a Colt Woodsman with a long barrel and the front sight filed off. That meant he thought he was good.

The other was a little terrier-like punk with bristly reddish hair and no hat and watery blank eyes and bat ears and small feet in dirty white sneakers. He had an automatic that looked too heavy for him to hold up, but he seemed to like holding it. He breathed open-mouthed and noisily and the smell I had noticed came from him in waves—menthol.

"Reach, you ——," he said.

I put my hands up. There was nothing else to do.

The little one circled around to the side and came at me from the side. "Tell us we can't get away with it," he sneered.

"You can't get away with it," I said.

The tall one kept on grinning loosely and his nose kept on looking as if it was made of white wax. The little one spat on my carpet. "Yah!" He came close to me, leering, and made a pass at my chin with the big gun.

I dodged. Ordinarily that would have

been just something which, in the circumstances, I had to take and like. But I was feeling better than ordinary. I was a world-beater. I took them in sets, guns and all. I took the little man around the throat and jerked him hard against my stomach and put a hand over his little gun-hand and knocked the gun to the floor. It was easy. Nothing was bad about it but his breath. Blobs of saliva came out on his lips. He spit curses.

The tall man stood and leered and didn't shoot. He didn't move. His eyes looked a little anxious, I thought, but I was too busy to make sure. I went down behind the little punk, still holding him, and got hold of his gun. That was wrong. I ought to have pulled my own.

I threw him away from me and he reeled against a chair and fell down and began to kick the chair savagely. The tall man laughed.

"It ain't got any firing pin in it," he said.

"Listen," I told him earnestly, "I'm half full of good Scotch and ready to go places and get things done. Don't waste much of my time. What do you boys want?"

"It still ain't got any firing pin in it," Waxnose said. "Try and see. I don't never let Frisky carry a loaded rod. He's too impulsive. You got a nice arm action there, pal. I will say that for you."

FRISKY sat up on the floor and spat on the carpet again and laughed. I pointed the muzzle of the big automatic at the floor and squeezed the trigger. It clicked dryly, but from the balance it felt as if it had cartridges in it.

"We don't mean no harm," Waxnose said. "Not this trip. Maybe next trip. Who knows? Maybe you're a guy that will take a hint. Lay off the Jeeter kid is the word. See?"

"No."

"You won't do it?"

"No, I don't see. Who's the Jeeter kid?"

Waxnose was not amused. He waved his long .22 gently. "You oughta get your memory fixed, pal, about the same time you get your door fixed. A pushover that was. Frisky just blew it in with his breath."

"I can understand that," I said.

"Gimme my gat," Frisky yelled. He was up off the floor again, but this time he rushed his partner instead of me.

"Lay off, dummy," the tall one said. "We just got a message for a guy. We don't blast him. Not today."

"Says you!" Frisky snarled and tried to grab the .22 out of Waxnose's hand. Waxnose threw him to one side without trouble but the interlude allowed me to switch the big automatic to my left hand and jerk out my Luger. I showed it to Waxnose. He nodded, but did not seem impressed.

"He ain't got no parents," he said sadly. "I just let him run around with me. Don't pay him no attention unless he bites you. We'll be on our way now. You get the idea. Lay off the Jeeter kid."

"You're looking at a Luger," I said. "Who is the Jeeter kid? And maybe we'll have some cops before you leave."

He smiled wearily. "Mister, I pack this small-bore because I can shoot. If you think you can take me, go to it."

"O.K.," I said. "Do you know anybody named Arbogast?"

"I meet such a lot of people," he said, with another weary smile. "Maybe yes, maybe no. So long, pal. Be pure."

He strolled over to the door, moving a little sideways, so that he had me covered all the time, and I had him covered, and it was just a case of who shot first and straightest, or whether it was worth while to shoot at all, or whether I could hit anything with so much nice warm Scotch in me. I let him go. He didn't look like a killer to me, but I could have been wrong.

The little man rushed me again while

I wasn't thinking about him. He clawed his big automatic out of my left hand, skipped over to the door, spat on the carpet again, and slipped out. Waxnose backed after him—long sharp face, white nose, pointed chin, weary expression. I wouldn't forget him.

He closed the door softly and I stood there, foolish, holding my gun. I heard the elevator come up and go down again and stop. I still stood there. Marty Estel wouldn't be very likely to hire a couple of comics like that to throw a scare into anybody. I thought about that, but thinking got me nowhere. I remembered the half-bottle of Scotch I had left and went into executive session with it.

An hour and a half later I felt fine, but I still didn't have any ideas. I just felt sleepy.

THE jarring of the telephone bell woke me. I had dozed off in the chair, which was a bad mistake, because I woke up with two flannel blankets in my mouth, a splitting headache, a bruise on the back of my head and another on my jaw, neither of them larger than a Yakima apple, but sore for all that. I felt terrible. I felt like an amputated leg.

I crawled over to the telephone and humped myself in a chair beside it and answered it. The voice dripped icicles.

"Mr. Dalmas? This is Mr. Jeeter. I believe we met this morning. I'm afraid I was a little stiff with you."

"I'm a little stiff myself. Your son poked me in the jaw. I mean your stepson, or your adopted son—or whatever he is."

"He is both my stepson and my adopted son. Indeed?" He sounded interested. "And where did you meet him?"

"In Miss Huntress's apartment."

"Oh I see." There had been a sudden thaw. The icicles had melted. "Very interesting. What did Miss Huntress have to say?"

"She liked it. She liked him poking me in the jaw."

"I see. And why did he do that?"

"She had him hid out. He overheard some of our talk. He didn't like it."

"I see. I have been thinking that perhaps some consideration—not large, of course—should be granted to her for her cooperation. That is, if we can secure it."

"Fifty grand is the price."

"I'm afraid I don't—"

"Don't kid me," I snarled. "Fifty thousand dollars. Fifty grand. I offered her five hundred—just for a gag."

"You seem to treat this whole business in a spirit of considerable levity," he snarled back. "I am not accustomed to that sort of thing and I don't like it."

I yawned. I didn't give a damn if school kept or not. "Listen, Mr. Jeeter, I'm a great guy to horse around, but I have my mind on the job just the same. And there are some very unusual angles to this case. For instance a couple of gunmen just stuck me up in my apartment here and told me to lay off the Jeeter case. I don't see why it should get so tough."

"Good Heavens!" He sounded shocked. "I think you had better come out to my house at once and we will discuss matters. I'll send my car for you. Can you come right away?"

"Yeah. But I can drive myself. I—"

"No. I'm sending my car and chauffeur. His name is George you may rely upon him absolutely. He should be there in about twenty minutes."

"O.K.," I said. "That just gives me time to drink my dinner. Have him park around the corner on Kenmore, facing towards Franklin." I hung up.

WHEN I'd had a hot-and-cold shower and put on some clean clothes I felt more respectable. I had a couple of drinks, small ones for a change, and put a light overcoat on and went down to the street.

The car was there already. I could see

it half a block down the side street. It looked like a new market opening. It had a couple of headlamps like the one on the front end of a streamliner, two amber foglights hooked to the front fender, and a couple of sidelights as big as ordinary headlights. I came up beside it and stopped and a man stepped out of the shadows, tossing a cigarette over his shoulder with a neat flip of the wrist. He was tall, broad, dark, wore a peaked cap, a Russian tunic with a Sam Browne belt, shiny leggings and breeches that flared like an English staff major's whipcords.

"Mr. Dalmas?" He touched the peak of his cap with a gloved forefinger.

"Yeah," I said. "At ease. Don't tell me that's old man Jeeter's car."

"One of them." It was a cool voice that could get fresh.

He opened the rear door and I got in and sank down into the cushions and George slid under the wheel and started the big car. It moved away from the curb and around the corner with as much noise as a bill makes in a wallet. We went west. We seemed to be drifting with the current, but we passed everything. We slid through the heart of Hollywood, the west end of it, down to the Strip and along the glitter of that to the cool quiet of Beverly Hills where the bridle path divides the boulevard.

We gave Beverly Hills the swift and climbed along the foothills, saw the distant lights of the university buildings and swung north into Bel-Air. We began to slide up long narrow streets with high walls and no sidewalks and big gates. Lights on mansions glowed politely through the early night. Nothing stirred. There was no sound but the soft purr of the tires on concrete. We swung left again and I caught a sign which read Calvello Drive. Halfway up this George started to swing the car wide to make a left turn in at a pair of twelve-foot

wrought-iron gates. Then something happened.

A pair of lights flared suddenly just beyond the gates and a horn screeched and a motor raced. A car charged at us fast. George straightened out with a flick of the wrist, braked the car and slipped off his right glove, all in one motion.

The car came on, the lights swaying. "Damn drunk," George swore over his shoulder.

It could be. Drunks in cars go all kinds of places to drink. It could be. I slid down onto the floor of the car and yanked the Luger from under my arm and reached up to open the catch. I opened the door a little and held it that way, looking out over the sill. The headlights hit me in the face and I ducked, then came up again as the beam passed.

THE other car jammed to a stop. Its door slammed open and a figure jumped out of it, waving a gun and shouting. I heard the voice and knew.

"Reach, you ———!" Frisky screamed at us.

George put his left hand on the wheel and I opened my door a little more. The little man in the street was bouncing up and down and yelling. Out of the small dark car from which he had jumped came no sound except the noise of its motor.

"This is a heist!" Frisky yelled. "Out of there and line up, you ———!"

I kicked my door open and started to get out, the Luger down at my side.

"You asked for it!" the little man yelled.

I dropped—fast. The gun in his hand belched flame. Somebody must have put a firing pin in it. Glass smashed behind my head. Out of the corner of my eye, which oughtn't to have had any corners at that particular moment, I saw George make a movement as smooth as a ripple of water. I brought the Luger up and started to squeeze the trigger, but a shot crashed beside me—George.

I held my fire. It wasn't needed now.

The dark car lurched forward and started down the hill furiously. It roared into the distance while the little man out in the middle of the pavement was still reeling grotesquely in the light reflected from the walls.

There was something dark on his face that spread. His gun bounded along the concrete. His little legs buckled and he plunged sideways and rolled and then, very suddenly, became still.

George said, "Yah!" and sniffed at the muzzle of his revolver.

"Nice shooting." I got out of the car, stood there looking at the little man—a crumpled nothing. The dirty white of his sneakers gleamed a little in the side glare of the car's lights.

George got out beside me. "Why me, brother?"

"I didn't fire. I was watching that pretty hip draw of yours. It was sweeter than honey."

"Thanks, pal. They were after Mister Gerald, of course. I usually ferry him home from the club about this time, full of liquor and bridge losses."

We went over to the little man and looked down at him. He wasn't anything to see. He was just a little man who was dead, with a big slug in his face and blood on him.

"Turn some of those damn lights off," I growled. "And let's get away from here fast."

"The house is just across the street." George sounded as casual as if he had just shot a nickel in a slot machine instead of a man.

"The Jeeters are out of this, if you like your job. You ought to know that. We'll go back to my place and start all over."

"I get it," he snapped, and jumped back into the big car. He cut the foglights and the sidelights and I got in beside him in the front seat.

We straightened out and started up the

hill, over the brow. I looked back at the broken window. It was the small one at the extreme back of the car and it wasn't shatterproof. A large piece was gone from it. They could fit that, if they got around to it, and make some evidence. I didn't think it would matter, but it might.

At the crest of the hill a large limousine passed us going down. Its dome light was on and in the interior, as in a lighted showcase, an elderly couple sat stiffly, taking the royal salute. The man was in evening clothes, with a white scarf and a crush hat. The woman was in furs and diamonds.

George passed them casually, gunned the car and we made a fast right turn into a dark street. "There's a couple of good dinners all shot to hell," he drawled. "And I bet they don't even report it."

"Yeah. Let's get back home and have a drink," I said. "I never really got to like killing people."

CHAPTER FIVE

.22 and .45

WE SAT with some of Miss Harriet Huntress's Scotch in our glasses and looked at each other across the rims. George looked nice with his cap off. His head was clustered over with wavy dark-brown hair and his teeth were very white and clean. He sipped his drink and nibbled a cigarette at the same time. His snappy black eyes had a cool glitter in them.

"Yale?" I asked.

"Dartmouth, if it's any of your business."

"Everything's my business. What's a college education worth these days?"

"Three squares and a uniform," he drawled.

"What kind of guy is young Jeeter?"

"Big blond bruiser, plays a fair game of golf, thinks he's hell with the women,

drinks heavy but hasn't sicked up on the rugs so far."

"What kind of guy is old Jeeter?"

"He'd probably give you a dime—if he didn't have a nickel with him."

"*Tsk, tsk*, you're talking about your boss."

George grinned. "He's so tight his head squeaks when he takes his hat off. I always took chances. Maybe that's why I'm just somebody's driver. This is good Scotch."

I made another drink, which finished the bottle. I sat down again.

"You think those two gunnies were stashed out for Mister Gerald?"

"Why not? I usually drive him home about that time. Didn't today. He had a bad hangover and didn't go out until late. You're a dick, you know what it's all about, don't you?"

"Who told you I was a dick?"

"Nobody but a dick ever asked so goddam many questions."

I shook my head. "Uh-uh. I've asked you just six questions. Your boss has a lot of confidence in you. He must have told you."

The dark man nodded, grinned faintly and sipped. "The whole set-up is pretty obvious," he said. "When the car started to swing for the turn into the driveway these boys went to work. I don't figure they meant to kill anybody, somehow. It was just a scare. Only that little guy was nuts."

I looked at George's eyebrows. They were nice black eyebrows, with a gloss on them like horsehair.

I said: "It doesn't sound like Marty Estel to pick that sort of helpers."

"Sure. Maybe that's why he picked that sort of helpers."

"You're smart. You and I can get along. But shooting that little punk makes it tougher. What will you do about that?"

"Nothing."

"O.K. If they get to you and tie it to your gun, if you still have the gun, which you probably won't, I suppose it will be passed off as an attempted stick-up. There's just one thing."

"What?" George finished his second drink, laid the glass aside, lit a fresh cigarette and smiled.

"It's pretty hard to tell a car from in front—at night. Even with all those lights. It might have been a visitor."

He shrugged and nodded. "But if it's a scare, that would do just as well. Because the family would hear about it and the old man would guess whose boys they were—and why."

"Hell, you really are smart," I said admiringly, and the phone rang.

IT WAS an English-butler voice, very clipped and precise, and it said that if I was Mr. John Dalmas, Mr. Jeeter would like to speak to me. He came on at once, with plenty of frost.

"I must say that you take your time about obeying orders," he barked. "Or hasn't that chauffeur of mine—"

"Yeah, he got here, Mr. Jeeter," I said. "But we ran into a little trouble. George will tell you."

"Young man, when I want something done—"

"Listen, Mr. Jeeter, I've had a hard day. Your son punched me on the jaw and I fell and cut my head open. When I staggered back to my apartment, more dead than alive, I was stuck up by a couple of hard guys with guns who told me to lay off the Jeeter case. I'm doing my best but I'm feeling a little frail, so don't scare me."

"Young man—"

"Listen," I told him earnestly, "if you want to call all the plays in this game, you can carry the ball yourself. Or you can save yourself a lot of money and hire an order-taker. I have to do things my way. Any cops visit you tonight?"

"Cops?" he echoed in a sour voice. "You mean policemen?"

"By all means—I mean policemen."

"And why should I see any policemen?" he almost snarled.

"There was a stiff in front of your gates half an hour ago. Stiff meaning dead man. He's quite small. You could sweep him up in a dustpan, if he bothers you."

"My God! Are you serious?"

"Yes. What's more he took a shot at George and me. He recognized the car. He must have been all set for your son, Mr. Jeeter."

A silence with barbs on it. "I thought you said a dead man," Mr. Jeeter's voice said very coldly. "Now you say he shot at you."

"That was while he wasn't dead," I said. "George will tell you. George—"

"You come out here at once!" he yelled at me over the phone. "At once, do you hear? At once!"

"George will tell you," I said softly and hung up—in his face.

George looked at me coldly. He stood up and put his cap on. "O. K., pal," he said. "Maybe some day I can put you on to a soft thing." He started for the door.

"It had to be that way. It's up to him. He'll have to decide."

"Nuts," George said, looking back over his shoulder. "Save your breath, shamus. Anything you say to me is just so much noise in the wrong place."

He opened the door, went out, shut it, and I sat there still holding the telephone, with my mouth open and nothing in it but my tongue and a bad taste on that.

I went out to the kitchen and shook the Scotch bottle, but it was still empty. I opened some rye and swallowed a drink and it tasted sour. Something was bothering me. I had a feeling it was going to bother me a lot more before I was through.

THEY must have missed George by a whisker. I heard the elevator come up again almost as soon as it had stopped going down. Solid steps grew louder along the hallway. A fist hit the door. I went over and opened it.

One was in brown, one in blue, both large, hefty and bored.

The one in brown pushed his hat back on his head with a freckled hand and said: "You John Dalmas?"

"Me," I said.

They rode me back into the room without seeming to. The one in blue shut the door. The one in brown palmed a shield and let me catch a glint of the gold and enamel.

"Finlayson, Detective-Lieutenant working out of Central Homicide," he said. "This is Sebold, my partner. We're a couple of swell guys not to get funny with. We hear you're kind of sharp with a gun."

Sebold took his hat off and dusted his salt-and-pepper hair back with the flat of his hand. He drifted noiselessly out to the kitchen.

Finlayson sat down on the edge of a chair and flicked his chin with a thumb-nail as square as an ice cube and yellow as a mustard plaster. He was older than Sebold, but not so good-looking. He had the frowsy expression of a veteran cop who hadn't got very far.

I sat down. I said: "How do you mean, sharp with a gun?"

"Shooting people is how I mean."

I lit a cigarette. Sebold came out of the kitchen and went into the dressing-room behind the wall-bed.

"We understand you're a private-license guy," Finlayson said heavily.

"That's right."

"Give." He held his hand out. I gave him my wallet. He chewed it over and handed it back. "Carry a gun?"

I nodded. He held out his hand for it. Sebold came out of the dressing-room.

Finlayson sniffed at the Luger, snapped the magazine out, cleared the breech and held the gun so that a little light shone up through the magazine opening into the breech end of the barrel. He looked down the muzzle, squinting. He handed the gun to Sebold. Sebold did the same thing.

"Don't think so," Sebold said. "Clean, but not that clean. Couldn't have been cleaned within the hour. A little dust."

"Right."

FINLAYSON picked the ejected shell off the carpet, pressed it into the magazine and snapped the magazine back in place. He handed me the gun. I put it back under my arm.

"Been out anywhere tonight?" he asked tersely.

"Don't tell me the plot," I said. "I'm just a bit-player."

"Smart guy," Sebold said dispassionately. He dusted his hair again and opened a desk drawer. "Funny stuff. Good for a column. I like 'em that way—with my blackjack."

Finlayson sighed. "Been out tonight, shamus?"

"Sure. In and out all the time. Why?"

He ignored the question. "Where you been?"

"Out to dinner. Business call or two."

"Where at?"

"I'm sorry, boys. Every business has its private files."

"Had company, too," Sebold said, picking up George's glass and sniffing it. "Recent—within the hour."

"You're not that good," I told him sourly.

"Had a ride in a big Caddy?" Finlayson bored on, taking a deep breath. "Over West L. A. direction?"

"Had a ride in a Chrysler—over Vine Street direction."

"Maybe we better just take him down," Sebold said, looking at his fingernails.

"Maybe you better skip the gang-buster stuff and tell me what's stuck in your nose. I get along with cops—except when they act as if the law is only for citizens."

Finlayson studied me. Nothing I had said made any impression on him. Nothing Sebold said made any impression on him. He had an idea and he was holding it like a sick baby.

"You know a little rat named Frisky Lavon?" he sighed. "Used to be a dummy-chucker, then found out he could bug his way outa raps. Been doing that for say twelve years. Totes a gun and acts simple. But he quit acting tonight at seven thirty about. Quit cold—with a slug in his head."

"Never heard of him," I said.

"You bumped anybody off tonight?"

"I'd have to look at my notebook."

Sebold leaned forward politely. "Would you care for a smack in the kisser?" he inquired.

Finlayson held his hand out sharply. "Cut it, Ben. Cut it. Listen, Dalmas. Maybe we're going at this wrong. We're not talking about murder. Could have been legitimate. This Frisky Lavon got froze off tonight on Calvello Drive in Bel-Air. Out in the middle of the street. Nobody seen or heard anything. So we kind of want to know."

"All right," I growled. "What makes it my business? And keep that piano tuner out of my hair. He has a nice suit and his nails are clean, but he bears down on his shield too hard."

"Nuts to you," Sebold said.

"We got a funny phone call," Finlayson said. "Which is where you come in. We ain't just throwing our weight around. And we want a forty-five. They ain't sure what kind yet."

"He's smart. He threw it under the bar at Levy's," Sebold sneered.

"I never had a forty-five," I said. "A guy who needs that much gun ought to use a pick."

FINLAYSON scowled at me and counted his thumbs. Then he took a deep breath and suddenly went human on me. "Sure, I'm just a dumb flatheel," he said. "Anybody could pull my ears off and I wouldn't even notice it. Let's all quit horsing around and talk sense.

"This Frisky was found dead after a no-name phone call to West L.A. police. Found dead outside a big house belonging to a man named Jeeter who owns a string of investment companies. He wouldn't use a guy like Frisky for a penwiper, so there's nothing in that. The servants there didn't hear nothing, nor the servants at any of the four houses on the block. Frisky is lying in the street and somebody run over his foot, but what killed him was a forty-five slug smack in his face.

"West L.A. ain't hardly started the routine when some guys calls up Central and says to tell Homicide if they want to know who got Frisky Lavon, ask a private eye named John Dalmas, complete with address and everything, then a quick hang-up.

"O. K. The guy on the board gives me the dope and I don't know Frisky from a hole in my sock, but I ask Identification and sure enough they have him and just about the time I'm looking it over the flash comes from West L.A. and the description seems to check pretty close. So we get together and it's the same guy all right and the chief of detectives has us drop around here. So we drop around."

"So here you are," I said. "Will you have a drink?"

"Can we search the joint, if we do?"

"Sure. It's a good lead—that phone call, I mean—if you put in about six months on it."

"We already got that idea," Finlayson growled. "A hundred guys could have chilled this little wart, and two-three of them maybe could have thought it was a

smart rib to pin it on you. Them two-three is what interest us."

I shook my head.

"No ideas at all, huh?"

"Just for wisecracks," Sebold said.

Finlayson lumbered to his feet. "Well, we gotta look around."

"Maybe we had ought to have brought a search warrant," Sebold said, tickling his upper lip with the end of his tongue.

"I don't *have* to fight this guy, do I?" I asked Finlayson. "I mean, is it all right if I leave him his gag lines and just keep my temper?"

Finlayson looked at the ceiling and said dryly: "His wife left him day before yesterday. He's just trying to compensate, as the fellow says."

Sebold turned white and twisted his knuckles savagely. Then he laughed shortly and got to his feet.

THEY went at it. Ten minutes of opening and shutting drawers and looking at the backs of shelves and under seat cushions and letting the bed down and peering into the electric refrigerator and the garbage pail fed them up.

They came back and sat down again. "Just a nut," Finlayson said wearily. "Some guy that picked your name outa the directory maybe. Could be anything."

"Now I'll get that drink."

"I don't drink," Sebold snarled.

Finlayson crossed his hands on his stomach. "That don't mean any liquor gets poured in the flower pot, son."

I got three drinks and put two of them beside Finlayson. He drank half of one of them and looked at the ceiling. "I got another killing, too," he said thoughtfully. "A guy in your racket, Dalmas. A fat guy on Sunset. Name of Arbogast. Ever hear of him?"

"I thought he was a handwriting expert," I said.

"You're talking about police business," Sebold told his partner coldly.

"Sure. Police business that's already in the morning paper. This Arbogast was shot three times with a twenty-two. Target gun. You know any crooks that pack that kind of heat?"

I held my glass tightly and took a long slow swallow. I hadn't thought Waxnose looked dangerous enough, but you never knew.

"I did," I said slowly. "A killer named Al Tessilore. But he's in Folsom. He used a Colt Woodsman."

Finlayson finished the first drink, used the second in about the same time, and stood up. Sebold stood up, still mad.

Finlayson opened the door. "Come on, Ben." They went out.

I heard their steps along the hall, the clang of the elevator once more. A car started just below in the street and growled off into the night.

"Clowns like that don't kill," I said out loud. But it looked as if they did.

I waited fifteen minutes before I went out again. The phone rang while I was waiting, but I didn't answer it.

I drove towards the El Milano and circled around enough to make sure I wasn't followed.

CHAPTER SIX

Young Mister Gerald

THE lobby hadn't changed any. The blue carpet still tickled my ankles while I ambled over to the desk, the same pale clerk was handing a key to a couple of horse-faced females in tweeds, and when he saw me he put his weight on his left foot again and the door at the end of the desk popped open and out popped the fat and erotic Hawkins, with what looked like the same cigar stub in his face.

He hustled over and gave me a big warm smile this time, took hold of my arm. "Just the guy I was hoping to see," he chuckled. "Let's us go upstairs a minute."

"What's the matter?"

"Matter?" His smile became broad as the door to a two-car garage. "Nothing ain't the matter. This way."

