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DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

THE GIRL WHO
WANTED MONEY

by JOHN D.
MacDONALD



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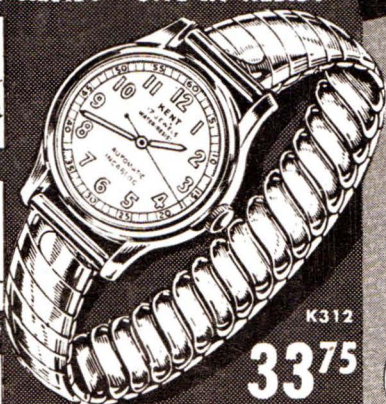
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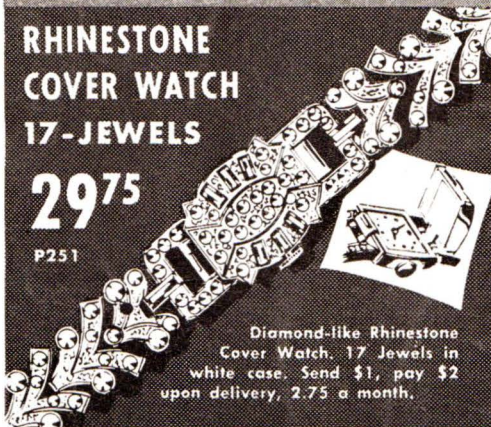
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CHUCK HEARD A SCREAM AND THEN...



HOPELESSLY LOST IN THE RUGGED CANYON COUNTRY, DIANE BLAIR WISHES SHE'D TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY THE "DUDE RANCH" RULES AGAINST RIDING ALONE... AND THEN...



ECHOING UP A NEARBY DRAW, HER CRY REACHES A YOUNG GEOLOGIST



LATER AT THE RANCH



WHEN IT COMES TO SHAVING QUICKLY AND EASILY AT A SAVING, YOU CAN'T BEAT THIN GILLETTES. THEY FAR OUTSELL ALL OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADES BECAUSE THEY'RE KEENER AND LAST LONGER. THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY, SO THEY NEVER NICK OR SCRAPE. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES

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25¢ **DIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE**



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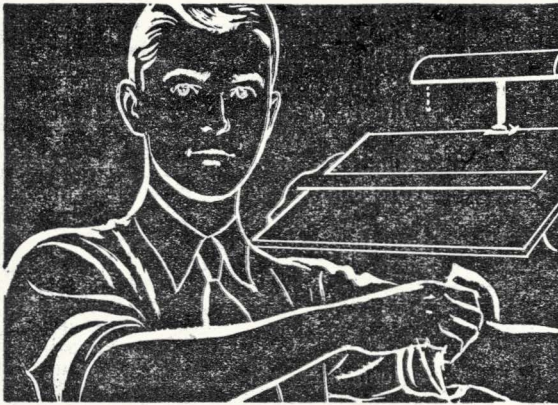
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READY for the RACKETS

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

As if the cost of living isn't high enough already, there's always some slick character lurking around the corner with a scheme to make yours and mine higher—so he can line his own pocket, of course. It takes real know-how to eliminate the "sucker" item from your budget these days, for even in the grocery store you may not be safe. We hope this column, however, will help you avoid being taken in by some of the trickier rackets.

If you've already lost out to a swindle scheme, maybe you can get back some of your loss. Write up your own experience and send it to The Rackets Editor, DIME DETECTIVE, 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. We'll pay you \$5.00 if we use your letter, but we cannot enter into correspondence concerning any letter, because of the press of mail in the office. Neither can we return any letter unless accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Bad Samaritans

Dear Sir:

Here's a neat swindle that can be worked in any part of the country on any type of public conveyance.

A young girl, going home late at night on the subway, was being annoyed by a man who insisted on crowding too close to her, even though many seats were vacant throughout the car.

This kept up until she reached her stop. A young couple, who had been sitting on the opposite side of the car, also got up to leave and came over to her. They inquired sympathetically if the man had been annoying her and volunteered to escort her to her home.

The girl was quite relieved, and the three of them proceeded down the street. Her relief was short-lived, however, for at the first dark spot, the annoying man of the subway car stepped up to her and with the help of the escorting couple robbed her of her pocketbook and her fur coat.

R. C. B.

Food For Thought

Dear Sir:

You can't trust an adding machine anymore. At least a dishonest grocery clerk can make it lie.

6

Recently we checked our grocery list—as totaled on the machine—and found to our amazement that it was 26c too much. We couldn't believe it was possible—an adding machine that was weak in arithmetic.

According to a former employe of the same grocery, this is how it is done. During odd moments between customers, the check-stand clerk punches a figure on the machine—26c in our case—and then tears it off before the next customer arrives. He then checks the grocery order and gives the unwary purchaser the "lying" machine slip. The figures correspond exactly to the price of the articles, but the 26c has registered on the machine, too, and is added to the total he pays.

With today's high food prices, even larger sums can be slipped by, and, in as much as the trick can be done quickly and unnoticed, a clerk can earn his paycheck several times over on a busy day.

We have found another grocer.

W. M.

Tire Trouble

Dear Sir:

Several years ago, when tires were scarce, I was riding with my dad when suddenly a tire went flat. Dad had been having trouble with this particular tire and had decided that the next time something happened he would positively get a new one. Luckily we were near a country town garage, and the man in charge said he had a new tire that would fit. Dad paid for it, and we waited for it to be put on. There was a long delay, and we were told that the men were busy and we would have to wait until they had a chance to locate the tire and bring it down from stock. Finally the tire was put on—a brand new one.

We started out again, but had only gone about ten miles into the open country when we had another flat—on our brand new tire. Dad jacked up the car and started to put on the spare. After he got the tire off, he took out the tube to find out what had caused the flat. He didn't have to look very closely. The tube was covered with patches. We had to wait at the garage while they patched an old tube to put inside the brand new tire they sold us.

Julia K. Feth
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Flattery Will Get You Somewhere!

Dear Sir:

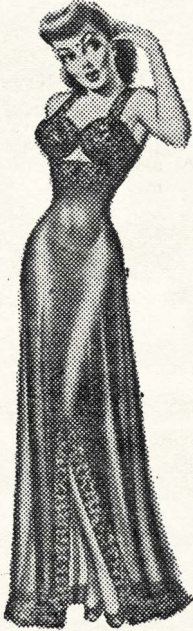
I operate two bakeries in San Francisco. One day, a personable young man approached me in my office and represented himself as the business director of a new magazine that had just come onto the market