He pushed me into the elevator and said "Eight" in a fat cheerful voice and up we sailed and out we got and slid along the corridor. Hawkins had a hard hand and knew where to hold an arm. I was interested enough to let him get away with it. He pushed the buzzer beside Miss Huntress's door and Big Ben chimed inside and the door opened and I was looking at a deadpan in a derby hat and a dinner coat. He had his right hand in the side pocket of the coat, and under the derby a pair of scarred eyebrows and under the eyebrows a pair of eyes that had as much expression as the cap on a gas tank.

The mouth moved enough to say: "Yeah?"

"Company for the boss," Hawkins said expansively.

"What company?"

"Let me play too," I said. "Limited liability company. Gimme the apple."

"Huh?" The eyebrows went this way and that and the jaw came out. "Nobody ain't kiddin' nobody, I hope."

"Now, now, gents—" Hawkins began.

A voice behind the derby-hatted man interrupted him. "What's the matter, Beef?"

"He's in a stew," I said.

"Listen, mug—"

"Now, now, gents—" as before.

"Ain't nothing the matter," Beef said, throwing his voice over his shoulder as if it were a coil of rope. "The hotel dick got a guy up here and he says he's company."

"Show the company in, Beef." I liked this voice. It was smooth, quiet, and you could have cut your name in it with a thirty-pound sledge and a cold chisel.

"Lift the dogs," Beef said, and stood to one side.

We went in. I went first, then Hawkins, then Beef wheeled neatly behind us like a door. We went in so close together that we must have looked like a three-decker sandwich.

Miss Huntress was not in the room. The log in the fireplace had almost stopped smoldering. There was still that smell of sandalwood on the air. With it cigarette smoke blended.

A MAN stood at the end of the davenport, both hands in the pockets of a blue camel's hair coat with the collar high to a black snapbrim hat. A loose scarf hung outside his coat. He stood motionless, the cigarette in his mouth lipping smoke. He was tall, black-haired, suave, dangerous. He said nothing.

Hawkins ambled over to him. "This is the guy I was telling you about, Mr. Estel," the fat man burbled. "Come in earlier today and said he was from you. Kinda fooled me."

"Give him a ten, Beef."

The derby hat took its left hand from somewhere and there was a bill in it. It pushed the bill at Hawkins. Hawkins took the bill, blushing.

"This ain't necessary, Mr. Estel. Thanks a lot just the same."

"Scram."

"Huh?" Hawkins looked shocked.

"You heard him," Beef said truculently. "Want your fanny out the door first, huh?"

Hawkins drew himself up. "I gotta protect the tenants. You gentlemen know how it is. A man in a job like this."

"Yeah. Scram," Estel said without moving his lips.

Hawkins turned and went out quickly, softly. The door clicked gently shut behind him. Beef looked back at it, then moved behind me.

"See if he's rodded, Beef."

The derby hat saw if I was rodded. He took the Luger and went away from

me. Estel looked casually at the Luger, back at me. His eyes held an expression of indifferent dislike.

"Name's John Dalmas, eh? A private dick."

"So what?" I said.

"Somebody is goin' to get somebody's face pushed into somebody's floor," Beef said coldly.

"Aw, keep that crap for the boiler-room," I told him. "I'm sick of hard guys for this evening. I said 'so what,' and 'so what' is what I said."

Marty Estel looked mildly amused. "Hell, keep your shirt in. I've got to look after my friends, don't I? You know who I am. O. K., I know what you talked to Miss Huntress about. And I know something about you that you don't know I know."

"All right," I said. "This fat slob Hawkins collected ten from me for letting me up here this afternon—knowing perfectly well who I was—and he has just collected ten from your iron man for slipping me the nasty. Give me back my gun and tell me what makes my business your business."

"Plenty. First off, Harriet's not home. We're waiting for her on account of a thing that happened. I can't wait any longer. Got to go to work at the club. So what did you come after this time?"

"Looking for the Jeeter boy. Somebody shot at his car tonight. From now on he needs somebody to walk behind him."

"You think I play games like that?" Estel asked me coldly.

I walked over to a cabinet and opened it and found a bottle of Scotch. I twisted the cap off, lifted a glass from the tabouret and poured some out. I tasted it. It tasted all right.

I looked around for ice, but there wasn't any. It had all melted long since in the bucket.

"I asked you a question," Estel said gravely.

"I heard it. I'm making my mind up. The answer is, I wouldn't have thought it—no. But it happened. I was there. I was in the car—instead of young Jeeter. His father had sent for me to come to the house to talk things over."

"What things?"

I didn't bother to look surprised. "You hold fifty grand of the boy's paper. That looks bad for you, if anything happens to him."

"I don't figure it that way. Because that way I would lose my dough. The old man won't pay—granted. But I wait a couple of years and I collect from the kid. He gets his estate out of trust when he's twenty-eight. Right now he gets a grand a month and he can't even will anything, because it's still in trust. Savvy?"

"So you wouldn't knock him off," I said, using my Scotch. "But you might throw a scare into him."

Estel frowned. He discarded his cigarette into a tray and watched it smoke a moment before he picked it up again and snubbed it out. He shook his head.

"If you're going to bodyguard him, it would almost pay me to stand part of your salary, wouldn't it? Almost. A man in my racket can't take care of everything. He's of age and it's his business who he runs around with. For instance, women. Any reason why a nice girl shouldn't cut herself a piece of five million bucks?"

I said: "I think it's a swell idea. What was it you knew about me that I didn't know you knew?"

He smiled, faintly. "What was it you were waiting to tell Miss Huntress—the thing that happened?"

He smiled faintly again.

"Listen, Dalmás, there are lots of ways to play any game. I play mine on the house percentage, because that's all I need to win. What makes me get tough?"

I rolled a fresh cigarette around in my fingers and tried to roll it around my

glass with two fingers. "Who said you were tough? I always heard the nicest things about you."

Marty Estel nodded and looked faintly amused. "I have sources of information," he said quietly. "When I have fifty grand invested in a guy, I'm apt to find out a little about him. Jeeter hired a man named Arbogast to do a little work. Arbogast was killed in his office today—with a twenty-two. That could have nothing to do with Jeeter's business. But there was a tail on you when you went there and you didn't give it to the law. Does that make you and me friends?"

I licked the edge of my glass, nodded. "It seems it does."

"From now on just forget about bothering Harriet, see?"

"O. K."

"So we understand each other real good, now."

"Yeah."

"Well, I'll be going. Give the guy back his Luger, Beef."

The derby hat came over and smacked my gun into my hand hard enough to break a bone.

"Staying?" Estel asked, moving towards the door.

"I guess I'll wait a little while. Until Hawkins comes up to touch me for another ten."

Estel grinned. Beef walked in front of him wooden-faced to the door and opened it. Estel went out. The door closed. The room was silent. I sniffed at the dying perfume of sandalwood and stood motionless, looking around.

SOMEBODY was nuts. I was nuts. Everybody was nuts. None of it fitted together worth a nickel. Marty Estel, as he said, had no good motive for murdering anybody, because that would be the surest way to kill his chances to collect his money. Even if he had a motive

for murdering anybody, Waxnose and Frisky didn't seem like the team he would select for the job. I was in bad with the police, I had spent ten dollars of my twenty expense money, and I didn't have enough leverage anywhere to life a dime off a cigar counter.

I finished my drink, put the glass down, walked up and down the room, smoked a third cigarette, looked at my watch, shrugged and felt disgusted. The inner doors of the suite were closed. I went across to the one out of which young Jeeter must have sneaked that afternoon. Opening it I looked into a bedroom done in ivory and ashes of roses. There was a big double bed with no footboard, covered with figured brocade. Toilet articles glistened on a built-in dressing table with a panel-light. The light was lit. A small lamp on a table beside the bed was lit also. A door near the dressing table showed the cool green of bathroom tiles.

I went over and looked in there. Chromium, a glass stall shower, monogrammed towels on a rack, a glass shelf for perfume and bath salts at the foot of the tub, everything nice and refined. Miss Huntress did herself well. I hoped she was paying her own rent. It didn't make any difference to me—I just liked it that way.

I went back towards the living-room, stopped in the doorway to take another pleasant look around, and noticed something I ought to have noticed the instant I stepped into the room. I noticed the sharp tang of cordite on the air, almost, but not quite gone. And then I noticed something else.

The bed had been moved over until its head overlapped the edge of a closet door which was not quite closed. The weight of the bed was holding it from opening. I went over there to find out why it wanted to open. I went slowly and about halfway there I noticed that I was holding a gun in my hand.

I leaned against the closet door. It didn't move. I threw more weight against it. It still didn't move. Braced against it I pushed the bed away with my foot, gave ground slowly.

A weight pushed against me hard. I had gone back a foot or so before anything else happened. Then it happened suddenly. He came out—sideways, in a sort of roll. I put some more weight back on the door and held him like that a moment, looking at him.

He was still big, still blond, still dressed in rough sporty material, with scarf and open-necked shirt. But his face wasn't red any more.

I gave ground again and he rolled down the back of the door, turning a little like a swimmer in the surf, thumped the floor and lay there, almost on his back, still looking at me. Light from the bedside lamp glittered on his head. There was a scorched and soggy stain on the rough coat—about where his heart would be. So he wouldn't get that five million after all. And nobody would get anything and Marty Estel wouldn't get his fifty grand. Because young Mister Gerald was dead.

I LOOKED back into the closet where he had been. Its door hung wide open now. There were clothes on racks, feminine clothes, nice clothes. He had been backed in among them, probably with his hands in the air and a gun against his chest. And then he had been shot dead, and whoever did it hadn't been quite quick enough or quite strong enough to get the door shut. Or had been scared and had just yanked the bed over against the door and left it that way.

Something glittered down on the floor. I picked it up. A small automatic, .25 caliber, a woman's purse gun with a beautifully engraved butt inlaid with silver and ivory. I put the gun in my pocket. That seemed a funny thing to do, too.

I didn't touch him. He was as dead

as John D. Arbogast and looked a whole lot deader. I left the door open and listened, walked quickly back across the room and into the living-room and shut the bedroom door, smearing the knob as I did it.

A lock was being tinkled at with a key. Hawkins was back again, to see what delayed me. He was letting himself in with his passkey.

I was pouring a drink when he came in.

He came well into the room, stopped with his feet planted and surveyed me coldly.

"I seen Estel and his boy leave," he said. "I didn't see you leave. So I come up. I gotta—"

"You gotta protect the guests," I said.

"Yeah. I gotta protect the guests. You can't stay up here, pal. Not without the lady of the house is home."

"But Marty Estel and his hard boy can."

He came a little closer to me. He had a mean look in his eye. He had always had it, probably, but I noticed it more now.

"You don't want to make nothing of of that, do you?" he asked me.

"No. Every man to his own chisel. Have a drink."

"That ain't your liquor."

"Miss Huntress gave me a bottle. We're pals. Marty Estel and I are pals. Everybody is pals. Don't you want to be pals?"

"You ain't trying to kid me, are you?"

"Have a drink and forget it."

I found a glass and poured him one. He took it.

"It's the job if anybody smells it on me," he said."

"Uh-huh."

He drank slowly, rolling it around on his tongue. "Good Scotch."

"Won't be the first time you tasted it, will it?"

He started to get hard again, then

relaxed. "Hell, I guess you're just a kidder." He finished the drink, put the glass down, patted his lips with a large and very crumpled handkerchief and sighed.

"O. K.," he said. "But we'll have to leave now."

"All set. I guess she won't be home for a while. You see them go out?"

"Her and the boy friend. Yeah, long time ago."

I nodded. We went towards the door and Hawkins saw me out. He saw me downstairs and off the premises. But he didn't see what was in Miss Huntress's bedroom. I wondered if he would go back up. If he did, the Scotch bottle would probably stop him.

I got into my car and drove off home—to talk to Anna Halsey on the phone. There wasn't any case any more—for us.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Waxnose

I PARKED close to the curb this time. I wasn't feeling gay any more. I rode up in the elevator and unlocked my door and clicked the light on.

Waxnose sat in my best chair, an unlit hand-rolled brown cigarette between his fingers, his bony knees crossed, and his long Woodsman resting solidly on his leg. He was smiling. It wasn't the nicest smile I ever saw.

"Hi, pal," he drawled. "You still ain't had that door fixed. Kind of shut it, huh?" His voice, for all the drawl, was deadly.

I shut the door, stood looking across the room at him.

"So you killed my pal," he said.

He stood up slowly, came across the room slowly and leaned the .22 against my throat. His smiling thin-lipped mouth seemed as expressionless, for all its smile, as his wax-white nose. He reached quietly

under my coat and took the Luger. I might as well leave it home from now on. Everybody in town seemed to be able to take it away from me.

He stepped back across the room and sat down again in the chair. "Steady does it," he said almost gently. "Park the body, friend. No false moves. No moves at all. You and me are at the jumping-off place. The clock's tickin' and we're waiting to go."

I sat down and stared at him. A curious bird. I moistened my dry lips. "You told me his gun had no firing pin," I said.

"Yeah. He fooled me on that, the little so-and-so. And I told you to lay off the Jeeter kid. That's cold now. It's Frisky I'm thinking about. Crazy, ain't it? Me bothering about a dimwit like that, packin' him around with me, and letting him get hisself bumped off." He sighed and added simply. "He was my kid brother."

"I didn't kill him," I said.

He smiled a little more. He had never stopped smiling. The corners of his mouth just tucked in a little deeper.

"Yeah?"

He slid the safety catch off the Luger, laid it carefully on the arm of the chair at his right, and reached into his pocket. What he brought out made me as cold as an ice bucket.

It was a metal tube, dark and rough-looking, about four inches long and drilled with a lot of small holes. He held his Woodsman in his left hand and began to screw the tube casually on the end of it.

"Silencer," he said. "They're the bunk, I guess you smart guys think. This one ain't the bunk—not for three shots. I oughta know. I made it myself."

I moistened my lips again. "It'll work for one shot," I said. "Then it jams your action. That one looks like cast-iron. It will probably blow your hand off."

HE SMILED his waxy smile, screwed it on, slowly, lovingly, gave it a last hard turn and sat back relaxed. "Not this baby. She's packed with steel wool and that's good for three shots, like I said. Then you got to repack it. And there ain't enough back pressure to jam the action on this gun. You feel good? I'd like you to feel good."

"I feel swell, you sadistic ———," I said.

"I'm having you lie down on the bed after a while. You won't feel nothing. I'm kind of fussy about my killings. Frisky didn't feel nothing, I guess. You got him neat."

"You don't see good," I sneered. "The chauffeur got him with a Smith and Wesson forty-four. I didn't even fire."

"Uh-huh."

"O. K., you don't believe me," I said. "What did you kill Arbogast for? There was nothing fussy about that killing. He was just shot at his desk, three times with a twenty-two and he fell down on the floor. What did he ever do to your filthy little brother?"

He jerked the gun up, but his smile held. "You got guts," he said. "Who is this here Arbogast?"

I told him. I told him slowly and carefully, in detail. I told him a lot of things. And he began in some vague way to look worried. His eyes flickered at me, away, back again, restlessly, like a humming-bird.

"I don't know any party named Arbogast, pal," he said slowly. "Never heard of him. And I ain't shot any fat guys today."

"You killed him," I said. "And you killed young Jeeter—in the girl's apartment at the El Milano. He's lying there dead right now. You're working for Marty Estel. He's going to be awfully damn sorry about that kill. Go ahead and make it three in a row."

His face froze. The smile went away

at last. His whole face looked waxy now. He opened his mouth and breathed through it, and his breath made a restless worrying sound. I could see the faint glitter of sweat on his forehead, and I could feel the cold from the evaporation of sweat on mine.

Waxnose said very gently: "I ain't killed anybody at all, friend. Not anybody. I wasn't hired to kill people. Until Frisky stopped that slug I didn't have no such ideas. That's straight."

I tried not to stare at the metal tube on the end of the Woodsman.

A flame flickered at the back of his eyes, a small, weak, smoky flame. It seemed to grow larger and clearer. He looked down at the floor between his feet. I looked around at the light-switch, but it was too far away. He looked up again. Very slowly he began to unscrew the silencer. He had it loose in his hand. He dropped it back into his pocket, stood up, holding the two guns, one in each hand. Then he had another idea. He sat down again, took all the shells out of the Luger quickly and threw it on the floor after them.

He came towards me softly across the room. "I guess this is your lucky day," he said. "I got to go a place and see a guy."

"I knew all along it was my lucky day. I've been feeling so good."

He moved delicately around me to the door and opened it a foot and started through the narrow opening, smiling again.

"I gotta to see a guy," he said very gently, and his tongue moved along his lips.

"Not yet," I said, and jumped.

His gun-hand was at the edge of the door, almost beyond the edge. I hit the door hard and he couldn't bring it in quickly enough. He couldn't get out of the way. I pinned him in the doorway, and used all the strength I had. It was

a crazy thing. He had given me a break and all I had to do was to stand still and let him go. But I had a guy to see too—and I wanted to see him first.

Waxnose leered at me. He grunted. He fought with his hand beyond the door edge. I shifted and hit his jaw with all I had. It was enough. He went limp. I hit him again. His head bounced against the wood. I heard a light thud beyond the door edge. I hit him a third time. I never hit anything any harder.

I took my weight back from the door then and he slid towards me, blank-eyed, rubber-kneed and I caught him and twisted his empty hands behind him and let him fall. I stood over him panting. I went to the door. His Woodsman lay almost on the sill. I picked it up, dropped it into my pocket—not the pocket that held Miss Huntress's gun. He hadn't even found that.

There he lay on the floor. He was thin, he had no weight, but I panted just the same. In a little while his eyes flickered open and looked up at me.

"Greedy guy," he whispered wearily. "Why did I ever leave Saint Looey?"

I snapped handcuffs on his wrists and pulled him by the shoulders into the dressing-room and tied his ankles with a piece of rope. I left him lying on his back, a little sideways, his nose as white as ever, his eyes empty now, his lips moving a little as if he were talking to himself. A funny lad, not all bad, but not so pure I had to weep over him either.

I put my Luger together and left with my three guns. There was nobody outside the apartment house.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Three-Gun Dalmas

THE Jeeter mansion was on a nine- or ten-acre knoll, a big colonial pile with fat white columns and dormer windows and magnolias and a four-car garage.

There was a circular parking space at the top of the driveway with two cars parked in it—one was the big dread-naught in which I'd ridden and the other a canary-yellow sports convertible I had seen before.

I rang a bell the size of a silver dollar. The door opened and a tall narrow cold-eyed bird in dark clothes looked out at me.

"Mr. Jeeter home? Mr. Jeeter, Senior?"

"May I arsk who is calling?" The accent was a little too thick, like cut Scotch.

"John Dalmas. I'm working for him. Maybe I had ought to of gone to the servant's entrance."

He hitched a finger at a wing collar and looked at me without pleasure. "Aw, possibly. You may step in. I shall inform Mr. Jeeter. I believe he is engaged at the moment. Kindly wait 'ere in the 'all."

"The act stinks," I said. "English butlers aren't dropping their h's this year."

"Smart guy, huh?" he snarled, in a voice from not any farther across the Atlantic than Hoboken. "Wait here." He slid away.

I sat down in a carved chair and felt thirsty. After a while the butler came catfooting back along the hall and jerked his chin at me unpleasantly.

We went along a mile of hallway. At the end it broadened without any doors into a huge sunroom. On the far side of the sunroom the butler opened a wide door and I stepped past him into an oval room with a black-and-silver oval rug, a black marble table in the middle of the rug, stiff high-backed carved chairs against the walls, a huge oval mirror with a rounded surface that made me look like a pygmy with water on the brain, and in the room three people.

By the door opposite where I came in, George the chauffeur stood stiffly in his neat dark uniform, with his peaked cap

in his hand. In the least uncomfortable of the chairs sat Miss Harriet Huntress holding a glass in which there was half a drink. And around the silver margin of the oval rug Mr. Jeeter, Senior was trying his legs out in a brisk canter, still under wraps, but mad inside. His face was red and the veins on his nose were distended. His hands were in the pockets of a velvet smoking jacket. He wore a pleated shirt with a black pearl in the bosom, a batwing black tie, and one of his patent-leather oxfords was unlaced.

He whirled and yelled at the butler behind me: "Get out and keep those doors shut! And I'm not at home to anybody, understand? Nobody!"

The butler closed the doors. Presumably, he went away. I didn't hear him go.

GEORGE gave me a cool one-sided smile and Miss Huntress gave me a bland stare over her glass. "You made a nice comeback," she said demurely.

"You took a chance leaving me alone in your apartment," I told her. "I might have sneaked some of your perfume."

"Well, what do you want?" Jeeter yelled at me. "A nice sort of detective you turned out to be. I put you on a confidential job and you walk right in on Miss Huntress and explain the whole thing to her."

"It worked, didn't it?"

He stared. They all stared. "How do you know that?" he barked.

"I know a nice girl when I see one. She's here telling you she had an idea she got not to like, and for you to quit worrying about it. Where's Mister Gerald?"

Old Man Jeeter stopped and gave me a hard level stare. "I still regard you as incompetent," he said. "My son is missing."

"I'm not working for you. I'm working for Anna Halsey. Any complaints

you have to make should be addressed to her. Do I pour my own drink or do you have a flunkey in a purple suit to do it? And what do you mean, your son is missing?"

"Should I give him the heave, sir?" George asked quietly.

Jeeter waved his hand at a decanter and siphon and glasses on the black marble table and started around the rug again. "Don't be silly," he snapped at George.

George flushed a little, high on his cheekbones. His mouth looked tough.

I mixed myself a drink and sat down with it and tasted it and asked again: "What do you mean your son is missing, Mr. Jeeter?"

"I'm paying you good money," he started to yell at me, still mad.

"When?"

He stopped dead in his canter and looked at me again. Miss Huntress laughed lightly. George scowled.

"What do you suppose I mean—my son is missing?" he snapped. "I should have thought that would be clear enough even to you. Nobody knows where he is. Miss Huntress doesn't know. I don't know. No one at any of the places where he might be knows."

"But I'm smarter than they are," I said. "I know."

Nobody moved for a long minute. Jeeter stared at me fish-eyed. George stared at me. The girl stared at me. She looked puzzled. The other two just stared.

I looked at her. "Where did you go when you went out, if you're telling?"

Her dark blue eyes were water-clear. "There's no secret about it. We went out together—in a taxi. Gerald had had his driving license suspended for a month. Too many tickets. We went down towards the beach and I had a change of heart, as you guessed. I decided I was just being a chiseler after all. I didn't want Gerald's money really. What I wanted

was revenge. On Mr. Jeeter here for ruining my father. Done all legally of course, but done just the same. But I got myself in a spot where I couldn't have my revenge and not look like a cheap chiseler. So I told Gerald to find some other girl to play with. He was sore and we quarreled. I stopped the taxi and got out in Beverly Hills. He went on. I don't no where. Later I went back to the El Milano and got my car out of the garage and came here. To tell Mr. Jeeter to forget the whole thing and not bother to sick sleuths on to me."

"You say you went with him in a taxi," I said. "Why wasn't George driving him, if he couldn't drive himself?"

I stared at her, but I wasn't talking to her. Jeeter answered me, frostily. "George drove me home from the office, of course. At that time Gerald had already gone out. Is there anything important about that?"

I TURNED to him. "Yeah. There's going to be. Mister Gerald is at the El Milano. Hawkins the house dick told me. He went back there to wait for Miss Huntress and Hawkins let him into her apartment. Hawkins will do you those little favors—for ten bucks. He may be there still and he may not."

I kept on watching them. It was hard to watch all three of them. But they didn't move. They just looked at me.

"Well—I'm glad to hear it," Old man Jeeter said. "I was afraid he was off somewhere getting drunk."

"No. He's not off anywhere getting drunk," I said. "By the way, among these places you called to see if he was there, you didn't call the El Milano?"

George nodded. "Yes, I did. They said he wasn't there. Looks like this house peeper tipped the phone girl off not to say anything."

"He wouldn't have to do that. She'd just ring the apartment and he wouldn't

answer—naturally.” I watched old man Jeeter hard then, with a lot of interest. It was going to be hard for him to take that up, but he was going to have to do it.

He did. He licked his lips first. “Why—naturally, if I may ask?” he said coldly.

I put my glass down on the marble table and stood against the wall, with my hands hanging free. I still tried to watch them—all three of them.

“Let’s go back over this thing a little,” I said. “We’re all wise to the situation. I know George is, although he shouldn’t be, being just a servant. I know Miss Huntress is. And of course *you* are, Mr. Jeeter. So let’s see what we have got. We have a lot of things that don’t add up, but I’m smart. I’m going to add them up anyhow. First off a handful of photostats of notes from Marty Estel. Gerald denies having given these and Mr. Jeeter won’t pay them, but he has a handwriting man named Arbogast check the signatures, to see if they look genuine. They do. They are. This Arbogast may have done other things. I don’t know. I couldn’t ask him. When I went to see him, he was dead—shot three times—as I’ve since heard—with a twenty-two. No, I didn’t tell the police, Mr. Jeeter.”

The tall silver-haired man looked horribly shocked. His lean body shook like a bullrush. “Dead?” he whispered. “Murdered?”

I LOOKED at George. George didn’t move a muscle. I looked at the girl. She sat quietly, waiting, tight-lipped.

I said: “There’s only one reason to suppose his killing had anything to do with Mr. Jeeter’s affairs. He was shot with a twenty-two—and there is a man in this case who wears a twenty-two.”

I still had their attention. And their silence.

“Why he was shot I haven’t the faintest idea. He was not a dangerous man to Miss Huntress or Marty Estel. He was too fat

to get around much. My guess is he was a little too smart. He got a simple case of signature identification and he went on from there to find out more than he should. And after he had found out more than he should—he guessed more than he ought—and maybe he even tried a little blackmail. And somebody rubbed him out this afternoon with a twenty-two. O.K., I can stand it. I never knew him.

“So I went over to see Miss Huntress and after a lot of finaygling around with this itchy-handed house dick I got to see her and we had a chat, and then Mister Gerald stepped neatly out of hiding and bopped me a nice one on the chin and over I went and hit my head on a chair leg. And when I came out of that the joint was empty. So I went on home.

“And home I found the man with the twenty-two and with him a dimwit called Frisky Lavon, with a bad breath and a very large gun, neither of which matter now as he was shot dead in front of your house tonight, Mr. Jeeter—shot trying to stick up your car. The cops know about that one—they came to see me about it—because the other guy, the one that packs the twenty-two, is the little dimwit’s brother and he thought I shot Dimwit and tried to put the bee on me. But it didn’t work. That’s two killings.

“We now come to the third and most important. I went back to the El Milano because it no longer seemed a good idea for Mister Gerald to be running around casually. He seemed to have a few enemies. It even seemed that he was supposed to be in the car this evening when Frisky Lavon shot at it—but of course that was just a plant.”

Old Jeeter drew his white eyebrows together in an expression of puzzlement. George didn’t look puzzled. He didn’t look anything. He was as wooden-faced as a cigar-store Indian. The girl looked a little white now, a little tense. I plowed on.

"Back at the El Milano I found that Hawkins had let Marty Estel and his bodyguard into Miss Huntress's apartment to wait for her. Marty had something to tell her—that Arbogast had been killed. That made it a good idea for her to lay off young Jeeter for a while—until the cops quieted down anyhow. A thoughtful guy, Marty. A much more thoughtful guy than you would suppose. For instance, he knew about Arbogast and he knew Mr. Jeeter went to Anna Halsey's office this morning and he knew somehow—Anna might have told him herself, I wouldn't put it past her—that I was working on the case now. So he had me tailed to Arbogast's place and away, and he found out later from his cop friends that Arbogast had been murdered, and he knew I hadn't given it out. So he had me there and that made us pals. He went away after telling me this and once more I was left alone in Miss Huntress's apartment. But this time for no reason at all I poked around. And I found young Mister Gerald, in the bedroom, in a closet."

I STEPPED quickly over to the girl and reached into my pocket and took out the small fancy .25 automatic and laid it down on her knee.

"Ever see this before?"

Her voice had a curious tight sound, but her dark blue eyes looked at me levelly.

"Yes. It's mine."

"You kept it where?"

"In the drawer of a small table beside the bed."

"Sure about that?"

She thought. Neither of the two men stirred.

George began to twitch the corner of his mouth. She shook her head suddenly, sideways.

"No. I have an idea now I took it out to show somebody—because I don't know

much about guns—and left it lying on the mantel in the living-room. In fact, I'm almost sure I did. It was Gerald I showed it to."

"So he might have reached for it there, if anybody tried to make a wrong play at him?"

She nodded, troubled. "What do you mean—he's in the closet?" she asked in a small quick voice.

"You know. Everybody in this room knows what I mean. They know that I showed you that gun for a purpose." I stepped away from her and faced George and his boss. "He's dead, of course. Shot through the heart—probably with this gun. It was left there with him. That's why it would be left."

The old man took a step and stopped and braced himself against the table. I wasn't sure whether he had turned white or whether he had been white already. He stared stonily at the girl. He said very slowly, between his teeth: "You damned murderess!"

"Couldn't it have been suicide?" I sneered.

He turned his head enough to look at me. I could see that the idea interested him. He half nodded.

"No," I said. "It couldn't have been suicide."

He didn't like that so well. His face congested with blood and the veins on his nose thickened. The girl touched the gun lying on her knee, then put her hand loosely around the butt. I saw her thumb slide very gently towards the safety catch. She didn't know much about guns, but she knew that much.

"It couldn't be suicide." I said again, very slowly. "As an isolated event—maybe. But not with all the other stuff that's been happening. Arbogast, the stick-up down on Calvello Drive outside this house, the thugs planted in my apartment, the job with the twenty-two."

I reached into my pocket again and

pulled out Waxnose's Woodsman. I held it carelessly on the flat of my left hand. "And curiously enough, I don't think it was *this* twenty-two—although this happens to be the gunman's twenty-two. Yeah, I have the gunman too. He's tied up in my apartment. He came back to knock me off, but I talked him out of it. I'm a swell talker."

"Except that you overdo it," the girl said coolly, and lifted the gun a little.

"It's obvious who killed him, Miss Huntress," I said. "It's simply a matter of motive and opportunity. Marty Estel didn't, and didn't have it done. That would spoil his chances to get his fifty grand. Frisky Lavon's pal didn't, regardless of who he was working for, and I don't think he was working for Marty Estel. He couldn't have got into the El Milano to do the job, and certainly not into Miss Huntress's apartment. Whoever did it had something to gain by it and an opportunity to get to the place where it was done. Well, who had something to gain? Gerald had five million coming to him in two years out of a trust. He couldn't will it until he got it. So if he died, his natural heir got it. Who's his natural heir? You'd be surprised. Did you know that in the state of California and some others, but not in all, a man can by his own act become a natural heir? Just by adopting somebody who has money and no heirs!"

George moved then. His movement was once more as smooth as a ripple of water. The Smith and Wesson gleamed dully in his hand, but he didn't fire it. The small automatic in the girl's hand cracked. Blood spurted from George's brown hard hand. The Smith and Wesson dropped to the floor. He cursed. She didn't know much about guns—not very much.

"Of course!" she said grimly. "George could get into the apartment without any trouble, if Gerald was there. He would

go in through the garage, a chauffeur in uniform, ride up in the elevator and knock at the door. And when Gerald opened it, George would back him in with that Smith and Wesson. But how did he know Gerald was there?"

I said: "He must have followed your taxi. We don't know where he has been all evening since he left me. He had a car with him. The cops will find out. How much was in it for you, George?"

GEORGE held his right wrist with his left hand, held it tightly, and his face was twisted, savage. He said nothing.

"George would back him in with the Smith and Wesson," the girl said wearily. "Then he would see my gun on the mantelpiece. That would be better. He would use that. He would back Gerald into the bedroom, away from the corridor, into the closet, and there, quietly, calmly, he would kill him and drop the gun on the floor."

"Nice people these college boys. Was it Dartmouth or Dannemora, George? George killed Arbogast, too. He killed him with a twenty-two because he knew that Frisky Lavon's brother had a twenty-two, and he knew that because he had hired Frisky and his brother to put over a big scare on Gerald—so that when he was murdered it would look as if Marty Estel had had it done. That was why I was brought out here tonight in the Jeeter car—so that the two thugs who had been warned and planted could pull their act and maybe knock me off, if I got too tough. Only George likes to kill people. He made a neat shot at Frisky. He hit him in the face. It was so good a shot I think he meant it to be a miss. How about it, George?"

Silence.

I looked at old Jeeter at last. I had been expecting him to pull a gun himself, but he hadn't. He just stood there, open-mouthed, appalled, leaning against the black marble table, shaking.

"My God!" he whispered. "My God!"

"You don't have one—except money. You—"

A door squeaked behind me. I whirled, but I needn't have bothered. A hard voice, about as English as Amos and Andy, said: "Put 'em up, bud."

The butler, the very English butler, stood there in the doorway, a gun in his hand, tight-lipped. The girl turned her wrist and shot him just kind of casually, in the shoulder or something. He squealed like a stuck pig.

"Go away, you're intruding," she said coldly.

He ran. We heard his steps running.

"He's going to fall," she said.

I was wearing my Luger in my right hand now, a little late in the season, as usual. I came around with it. Old man Jeeter was holding on to the table, his face gray as a paving block. His knees were giving. George stood cynically, holding a handkerchief around his bleeding wrist, watching him.

"Let him fall," I said. "Down is where he belongs."

He fell. His head twisted. His mouth went slack. He hit the carpet on his side and rolled a little and his knees came up. His mouth drooled a little. His skin turned violet.

"Go call the law, angel," I said. "I'll watch them now."

"All right," she said standing up. "But you certainly need a lot of help in your private-detecting business, Mr. Dalmas."

CHAPTER NINE

I Get Some Sleep

A SHINY black bug with a pink head crawled slowly along the top of the old scarred desk. It wobbled as it crawled, like an old lady with too many parcels. At the edge it marched straight off into the air, fell on its back on the dirty brown linoleum, waved a few thin worn legs

in the air and then played dead. A minute of that and it put the legs out again, struggled over on its face and trundled off, wobbling towards the corner of the room.

I had been in there for a solid hour, alone. There was the scarred desk in the middle, another against the wall, a brass spittoon on a mat, a police loudspeaker box on the wall, three squashed flies, a smell of cold cigars and old clothes. There were two hard armchairs with felt pads and two hard straight chairs without pads. The electric light fixture had been dusted about Coolidge's first term.

The door opened with a jerk and Finlayson and Sebold came in. Sebold looked as spruce and nasty as ever, but Finlayson looked older, more worn, mousier. He held a sheaf of papers in his hand. He sat down across the desk from me and gave me a hard bleak stare.

The loudspeaker on the wall put out a bulletin about a middle-aged Negro running south on San Pedro from 11th after a holdup. He was wearing a gray suit and felt hat. "Approach carefully. This suspect is armed with a thirty-two caliber revolver. That is all." (When they caught him he had an ammonia gun, brown pants, a torn blue sweater, no hat, was sixteen years old, had thirty-five cents in his pocket, and was a Mexican.)

"Guys like you get in a lot of trouble," Finlayson said sourly. Sebold sat down against the wall and tilted his hat over his eyes and yawned and looked at his new stainless-steel wrist watch.

"Trouble is my business," I said. "How else would I make a nickel?"

"We oughta throw you in the can for all this cover-up stuff. How much you making on this one?"

"I was working for Anna Halsey who was working for old man Jeeter. I guess I made a bad debt."

Sebold smiled his blackjack smile at me. Finlayson lit a cigar and licked at a tear on the side of it and pasted it down, but

it leaked smoke just the same when he drew on it. He pushed papers across the desk at me.

"Sign three copies."

I signed three copies.

He took them back, yawned and rumbled his old gray head. "The old man's had a stroke," he said. "No dice there. Probably won't know what time it is when he comes out. This George Hasterman, this chauffeur guy, he just laughs at us. Too bad he got pinked. I'd like to wrestle him a bit."

"He's tough," I said.

"Yeah. O.K., you can beat it for now."

I got up and nodded to them and went to the door. "Well, good-night boys."

Neither of them spoke to me.

I WENT out, along the corridor and down in the night elevator to the City Hall lobby. I went out the Spring Street side and down the long flight of empty steps and the wind blew cold. I lit a cigarette at the bottom. My car was still out at the Jeeter place. I lifted a foot to start walking to a taxi half a block down across the street. A voice spoke sharply from a parked car.

"Come here a minute."

It was a man's voice, tight, hard. It was Marty Estel's voice. It came from a big sedan with two men in the front seat. I went over there. The rear window was down and Marty Estel leaned a gloved hand on it.

"Get in." He pushed the door open. I got in. I was too tired to argue. "Take it away, Skin."

The car drove west through dark, almost quiet streets, almost clean streets. The night air was not pure but it was cool. We went up over a hill and began to pick up speed.

"What they get?" Estel asked coolly.

"They didn't tell me. They didn't break the chauffeur yet."

"You can't convict a couple million

bucks of murder in this man's town." The driver called Skin laughed without turning his head. "Maybe I don't even touch my fifty grand now. . . . She likes you."

"Uh-huh. So what?"

"Lay off her."

"What will it get me?"

"It's what it'll get you if you don't."

"Yeah, sure," I said. "Go to hell, will you please. I'm tired." I shut my eyes and leaned in the corner of the car and just like that went to sleep. I can do that sometimes, after a strain.

A hand shaking my shoulder woke me. The car had stopped. I looked out at the front of my apartment house.

"Home," Marty Estel said. "And remember. Lay off her."

"Why the ride home? Just to tell me that?"

"She asked me to look out for you. That's why you're loose. She likes you. I like her. See? You don't want any more trouble."

"Trouble—" I started to say, and stopped. I was tired of that gag for that night. "Thanks for the ride, and apart from that, nuts to you." I turned away and went into the apartment house and up.

The doorlock was still loose but nobody waited for me this time. They had taken Waxnose away long since. I left the door open and threw the windows up and I was still sniffing at policemen's cigar butts when the phone rang. It was her voice, cool, a little hard, not touched by anything, almost amused. Well, she'd been through enough to make her that way, probably.

"Hello, brown-eyes. Make it home all right?"

"Your pal Marty brought me home. He told me to lay off you. Thanks with all my heart, if I have any, but don't call me up any more."

"A little scared, Mr. Dalmas?"

"No. Wait for me to call you," I said. "Good-night, angel."

"Good-night, brown-eyes."

The phone clicked. I put it away and shut the door and pulled the bed down. I undressed and lay on it for a while in the cold air.

Then I got up and had a drink and a shower and went to sleep.

THEY broke George at last, but not enough. He said there had been a fight over the girl and young Jeeter had grabbed the gun off the mantel and George had fought with him and it had gone off. All of which, of course, looked possible—in the papers. They never pinned the Arbogast killing on him or on anybody. They never found the gun that did it, but it was not Waxnose's gun. Waxnose dis-

appeared—I never heard where. They didn't touch old man Jeeter, because he never came out of his stroke, except to lie on his back and have nurses and tell people how he hadn't lost a nickel in the depression.

Marty Estel called me up four times to tell me to lay off Harriet Huntress. I felt kind of sorry for the poor guy. He had it bad. I went out with her twice and sat with her twice more at home, drinking her Scotch. It was nice, but I didn't have the money, the clothes, the time or the manners. Then she stopped being at the El Milano and I heard she had gone to New York.

I was glad when she left—even though she didn't bother to tell me good-bye.



The *bico* guns made a shambles of the ranks, and Legionnaires fixed bayonets to meet a last charge, and a sergeant watched a wild-eyed man swing a clubbed gun against three foes and learned why it was that a certain breed of man can be a bad soldier in barracks—and the best of his regiment when the chips are down! That's the theme and the story of

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The August-September issue is on sale
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Fire and Ice

By O. B. Myers

Author of "Cash on the Line," etc.

Old Aunt Margot was the only one in that menagerie of eccentrics who inhabited the architectural monstrosity called Harquist House, who believed in the family ghost. Every Harquist had to die within those walls, she knew, even if they had to return from the grave to be killed a second time. And woe to the mortal who tried to meddle with the specter's law.

THE rain, slanting noiselessly across the dismal gray landscape, made a grimy blur of the train windows. Through the early twilight Rex Parke stared gloomily at empty fields and scattered shacks, a row of trees with bare, dripping limbs, and a gleaming stretch of black road. The train gave a faint lurch under him as the brakes were applied, and he saw the road curve closer to parallel a succession of gray-walled factory buildings. There was a sign that said *Harquist Mills*. The letters were indistinguishable

From the balcony dangled the figure of a girl.



after long neglect, but he did not need to read them to know where he was.

From the end of the car the conductor shouted hoarsely: "Shawmill! . . . Shawmill!"

Rex buttoned his waterproof and gathered up a briefcase and a handbag just large enough to hold a change of linen, a toothbrush and a pair of pajamas. He hoped fervently that he would not have to stay long enough to need anything more.

The platform was a sloppy deck of warped planks that ended in the dingy square block of the depot. Rex lowered his head against the damp gusts and walked briskly up toward the middle of the train. He had been in the last car. A half dozen other passengers had descended, but seemed to have evaporated into waiting cars or off along the curve of the street. The train shuddered and groaned, and the conductor swung to the bottom step as it creaked into heavy motion.

Rex looked in both directions and muttered under his breath. Then he saw the station wagon, half hidden behind the depot. Its paint was peeling, the curtains were cracked, and the tires looked soft. He had to move close before he could make out the letters, *Harquist House*, on the side. There was no one in it. He slid his bag in on the floor and climbed to the seat, holding his briefcase on his knees.

It was more than a minute before the driver came out of the station. He wore a cap with a visor and a long black ulster. The turned-up collar did not hide the fact that he had needed a shave for a couple of days. He climbed in under the wheel without so much as a nod of greeting.

Rex said: "Hello, Jarvis. . . . Waiting for anyone else?"

The chauffeur put his foot on the starter and the motor rattled into life. "I was

inquiring about the trains," he replied sullenly, adding as if by afterthought: "I'm leaving this town."

Rex opened his mouth for the obvious question but closed it without speaking. As a partner in Phillips, Parke & Phillips, it was his job to worry about the legal troubles of the Harquist family, ever since the elder Phillips had grown too old to be active. But that did not include fretting about the servant problem, thank God.

"Well, let's get going," he said quietly.

THE station wagon lurched through puddles, ground in second up the steep rise of the block west of the main street, turned onto the state road. After a mile or two at a fairly rapid pace, it swung off onto a side road that had once been macadam but was now a washboard of jagged holes and spine-jarring ridges. Jarvis drove slowly but the springs hit bottom more than once. The latch on the right side was broken and the door next to Rex kept swinging open and banging shut. The mica was all gone from the curtain, and the cold rain pelted his face and ran down inside his collar.

"Lord—is this the best car you've got out there?"

The driver spoke without turning. "Mr. Boyle uses the see-dan to go to the office. The coupe is on the bum, in the shop. It's always on the bum. And since Miss Lydia took the roadster and—"

"Yes, I know," said Rex quickly.

The road, such as it was, grew worse. It slithered down a slope into a valley between gaunt trees, where it crossed a yellow stream on a narrow bridge with concrete abutments. One of these abutments was chipped and cracked and in an open space to one side of the road lay the wreck of a car. It was nothing but a skeleton, crumpled and charred. Even the upholstery had been burned off, the paint blistered away.

"My God," muttered Rex. "Can't someone haul that out of sight?"

Jarvis hunched over the wheel, driving faster and keeping his eyes rigidly on the road. "It ain't my job," he grumbled.

Rex grunted under his breath. A year or so of being married into the eccentric Harquist family seemed to do something to a man. Wilson Boyle had always seemed a normal, likable sort of fellow, but he must be turning as odd as the rest of them. What normal man, after his wife was killed and burned to a cinder in a shocking accident, would leave the grisly reminder for almost a month right there alongside the road he had to travel at least twice a day? Perhaps what Will Boyle needed was not a lawyer but a nurse.

AFTER another mile of rough going the car mounted a ridge, followed it northward. On the right a thick screen of evergreens hid the house until they were quite close, then a sharp turn took them past the old stables and up the weed-grown drive. The forbidding gray brick and small-paned windows of the old wing loomed up in front of them through the slaty dusk like the walls of a deserted stronghold. The car grated to a stop in a gravel circle, but it wasn't until Jarvis switched off the sputtering motor that Rex heard the scream.

It was a cry of sheer terror, long-drawn, high-pitched, and rang out across the bare hills like the shriek of a doomed soul.

"My God, what's that!" Rex sprang out. By the time his feet were on the ground the cry was repeated, breaking this time in a falsetto gurgle.

He started toward the door, then realized that the shriek was too loud and plain to have come from inside the house. As it was repeated, sending a tingle of horror down his spine, he looked hastily about him. He could see no one in the drive, in the dank shrubbery that hugged

the base of the wall, or on the sodden brown lawn. Then something made him raise his eyes.

The house was a full three stories high on this side, and a window high up under the eaves was equipped with a small wrought-iron balcony scarcely more than a foot wide, built purely as architectural decoration. From that iron grillwork dangled the figure of a girl, nearly thirty feet above the ground, swaying perilously. She had a grip with both hands, but was obviously unable to draw her weight up. How she had gotten there was a mystery. How long she could hang on was equally problematical. Her screams were growing weaker.

Rex bounded up the steps and beat on the door.

"Hey, there, inside! Open up! Run up to the top floor, quick! Front window, third floor! Hurry! She can't hold long—"

He might have been beating on the wall of a dungeon. The door did not open. It was of solid paneled oak, and locked. He could hear no sound from the other side.

He banged the old-fashioned knocker and jerked savagely at the bell-pull. Nothing happened. He shouted at the top of his lungs. There was no reply. Dashing down the steps, he picked up a handful of gravel and hurled it against the nearest window. It produced a loud crackle, but no one appeared inside.

"Good Lord, are they all dead in there?" he groaned.

He looked up again, cold with fear at what he might see. The girl's feet, clad in high-heeled pumps, were scrabbling desperately at the wall, but to no effect. Her cries were piteous gasps.

"Hang on!" he shouted. "I'll get a ladder or something!"

He turned toward the station wagon to ask a question but Jarvis was not there. The chauffeur had disappeared.

Rex had no idea where a ladder might be found, but the stables seemed to be the likeliest place. He started back down the drive, sprinting, but after a dozen steps came to a halt and looked back. The girl's cries had ceased.

His horror evaporated, however, when he saw the reason. A man had appeared at the third-floor window. Rex recognized Will Boyle. He already had a grasp on the girl's wrists, and was raising her slowly. As Rex watched in relief she was drawn upward, then in over the rail. He could see that she was limp as a rag. Probably she'd fainted from fright.

"Phew!" Rex pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his face. A pleasant reception, but typical of Harquist House, he mused grimly. He would certainly get his business finished and depart as soon as possible. This was no place for a man who wanted to stay sane.

IT WAS some time, however, before Rex even got his business started. Though he hammered thunderously on the door, at least ten minutes passed before it creaked slowly open. The butler stood facing him, impassively correct, thick-set, broad-shouldered in his dark jacket, his bald head gleaming under a single light in the ceiling of the foyer.

"Yes, sir? . . . Will you come in, sir?"

"What the devil is going on here? Does no one open doors? That girl who was out the window—who is she? Is she all right?"

"Er—Mr. Parke, I believe? I'll tell Mr. Boyle you're here."

"Of course. Damn it, Meggin, you remember me. What's the trouble here, anyway? What happened up there on the top floor?"

Meggin, however, preserved the stony discretion of the perfect servant. With never a gleam in his eye he bowed stiffly and murmured: "Doubtless Mr. Boyle can tell you about it, sir. . . . This way, sir."

Will Boyle, however, was a trifle incoherent when he appeared. He was below medium size and had the ineffectual, drab look of a man who looks forty when he is thirty. Why Lydia Harquist ever married him no one understood, Will himself probably least of all.

"Molly Pearson. She's lying down," he told Rex, in the great, gloomy hall. "One of the girls from the plant—my secretary, that is. I brought her up from the office this afternoon to help put the papers in shape for you to look over. We worked for a couple of hours in the study, then I quit. I was tired. She asked if she might browse through the old wing. She's very much interested in the house, though she was here only once before. While Lydia was alive, of course—er—"

"Yes, I understand," said Rex quickly. He remembered quite well the evening when Will had brought his secretary home with him to go over household accounts. Rex had been there. Lydia's jealous rage had been as unrestrained as it was selfishly intense. She had looked into the study where they were working at least once every fifteen minutes. Finally, unable to control her tongue, she had burst into a torrent of mingled abuse and weeping that had ended all work—and all future visits of Miss Pearson to the house—in a violently unpleasant scene.

"Next thing I knew," Will continued, "I woke up to hear her screaming. Fortunately I guessed where she was. I was just in time."

Rex looked slightly puzzled. "But what the devil did she open that window for? And how did she happen to tumble out? Get dizzy?"

Will Boyle glanced over his shoulder and lowered his voice. "She says she saw a car coming along the road. That must have been you in the station wagon. She was curious, and the window was so dusty she couldn't see clearly, so she opened it. It has a full-length sash, like

a French window, you know. Then—someone pushed her out.”

Rex went blank with astonishment. “Pushed her! . . . Who?”

She doesn’t know. There was no time to turn and see. It was all she could do to clutch that railing as she fell.”

Rex shook himself, and made a grimace. “Nonsense! She probably leaned out and got a touch of vertigo. The push is imagination.”

“That’s what I told her. But she insisted she was pushed sharply, from behind, without a sound. That store-room is jammed full of old furniture, and what not. Lots of places for a person to be concealed.”

Rex was incredulous. “Why, damn it, Will, that would be murder! Attempted murder, at least.”

Will Boyle nodded slowly. “That isn’t the only strange thing around here the last few days. We’ve been—” He broke off as a maid appeared at the back end of the hall carrying a tray bearing a teapot and a cup. “Oh, Bonnie! Is that for Miss Pearson? . . . I’ll take it up to her. You show Mr. Parke to his room, will you? Next to Aunt Margot—that’s right. . . . Dinner with the family in an hour, Rex. And after dinner perhaps we’ll have a talk.”

WILL BOYLE went directly up the main staircase, but the maid led Rex off along a side hall in a different direction. The interior of that house always baffled him, made him wish for a map. Originally built a hundred years before, wings and ells had been added three or four times since, as the Harquist family fortunes grew, until now the first floor alone contained nearly twenty rooms. To add to the confusion, a couple of self-contained duplex apartments had been partitioned off at one time during the depression, and completely equipped with modern furnishings, for rental. The plan

had flopped, the distance from town being too great, and when Lydia married Will she had knocked down some of the extra partitions, but left the stairs and most of the furnishings. As a result there were half a dozen ways of getting from one floor to another. A stranger could get lost easily.

The maid now led Rex through an arched doorway that had been walled up not long ago, and across a couple of rooms that had formed a portion of one of the apartments. Passing an open door that gave him a glimpse of a small room equipped as a kitchen, Rex stopped her.

“I say, Bonnie, there isn’t a cold bird in that refrigerator, is there? I left town before lunch, and I’m starving.”

“I’m afraid not, sir. All the food is in the old-fashioned icebox, in the main kitchen. We only use this once in a while, for cubes.”

She stepped ahead of him and threw open the gleaming white door. The interior was empty. Even the shelves had been removed.

“If you like, Mr. Parke, I can bring you something—”

“Well, no, don’t bother. Guess I can hold out until dinner.”

She closed the door with a faint click, then reached for the control switch on top. “With all these guests in the house we’ll probably need extra ice cubes. I think I’ll turn— Why, the switch is on already, isn’t it? But it isn’t cold. Why—”

Rex’s eye chanced to drop to the baseboard. The electric cord leading from the refrigerator ended in an ordinary push-plug which fitted into a wall-socket there. Now, however, the plug wasn’t pushed all the way in, where it belonged, thus making no contact. He leaned down, shoved it home, and when he put his ear against the porcelain of the refrigerator could hear a faint hum.

“There you are.” He smiled. “It’s on now.”

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Parke. . . . Are you sure you wouldn't care for a bite of something? I could make a sandwich—"

"No—no sandwich. You might bring up a highball, though. Rye and ginger, if you've got it."

"Certainly. I'll tell Meggin."

She turned and pushed open another door on the other side of the refrigerator, leading to the main pantry. The butler must have been coming in their direction. Rex could hear his stern voice without seeing him.

"What are you doing in there, Miss Bonnie?"

"I was just showing Mr. Parke up to his room. It's shorter this way. . . . He wants a rye highball with ginger ale."

"I'll take it up to him. And I suggest, Miss Bonnie, that in the future you confine your movements to the main hall and staircase. There's no need to be tramping through *all* these rooms, soiling them."

Rex heard the maid sniff faintly. When she rejoined him her cheeks were rosy, but without saying anything more, she led him up the inner stairs to a high-ceilinged room on the second floor.

He said, "Thanks, Bonnie. This is fine," and heard the door close behind him. He tossed his bags to a chair and stripped off his coat. Turning around, he saw to his surprise that she was still in the room with him. She stood with her back against the door, her china-blue eyes clouded.

"Mr. Parke—excuse me—do you mind my asking something? When you go back to New York, if you happen to know anybody—I mean—do you think I could find a position there, if I came down? Right away?"

"Why, what's the matter, Bonnie? Don't you like it here?"

She hesitated, as if afraid to give him a direct answer. "It—it isn't the same, since Miss Lydia was—since she died.

There's something queer about the house—I don't know what. I'm afraid. And Meggin is always watching—" She stopped abruptly, as if the very mention of the butler's name had frightened her. Then her lips were quivering and she was dabbing at her eyes with a damp handkerchief.

"Come, come," said Rex. "Aren't these imaginary troubles?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Parke. I shouldn't have spoken, I guess." She turned and left before he could frame another question.

REX stayed in his room until the gong sounded. When he came down the others were already taking their places in the dark-paneled dining-room. John Harquist, the cousin from the mid-west, was a lantern-jawed, bushy-browed man of indeterminate age. Like all eccentrics, he considered himself perfectly normal and other people queer, though outwardly he showed few of the Harquist family traits apart from a capacity for searing cynicism. His wife, Amanda, was one of those fattish, fluttery women who always seemed frightened by nothing, yet refuse to quail in the face of real danger. Aunt Margot, nearly twice Amanda's age, was a sharp-witted old crone who cackled dryly behind her false teeth and observed them through rheumy, suspicious eyes.

Will Boyle was the last to appear. The chair on his left was empty. "Molly—Miss Pearson, I mean—is considerably shaken up by her experience," he explained. "She's staying in her room. In fact, she urged me to let her stay the night. Naturally, I agreed."

John Harquist sniggered. "Naturally," he repeated.

Will Boyle showed one of his rare flashes of spirit. "John, you're insulting. You needn't use that tone. Miss Pearson and I have known each other in a

business way for years, and I assure you that our relations have always been most friendly, nothing more."

"Certainly, Cousin Will, certainly." John attacked his soup with a gusto not entirely silent.

His wife, however, was leaving hers untouched. She looked round the table with the air of a child about to impart a secret. "I went in to see the poor girl," she said in a tone that shuddered with pity. "It's simply dreadful. Do you know what she told me? She didn't fall from that window accidentally—she was pushed out!"

Will Boyle's face showed his displeasure. He had obviously intended to keep that statement, hallucination or no, out of the general conversation.

"Nonsense!" he said sharply. "Who would have any reason to push Miss Pearson out of a window? Besides, I've made inquiries, and it's physically impossible. Everyone in the house, as the police say, has an alibi. The servants were all together in the kitchen. Aunt Margot was sleeping in the small library, and you and John, Amanda, were together in the next room, where she could not have passed you without being seen. I was taking a nap in the study. You both saw me come along the hall, just after she first cried out. So—By Jove!" His jaw dropped. "I had forgotten one person—Jarvis."

Rex spoke up curtly. "He was driving me from the station. He was nowhere near the top floor, I can assure you."

"That's right. There you are. Every person accounted for and the doors locked. Who could possibly have pushed her?"

Amanda Harquist cast down her eyes in defeat. It was Aunt Margot who emitted a ghastly chuckle. "How about Lydia?" she croaked.

A spoon rattled against a plate. In the

pantry door Rex saw the maid, Bonnie, turn pale as a sheet. Meggin, at the sideboard, dropped a half-filled water goblet, which thumped on the thick rug without breaking, spreading a dark stain of dampness.

"What are you saying?" snapped Rex. "Lydia Harquist has been in her grave for nearly a month now."

"Yes, I hadn't forgotten," wheezed the old lady with a sly grin. "But she'll never rest easy there, Lydia won't. You see, young man, she didn't die in the house. This is the Harquist house. For three generations every Harquist that has died has died in this house. But poor Lydia met her death outside, didn't she? That means there has to be another death, in these walls, before her spirit can be properly laid."

There was a moment of rigid silence, then Will Boyle exploded. "For God's sake, Margot, keep quiet! You must be insane, to talk such rubbish. Do you think we believe in ghosts?"

"No?" chortled the old lady, her wrinkled features contorted maliciously. "Then who, or what, was walking around over John's head in the middle of the night, last night? He told me this morning. Didn't he tell you? And why are there *five* soiled towels in the clothes hamper every morning, when there have been only *four* of us occupying the east wing? And why did one of them have a smear of dark-red lipstick on it yesterday? Amanda there is a blonde. She uses orange lipstick, as you can see for yourself. And as for me"—she cackled sardonically—"it's been many years since I needed any. I tell you, Lydia's spirit is in this house, and it won't be at peace until—" She ended abruptly with a shrug of her skinny shoulders.

THE rest of the meal was finished in gloomy silence, broken only when someone spoke to the servants. Rex

Parke, fuming inwardly, kept his eyes on his plate. It was impossible to take Aunt Margot's ravings seriously, yet it was equally impossible to argue with her. She was as stubborn as all the Harquists, and as passionately prejudiced. When the butler passed the vegetables, Rex could not help but notice that his hand was shaking. Even Meggin, the stolid male, had been infected by the atmosphere of morbid hysteria!

As soon as the meal was ended, Will Boyle motioned Rex and John Harquist to follow him across the hall.

"We've got these records to go over, in connection with Lydia's estate," he told them. "It may be quite a long job. Shall we get started?"

"Suits me," replied John. "Where are they, in the study?"

"Yes, but that room is always cold as the devil at night. I'll bring them in here. These apartment rooms are always more comfortable. If you'll wait for me a few minutes, I'll see how Miss Pearson is."

REX took the opportunity to go up to his room and get his briefcase. Coming down, he used the same inner stairs, leading directly to the partitioned-off apartment, that the maid had descended earlier. Will Boyle appeared shortly, his arms full of folders and loose papers.

"How is that secretary of yours?" leered John Harquist. "Does she still think she was pushed?"

Will's manner was cool. "I didn't mention it again. I believe it's really only imagination on her part, and the less it's referred to, the sooner she will forget it."

He spread his armful of records on a table in the center of the room. Rex sat down and opened his briefcase. As the family lawyer, he undertook to outline the task before them.

"You were present at Lydia's funeral, Mr. Harquist, and at the reading of her will, afterward. As you know, it be-

queathed everything to her husband, Will. However, he feels that there is a certain unfairness to the other branches of the family in that provision, and he has very generously volunteered to remedy that unfairness by turning over to you, and to Aunt Margot, outright, certain sums. The exact amounts have not yet been definitely decided. They will depend, naturally, on the size of Lydia's estate, which has yet to be determined. But there will be no strings whatsoever—outright gifts, you understand."

John Harquist could hardly conceal his astonishment. "Well, that's—that's damned decent of you, Cousin Will."

Will was flushing in evident embarrassment. "As I told you, Rex, that was my intention. However, it turns out that I may not be able to carry it out. At least not to the extent I had hoped."

"What do you mean?"

"In going over Lydia's records, with my secretary, we uncovered an unexpected situation. I never knew exactly how much my wife was worth, because I never asked her. But I had always supposed that she owned a controlling interest in the Harquist Mills, left to her by her father, Peter Harquist. In fact, such was the case. She owned, up to a few months ago, about sixty percent of the stock. But at that time she began to sell, on the open market, through a city broker, without my knowledge. By the time of her death she had disposed of all but fifty shares."

"The devil you say!" exclaimed John. "What for?"

"I can't imagine. But the sales records are here. You can examine them yourself. At the same time, there are notations that show purchases of government bonds, in nearly equal amounts. We have not quite completed our auditing, but it appears that she transferred her fortune, or most of it, from Harquist Mills stock to government bonds."

"Well, that's O.K. with me," grinned

John. "The one is as good as the other."

"The odd thing is, however," continued Will, "that those bonds cannot be found. Over three hundred thousand dollars, in negotiable securities, and I haven't been able to discover the slightest trace of where she hid them."

John Harquist's grin vanished instantly. His face showed plainly his suspicion and distrust. "Oh, that's it, is it? Well, let's dig into this stuff. I want to see these transactions for myself. It's going to be a dry job, though. How about a drink?"

Will nodded. He rang for the butler, who appeared so promptly that Rex suspected he had been waiting close to the door. In a few minutes Meggin was back with a tray holding a decanter of rye and three glasses. John swallowed his at a gulp. Will poured out a drink but did not touch it. Rex took a short sip, pushed the glass aside, and the three men bent their heads over the table.

AT MIDNIGHT the floor was littered with paper covered with penciled figures, but they had only succeeded in confirming Will's statements. For some reason known only to herself, Lydia had shifted the bulk of her fortune from Harquist stock into government bonds, and with true Harquist eccentricity had concealed them where no one had yet thought to look.

John could hardly hide his disgust. "Damn little fool—just like her," he muttered. He picked up the decanter, tilted it, reached for the bell. It was, surprisingly, Bonnie who came in response. "Fill that up for us, sister," said John gruffly. "And bring some fresh ice in the glasses."

Will glanced at her curiously. "You still up, Bonnie?"

"Oh, that's all right—I don't mind," she said hurriedly, and went out toward the back of the house without using the main hall.

Rex was sliding his pencil down a column of figures a few moments later when he was startled by a crash of glass and the ring of metal somewhere in a nearby room.

John grinned crookedly. "Sounds like she dropped the tray," he observed. "You've got plenty more glasses, haven't you, Cousin Will?"

"Yes, of course," replied Will impatiently.

It was fully five minutes before Meggin, this time, appeared in the door from the hall. He carried a square tray instead of the oval one, and a bottle of rye instead of the decanter.

"Miss Bonnie was quite tired," he murmured quietly, sliding the tray onto the table. "I sent her up to bed. . . . Is there anything else?"

"I think not, Meggin. We're going to bed ourselves very soon."

After another half-hour spent in futile search for some mistake, they postponed further work till morning and separated for the night.

Rex went directly up to his room, undressed and got into bed. But his mind was too full to let him go to sleep at once. What a fantastic situation, worthy of the fantastic Harquists, he thought. Nearly a third of a million in government bonds! What if they had been in Lydia's possession at the time of her fatal accident, and gone up in the same flames that had cremated her crushed body in the car? There wouldn't be a trace, obviously. What a droll twist of fate that would be, he was thinking when he finally dropped off.

Rex did not believe in ghosts, and he was a light sleeper, but when he came suddenly awake, his spine was tingling. He had not slept long, but some definite sound had awakened him. He couldn't tell what it had been. He lay rigid, listening.

The rain had stopped. Indoors and out

the night was shrouded in silence. Suddenly a sound, faint but definite, came from the direction of his door. Not a knock—rather a bumping, as if a shoulder were being applied to the panels half-heartedly.

Noiselessly Rex reached out and switched on the night lamp, slid his feet to the floor. The door was closed. At the dull sound of another thump, he saw the panels shiver slightly. He glided across the carpet like a cat. The door was not locked and he put his hand on the knob, jerked it open. Someone toppled into his arms.

"Here, what's this? Who is it?"

Then he recognized the maid's uniform, strangely awry. Her apron had been jerked up and knotted across the lower half of her face, gagging her. A dish towel bound her hands behind her back. Her feet, without shoes, were free. But she was too weak to stand, and even after he had hastily untied the knots she could scarcely speak. He made her lie on the bed and fed her sips of brandy from his flask. After a minute she began to gasp and sob out her story incoherently.

IT HAD all started at the moment when she had picked up the tray and glasses to replenish them. She had gone directly out to the small kitchen for ice cubes. The refrigerator there was nearer. She had opened the door, gotten a glimpse of what was inside. Paralyzed with fright, she let the tray slip from her hand. Instantly Meggin had appeared from the pantry door, which was half hidden by the refrigerator. Without looking in, he had slammed the thick porcelain door shut and confronted her with a revolver. Still too petrified to utter a sound, she had obeyed his whispered command to step into the pantry. There, before she guessed his intention, he had stepped behind her and in a few seconds gagged and bound her from the waist up.

A couple of minutes later she had been deposited in some closet. She didn't know which one even now, except that it was on the second floor. When she recovered her wits she had kicked off her slippers and used her stockinged toes to work on the inner handle of the door. After God knows how long, she had gotten the door open, and staggered blindly along corridors until she located a door, on which she had tried to knock with her head.

"Thank God it was yours, Mr. Parke," she quavered.

"But the refrigerator," said Rex impatiently. "What was it you saw inside that scared you so?"

Her eyes went wide with remembered terror, and all the blood drained from her cheeks. "I saw Miss Lydia!"

Rex snorted in disgust. "For God's sake! Are you seeing things, too? Now collect yourself, and try and tell me what—"

But the more he questioned her, the more vehemently she insisted. Hadn't she worked for Miss Lydia for several years? She knew her when she saw her. The distracted girl even declared that she recognized the slip the ghost was wearing, if ghost it was. It had been the same one Miss Lydia had had on the last day she was alive.

Rex shook his head impatiently. He couldn't decide whether he was listening to a demented woman's account of a nightmare or what. It struck him, however, that there was something very substantial about the way Bonnie had been tied up. At least she couldn't have dreamed that part. Those knots had been very real.

"You stay here," he ordered. "I'll find out about this."

He took his flashlight and started along the upper hall without switching on the lights.

As he stepped past the door beyond his own, it creaked softly. He swung the

light instantly to see Aunt Margot's face.

"Is that you, Lydia?" she whispered. Her eyes were closed, perhaps against the glare of the flash.

"Get back in there, and keep that door shut," he commanded.

He went on, crossing the central hall toward Will Boyle's room. Just as he reached the door it flew open and another flashlight glared in his own eyes, blinding him for a moment.

"Rex?" said Will's voice. "What the devil's up?"

"Come along downstairs." Rex spoke barely above a whisper. "That maid, Bonnie, has a wild tale about seeing a ghost in an ice-box, and being tied up by Meggin. At least half of it must be crazy, but she was tied up all right, or else I'm nuts. We'll see."

They took the side stairs, crossed the room where they had spent the evening and went through to the apartment kitchen. Will reached up and pulled on a light.

"This must be the one she means," muttered Rex. "Now let's see—"

His voice died as he threw open the heavy door of the refrigerator. Inside was curled the figure of a young woman, wearing nothing but a cherry-red slip and silk stockings. Her eyes were closed. Lustrous hair rippled over her smooth shoulders. Her lips were red with rouge. There could be no mistake. It was Lydia Harquist—Mrs. Will Boyle.

"Lydia!" Rex croaked, and reached out to seize her arm. He recoiled in cold horror. "My God, she's frozen stiff!"

WILL was so shocked that he wasn't much help. Rex had to drag her out unaided. The task was doubly difficult because her limbs refused to give an inch. She was literally frozen solid. There wasn't the slightest doubt about her being dead, in spite of her amazingly life-like appearance. Rex chafed his hands to rid

them of the feeling of that icy flesh.

"So that's our glost!" he muttered through his teeth.

"But—she burned up, a month ago." Will was still acting dazed. "How can she be—here?"

Rex began, "I don't—" then he stiffened. A sound came to his ears. It might have been a footstep, out in the front hall. "Who's that?" he growled. He started across the next room in the dark, fumbling for the button on his flash. Before he found it he stumbled over a chair and fell headlong with a resounding crash. The noise betrayed their presence. Now he heard footsteps plainly. They were running.

"Come on, Will!" he cried.

As he leaped to his feet he heard a door slam open. Gaining the hall, he saw that it was the main entrance. With Will at his heels he dashed out to the head of the steps. For a moment he could discern nothing in the thick blackness of the night. Then the grind of a starter, followed quickly by the clatter of an engine, told him what was happening. On the other side of the gravel circle the station wagon was moving.

"Meggin!" Rex yelled desperately.

There was a spurt of flame from the driver's seat, the slam of a heavy revolver, and a bullet spatted on the brick near his head. Then the car swirled into the drive and its headlights stabbed the night.

"Whatever his reason for running, it's the reason we must catch him. Quick, Will, your sedan, where is it?"

"Just around the corner of the house."

Rex slid under the wheel. The motor was cold, and he had to back and turn. By the time he roared down the drive in second and slithered along the ridge, there were no lights in sight ahead. He abandoned all caution to speed.

"Are there any side lanes?" he shouted.

"No, nothing before you reach the main road!"

The car leaped and rocked from rut to rut. Every hole tried to take the springs out by the roots, and the ditch leered at him. By sheer nerve and muscle he kept the car on the road, his foot down to the floor. After a level stretch the grade pitched downward and he was forced to shift momentarily from accelerator to brake.

The sedan swooped down a slope and careened around a curve. Just ahead was another curve leading onto the bridge over the creek. Rex jammed the brake on hard, held it down. With a screeching of tires the car slid to a stop.

The station wagon, unable to make that second curve at its reckless speed, had met the concrete abutment head-on. It lay on its side in the middle of the bridge, wheels spinning gaily, its nose crushed in as far back as the dash. A man's form was jammed half through the smashed windshield, the roof of his skull sheered off and his features carved by the jagged edges of the old-style glass. But he wore the striped vest of an upper-class servant, and stuffed inside it they found government bonds to the value of precisely \$302,500.

Will straightened up, shuddering. "God, he's cut to pieces! If it weren't for his clothes, you'd never know him, would you?"

Rex shook his head, then gave a sudden start. The words, together with this spot on which they were spoken, had suggested something to him.

"Say, Will . . . do you know if there have been any unsolved disappearances in this neighborhood in the last month or so?"

Will Boyle, puzzled, shook his head in negation.

"I wouldn't know, Rex. You can ask the police. I suppose now we'll have them around again."

THERE were half a dozen local officers, as well as a detective from the city, in the big library shortly after daylight. It was the sheriff who answered Rex's question.

"Why, yes. Ann Gedding ran off just about four weeks ago. Her parents haven't had any word from her. Nineteen, she was. Attended high school. They lived pretty far out Tipton way. She used to thumb rides home. Miss Lydia often gave her a lift, I've heard. Her folks think she must have hitch-hiked her way to the city, perhaps. They've been pretty worried. Asked us to broadcast a pick-up order."

"You can cancel that order, Sheriff," said Rex. "You'll find Ann Gedding under eight feet of earth—in Lydia Boyle's grave."

He answered their exclamations by starting at the beginning.

"Lydia Harquist was always unusual, to put it mildly. A forceful, wayward personality, with unbridled passions and too much wealth for her own good. A terrible combination, gentlemen. Both before and after her marriage to Will Boyle, she was intensely jealous of Molly Pearson. Will's repeated assertions that his feeling for Molly was nothing but friendship, did nothing to cool that jealousy. Lydia was determined to find out whether Will was lying. And what better way to uncover his true feelings than to disappear and see how his attitude toward Molly ripened in her absence? In other words, to die?"

"Are you telling us that she killed herself to see what would happen?"

"Not quite. She merely led everyone to believe that she was dead. We have to guess at some of the details. She got Ann Gedding in her roadster and somehow rendered her unconscious. After that it was simple. She switched a few of the outer clothes, ran the car into the bridge, and a little gasoline on the seat assured

that the corpse would be unidentifiable. But it was Lydia's car, and the buttons and rings and shoe buckles that were not destroyed were Lydia's. Ergo—we all took it for Lydia's corpse."

"Then, where the devil has Lydia been ever since?"

"Right here in this house. She had to take someone into her confidence. She chose Meggin. She might have chosen more wisely, for he was a rogue at heart. He helped her to keep out of sight, supplied her with food, and tipped her off to what was going on. It was Lydia, of course, who pushed Molly Pearson out the window. God knows, a better place could not be imagined to run loose without risk of discovery than this rambling barn of a place, with its thousand hiding-spots. And that refrigerator was ideal, as a quick cache in an emergency, centrally located on the ground floor, and never used—or at least, so they thought."

"There's a big refrigerator, out in the main kitchen, isn't there?"

"Yes. But it seemed the maid occasionally used the one in the apartment wing. It was handier. Yesterday afternoon we happened to pass that way, and noticed the plug was out, cutting off the current. She thought she might need ice cubes, so I pushed the plug home for her, after glancing inside. Lydia, of course, was not in there then. But she must have ducked in a few minutes later, before the interior had gotten cold enough for her to notice. Either she slammed the door shut on herself or Meggin did on purpose.

She probably realized very shortly that the current had been turned on, but what could she do? There is no handle on the inside of the door, and the walls are naturally heavily insulated, so that her cries were futile. She slowly suffocated and froze to death."

The sheriff shuddered. "How long do you think that took?"

"I don't know. But I have a suspicion that when Meggin caught the maid opening the door, around midnight, Lydia may have been still alive, too cold to utter a sound. Meggin slammed the door again at once and bound Bonnie in the closet. He had eavesdropped on our conversation about the missing bonds, and was hunting frantically in the various spots Lydia had been using for hideaways. Those bonds were what he was after and he wanted Lydia out of the way while he searched for them. When he finally got his hands on them it suited his book better if Lydia never did turn up alive again."

"And by the time you opened the refrigerator yourself, at two thirty, she was dead?"

"Frozen stiff as a board," nodded Rex.

Some time later, as Rex was crossing the hall, he felt a tug at his sleeve. It was the aged Aunt Margot, chuckling until her false teeth clattered noisily.

"You see, young man, I was right after all," she smirked.

"Yes? What do you mean?"

"Lydia had to come back into this house to die, in the end—just as I said."



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When he pushed me down again there were manacles on my wrists.

In which a careful killer cold-decks himself into the chair—not because his "perfect crime" had a flaw in it but because he didn't have sense enough to realize just how perfect it was till a mere second too late.

AS I remember it, Newcombe was saying over his tomato juice: "You'll like him, Mason. He's a good man. He'll have you straightened out before you even know the medical name for what's wrong with you. And damn it, old man, you did act queerly yesterday. Almost as though your mind were a million miles away . . ."

Yes, it was something like that. He was raving on about this friend of his, this Doctor Somebody-or-other, who would do wonders for me. I couldn't tell him, of course, that there was nothing in the world the matter with me. Yesterday's experience had convinced him that I was close to a breakdown.

Then the waitress brought the rest of

our breakfast and put a morning paper on the table. I stared at it and Newcombe stared at me.

"What on earth's the matter?" he demanded.

Plenty was the matter. A picture on page one was captioned, *Woman Found Dead in Lonely Beach Cottage*, and the face above the words belonged to Martha.

I sat there looking at her. I remember thinking it was a good likeness of her. It was the photograph she'd had taken in Boston last year by that fellow who did portrait work for so many society people. You could almost see the faded blue of her eyes, the tiny twitch that ran along her lower lip when she smiled that way. Then Newcombe was looking up from the headlines and reaching for my hand.

"Steady, old boy," he said. "Steady, Mason. It may all be a mistake."

You don't know how you'll act at a time like that. One man might stand up and scream; another put his head in his hands and begin to cry. I'm not sure what I did at first, but after a while I pulled the paper toward me and read what was under the picture.

It was a CP dispatch from Providence, and of course out there in Cincinnati most of the details had been deleted. It gave her name and said she'd been found dead by a neighbor. Murdered. And it said her husband, Arthur Mason, was an insurance salesman, at present thought to be in Toledo.

She was the former Martha Lawlor, it said, well known in Boston society, and there were a few lines about how she had shocked the bluebloods three years ago by turning down a titled suitor to marry a football hero. Meaning me.

I suppose if they'd known that she carried a quarter of a million dollars worth of insurance, now mine, they would have printed that, too. It would have made choice gossip for scandal-hungry morons.

I stood up. Newcombe stood up with me and said: "I'll go to your hotel with you." An hour later I was in a plane.

NEWCOMBE had wired the Providence police of my arrival and they were waiting at the airport. There was no point, they told me, in my going out to Quonchaug Beach. My wife's body lay in an undertaking parlor and the beach house was closed. They drove me to police headquarters. There I met Darezzo.

Luigi Darezzo. A frail, swarthy fellow with close-cropped black hair and restless black eyes. A detective.

"How old are you, Mason?"

"Thirty."

"Thirty. And you married Miss Lawlor three years ago. Your first marriage?"

"Yes."

"How did you happen to meet her?"

"Through a friend of mine."

"Just how?"

I didn't like his eyes or his attitude. "Well . . . this friend was going to a party at her home and asked me along."

"I see. It was love at—er—first sight?"

"Is this necessary?"

"I think it is, Mason."

"Well then—yes—it was love at first sight."

"I see. Now about the insurance. You know, of course, that your wife carried considerable insurance."

"Yes."

"More than a quarter million dollars, in fact. With you the beneficiary."

"Yes."

"Isn't it rather unusual, an arrangement of that sort?"

"My wife," I said, "was wealthy. When we first talked of marriage, all I had was a few dollars earned by playing professional football. In school I had specialized in chemistry and my ambition was to do chemical research, but I was selling insurance."

He nodded.

"We talked it over and I put my cards on the table. If she married me, she'd have to become Mrs. Art Mason. I didn't intend to be a social parasite and be called Mr. Martha Lawlor the rest of my life. That may be a little over your head. At any rate, she agreed. We were married and we lived on my salary."

"I see. And the insurance?"

"After we'd been married a year or so, my wife wanted to buy me out of the insurance game and set me up as a chemist. She even got my old chemistry professor to plead with me. But I wouldn't have it. Then she took out the insurance."

"I don't quite understand," Darezzo said.

He didn't want to understand.

"Martha," I explained patiently, "had a flock of chiseling relatives who hated me. I guess they still do. She was afraid they might get their hands on her money if anything happened to her, and she wanted me to have enough to carry on my work. Insurance was the safest means of making sure of that."

"I see," Darezzo said, inspecting his fingernails. "Have you done anything at all in the line of chemical research, Mason?"

"I have a small laboratory at home."

"Yes. I remember."

He had known all along.

"Is that all?" I asked wearily.

"Nearly all," he said. "I wish you'd straighten out a few small details about your trip to—Toledo, was it?"

"I went to Toledo first, then Cincinnati."

"On insurance business?"

"Yes."

"Just when did you leave? That is, when did you last see your wife, Mason?"

"I left home Monday morning," I said, "and reported to the main office in Toledo on Wednesday. Wednesday night I left for Cincinnati. On Thursday morning I had a session with a Mr. Buttridge,

a client of mine, and had lunch with a Mr. Newcombe, another client. Newcombe asked me to his home for dinner that night and I saw him again Friday morning. In fact, I was having breakfast with him at my hotel when—when I saw in the paper . . ."

Emotionless as a machine, Darezzo got up, paced the floor. "We know one or two very definite things about this murder, Mason. We know that your wife was alive at eleven o'clock Thursday morning, while you were with your Mr. Buttridge—or was it Newcombe?—in Cincinnati. She telephoned at that hour to a neighbor, Mrs. Reyle, asking her to come over for lunch. She hinted at having a surprise in store."

"Surprise?"

"I'm afraid we'll never know what it was. Mrs. Reyle arrived at the house about twelve thirty and found your wife dead." He focussed a queerly intent stare on me. "Could your wife have meant that she intended to commit suicide?"

"Suicide? But you said it was murder!"

"We think your wife was strangled."

"Don't you know?"

"At this stage of the investigation we don't, officially, know anything. The assumption is that she was slain by some prowler who hoped to find valuables in the house."

I said vaguely: "Is it possible to find fingerprints on the throat of a dead person?"

"Quite."

"Did you find any?"

"I'm still waiting a report on that. We're doing all we can, Mason."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, of course. Now may I go to see her, please?"

"I'll go with you."

JUST why they had taken her to an undertaker's parlor I don't know. The man in charge led us into a small, murky

room and I looked at her, shuddered, then closed my eyes and backed away.

Darezzo held my arm and said gently: "Steady, Mason, steady."

I thought: "That's the only word they know. *Steady*. But he's not fooling anyone. Actually he thinks I know more about this than I've told him, and he'd like to see me break down."

Only her face was visible. A drape of some sort was drawn up about her neck. I stepped forward to move it, but the detective stopped me.

"Better leave well enough alone."

The undertaker fellow nodded.

"What's going to happen to her?" I said.

"We'll talk about that when you've had a chance to get hold of yourself," Darezzo promised evasively.

On the way back to headquarters he said: "Perhaps you'd better stay at a hotel in town until this is over."

"Yes," I said.

THE next two days were horrible because I had nothing to do and for the first time began to understand what had happened. Until then I'd been dazed. Now things were hellishly clear.

They suspected me of being mixed up in this. The insurance was against me. Unless some other angle cropped up, they would make life miserable for me. But I was sure something would crop up very soon.

It had to.

She was buried Monday, with only a handful of people in attendance. Her mother, her two sisters, her brother Matthew were there, hating me. I had married Martha for her money. This was no more than they had expected.

Darezzo was there, and when it was over he returned to the hotel with me. "We're doing all we can," he said.

All you can? I don't believe you. *You* hate me, too.

Three times in the next two days he called me to police headquarters and questioned me. Time and again he asked me about the insurance, about my chemical research, my trip. I wrote out for him a complete time-table of my departure from home, my activities in Toledo and Cincinnati. He asked for the addresses of the clients I had interviewed while away. But in answer to my questions he would only say: "We're doing all we can."

Yes. To make me a murderer!

One day he said: "Do you feel up to taking a ride to Quonchaug Beach, Mason?"

We went in his car. The day was cold and gray with rain. I didn't want to go, or ever to set foot in that house again. But I knew that if I refused, he might make something of it, and I had begun to fear him.

Quonchaug Beach is a half-mile strip of land bordered on one side by the Atlantic, on the other by a salt marsh. A mushroom growth of houses covers the lower end of it. At the upper end my own house sits on a low rise of sand. Our nearest neighbor, Mrs. Reyle, lived a long thousand yards distant.

Darezzo drove his car in second speed through the soft, shifting sand and we went up the board walk to the porch. Had I been alone, I would have stopped right there and turned back. The house looked utterly abandoned. A chill wind off the ocean hurled a fine spray of rain into my face. The sound of the surf was a muttered dirge, depressing as funeral music.

We climbed the porch steps, covered now with sand, and with a tagged key Darezzo unlocked the front door. I stood just inside it, shivering, wanting to run.

"Where—where was she found?"

"I'll show you," he said in that voice which had never once changed tone or inflection since my introduction to him.

The wind flung rain against locked windows and the crunch of sand on our shoes

accompanied us as I trailed him into the bedroom. "Here, on the floor," he said, pointing. I looked, biting my lips.

It was a painted floor, a gray floor, and the paint had been eaten away.

"She was lying there," he said, and modified that quickly by adding, "according to Mrs. Reyle."

"Something has—taken off the paint."

"Sulphuric acid," he said. "The bottle was beside her, on the floor. A bottle from your laboratory downstairs. It's in my office now." He looked at me and was scowling. "We haven't determined yet why it was used."

I sat on the bed and shut my eyes, hearing the hollow throb of the rain. Darezzo walked around the room, stopped, walked again. He said: "This case has a lot of queer angles, Mason. Let's go downstairs."

Her photograph was on the dressing-table and she was smiling that odd, patient little smile of hers. I hadn't told Darezzo the whole truth about the insurance. Had he known Martha he might have seen through the lie. Her smile said plainly: "You'll do better some day. In spite of yourself, I believe in you."

I bit my lip until it bled.

Downstairs we went into my workshop. The door was open now. The police, Darezzo said, had removed the lock with a screwdriver. I had left it locked. I remembered going back to lock it.

"Did you work down here often, Mason?"

"Not very often."

"Your job took you away from home a lot, I suppose."

"Yes."

"I presume this is where the bottle of sulphuric came from." He pointed to a shelf, to a gap in a long row of matched bottles, all neatly labeled. I nodded and he scowled around the room for a time, then looked at me and said: "You've some dangerous stuff here. Weren't you

afraid it might get into careless hands?"

"I kept the room locked."

"I see."

We went upstairs and he trailed me into the bedroom, watched while I took some needed clothes from a bureau drawer. "I suppose you'll be giving the place up."

"I suppose I shall," I said.

IT WAS the following day they caught the fellow. Grenlund, he called himself, and he was a coarse, mean-looking man, inches taller and pounds heavier than I, and strong as a horse. Beside him Darezzo was a dwarf.

They caught him, Darezzo told me, by maintaining a day-and-night vigil at the scene of the murder. "Killers, Mason, occasionally do return to look things over—just like in the story books. In this case it was almost a foregone conclusion he would return. So many queer angles to this. So many things that might have gone wrong. When the fellow is brought in, take a good look at him. I'll want to know later if you've ever seen him before."

Flanked by two husky officers, Grenlund was brought into Darezzo's little office and I stared at him while the detective asked questions. He had small, vicious eyes and a mouth that was all sneer. He stood with his hands clenched and snarled denials to every accusation the detective flung at him. Not one civil answer left his lips.

Afterward, I said simply: "I've seen him before. I've seen him hanging around the beach barroom, and around the dance hall down there."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"I thought so," Darezzo said. "Without a shadow of doubt, Mason, that fellow is our murderer. Before we're through with him he'll admit it."

"You mean you'll force it out of him?"

"He'll talk."

Back in my room at the hotel I thought about it and wondered what they would do to him, what he would look like when they were finished. It wouldn't take them long, I told myself, to wipe the sneer from his ugly face. He'd break.

But about six o'clock, when Darezzo came, I knew the police had failed. Darezzo was exhausted. His shoulders drooped, his face was gray and haggard. Pacing with short, slow steps into my room, he let himself into a chair and sat there without removing his hat.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe we're wrong."

"You mean he won't confess?"

"He hasn't yet."

"But we're not wrong!" I cried. "We can't be wrong! It's up to you to make him confess!"

He said dully: "We've done about everything possible. You can't kill a man, you know." His tired eyes, staring at me, were like dead goldfish floating in a bowl. "If we could get at him from some solid angle . . . that bottle of sulphuric acid, for instance . . . but confound it, we don't know why the killer used acid. Without proper tools you can't build a scaffold, Mason."

I said, "Perhaps he used acid to—" but then I stopped. Better not say it. He may turn it inside out and get suspicious again. He may be waiting for something just like that.

"To what?"

"I don't know. I wish I did."

"You're not much help," he said, getting up.

"I'm sorry."

THEY worked on the fellow for two days. Two years, it seemed. I went out only for meals and it was hell, waiting for Darezzo to come around with reports. I knew by heart every inch of the mouse-colored wallpaper in my room, every

worn spot on the carpet. I could have painted from memory the view from my window. But damn him, he wouldn't crack.

He can't stand it forever. If they keep at him, keep pounding at him, he's got to give in.

But . . . suppose he doesn't?

I sat in pajamas, in a fog of cigarette smoke, with the window shut to keep out street noises. It was eleven o'clock Friday night and my nerves were so far gone that I was talking to myself. When Darezzo knocked, I bounded erect and my teeth chattered.

"We've done it," he said, gripping my shoulders. "We've done it! Come down to headquarters!"

Thank God.

It was raining. We walked through the rain to headquarters, out of the rain into the hot, smoky room which was Darezzo's office. Two men in uniform were waiting there for us.

"Sit down, Mason," Darezzo said. "All right, boys, bring him in."

They were gone a long time. I picked at my fingernails, pulled up my socks and rubbed out what little crease was left in the knees of my trousers, damp from the rain. A clock ticked on the desk and Darezzo sat facing me, staring at me, saying nothing.

What was keeping them? Why didn't they bring him in and get it over with?

The clock ticked . . . ticked . . . ticked. The room was hot and dry and my lips were dry. I had to keep licking them.

Why can't they hurry it up, damn them?

I heard footsteps and Darezzo got up to open the door. He stepped aside and the two detectives entered, holding him between them. Holding him up, dragging him. But his head hung on his chest, hiding his face, and his legs were lifeless.

They put him into a chair. Darezzo stood behind him and cupped a hand un-

der his chin and lifted his head. I stared.

"No," I said. "No!"

He was dead.

Not Grenlund. Not the man they had caught at the beach. But the other one, the poor fool who had come to me so long ago, looking for a job. The poor fool who had gaped at me and said: "Why—why—I look enough like you to be your brother, Mr. Mason!" Dead.

"I think you'd better tell the truth," Darezzo said.

My lips were dry and my eyes hurt. You stare that hard and your eyes are bound to hurt. I wanted to stand up, throw myself away from him and scream, but they were waiting for me to do that. They wanted me to do it. I sat still and said nothing.

"No?" Darezzo said. "Well, let's face the facts then. You left home Monday morning. On Wednesday you reported at the main office in Toledo and that night you left for Cincinnati. But it wasn't you who went to Cincinnati; it was this man, using your name. A most uncanny resemblance, Mason. Your brother, is he?"

Don't answer him!

"We'll find out in time," he said, shrugging. "The point is, he assumed your identity, took over your business, established an alibi for you by spending Thursday with clients of yours, leaving you free to return here to murder your wife. You walked in on your wife Thursday morning. You told her, I suppose, that you'd completed a fat business deal and suggested calling Mrs. Reyle over for a bit of celebration. Neat thinking on your part, Mason, to establish the time of the murder and strengthen your prepared alibi."

He's guessing. He must be guessing. What possible proof can he have?

"Your wife made the call and then you strangled her. The rest was simple enough. You merely had to get out of the house, out of town, without being seen. A little detail which I suppose you

planned with the same touch of genius used in the rest of your scheme.

"You went to Cincinnati, probably by plane. There, Thursday night, you met this double of yours on schedule, and got rid of him. But you made two mistakes in Cincinnati, Mason. You washed your hands too vigorously and you hid this poor devil's body in the wrong place."

Laugh at him, you fool! Tell him he's mad!

"The Cincinnati police found traces of sulphuric acid in the wash basin in your hotel room. They found bloodstains on the carpet. Not her blood—so it had to be someone else's. We had no lead on a second murder, so they went ahead on their own. They talked with your two clients, Newcombe and Buttridge. Both thought you had acted queerly. We had you."

YOU'RE very clever, Darezzo. Too clever to live. But it won't work. My nerves are bad, but not that bad, and it will take more than guesses on your part to make me crack. It will take more than a transplanted corpse.

"It's a funny thing, Mason," he said, "but murderers nearly always make the same mistakes. You had a body to dispose of. The place to hide it, you thought, was outside the city, perhaps out on some lonely road far from the beaten path. You hired a car. Not many persons hire cars late at night, and it was fairly easy for the police to locate the particular machine you used.

"Cars have tires, Mason, and tires tell stories, especially when driven over dirt roads in the rain."

You've been reading too many books, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Go right ahead. Enjoy yourself. Then when you're quite finished, I'll show you which of us is the fool.

"It took time, Mason, but through an analysis of the dirt from those tires, the police succeeded finally in locating the

body. Meanwhile, we handled you with asbestos gloves until we were sure of you. We led you on . . . and on . . . until the body reached here by special plane. Now the game's over. You're a cold-blooded killer, Mason. You'll spend the rest of your life in prison."

BUT he wouldn't talk that way if he had proof. No one knew the fellow. He was a drifter, down and out, broke and homeless. No one knows how he was coached stuffed full of insurance lore and drilled to take another's place. No one knows the lies he was told. . . .

"Your first mistake, Mason, was the fatal one. When you took the sulphuric acid from your laboratory, you shouldn't have locked the door. No ordinary prowler, even if able to get into the laboratory, would have stopped at a time like that to lock up after him. You're a victim of habit."

I said: "Am I?"

"And you should have worn gloves. You did wipe your prints off the bottle—I'll grant you that—but gloves would have been safer. Then you wouldn't have had to wash your hands in that hotel room."

See? He's groping again. He's weakening!

"Why should I wait that long to wash my hands, Darezzo? If you're so smart."

"You were in pretty much of a hurry."

"Really. And can you prove all this?"

"Some time ago," Darezzo said, "you asked if it were possible to obtain fingerprints from the throat of a strangled person. I said it was, and it is. We found your fingerprints on your wife's throat."

"You're lying, Darezzo!"

"Lying?"

"You found no fingerprints on my wife's throat! Her throat was eaten away by acid!"

He stared at me and his thin dark lips curled in just the shadow of a smile. Two short steps brought him close to me.

"How do you know that, Mason?"

"Why . . . it was in the papers."

"But it wasn't. We made sure it wasn't."

"Well, then, I saw her—didn't I? At the undertaker's."

"You didn't see that, Mason. I stopped you from looking."

You've blundered!

I staggered erect. "You can't do this to me, Darezzo!" I shrieked.

He pushed me down again, and there were manacles on my wrists. "You've done it yourself," he said gently.

They stared at me in silence and I stared back. You've done it yourself, done it yourself, done it yourself. After being so careful, so very careful, you stumbled into a trap. They'll put you in prison. For life. In prison for life. Isn't . . . isn't that a laugh? Isn't it funny?"

Darezzo gripped my shoulders. "Be quiet, Mason," he said firmly. "Quiet!" Then, turning his head, "Better ask Doctor Jamieson to step in, Frank."

The poor fool, he thinks you're crazy. Ha-ha-ha-ha! Crazy.

"Be quiet, Mason."

A huge man came into the room and stood over me, and Darezzo said: "Better look him over, Doc."

I stared at the man. "You fools! This is Grenlund, the man you caught prowling—"

"We didn't catch anyone prowling, Mason. We were testing you."

Jamieson bent closer to peer into my eyes. "Just hysteria," he said, shrugging. "He'll be all right."

I am all right. Really I am. I don't laugh like that any more. I just wait.

At birth, a man has a life expectancy of sixty years. I sold insurance and I know.

I have thirty years to go, and in thirty years there are ten thousand nine hundred and fifty days. If you wait a minute I'll tell you how many hours that is. How many minutes. I don't laugh any more.

Laughter in Hell

By D. L. Champion

Author of the Inspector Allhoff Stories



"Jim, I tell you—" He never finished his sentence for I'd pumped two bullets into his brain.

Grange had no illusions about avoiding the chair when he filled Latham with lead. It was murder plain and simple and he was prepared to take the rap. But what burned him in his final hour—more than any juice the state shot through his frame—was the knowledge that he'd never get his revenge now—even in hell.

THERE were over seven thousand little crosses on the wall of the cell when I made the last one. The dog-eared calendar hanging over my bunk was the twentieth I had owned since that clanging steel door closed on me for the first time. Two decades had gone by—but only in time.

Life, itself, had not moved forward. It was shortly after dawn when Mullins came to the door of my cell. He thrust a safety razor, blade, soap and a towel through the bars.

"Here," he said. "I guess we can trust you not to cut your throat this morning."

In my estimate of the evolutionary

cycle, the best screw in the world rates somewhere below a louse and above an amoeba. I took the things from him without answer, went over to the washbasin and began to lather my face.

I noticed that my hand was shaking as I ran the razor over my jaw. I could feel my heart beating with a quickened rhythm. There was a strange excitement within me, breaking the deadly monotony of all these years.

In two hours I would be out of this crypt of stone and steel. In three, I would be back in the city. In four, I might well be headed back to this damned cell again—but by then it wouldn't matter.

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast the sovereign State of California presented me with the crummiest suit of clothes I had ever worn. I struggled into a shirt half a size too small for me and took a good three minutes trying to remember how to knot the brilliant green tie that came with it. Then, looking like an aspiring immigrant, I went into the warden's office.

He was a gray-haired political hack who had been kicked upstairs into this job when his county delivered a whacking plurality for the present administration. He possessed a naive and firm belief that a penitentiary could best be run by the liberal quoting of copybook maxims.

He looked up at me over his desk. There was an official-looking document and a ten-dollar bill on the blotter before him.

"Well, Grange," he said. "Now you can start afresh. The black dead past lies behind. Before you is the future which shall be whatever you care to make it."

His manner annoyed me but I didn't say anything. He signed the document with a flourish and pushed it across the desk to me. Then he handed me the ten-dollar bill with the air of a Sunday-school superintendent bestowing a gold star for

regular attendance. I wanted very badly to tell him what to do with the ten dollars, but the fact that I needed it for an important and specific purpose kept my mouth shut. I put the bill and my prison discharge in my pocket and headed for the door—but he wasn't done yet.

"Wait a minute, Grange," he said. "Just what are your plans?"

I looked him full in the eye. "Listen," I told him. "This piece of paper you just signed gives me the the privilege of telling you to mind your own damn business."

He blinked at that. Then he shook his head and registered noble tolerance.

"Now Grange," he said. "There's no sense in your becoming bitter. Far better—"

I blew up at that. "Not bitter?" I yelled at him. "I've just lived the best years of my life—twenty-five to forty-five—in a black ugly cell. And for nothing! I didn't kill Henderson any more than you did. Yet you tore seven thousand, three hundred and five days out of my life for it. Seven thousand, three hundred and five! I even know the answer in minutes. I've been sitting in the middle of a million tons of steel and concrete counting them. Not bitter! What do you expect from me? A spring song?"

"Now then, Grange," he said like a schoolmaster. "Whether you were innocent or guilty, I don't know. But you mustn't let your experiences distort your ideas."

I was a little calmer now. "My ideas aren't as distorted as you might think," I told him. "I came in here with a single thought in my brain, a single emotion in my heart. They're still there, pounding and beating, fighting for release. In another few hours they'll be free."

He frowned. "I don't just know what you mean, Grange. But I'm afraid we're quite likely to see you back here again soon."

"Quite likely," I told him. "My life's

nearly done. What matter where I spend it? I'll tell you one thing, though. When I do come back here, I'll go to the death block. The next time I'm accused of a crime you can be damn certain of two things. First, that I committed it. Second, that it was murder. Cold, premeditated, first-degree murder!"

I turned and walked out of the room before he could unload any more gratuitous advice.

THE ten bucks came in handy. The gun and ammunition cost a little over seven dollars. Bus fare was a dollar more. There was only some silver left when I arrived at the towering Commerce Building in San Francisco. I went up to the fourteenth floor and stood for a moment before a glass door with gold lettering on it—*Roy Latham, Stocks and Bonds*.

The last time I had seen that panel my own name had been on it, too. And in front of Latham's. I took a deep breath and walked in. I announced myself to the girl at the switchboard. She looked up at me and smiled. It had been a long time since a woman had smiled at me, even as impersonally as this.

"Oh, Mr. Grange," she said. "Go right in. Mr. Latham's expecting you."

I blinked at that. I was hardly expecting a cordial reception. I put my hand in my pocket and felt the cold steel of the cheap revolver. I walked across the outer office and opened another door. Latham looked up from his desk. He sprang to his feet, grinned, and crossed the room with an outstretched hand.

"Jim!" he said. "Damn glad to see you. Sit down. . . . Here. Have a drink. Have a cigar."

He gave me both. I sat down and looked at him. He was fat and well fed. I knew I was gaunt and appeared ten years older than I was. He was wearing a good suit, well cut. I fingered the fabric of my

own cotton trousers and felt a chaotic wrath whirl around inside me.

The unaccustomed brandy he had given me burned pleasantly along the membrane of my throat. The cigar was fragrant on my tongue. I watched Latham closely and marveled that he was not afraid.

"Say," he said. "Larsen called me up two days ago."

The name was faintly familiar. I groped back twenty years in the recesses of my memory. "Larsen?"

"You remember. He was Henderson's attorney. He knew you were getting out. He asked us both to drop into his office on the twelfth. That's a week from Wednesday."

Both of us. A week from Wednesday. That was funnier than Latham thought. I kept my eyes on him. Obviously he wasn't kidding. Obviously he wasn't scared. As a matter of fact he wasn't even embarrassed. It was all very puzzling.

He filled my glass again before he spoke.

"Now, listen, Jim," he said. "I've made arrangements with my tailor. He'll give you whatever you want. You'll stay at my apartment until you get settled. We'll start you off right here in the office at a hundred a week. After you get back in the routine, we'll discuss the old partnership."

I put down my glass and stared at him in stark amazement. I was too surprised to be angry.

"Latham," I said, "do you really believe you can square things with a couple of suits, a bed and a job?"

"Why, Jim," he said gently, "I suppose nothing can square what you've been through. I'm doing all I can. After all, it wasn't my fault, you know."

I took a deep breath. "Will you say that again?"

He frowned. "Say what again? You mean that it *was* my fault?"

"That's what I mean," I told him.

He narrowed his eyes and added creases to his frown. "What are you driving at, Jim?"

"Listen," I said. "How's your memory?"

"Good enough. Why?"

"Mine's excellent," I told him. "You see, for twenty years my life's been a blank. Having no new things to remember, I recall the old things all the more clearly. Can you understand that?"

"Yes," he said. "That's reasonable. But what—"

"All right," I said. "I want you to remember with me. Let's go way back."

I STARED at him unblinkingly. He still didn't seem afraid. Either he had more guts than I'd expected or he was a bigger fool.

"Way back," I went on. "Back to the lush days when Grange and Latham were the crookedest operators on the West Coast. You remember that?"

He actually had the nerve to grin. "Sure I remember it, Jim. We were terrific. We—"

"Wait a minute," I said, "I'm doing the remembering." I took a fresh cigar from his desk and lit it. "All right," I went on. "So we made a lot of money. And while we were making it we broke every law in the statute book."

"Right," said Latham and the fool was still grinning. "We were lucky and smart. No one ever put a finger on us."

"Except once," I said.

He coughed apologetically. "Sorry, Jim," he said. "Except once."

"Now let's remember that," I said. "Let's remember Henderson. We broke Henderson. We sent him to the wall and cleared a neat hundred grand on the deal. We raised hell with the penal code while we were doing it but we were nicely covered up. Just as we had Henderson where we wanted him we discovered that a friend of his was about to put up enough

money to tide him over, to wreck our plans. So that time we went a step further. We arranged for that friend to be drowned, Latham. Remember?"

Latham glanced nervously at the door. He wasn't grinning now. "For God's sake!" he said. "Don't remember so loud."

"Anyway," I continued, "we cleaned Henderson out. We left him with a couple of grand and an old frame house on the outskirts of town. Then, a week or so later, Henderson came to this office. He stated loudly and in front of witnesses that he could prove we were crooks, and that he'd do it unless we gave him back his dough."

Latham waved a hand at me. "Why go over all this?" he said. "You'll only upset yourself, Jim. You'll only—"

I'd only upset myself! The colossal gall of him!

"Then one day when we were both out of the office, a mysterious telephone call came in. The girl took the message which requested either one or both of us to see Henderson at his house at precisely three o'clock that afternoon. You never came back from lunch that day, Latham. So I kept the appointment."

Latham poured himself a drink and I noted with satisfaction that his hand shook.

"Well," I continued, "I hadn't been there three minutes when the cops came in. They found signs of a struggle. They found my business card in Henderson's hand. They found Henderson lying on the floor with a bullet in his brain. Later, they found that bullet had been fired from the same sort of gun that we kept here in the office. The gun was never found. It wasn't in the drawer where we always kept it."

"Now listen—" began Latham, but I interrupted him.

"I'm almost done," I said. "They built up a sweet case against me. The motive,

of course, was to prevent Henderson's exposing us as he had threatened. It was all perfect save one thing that I never got straight at the trial. How did the coppers happen to come to Henderson's house at that moment. Who tipped them off?"

Latham shook his head. He was very serious now. "Jim! You don't believe I did? God, man, how could I possibly have guessed that you'd killed him? How could I—"

That was too much for me. I stood up and banged my fist on the desk.

"What do you mean, I killed him?" I roared. "You know damn well I didn't kill him. I was framed. He was dead when I got there. All the evidence was planted."

"Listen, Jim," Latham said. "Now take it easy. If you didn't kill him, who did?"

I was a little calmer now. I'd waited twenty years for this. Another few minutes wouldn't matter. I sat down, took the cheap gun from my pocket and balanced it carefully on my knee. I deliberately made my voice calm and low.

"You did," I said.

He stared at me, then dropped his eyes to the revolver. He was pale and there was a wild desperate glint in his eyes.

"You were scared," I told him. "Scared that Henderson would send us to the can. You killed him with the office gun. You left my card in his hand as if he'd grabbed it in a struggle. You phoned, leaving that message to bring me to Henderson's house. Then you went and fixed yourself up an alibi at the Country Club."

"Listen, Jim," he said and his voice was hoarse. "You're crazy. You're—"

"Sure, I'm crazy," I said. "Try sitting in one spot for twenty years, thinking about one thing. You'll go crazy, too. The one thought that's kept a vestige of sanity in my brain was anticipation of this moment. When that judge sentenced me for second-degree murder, he sentenced

you to death, Latham. He didn't know it. You didn't know it. But, by God, I knew it!"

"Listen," said Latham. "I never killed Henderson. You're screwy. Stir-crazy. That's what. I—"

"One of us killed him," I said. "All the evidence pointed that way. And it wasn't I."

I lifted the gun from my knee. I felt a surging lift of my pulse as I aimed the barrel at Latham's head. He put a trembling hand before his face.

"Jim," he said, "don't do it. They'll burn you for it. You can't get away with it."

"I'm not even going to try," I told him. "That's the beauty of it. It's just a plain simple murder. No covering up. No worrying afterwards. I'm going to walk out of here into the arms of the first copper I see."

"No, Jim. No, no! You're all wrong. What's the sense of us both dying?"

"I've got nothing to live for," I said. "I'm an old man. Broke. No friends. I can't start all over again now. I would have cut my throat in my cell a hundred times over but I had this job to do first."

"No, Jim," he said again and there was terror in his voice. "You're not old. You're in your prime. You're only forty-five."

"I'm a hundred and forty-five," I said. "I stopped living twenty years ago. I'm an old, beaten man. I've been living for one thing. And when you're dead there won't even be that to live for."

"Jim!" he cried and the fear in his voice filled me with a singing happiness. "Jim, I tell you—"

The reason he never finished the sentence was that I had pumped two bullets into his brain.

IT took three weeks to go through the formalities of getting me from the precinct house to the death cell. Then there

was another week of waiting before some respected citizen collected a hundred and fifty bucks for throwing the switch on me.

But I didn't mind that. After sitting in a cell for twenty years you learn patience. I wasn't afraid to die. I hadn't been lying when I told Latham that I was already dead.

What difference did it make now?

For five days I ate my meals, smoked occasionally and spoke to no one. Twice I'd refused to see the chaplain. I wasn't looking forward to a life of bliss in Paradise. I looked forward to nothing. Real nothing. Minus even the boredom and monotony that had been my lot for the better part of my life.

I was calm and satisfied. As long as Latham had lived there had been something inside me that was bigger than I. Something I couldn't lick. A sort of driving force, engendered by hatred and bitterness. But that, too, was gone now. I can't say I was happy. But, oddly enough, I was at peace.

I had twelve hours to go when the warden came to my cell. With him was a short, dark guy with a vaguely familiar face.

"Grange," said the warden, "here's someone to see you."

"Listen," I said. "Why don't you enforce the rules? A guy in the death house isn't allowed to have visitors unless they're blood relatives."

"This is important," said the warden. "This is Mr. Larsen."

Larsen? Latham had said something about Larsen. Henderson's attorney. But what the devil did he want with me? I asked him.

"Mr. Grange," he said, regarding me oddly, "there's been an injustice done."

"Well?" I said.

"Shortly before Henderson died he left a letter with me. Further, he left instructions that it was not to be opened for twenty years. I read it for the first time a few weeks ago. I thought it only right that you should read it before—before—"

"All right," I snapped. "Give it to me."

He handed me a sheet of crisp parchment. I held the crabbed writing up to the light, read.

Dear Larsen:

Grange and Latham have driven me to my death. If their fingers did not press the trigger of the gun that killed me, they are no less my murderers. They ruined me, forced me to the grave. I am helpless to punish them legally, so I have done these things:

First, I have stated in the presence of witnesses that I could prove them thieves. This was not true, but it provided a motive for my murder. I have stolen the thirty-eight which they kept in an office desk. I have attached the weapon to a strong rubber cord. I have attached the cord to a nail in the chimney. After I have pressed the trigger, the band will jerk the gun from my hand, conceal it up in the chimney. I shall be found dead with their business card in my hand. I shall telephone their office, asking them to come to my house at precisely three o'clock. When I see them approaching I shall telephone the police, begging for help. Then I shall blow my brains out. Perhaps they will be clever enough to evade my trap. Perhaps not. In any event Grange and Latham have killed me, and I have done my best to even the score.

Ronald Henderson.

In another hour I shall hear Henderson's triumphant laughter in Hell.





It's swell to have a gal love you enough to want to cement your job for you with your boss. But when she's a newspaper reporter and you're a cop, and she gives you credit over her byline for solving a kill you didn't even know had been reported, that's pushing loyalty a little too far. That's what Johnny Grande thought, anyway, when his cupcake shoved him blindfolded through

Three Doors to Doom

A Complete Murder Mystery

By Edward Ronns

CHAPTER ONE

Front-Page Trouble

JOHNNY GRANDE said: "Listen. Who started this gag, anyway? I'm not a hero. Don't call me a hero. I didn't do anything to deserve this. I'll

pay for my own drinks. I'm just trying to find that jitterbug girl-friend of mine."

He looked harassed. There was an angry glitter in his gray eyes that made Oscar, the barman, tuck in his lips defensively and pay close attention to the beer pumps.

"I just thought I'd congrat—"

Boy, it was a pleasure smashing
hell out of the Club Alhambra!



Johnny Grande said: "Will you cut it out? I asked you a simple question. Was Ginnie Claire in here, or wasn't she?"

"She wasn't," Oscar answered sullenly.

"All right!"

Johnny Grande slammed his hat on his head and walked—not very steadily—away from the bar. He listed to port a little and then, going through the revolving door, he tilted quite suddenly in the opposite direction. But he kept going, even if he was pretty drunk.

On the sidewalk he paused, fumbling in his pockets. A plumb line, if dropped from the incised scowl between his brows, would have touched the pavement two feet to the right of his shiny brown shoes. He stood like that, leaning against a non-existent wall, and counted his nickels.

A casual acquaintance went past, punched Johnny's biceps. "Hi, Johnny. Nice work. That's showing 'em."

Before he could open his mouth to make a bitter reply, the man was gone. Johnny pushed his hat back on his head and straightened painfully, muttered: "What the hell did I do?"

Momentarily he tasted panic, wondering if he'd suffered a mental lapse during the evening's festivities. But he could recall every minute of his trek through the city's bars. He hadn't done anything to anybody to rate all these congratulations.

He dug four nickels from his pocket, a few crumpled bills, a wallet to which was pinned a shiny gold shield. It said *Detective-Captain* on the shield. That was partly the reason why Johnny Grande had imitated a launching, trying to drink himself afloat. He didn't want to be a detective-captain. But he was.

If he had that rank on Homicide, the bat would have been a celebration. Johnny Grande belonged on Homicide. He'd have told you that himself. Instead, because of a severe case of over-flippancy

in handling the death of the city's biggest and fattest alderman, Johnny found himself a precinct captain out where the goats nibble tall, tall grass. He'd managed the case like a comic juggler—never actually fumbling, but seemingly always about to—and although he ended with a bow and a flourish, it was all too much for the commissioner. Hence the goats. The shiny gold shield was supposed to soothe his outraged feelings, but it didn't. It simply made him feel worse.

On top of this grievance came two others. There was Ginnie Claire, standing him up for the first time since he could remember. And there was this "Congratulations, hero," stuff that didn't make sense. Maybe they thought he was tickled with his so-called promotion, but it didn't sound quite like that. It all had a very rank odor to Johnny Grande. He decided to call at Virginia Claire's apartment.

THE clock over the clerk's desk read well past two in the morning. Johnny Grande pushed air through his nose and sank back into a chair, his gray eyes moody. A couple came into the lobby and moved toward the elevators, the man laughing, the girl looking straight ahead. Johnny lit a cigarette and sucked it hungrily, then got up and walked toward the long-nosed clerk.

"Are you sure Miss Claire didn't come in or leave any message for me?"

The clerk was hunched over the telephone switchboard. He wagged his head suddenly and plugged in a line and twisted around, shoving a handset over the desk. "Call for you. But it's a man, not Miss Claire."

Johnny Grande stared at him with a heavy scowl, snapped the cigarette into a convenient sand urn and flipped the receiver to his ear. The voice that answered his query was low and hoarse, never more than a whisper.

"Johnny? I been tryin' to get you all over town. Listen, Johnny, you know me—I'm Al Snow, barman at the Alhambra. This is about your girl, see, and that *Chronicle* story."

A chill eddied around the nape of Johnny's neck. His face went blank and expressionless.

"What *Chronicle* story?"

"Geez, ain't you read the papers?"

"No, I haven't had time. I've been drifting around, looking for Ginnie. No, I haven't read the papers."

"Well . . . well, get one. Geez, get one! I'll hang on."

Johnny Grande put down the phone and looked at the desk clerk. "*Chronicle*," he said quietly.

He picked up the newspaper the clerk got for him without looking at it for a moment. There was a queer dryness in his throat and suddenly he wished he hadn't been drinking. Turning his back to the clerk's inquisitive eye, he scanned the front page.

The headlines leaped at him.

**COP FINDS NIGHT CLUB OWNER
LESLIE VANE, MISSING TWO DAYS,
DISCOVERED AT ALHAMBRA**

There it was—the source of the congratulations with which he'd been bombarded all evening. Shocked astonishment deepened in Johnny Grande's eyes as he studied the story. It was nicely written, under Ginnie Claire's by-line. But he knew she hadn't written it, just phoned the facts in.

THE story dealt with the discovery of the missing Vane, co-owner of the notorious Club Alhambra that clung like a leach to the wrong side of the county line. Leslie Vane, missing forty-eight hours, had been feared kidnaped. Now it seemed that through the alertness of one John Grande, newly-appointed police captain and Miss Claire, reporter for the

Chronicle, Leslie Vane had been dug up with nothing more dangerous than a promising hangover. He had been found on the Alhambra grounds.

There were just three things wrong with the story.

First, Johnny Grande hadn't been near the Club Alhambra that night. Second, he hadn't seen Ginnie Claire for almost a week. And third, he didn't know Leslie Vane from a ring-tailed monkey.

Johnny had reason for shivering. He swallowed dryly, twice, but the liquor inside him insisted on forming a tidal wave of threatening proportions. He stood there and fought it down and finally turned back to Al Snow's voice on the telephone.

"All right, Al. Go ahead."

The barman's voice bubbled: "It's like I'm telling you, see? My wife and I both work at the Alhambra, and I was sticking around to take her home, like. I saw your girl-friend find Les Vane on one of the paths—and I know you wasn't there, Johnny. If you want to make sense of it, you gotta remember the doors. There's three of 'em, see, and they all lead to different streets. Two of 'em was covered. I seen the gunboys myself."

Johnny Grande snapped hoarsely: "Well, tell it! What are you getting at?"

"I'm tellin' you, the only thing about that *Chronicle* yarn that's true is that your girl found Vane. But he wasn't drunk, Johnny. He was shot! No matter what door Les Vane came outa, he was bound to get it. My wife, she says it's got to be that way. You know Joey Asche—Les Vane's partner in the Alhambra? Well, Joey Asche put the chill on Vane. And listen, Johnny—just listen. You gotta protect me and Carole on this."

"I'll cover you," Johnny said. His mouth worked wryly, thinking of the Club Alhambra and its two owners, Vane and Joey Asche. The place was just across the city line, opposite Johnny's

new precinct, and it had all the city cops with their tongues hanging out wishing they could ax the joint.

Al Snow's voice said: "You better see me, Johnny. It's like my wife says. Asche gave it to Les Vane, and your girl is caught in the middle. Them guys are tough—"

Johnny said: "Where can we meet?"

"Make it my place—the Leicester. Know it?"

"Yes. I'll see you in an hour or so. Keep the lid on it, Al."

JOHNNY hung up and stared at his hands. His fingers were twitching. It made a little sense, but not too much. Obviously Ginnie Claire, in sympathy with his being wafted out to the bunk-docks, had planned on giving him a little undeserved credit. It was like Ginnie, he thought bitterly. Then something had come up and she hadn't been able to contact him and here he was—stuck with the job of shouldering credit where no credit was due.

Cursing softly, Johnny Grande went up the stairs to the girl's apartment. He still tilted to one side and he wished he were completely sober. He got into the girl's rooms with one of his trick keys and stood there, feeling sudden alarm claw at his insides. There could be only one reason why Ginnie hadn't contacted him, and that was because she was physically unable. He had to get sober in a hurry.

Ginnie's bathroom was all green-and-ivory tile, with one wall occupied by a huge mirror. Johnny shucked off his clothes and stepped into the shower closet. He turned the water down to a fine needlepoint and made it cold. He stood under the stinging spray, shivering, with duckbumps breaking out all over his tanned skin, and after a while he found that he could look straight down and see his feet directly below his chin,

and then he knew he was all right again.

He got out of the bath and a voice said from the doorway: "Gosh, ain't you pretty?"

It was Nelly Kelly. Nelly stood for Nelson, and Nelly Kelly himself stood six feet two and carried more than two hundred pounds of hard-packed weight on his Irish frame. He had curly red hair and a big-toothed grin and his blue eyes looked at Johnny Grande with a paternal, protective air.

"The department," said Kelly, "told me to tell you that they'd appreciate it if you'd break down once in a while and send in a report. How are you, Johnny?"

"Lousy."

"You been drinkin' too much. Much too much. Whyn't you let me come along? Hell, didn't they kick me out in the sticks here with you? Me, I like a companion in misery, too."

Johnny climbed into his pants and shirt and said: "What is it, Nell?"

Kelly shrugged. He picked up Johnny's tie and slipped it over his shoulders, made a knot under Johnny's chin. He said: "It's Leslie Vane. What are you hiding him for?"

Johnny said: "I'm not hiding him. I don't know where he is. I don't know anything about it."

Kelly held Johnny's coat. "Is that a fact, keed?"

"A fact."

Sergeant Kelly said: "Hell, you can't clam up now. We found Les Vane. Hell, we found him!"

Johnny Grande straightened very slowly. His lips were white. "Yes?"

"Dead as a mackerel."

"Where?"

Kelly said: "In your room, keed. In your room."

Johnny Grande let air out of his lungs with a long sigh. He looked at his reflection in the big wall mirror across the bathroom. His face looked chalky.

A muscle twitched over his left eye.

"What a gag!"

"Shot with a twenty-two. A small wound—a real small one. But he's got powder scorches all over his shirt. Mark as big as my hand."

Johnny said woodenly: "I still don't know anything about it."

"Then you'll fly high. The blow-off will lift you an' me clean out of town. You musta seen the papers."

"I saw them."

"Oh." Kelly stepped back a little and examined him, cocking his red head to one side. He seemed to approve of Johnny's appearance. "You look almost human now So that dizzy damsel of yours put you on a spot?"

Johnny Grande nodded. "She did that. And where is she?"

Kelly said: "Aw, who cares? The commissioner—"

Johnny said: "I care." He was conscious of cold sweat on his forehead. "Look, Nelly." He led the way into the living-room of the girl's apartment. There was a telephone scratch-pad on the stand in the tiny foyer. Johnny picked it up and said: "I didn't mean to read this. I happened to see it when I came in."

In Ginnie Claire's neat round script was written: *Johnny. Johnny. Johnny.* Under it was added: *I—love—you.*

Kelly looked embarrassed and said: "I wisht I had a drink." Then he said: "The commissioner wants to see you, Johnny. He's been in a stew ever since the papers hit the street."

"I've got nothing to tell him."

"But you gotta give him something!"

"Yes," Johnny Grande said slowly. "My badge." He thought of Al Snow's garbled message. "Come on, Nelly, let's make tracks."

It had two wings and a plain concrete court between them. At three in the morning it looked gloomy and bare, cold in the moonlight. The center lobby between the wings was quiet and deserted, dimly lighted. Johnny Grande turned to the left and went up the steps with Kelly trudging behind him.

A card in a name plate had Al Snow's name engraved on it. Johnny reflected that maybe bartending wasn't such a bad racket at that, and then he paused and sniffed, leaning on the doorbell and waiting. Kelly took out a stubby pipe and lit it, blew smoke toward the black window far down at the other end of the corridor.

After a while Johnny rapped knuckles on the door, then took a flat key from a ring and tried it in the lock. The door opened and he stepped inside. The apartment was utterly dark. Johnny sprang back with a swift curse and grabbed Kelly's pipe from the big man's mouth. He hurled it far down the corridor. Then, ignoring the big man's whispered protest, he groped in the darkness toward a window and threw it open. Cool night air gushed in.

Kelly said grievously: "Are you nuts, Johnny? What's up?"

"Don't you smell it?"

"Nope."

"Try."

Kelly made sniffing noises. "I don't smell a thing."

Johnny swore softly and snapped on the bedroom light. He scowled at two beds, both unmade, and a night-table between them. On the table lay parts of a little .22 revolver. He stared at the shiny bits of metal and then raised the windows in this room, too. Then he returned and bent down, sniffed at the gun parts.

"Clean," he muttered.

He touched a bit of green fabric that had been caught in the trigger guard. Abruptly he turned and stared at the

THE Leicester was a neat little apartment house of reddish stone, set back a bit from the wide, tree-shaded street.

bathroom door. Kelly looked, too, and his jaw hung slack.

The crack under the door was stuffed tightly with paper. Johnny tried the knob, rattled it, tried to peer through the keyhole. This, too, was filled with paper. He took a pencil and poked at it until light suddenly shone through. Coughing, he took a key and opened the door.

He moved inside fast, his handkerchief over his nose, and threw up the little pebble-glass window. Then he turned and shut off the viciously hissing gas heater.

"Smell it now, Kelly?"

The big man nodded grimly, his eyes fixed on Al Snow's mottled, congested face.

Al Snow was quite dead. He was a fat little man in an open-necked shirt and cotton slacks. Soft leather slippers were on his bare feet. His eyes were closed, his brows drawn together into a close-knit frown, as though he were trying to remember something.

Kelly said, "Phew!" and waved his arms around to dispel the gas.

Johnny went close to the dead man and said softly: "You found out too much, didn't you, Al? I'm sorry. Sorry as hell. I'll bet there's even a suicide note and all."

Kelly said in a queer voice: "Here it is, Johnny."

It was clutched tightly in the dead man's fist. Johnny perspired gently as he worked the paper from between stiff, cold fingers. It came away with two banknotes, one a hundred and the other a fifty. Frowning, Johnny got up and read the note.

It was a bum steer, Skipper. Just forget it and me, too. The dough is to bury me with. Tell Carole I'm sorry.

Johnny said, "Yeah," very softly and stood still for a long time. He put the note in his pocket, tucked the money back

into the dead man's vest, and then said aloud: "I'll tell her, Al. I'll tell Carole for you."

Kelly said: This is just something else you got to explain to the commissioner."

Johnny Grande said: "I can't explain it. Not yet." He turned and walked quickly from the apartment. Nelly Kelly followed him on heavy feet. They walked around the building into the garage.

Al Snow's car was parked near the garage entrance, the keys dangling in the ignition lock. It was a neat little coupe, with green upholstery that matched the fragment caught in the .22 trigger guard upstairs. Johnny opened the door and slid his hand in the side pocket. The lining was torn.

He straightened, breathing through his nose.

Kelly looked at him anxiously, said: "You need some sleep, Johnny. Don't worry about Ginnie. That dame always bobs up on top."

Johnny Grande muttered: "I can't help worrying. I feel sick, I'm so scared. If she's hurt, Nelly, I'll—"

Kelly said: "Good-night, Johnny.

He could see the big man's arm swing up, but he couldn't do anything to avoid it. His muscles were frozen taut. Nelly's big fist crashed into his jaw, and as Johnny swirled down into an abyss of cool blackness, he was dimly conscious of gratitude toward the big lug.

CHAPTER TWO

Redheaded Widow

THE commissioner said: "You've cut a lot of capers in your time, Johnny. I don't say your flip attitude doesn't get results. I'm simply saying—"

Johnny Grande said: "I'm not being flip. Not this time. I don't feel any too good, Commissioner."

It was well after noon of the next day. Johnny stood with his back to the window. The commissioner sat behind a desk. He was short and squat, with heavy-lidded green eyes that were deceptively tired. He had a newspaper unfolded on his desk. Its headlines shrieked double murder.

"It is time," said the commissioner, balancing his words carefully, "for you to learn to hold a little respect for your superiors."

"I haven't got anything to say," Johnny muttered.

"But you've got to explain. This story in the papers says you found Leslie Vane in Karen County—found him drunk. Then Sergeant Kelly went to your rooms and found Leslie Vane—found him dead. Dead of gunshot from a twenty-two that must have been rammed right up under his nose before it was fired. So if Leslie Vane was alive when you found him, you must know how he was killed."

Johnny said: "I don't."

The commissioner shifted in his swivel chair. "Listen. We've got our reasons for wanting to know what happened to Vane. His wife reported him missing two days ago, and now this story pops up. Hell, you've got to know what it's all about!"

Johnny stared blankly out the window. "I don't," he repeated.

"Then your fiancée—this Virginia Claire—she knows."

Johnny lifted one shoulder, put his hat on one knee and studied the feather in the band. He said softly: "Yes, I guess she does know. But who knows where she is now?"

"You do."

Johnny Grande shook his head. "You're mistaken. I don't give a hoot for a two-bit chiseler like Les Vane. I just can't talk because I don't know a damn thing. I know less than you do, because I don't know what the department had up its

sleeve about Vane and his joint. I just want to find my girl."

"You forget your rank and your duty."

Johnny said tonelessly: "I'm not forgetting a thing. Are there any charges against me about Vane? Because he was found in my rooms?"

"No. No, listen. You did fine work before, Johnny. Very fine work, in spite of—everything. Do you want to go back to Homicide—still as a captain?"

"Sure."

"Then explain this business! If you're worried about your girl—afraid that she'll be harmed—"

"I am worried. I am afraid. But that wouldn't stop me. You know that. I just can't explain why Vane was killed because I wasn't really there, whether you believe me or not. And I don't know who killed Al Snow, or where Ginnie Claire is."

The commissioner pushed his chair back and drummed fat white fingers on the desk. He didn't look sleepy any longer. He said gravely: "Then I'm sorry, Grande." He reached out a soft, fat palm. "Turn it in."

Johnny took out his wallet, unpinned the gold badge, stared at it for a long moment and dropped it on the glass-topped desk. His lips were very white.

"O.K.," he whispered.

"You are suspended, pending action of the Board. You are not to leave town. I could jail you, you know. I could do lots of things to you. But I won't. That will be all."

Johnny Grande said nothing, didn't look at the commissioner again. He turned on his heel and walked out.

NELLY KELLY was waiting for him in Oscar's. He was eating butcher's sirloin and French fries and drinking bock beer as a light lunch. He looked up with a grin, waved his fork around and said: "Hi!"

Johnny Grande said: "I ought to lay you out." He picked up Kelly's beer and finished it. "I'm canned, my boy."

"Sure," said Kelly cheerfully. "With you it happens all the time. I remember the McKee case, when you were a sergeant and I was just a pavement pounder. Remember the old dowager and her dogs, and what you said to her? Boy, I'll never forget the look on her pan—"

Johnny Grande said: "Has the *Chronicle* heard from Ginnie yet?"

"Uh-uh," said Kelly, suddenly sobered.

"What did the M.E. say on Al Snow?"

"Suicide."

Johnny cursed softly. "It doesn't make sense. Nelly, I'm in a bad spot."

"What do you expect, keeping company with a dame who'll pull a trick like that on you?"

"It's not her fault," Johnny said. "She meant well. Look. The only thing I've really got is what Al Snow told me about Les Vane and Joey Asche feuding. It's a lead, anyway. If Asche did it, then Asche has got Ginnie, too. It's a cinch to figure what happened last night. Ginnie found Vane lying in one of the paths around the Alhambra and thought he was drunk. Asche's hoods came up and kidded her along and at the first break she got she called the *Chronicle*, pulling me into the mess. She probably intended to get me over there right away. Before she could say much, Asche's men grabbed her and hung up the phone, leaving the *Chronicle* up in the air. How does that sound, Nelly?"

The big man contemplated his potatoes. "All right," he decided, "but you can't prove a thing."

"Let's go on from there. Asche's hoods, or maybe Asche himself, heard Ginnie mention my name over the phone when she called the paper. They had to get rid of Vane's body somewhere, and they figured my place was as good as any.

They probably split their sides, laughing at the jam I'd be in," Johnny finished bitterly.

"It jibes pretty well," Kelly agreed. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Backtrack. I'm going to Karen county and interview Les Vane's widow."

Kelly said, alarmed: "Hey, you got to stick in town! You can't go to Karen."

"The hell I can't," Johnny said grimly. "You just watch me."

He left the big Irishman, climbed into his car and drove out to City Line Boulevard. He gave the massive Club Alhambra, on the county side of the road, only a passing glance as he went by. His mouth was grim and taut as he considered what the commissioner would say if his departure from the city became known.

In the county seat he stopped at a drug store and leafed through the directory. Then he went back to the car and drove to the north side of Karen.

THERE was a long wait while Johnny stood in front of the old oak door with its four tiny panes, waiting for an answer to his ring. The late afternoon was warm, drowsy with summer heat. From far away came the sleepy drone of traffic on the highway.

The door swung inward and Mrs. Leslie Vane said: "Yes, young man?"

She was a little dumpling of a woman who still bore traces of having been pretty once—at a time when a man like Les Vane would have been interested in that type of prettiness. Now her dull purple dress emphasized the dowdiness of her figure. Her speech was slow and uncertain and she squinted vaguely at Johnny's tall figure in the doorway. Her hands made arabesques in the air. She was dry-eyed.

Johnny said gently "My name is Grande. I'm a city cop. I'd like to talk to you about your husband."

She stared at him and turned slowly.

Light sifted through her too-red hair. "Grande?" she said. "You are the one who was in the papers. They say you found him—that he was in your rooms—"

"If I can come in. . . ."

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course." Her voice had a dreamy, far-away quality.

She led him into a small, carelessly furnished living-room and waved a plump pink hand at a chair. Johnny Grande ignored it. He stared at the tall man who stood there, flicking down the brim of a pearl-gray hat. "Where is she, Ashe?" Johnny barked.

Big Joey Ashe was tall, well-muscled, dark-faced. There were traces of powder on his lean blue jaw, and his long thin fingers held a long thin cigar, lightly. His thick hair was straight, parted low on one side. He knew how to wear clothes.

"Where is who?" he asked.

Johnny said: "You know. Ginnie Claire. Where is she?"

"Oh. Your girl, eh?"

"My girl."

"I don't know where she is." A smile curled Ashe's thin mouth. "I'm sure I don't know." He turned to Mrs. Vane. "I'll be going now, Madge. Good-evening."

Johnny said: "Just a minute."

Joey Ashe paused. He stared down at Johnny's hand on his arm. "You're down in Karen County now, Grande," he suggested softly. "One wrong move out of you and you'll be sat on plenty hard."

He shrugged off Johnny's hand and went out.

Johnny pinched the peak of his hat with trembling fingers. His eyes still smoldered with anger.

He turned to the wide-eyed plump woman and said: "It wasn't I who found your husband last night, Mrs. Vane. It was my fiancée. Since then, she has been missing, too. I want to know what it's all about. I'd like to find her—and I'd like

to find your husband's murderer, too."

She looked vaguely at the floor, blinked her eyes at a lamp on the table and then sat down, folding her hands in her lap.

She shook her head. "Les disappeared two days ago, and I hadn't seen or heard from him—until today." She shivered and stared at Johnny's necktie. "I never did like Leslie's mixing up in the Club Alhambra or that man—Joey Ashe. You've just seen him. You know what he's like. He scares me. They say that the club is a terrible place, catering to all sorts of . . . but I wouldn't know. Leslie never told me much about his business. I do know," she finished with a note of pride, "that Leslie was getting out of it."

She paused and beamed childish satisfaction at Johnny Grande. He twisted his hat in his fingers. "You mean he was selling out?"

"Yes, he'd sold out already to Joey Ashe. Ashe was his partner in the club, you know. Leslie sold out last week. We were going to take a trip to Mexico. We planned to stay a year. We always wanted to travel to places like Mexico."

Johnny rubbed his jaw and stared out through the window. A sedan had parked across the tree-lined street, in the gathering dusk. A cigarette glowed in the darkened front seat.

He said, abruptly: "Your husband was shot with a twenty-two. It looked as though it was a contact wound. Did Les have any guns?"

"Oh, yes."

"May I see them?"

SHE stared at him, then shrugged and got up, left the room. Johnny stood still, staring at the opposite wall. He moved away from the window as Mrs. Vane returned. She was carrying a large .38 Smith & Wesson revolver and a smaller .32. Johnny stared at them without touching them, shook his head. The

red-haired woman slid the two guns on a long table and gave a little shudder of revulsion.

"I don't like them," she whispered.

"You don't have a gun of your own?"

"Oh, no." She looked at him with a sudden glimmer of sharpness in her dulled eyes. "Why do you ask?"

"It occurred to me that a twenty-two is a woman's gun."

She looked at him steadily. Johnny stared back. There was no sound in the room save the ticking of a little clock on the mantel and the woman's breathing. It became louder, more rasping, and then she purred viciously: "Get out. You get out of here. Make it fast, copper."

Johnny didn't try to argue with her. He looked at the two guns, and the woman's eyes jerked to follow his glance. Shrugging, he put on his hat and walked down the hall. The woman stood motionless in the room behind him. Muscles on his shoulder-blades crawled and jerked with tension. When he closed the front door behind him he let air out with a long sigh. He mopped his brow with his pocket handkerchief and said, very softly: "Ouch!"

A blob of white to his left said solicitously: "Something hurt, buddy?"

THERE were two of them, standing in the shadow of the hedge that bordered the walk to the pavement. One was a tall, cadaverous man, with a round bald head and pink scalp. He was showing yellow teeth in a crooked grin. His face was the color of wet ashes. The other was shorter and much younger, in a neat brown pinstripe. He stood adjusting his tie with his left hand. He had a large gun in his right. It was pointed at Johnny Grande's middle.

The tall, bony man jerked his thumb at the younger one and said casually: "He's Sleek Smith. I'm Deputy Sheriff Cass Keasy. Karen County cop."

Johnny kept staring at the gun in Smith's hand. "Pinched?" he asked.

The bony man said: "Maybe. Your name, mister?"

Johnny Grande told him his name and position on the city force. Keasy's deep-set eyes brightened and his thin mouth curved abruptly upward. The smile was not pleasant.

"Trespassing, huh? Let's see the tin."

"I don't have my badge," Johnny said.

"You bet you don't. You were suspended this noon for clamming up on your superiors. Oh, yeah—we get to know things in Karen. News drifts in. You're breaking bounds."

Johnny said: "Am I?" He stood still and waited.

Smith said: "He's a smart guy, Cass, like the rest of them city men. Let's get done with it."

Johnny's gray eyes swung to the neatly dressed younger man. "Done with what?"

"Done with you. You're going back to the big village. You're not wanted in Karen County. We got our own law."

"Midget law," Johnny muttered.

"Yeah, maybe. So let's get going. We'll use your car."

Sleek Smith took the wheel. Deputy Sheriff Keasy motioned Johnny to crowd in between them. The dark-faced youth set the car rolling toward the county line, made it in forty minutes flat. There was a concrete bridge over a tiny river and Smith parked the car on the opposite side. He got out, smiling, his hands in his pockets. Keasy followed his helper to the pavement.

"Next time," Keasy said heavily, "mind the chickens in your own back yard."

"Next time I'll come back with an ax."

Sleek Smith grinned, showing very white, even teeth. He swung a little closer to Johnny. "Don't you think we ought to search the guy, Cass?"

Keasy said: "That's not a bad idea."

Johnny said softly: "Lay off."

THE younger man's hands flitted over Johnny's body. Johnny swung hard at Smith's jaw. His knuckles made the sound of a whip cracking, and the man made a bubbling noise and skittered backward over the darkening pavement. He hit the concrete guard rail with a dull, solid jar, and came up gripping his gun.

Johnny dived on him, grabbing for the weapon. Keasy stood by, not moving. Smith cursed bitterly and swung the gun at Johnny's head. He caught it flat on his palm and closed quick fingers around the barrel. A quick twist, and the gun went sailing over the bridge into the river below. It made a faint splash in the water.

He turned to face a second gun in Keasy's hand. The man's fist showed up taut and blue-veined and freckled. His eyes blazed yellow. Johnny said swiftly: "You're across the bridge, Keasy. Inside city limits."

The bony man's eyes flickered. Johnny started to turn and staggered under the shock as Smith leaped on his back. Out of the tail of his eye he caught the flash of a leather sap in the man's hand. It crashed down on the side of Johnny's skull, hammering pain into the base of his brain. Johnny wobbled and hit the pavement with his knees. Smith kicked him in the ribs.

Keasy said thinly: "Hold it, Sleek. Don't."

Smith withdrew a step, panting. Wild lights pinwheeled in his eyes. "I'll kill the——. So help me, I'll kill him."

Johnny dragged his legs under him and suddenly straightened, his fist shooting upward. It smashed into the bright dribble of blood on Smith's chin. The man left his feet and sailed three yards through the air. He struck shoulder-first, moaned, and crumpled up.

Johnny Grande turned a dead-white face toward Keasy. "When the lollipop comes to, tell him to stay out of my way." He paused, breathing deeply, and felt a sudden ache in his ribs. They seemed mangled. He was trembling from head to foot with suppressed anger. "And I mean stay out," he repeated.

A high voice yelled: "Hey! Hey, you!"

A man came pounding down the bridge from the direction of a diner poised on the lip of the road. He was still a good way off. Keasy hesitated, his mouth a straight white gash, and then slid the gun in his pocket.

He walked over to Smith, shook him and said: "Come on, Sleek. We're out of bounds."

He helped the younger man to his feet, threw an arm around him and helped him walk off through the gathering dusk. Johnny leaned back against the bridge rail and stood still, sucking air. The pain in his ribs became a steady throb with every thump of his heart. He touched his forehead and stared at his fingertips. They glistened with shiny red.

The newcomer pounded up, breathless. "Hey, pal! You're hurt! What were they—mugs?"

Johnny stared at him. He was a young man in khaki and puttees and checked cap. His eyes were hot with excitement.

"Yeah—mugs," Johnny said.

"You're hurt bad, pal."

"Not too bad. I'll have a cup of coffee."

He got into his car with the the khaki-clad man and drove to the lunch wagon. Outside he wiped the blood from his face, then he went in and slid his leg over a stool.

"Coffee. Black and hot."

The hamburger artist behind the counter drew steaming liquid into a thick cup. Johnny sucked it slowly, feeling its warmth penetrate through his body. Some of the icy chill left him. He didn't say anything to the interested man in khaki

until he noticed the tripod and plumb line in a corner of the lunch wagon. Then he put down his cup and said: "Surveyor?"

The checked cap bobbed. "Yep. City. I got stuck out here waiting for somebody to pick me up. No damn cars would stop. How do you feel?"

"I feel all right." Johnny stared at the yellowed mirror across the counter. His face had tired lines in it. While he looked his eyelid twitched at him. He winked at himself twice before asking: "What kind of job are you on?"

"It's an old error," the surveyor said. "Goes 'way back to the 1878 records. It's an order from the police commissioner, they say. About a hundred feet added past City Line Boulevard."

Johnny said: "Always expanding, always growing—that's our motto, huh?"

"You bet."

Johnny put a nickel down on the counter and went out.

CHAPTER THREE

The House on the River Road

NELLY KELLY was sprawled in Johnny's big easy chair when he let himself into his apartment. The big sergeant had a highball glass to his lips. He caught Johnny's scowl and said: "It's all right. I'm off duty. Hey, you're bunged up again."

Johnny said: "Anything new?"

"I went over to the *Chronicle* office. Ginnie hasn't shown up yet. Then I made a round of the newsguys' hangouts on Broad Street, but nobody had seen her. I had dinner, then I went to her apartment but she wasn't there either. That gun in Al Snow's flat is over at Ballistics. They think maybe it did the ventilating in Leslie Vane."

"That's interesting. How about Carole Snow?"

"She's all right. She ain't broke up at all!"

Johnny said: "I guess mourning the dead isn't in fashion any more."

Kelly heaved his big frame out of the chair. "I wonder," he said, "what goes on. The department is turning itself inside out over this Vane rub-out. They even got flyers out on Ginnie, looking for her. Why should we be worried about what happens at the Club Alhambra?"

"The Club Alhambra may be over in Karen County but it dumps all its trouble and dirt right in our laps. That's why the commissioner is hot."

"So what can we do?"

"Find Ginnie."

Johnny changed to a plain blue serge, white shirt and blue tie. He put on a soft hat and walked to the door.

Kelly said: "Ain't you gonna eat?"

"At the Club Alhambra," Johnny told him.

THE Club Alhambra was an architectural monstrosity atop a knoll across City Line Boulevard. It was a rambling stucco structure that vaguely resembled its Moorish original in Grenada. There were castellated walls on three sides, and the fourth ended in a sheer drop of a hundred feet into the river. There was no parking lot outside but space was provided for cars under a columned arcade. At nine o'clock Johnny Grande slid his coupe between two long limousines and got out, pocketing the key. He walked around to the wide bar entrance and stared at it.

"One door," he muttered.

His eyes swept the pavement that reached like a finger across dim terraced lawns to a distant street. Faint muted music drifted to him. He walked around to the big main entrance, under a blinking neon sign.

"Two doors," he said.

The third door was a small employees'

exit. He glanced at it casually, surveying the thick shrubbery around it, and then returned to the main doorway, walked in.

A smooth-faced Greek bowed and smiled and crooked a finger at a girl, and she came forward toward Johnny. He stared at her curiously. She had a wide netted veil over her eyes and wore a houri's costume—skin-tight and drafty in spots. She looked sleepily disinterested. Her eyebrows were arched up to give her a continually surprised expression.

Johnny said: "No games tonight. Just a drink."

She lazily examined the bruise on his forehead and indicated the bar by turning her hand palm-upward toward an arch. "Over there, sir."

"I want company with the drink, too," Johnny said.

"That can be arranged."

"I want to see Carole Snow."

The houri looked less sleepy. "You're asking in the wrong department. Carole just sings here—nothing else."

She drifted away. Johnny shrugged and sat down on a black leather bench by the wall. He lit a cigarette and waited and watched. The houri moved toward the Greek and said something, and then the Greek smiled and glided toward Johnny and bowed.

"You wish something special, yes?"

"Yes. Tell Carole Snow I'm waiting to see her. Tell her it's about Al."

"Oh—Al. I'm afraid—"

A five-dollar bill eased the man's fears. He left and Johnny got up and entered the bar. It was supposed to be a reproduction of the famous Court of Lions. Amber and pale green spotlights made a glow on the vaulted ceiling. There was a circular black marble bar built around a cylindrical mirror. A tiny fountain tinkled at the top of it all. The patrons sat around the bar on stools supported by twelve green lions. There wasn't much noise in the place.

He had a Scotch highball at the bar, then carried a second to a secluded table in a corner.

He had finished half of it by the time the dark-haired girl entered and spotted him. She walked with a faintly false swagger, antagonism in her green eyes. There was a bruise on her jaw that had been painted over and carefully powdered. She had a square, red mouth that looked angry.

"The generalissimo says you're making a nuisance of yourself, asking for me."

Johnny hooked a finger at a waiter and gave an order for himself and the girl. "It's about Al," he said. "And Joey Asche."

She said quickly: "We're not allowed to discuss the boss with patrons."

Johnny said: "I'm not a patron, I'm just a cop. I'm the one who found Al last night."

THE girl's mouth tightened at the corners. Yellow flecks of gold danced in her green eyes. She looked up and caught the eye of a waiter, and the man looked suddenly anxious and walked stiffly through the arched doorway. Johnny watched him go with moody eyes.

"Well?" the girl said.

"I thought you might have something to say about it."

"All right," she whispered huskily. Color had drained from her face. She folded her hands on the edge of the table and stared at her scarlet fingernails. "I'll bite. Who did it?"

"It looks like suicide, Carole."

Her chin jerked up a little. "The hell it is! He was killed."

"I think so myself."

"You bet. He knew too much. Me, too." She laughed, loudly and tinnily. Her eyes looked frightened. "I guess I'm going to be a suicide myself one of these days—or hours."

Johnny stared at the bruise on her jaw

and shrugged. "Not if you play ball."

"Uh-uh. Al said he'd talk to you if you gave him protection. A lot of protection he got."

"I didn't get a chance. It happened even before I saw him."

She said suddenly: "If I tell you, they'll kill me, too."

"You look like a brave girl." Johnny smiled. "You're not afraid."

She laughed again, falsely. "No, I'm not afraid. Not much. I'm shaking apart inside, I'm so scared. I haven't Al's courage—and he's dead. That's very funny. We were married a long time ago. When we were kids."

"I know," Johnny said.

"And now he's dead."

"Yes."

She fumbled for a cigarette and blew thick, rolling smoke rings toward the ceiling. Her eyes were the only live things in her white face. They finally drifted to the doorway and stayed there.

"I'm scared of Joey Asche," she said. "He killed Leslie Vane. I know he did. He had two guns covering the bar entrance and the main doorway. I called Les aside and got him out of the employees' exit, but it wasn't any use. They got him anyway. They got your girl, too, didn't they?"

Johnny said quietly: "Yes, they got her. I'm looking for her. What was Vane doing here in the first place? Where'd he been for two days?"

"Right here. Asche was holding him here, feeding him spiked drinks. Asche wanted Vane to talk. I don't know about what. But Vane was too tough and he didn't crack. Asche finally got tired of playing and sent Vane out to meet the gunboys. I saw them outside and steered Vane out through the service door. It didn't do any good. No matter what door he went out, he was bound to get sieved."

Johnny said pointedly: "What time did all this happen? The newspaper got Gin-

nie's call at twelve thirty-five, but Ginnie didn't phone it in from here, I'm sure."

The girl shrugged. "About twelve, I guess. Al saw them go. He said they all went north into Karen County." The girl stopped talking suddenly and stared at the doorway. Her square red mouth twisted in her white face. She whispered: "Start protecting, copper. Here comes Asche, now."

The very tall, dark-haired man with the thick black brows and boyish haircut paused in the entrance, smiling fixedly, and then came toward them. Johnny didn't get up. Asche nodded curtly and said to the girl: "You go on next, Carole. I switched routines."

She looked at Johnny with sudden fright in her eyes.

"I'm not going on. Not tonight. If you want to know why," she said, her voice suddenly rising above the dim, pulsing music, "I'll tell you, too. Because you killed Al! You killed him, you did!"

Asche straightened abruptly, touched his dubonnet tie and smiled at the startled faces that turned toward them. Johnny leaned back and put his hand on the girl's chair. His muscles were tightening, very slowly.

Asche said swiftly: "This doesn't add up to anything but trouble, honey. Take it easy." He swung black eyes to Johnny. "And you, copper—get out."

Johnny said flatly: "I'm waiting to take Carole home."

"She's not going home."

The girl said: "The hell I'm not."

ASCHE said: "Maybe we can settle this in private. You're upset, Carole. I'm sure you don't know what you're saying. We can straighten this out alone, between us."

"There are only a few questions," Johnny murmured. "Sit down."

The tall man smoothed his hair. "What do you want to know?"

"What was Vane doing here for two days?"

"Was he here?"

The girl said loosely: "You know damn well he was here. I told the copper."

Asche said: "Oh, you told the copper." Then he smiled. "Well, Vane was here on a bat and I accommodated him, that's all."

"He sold out to you, didn't he?"

"That was last week. I'm the sole owner of the Alhambra now."

Johnny said: "That's all I wanted to know." He got up, touched the girl's shoulder. "We'll go now."

Asche said: "No, you won't."

Johnny looked at him. Grinning, he put his hand in his pocket and took out his gun. It bulked large and blue in his fingers. A woman at the next table made a queer little noise and clapped her hand over her mouth. Asche stepped quickly in front of the gun to block the sight of it from the other customers. Words spilled quickly from his whitened lips.

"Put it away, you fool!"

Carole Snow gurgled: "That's what I call real protecting, copper! Let's go."

Johnny put the gun in his pocket and kept his hand on it. He didn't take his eyes off Asche. The big dark man smiled and bowed slightly, started to say something and then changed his mind. The girl swaggered ahead, even more loosely than when she had come in. Johnny caught up with her and she tucked her hand possessively in his arm. Nobody interfered with them as they went out.

Johnny slid into the coupe and backed downhill to City Line Boulevard. He turned north into Karen County, consulted the clock on the dashboard, said: "Tell me when it's half past."

The girl said thickly: "Where we going, huh?"

"We're going to find Ginnie Claire."

"How?"

"Leslie Vane left the Club Alhambra at

five after twelve last night. Ginnie found him and then the killers picked her up and drove off in a car along this road. Thirty minutes later she managed to call her newspaper before being cut off. By timing it right we ought to find the place she called from."

The dark-haired girl said glumly: "That's a wild chance."

"There are almost no intersections on the road into Karen, and few houses. We might hit it right."

He drove on in silence.

THE highway coiled like loose white ticker-tape along the banks of the rocky stream that writhed between close-pressing walls of thick trees. There was a pungent scent of pine in the air, a soft wind.

Carole Snow slid down on the seat and her head rested on Johnny's shoulder. Her face looked pale and exhausted in the moonlight. Her breath was uneven, alcoholic.

After twenty minutes the headlights picked up a narrow, rutted by-pass—a private road leading through the trees to the river. Johnny braked, swung the wheel and muttered: "Here we go."

The jolting road ended in a vine-covered wall overlooking the river bluff. There was no sound but the whisper of the wind.

The dark-haired girl bubbled softly: "Isn't this cozy?"

Johnny stared at her. "You're drunk."

"You bet. Gonna be drunker."

He studied the house nearby. It was completely dark. There was a wide veranda, a large double door and bay windows on each wing. The place had a carefully groomed look to it. White moonlight shone on window glass and revealed dark blinds.

"I'm going in," he said.

The girl said: "Think you'll come out?"

JOHNNY looked away from her and walked stiffly up on the porch. His muscles ached with tension. The big door opened at his touch and he looked into the utter blackness of a hallway.

He said aloud to the dark shadows, "Hell, I forgot," and turned around, went halfway back to the car. Then he suddenly wheeled and ran swiftly around the house to where the trees pressed up close to the back door. There was a screened sleeping porch here that didn't offer too much difficulty. Johnny lifted the latch with a match-stick he poked through the copper mesh and stepped softly inside. He crossed a patch of molten moonlight and flattened against the rough granite wall of the house.

A sound drifted through the partly open door and a man came out onto the sleeping porch. He came through quickly, sidewise and he held a gun in his hand. His eyes were shiny-white in the half-light.

"Looking for me?" Johnny said softly.

The man snarled, whirled, and Johnny's fist flashed upward, countering the lift of the man's gun. The other fell, slipped on the rush carpet. He sat down with a jar. Johnny reached for the gun and the man lifted his knee in a vicious kick. Johnny jumped back a step, moving high, and brought his heel down on the other's instep.

A sobbing curse ripped through the darkness. The gun went sailing in an arc at Johnny's head. He ducked it and it rattled against the granite wall and fell to the floor behind him.

Johnny said: "You shouldn't have left the front door open so conveniently, Sleek. I could see your eyes."

The county cop cursed and started for his feet. Johnny leaned down and grabbed his collar, pulled him violently closer. He cut upward with his left and Smith went limp in his arms. Johnny let him slide to the floor. Then he walked

over and sank into a wicker chair, stretched his long legs, breathing softly, evenly.

After a moment Smith began to move, slowly at first. Then he suddenly bolted for the screen door. Johnny stuck out his foot without rising from the chair. Smith tripped and landed on all fours with a grunt of pain.

Johnny said in a dry, tired voice: "Now you're going to tell me what you and Keasy did with my girl."

"You got a fat chance."

"She may be dead," Johnny went on softly. "If she is, I'm sorry for you. If she isn't, I want to know where you've got her. You're going to tell me. Then you're going to tell me just how you and Keasy tie into all this."

Smith's face gleamed with sweat. His eyes rolled. He shook his head and compressed his lips into a tight, stubborn line.

Johnny waved his gun, said: "Sit down, Sleek. Over there." He indicated a chair, and the man sank into it. His eyes were hot with hatred.

"You can't get me to talk," he snarled.

"We'll see," Johnny promised.

He took out a large clasp knife and touched the spring button. The blade sprang out, long and shiny, pointed at Smith's eyes. The man sucked air, gripped the arms of his chair and shivered.

With a quick movement Johnny sliced away the buttons from Smith's shirt. He flicked aside the cloth with the point of the knife, baring the man's smooth brown chest.

Johnny said, almost gently: "I'm not fooling, Sleek. I'm not a cop any more. I'm nothing any more. So I don't have to be particular about my methods. It's my girl's life that's at stake. You're going to talk, aren't you?"

Smith rolled his eyes and made a spitting sound.

Johnny moved closer. "Well, I won't bother carving sunsets on your chest. I'll work on that handsome face of yours."

The man shrank back, gasping. Terror made his eyes shine round and white. He rasped: "No . . . wait. I'll tell you. . . . Everything. . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Blast-Out

A FEW minutes later Johnny followed Smith's figure down the second-floor hallway to a front bedroom. He snapped on the lights with a backhand gesture, waved Smith aside and stared.

There was a maple bed across the room, beneath a glass-and-chrome wall-light that reflected into a circular blue mirror. The light shone on Ginnie Claire's wide blue eyes and frightened little face as she lay bound and gagged on the bed.

Johnny stood for a long moment without moving. Then he breathed out slowly, as though his lungs had been paralyzed for the last twenty-four hours.

He said softly: "Don't you look a mess?"

The girl on the bed made vague sounds behind the white gag that covered the lower part of her face. Johnny glanced at Sleek Smith and the smile abruptly left his lips. He walked over to the girl and used his knife to slash away her bonds.

She sat up dizzily. "That," she said, "is the nicest thing you ever did, Johnny Grande."

He stared at her. "I ought to whale you. How do you feel?"

"Fine."

"That's good," he said grimly, "because as soon as we're out of this I'm going to give you the walloping of your life."

Her tiny red mouth curled in a grin. "Honest, it'll be a pleasure. I'm sorry, Johnny. Honest, I am. I thought I was

doing you a favor, dishing out some credit to you."

He said flatly: "I lost my badge."

"You'll get it back."

"I nearly went crazy trying to find you."

"Did you really? Johnny, I'll admit what I did and quit my job, and then you can whale me to your heart's content."

"Don't think I won't," he promised.

He stared at the palm of his hand and then at her trim little figure and grinned. He turned to Sleek Smith. "All right. The band's playing the exit march."

The county cop lifted a corner of his mouth in a sneer and turned, walked out of the room. Johnny followed him into the corridor, started to turn toward the staircase.

Light flashed high over his head and came down with a sickening crack on the back of his skull. His knees turned watery and he went down, pawing at the air. Consciousness left him with the successive dropping of many black curtains.

He felt the bump when his head hit the floor only as a far-away shock.

BRIGHTNESS rushed at him from far away, growing stronger until it filled the whole room. Sound came back the same way—first as a distant, low-pitched murmur, then louder until it was a smooth voice saying: "Well, he's out of it."

Johnny's head ached and throbbed. His jaw hurt. His arm felt as though it had been run through a wringer. He took a tentative deep breath, but aside from the general ache, he felt all right.

He focussed his eyes on the face that had spoken—smooth, dark-skinned, black-haired. A thin cigar drooped from a tight-lipped mouth. The eyes smiled amusedly at him.

"Hello, copper."

Johnny said: "Hello, Asche."

"Meet the folks, copper."

He was in the living-room of the same house. Ginnie was still here. She sat on one end of a leather couch and stared wide-eyed at him. Her cheeks bore traces of tears. On the other end of the couch sat Carole Snow, her chin cupped in her hands. She was looking blankly at the far wall. Deputy Sheriff Keasy stood by a window, a pair of night-glasses glued to his deep-socketed eyes.

Keasy was saying: "It's city cops, Asche. They're pulling the place apart."

The dark man's eyes jerked away from Johnny, surprised. "They can't do that! The club is over the county line!"

Johnny sat up straighter. "You mean it was," he said quietly.

Asche leaned a slim brown hand on the arm of a chair and stared at him. Then he looked slowly at Keasy.

Keasy shook his head. "I don't understand it."

Asche purred softly: "You don't understand it, you don't know anything. But Vane knew. He *knew!* That's why he cleared out. But I pay you, and you can't understand it."

Sleek Smith drawled: "Let's ask the copper. Let me do the asking. I'd like that. I sure would."

JOHNNY turned his head carefully. The man grinned, touched his cheek lightly, and got up out of the chair. His lips jerked.

"Now we play even-up, copper. Now we see how much guts *you* got."

Asche said: "Put that knife down, you fool."

Smith straightened, adjusted his tie. He pushed his jaw forward with a circular motion. "Well, I owe him something, Joey."

"Later, later." Asche turned hot eyes on Johnny. "Know any reason why we shouldn't get rid of you?"

"Lots of them," Johnny said. His eyes glowed faintly. "A whole flock of rea-

sons. I gather the city cops are axing your joint."

"They are." Asche nodded.

Johnny said: "I'll tell it. You snatched Leslie Vane to make him talk. He was pulling a fast one. He sold out his share in the Alhambra to you and you smelled a phony deal. You wanted to know what it was so you worked on him for two days. But he was too tough for you. You decided to get rid of him. He was crossing you, all right. He knew there'd been a surveying error discovered, from way back to 1878. The city cops have been wanting to smash your place for a long time, but Karen County cops always covered you.

"So the department found out about this old surveying error, a matter of a hundred feet across the present city line. It just about brings the Alhambra inside city limits. That's why Leslie Vane sold out to you. He knew about it. That's why the cops are raiding tonight."

Asche said softly: "Go ahead, don't stop. You're getting hot."

"It's hot all right," Johnny agreed. "This is a honey. You intended to kill Vane so he wouldn't squawk about your torturing him. You were afraid he'd strike back at you. So you planted hoods to cover the two doors the patrons used. But Vane was steered out the service exit. Somebody shot him down there. Keasy and Smith found him, with my girl, Ginnie Claire, stumbling accidentally into it.

"They brought Vane and her here. Keasy figured you'd had the job done, and tried to cover for you. He's on your payroll. And because you'd actually made the arrangements to kill Vane, you were wide open and had to protect yourself, just as if you had actually gone through with it. But"—Johnny paused—"you didn't kill Leslie Vane."

Asche nodded, very slowly. His eyes were thoughtful.

Sleek Smith drawled: "Hell, Joe, he's making this up. He can't prove anything."

Johnny said: "Sure, I'm spinning this out of the air. But it makes a web that looks pretty good to me."

THE dark-haired Carole Snow lifted her head slowly and stared at Johnny. She got up from the lounge and stood hugging her purse to her breast. She breathed quickly, her nostrils moving faintly. Her mouth twitched and her eyes turned bitter green.

She whispered: "You rotten copper. You know Asche killed Les."

Johnny said: "I don't know anything like that. I know this, though—a likable little guy named Al Snow killed himself last night. And I'm wondering why."

"He didn't kill himself. He was murdered. Asche or one of these so-called cops murdered him."

Johnny shook his head. "No, he committed suicide. Nobody could have gotten to him, locked in as he was. And he had a twenty-two in his bedroom—your bedroom, too—after he called me. He'd found it in the side pocket of his car—your car, too. You filled him with a lot of talk aimed at pinning the murder on Joey Asche. And then Al happened to find the gun.

"He was so shocked he killed himself. He thought it would help if he wasn't around to answer questions, because he loved his wife. He knew that neither Asche nor a hired hood killed Les Vane. Not with a little twenty-two. Hoods use bigger guns. He knew a woman had killed Vane. Maybe Vane's wife. Maybe some other woman. He played around a lot."

Silence spun out through the room, thick with breathing. The cigar in Asche's fingers sputtered faintly. Johnny watched the smoke drift upward in loose blue ribbons.

Carole Snow stared, not moving. Then

she said in a rushing whisper: "Go on, say it—say it."

"All right," Johnny said quietly. "You killed Leslie Vane. I knew it ever since I saw that gun, but I had to find Ginnie first. Vane had pulled his deal and he was going to Mexico on the profits. But he was taking his wife, not you! He was jilting you. You pulled him aside from Asche's gunmen to give him one more chance to reconsider. When he laughed at you, you shot him. You put your little gun up to his chest and shot him. He didn't die right away. He had time to sock your jaw and knock you out and then stagger down the path to where he was found. But you killed him."

She shivered suddenly from head to foot. She dropped her purse and her hand came away carrying a small automatic. Her eyes were pale and completely empty of reason.

Then she pointed the gun.

Keasy yelled and swiped at her arm. She turned without a flicker of hesitation and triggered twice. The crash of the little gun echoed back and forth in the room. Keasy's bony head jerked and he went down, falling toward Johnny. A gun spilled from his pocket.

Johnny reached for it and got his fingers on the barrel.

The girl turned to Asche, fired again while the tall man just stared. Asche tripped forward, clutching his arm. The crash of a heavy service gun blasted over Johnny's head. It was Sleek Smith. The man's lips were pulled back in a hard, tight grin. The girl fired at him at the same time, and missed. Smith's heavy bullets knocked her off her feet. Her legs twisted curiously, suddenly boneless, and she slid down on her side, lost her gun, and tried to sit up again. She stared at Johnny and plucked aimlessly at her throat. Her eyes rolled once and remained open. A pink bubble appeared on her lips.

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Smith turned toward Johnny. The man was still grinning. Gunsmoke leaked from his heavy gun.

Johnny fired three times, the shots crowding so close on each other that the explosions made a continuous roar. Smith's coat jumped and jerked, and then he started to turn toward Ginnie Claire, huddled on the couch. Johnny fired once more. Smith fell in a tight spiral, still grinning.

The air was acrid with coiled gunsmoke. Johnny got to his feet and walked slowly across the floor toward the body of the dark-haired girl. He knelt, forked his fingers and closed her wide, staring green eyes.

Turning to Ginnie, he said: "You all right, honey?"

She nodded, swallowing.

"Then this time," he said, "call the cops—first."

NELLY KELLY, a few minutes later, stood with battered face grinning and swung a fireman's ax through the air. He leaned toward Joey Asche in the crowded room and said: "Boy, it was a pleasure. I put my heart into it. Mirrors, wheels, curtains, bar, rugs—I put my heart into it, gambler."

Asche looked through the press of men toward Johnny Grande. He said: "At least I'm clear of the Vane job. I'm glad it's over."

Johnny said grimly: "You're not clean. You've got plenty of counts against you. Kidnaping and accessory after the fact in Vane's murder, because you tried to cover it up by dumping him in my rooms. Maybe you thought it was a cute trick. But you made a mistake in picking your fall-guy. I happen not to like such games."

Asche shook his head slowly and said: "Well, at least it's not going to be the chair."

Johnny's eyes sought out Ginnie's trim

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figure. She stood looking very meek among the uniformed men. He pushed past the photographer and the M. E. and took her arm.

"Johnny," she said. "Johnny, I'm so hungry. They hardly fed me. Take me someplace where I can eat."

"All right," he said.

They went out into the night. When she started for the cars parked around the house, Johnny tugged her in the opposite direction, around to the back of the place.

She said, faintly apprehensive: "Johnny, what is it? What in the world is this place?"

Johnny Grande stared at her and a faint grin curled his mouth. He studied the palm of his hand carefully, and his eyes went dreamy with pleased anticipation.

He looked from his hand to her, back to his hand.

"You're a headache," he said. "You're always getting me into jams. And if I'm going to spend the rest of my life with you, I've got to put my foot down sometime. This is as good a time as any. And this place, as you call it," he said, indicating the little hut under the trees, "is what is commonly known as a woodshed. It's a great American institution."

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(Continued from page 3)

out the necessary number of wrappers desired, or were given the wrapped sections to address to your relatives and friends. Personally, I addressed twenty such wrapped sections, turned them over to the racketeers for mailing and paid them the sum of \$1.00. Not one copy was ever delivered to those addressed, and I understand the modus operandi was to take the papers, which were in a large number of apparent mail sacks, to a local destination where the inscribed wrappers were removed, new ones substituted and the packages returned to the fair for sale to other suckers. The "take" at Chicago must have been enormous.

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30x4-74-18	2.45	32x4-74-18	2.65	34x4-74-18	2.80
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30x4-25-19	2.15	32x4-25-19	2.35	34x4-25-19	2.45
30x4-35-20	2.30	32x4-35-20	2.50	34x4-35-20	2.60
32x4-35-21	2.40	34x4-35-21	2.60	36x4-35-21	2.70
34x4-35-22	2.50	36x4-35-22	2.70	38x4-35-22	2.80
36x4-35-23	2.60	38x4-35-23	2.80	40x4-35-23	2.90

Size	Tube	Size	Tube	Size	Tube
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30x4-10-19	1.45	32x4-10-19	1.55	34x4-10-19	1.65
30x4-10-20	1.50	32x4-10-20	1.60	34x4-10-20	1.70
30x4-10-21	1.55	32x4-10-21	1.65	34x4-10-21	1.75
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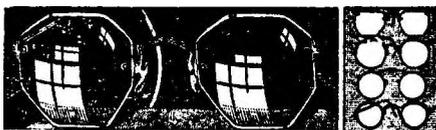
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If you part with only a dollar for three of the plants, you will have given the gyp about 97 cents profit! Those lovely plants are common water hyacinths, growing by the billions in the bayous of the deep South. You can't possibly keep them alive. All they cost the gyps is the transportation and they can well afford to give you another—and will if you call for it! They have a small storeroom rented to handle any and all complaints until they are ready to skip! By then thousands will have been mulcted of their money!

Sincerely yours,
Gay Johnston

AND here is a splendid analysis of a smooth-working racket which has been used in various parts of the country lately. It is extremely hard to detect until after the crook has collected and made tracks for parts unknown and far-distant from the scene of his operations. And there is small likelihood of legal redress as the gang, naturally, covers itself well from all angles. Like so many similar schemes it depends entirely on the cupidity of the victim who seeks to profit himself and ends up by being royally gypped.

Columbus, Ohio

Dear Sir:

The following painful experience came to a friend whose work necessitated a change of residence to another city.

He decided to sell his home and advertised the fact in the daily press. There came almost immediately a gentleman who wished to buy a house. After a careful examination, the man began to talk terms, price, etc. . . .

They finally agreed on \$6500 cash. The fellow seemed very pleased, but said it would take him a couple of weeks to raise that amount. But as evidence of good faith on the part of both parties, it was decided that the owner would give the prospective purchaser an option for thirty days for a down-payment of \$100.00.

My friend was of course glad to have effected such a speedy deal. The man got his option, left his name and telephone number, and departed. A day or two later, a young fellow and a girl who acted like newly-weds the world over act, appeared on the scene. "Had the house been sold yet? We would like to take a look through it." My friend noted that they drove a good car, and since the other deal was certainly not final, decided to show them about.

The girl gushed her thrilled praise about everything. This was just what she had

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WANTED

MEN AND WOMEN TO MAKE \$132.00 A WEEK

Introducing Hose Guaranteed 4 to 8 Months EARNINGS START AT ONCE! Brand new Ford given producers. Everybody buys hose Guaranteed to wear from 4 to 8 months (depending on number of pairs) without holes, seams or runs or replaced FREE. Big repeat sales. Grace Wilber, Iowa, earned \$37.10 in 6 hours and received 3 new cars; Charles Mills, Minn., earned \$120.00 in one week and received 2 new cars, as extra bonuses. Your own hose given as bonus, send hose size. Rush name on penny card for sample outfit, details. **ACT NOW!**

WILKNIT HOSIERY CO.
Midway H-15, Greenfield, Ohio

HOSE
FOR YOUR PERSONAL USE SENT WITH OUTFIT

IF I Send YOU THIS FINE SUIT—



Will You Wear it and Show it to Friends? I need a reliable man in your town to wear a fine, made-to-measure, all-wool DEMONSTRATING SUIT—advertise my famous Union clothing—and take orders. You can make up to \$12.00 in a day. My line contains over 150 quality woolsens, all sensational values, guaranteed. You need no experience or money. I supply everything required, FREE of extra cost. Write me today for FREE details. M. J. GRAVES, STONEFIELD CORP., 1300 W. Harrison Street, Dept. W-786, Chicago, Illinois.

STOP the ITCH of Insect Bites—Heat Rash

For quick relief from itching of insect bites, heat rash, athlete's foot, hives, eczema and other externally caused skin troubles, use world-famous, cooling, antiseptic, liquid D. D. D. Prescription. Greaseless, stainless. Soothes irritation and quickly stops the most intense itching. 35¢ trial bottle proves it, or money back. Ask your druggist today for D. D. D. PRESCRIPTION.

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START \$1260 to \$2100 Year

Thousands of appointments each year.

Get ready at once.

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FRANKLIN INSTITUTE, Dept. M-174
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First: Rush to me without charge (1) 32-page book with list of U. S. Government Jobs. (2) Tell me immediately how to qualify for one of these examinations.

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Agents Wanted

Your Hose free with outfit. Make up to \$32.50 in a week taking orders for amazing new hosiery. Replacement guaranteed against holes, snags, runs. Rush name, hose size. Wilknit, Desk H-15, Greenfield, Ohio.

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Indian Relics, Coins, Curios, Catalog 5c. INDIAN MUSEUM, NORTHRANCH, KANSAS.

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AVIATION APPRENTICES—Training for entering Aviation as Apprentices. Write immediately enclosing stamp. Mechanix Universal Aviation Service. Wayne County Airport, Dept. U21, Detroit, Michigan.

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Correspondence courses and educational books, slightly used. Sold. Rented. Exchanged. All subjects. Satisfaction guaranteed. Cash paid for used courses. Complete details and bargain catalog FREE. Send name. NELSON COMPANY, H-218 Manhattan Building, Chicago.

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FOREST JOBS AVAILABLE \$125-\$175 MONTH. Cabin, hunt, trap, patrol. Qualify immediately. Write Rayson Service, C-62, Denver, Colo.

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AT LAST! ALL YOUR SNAPSHOTS IN NATURAL COLORS. Roll developed, 8 Natural Color Prints, only 25c. Reprints, 3c. Amazingly beautiful. NATURAL COLOR PHOTO, C-132, Janesville, Wisconsin.

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TWO BEAUTIFUL wide border enlargements, 8 snappy prints, 25c. Sunbeam Film Service, Dept. K, La Crosse, Wis.

Poems—Songwriters

Songwriters: Interesting Proposition. Write: PARAMOUNT SONG-RECORDING STUDIO, L-86, Box 190, Hollywood, Calif.

SONGWRITERS: Send your poem today for immediate consideration. RICHARD BROTHERS, 30 Woods Building, Chicago.

SONG POEMS WANTED TO BE SET TO MUSIC. Free examination. Send poems to McNeil, Bachelor of Music, 4153-A South Van Ness, Los Angeles, Calif.

ORIGINAL POEMS, SONGS WANTED for publication, radio. WESTMORE MUSIC CORPORATION, Dept. 82E, Portland, Oregon.

SONGWRITERS: Important information FREE. Write—Music Advisers, Box 106, Times Square Station, New York City.

SONGWRITERS: Send us your poems—wonderful proposition. Keith-Downing Publications, Clearwater, Florida.

always dreamed about; they just had to have it. Then she grew serious, and wondered—loud enough for my friend to hear—whether they could buy it for the eight thousand set aside for the purpose? The husband was deeply vexed with her lack of business acumen, but he got lovey-dovey again before long. They were both plainly pleased with the house, the girl even going so far as to suggest what she would do with the various rooms, and how they should furnish it. My friend was naturally impressed with their manner, and since they would like to have it, he sort of felt the same way, since they were newlyweds.

Like the average American business man, my friend was not averse to making an honest dollar, so when the price was brought up, he told them it was \$8500. They haggled a while, got down to \$8000, and the fellow said: "Sold! I'll give you cash on the barrel-head as soon as the title can be searched and the deed made over. . . ."

Remembering the option which legally enjoined him from selling, my friend stalled and asked for a day or two to think it over. They were agreeable, but they insisted they had to have the house. And so the owner contacted the gent who held the option. But he was very much disinterested in listening to anything about it; he was getting the money to buy. The difference between the two figures loomed big, and like you or any uninformed person would have done, he offered increasing amounts for the option to be cancelled. The man finally agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to take \$750. Ticked to think he would realize as much for his efforts in the matter, my friend gave the man a check and went with him to the bank while he cashed it.

Then he called the other couple. They were very pleased to know he had definitely decided to sell, but they would be unable to deal until the following week. A telegram stating that the girl's father had been killed in an auto accident had just reached them, and they were hurrying to an adjoining state, but they insisted that my friend hold the place for them.

There was nothing to suggest any irregularity. Came the new week, but not the eager pair who just had to have the house. At last my friend tried to contact the man who had held the option, but that bird had also flown.

Legal authorities state it would be extremely difficult to convict the parties to such a swindle unless it could be proven that a conspiracy existed. Obviously, the gyps are careful to see that such evidence is not available, and even should they be apprehended, they have little to fear.

The same scheme, I am told, has been worked from one end of the country to the other, with every conceivable small business man and home owner as the victims.

Publicizing the operation may save others who would likewise be taken.

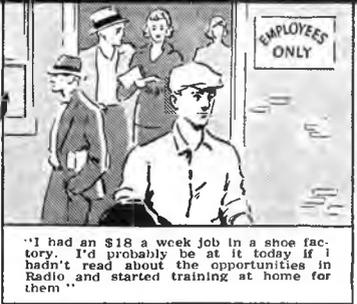
Very truly yours,

E. R. Russell



I jumped from \$18 a week to \$50
-- a Free Book started me toward this
GOOD PAY IN RADIO

HERE'S
How it
Happened
 by **S. J. E.**
 (NAME AND ADDRESS
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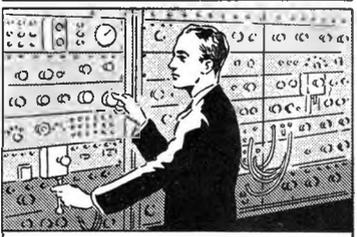
"I had an \$18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio, and started training at home for them."



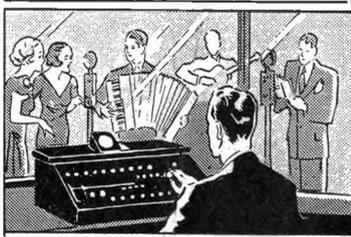
"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make \$5, \$10, \$15 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."



"When I finished training I accepted a job as serviceman with a Radio store. In three weeks I was made service manager at more than twice what I earned in the shoe factory."



"Eight months later N.R.I. Employment Department sent me to Station KWCR as a Radio operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUL. I am also connected with Television Station W9XK."



"N.R.I. Training took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay. Radio is growing fast. The field is wide open to properly trained men."



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 Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay well for trained men. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many \$200 to \$500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen. In good-pay jobs with opportunities for advancement. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud-speaker systems, are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

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 The day you enroll I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—\$200 to \$500—for hundreds, while learning. I send you special Radio equipment

to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 method of training makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make good money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time jobs after graduation.

Find Out What Radio Offers You
 Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those

coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President Dept. 9HS9 National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.



J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9HS9, National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out spare time and full time opportunities in Radio, and explains your practical method of training at home in spare time to become a Radio Expert. (Please write plainly.)

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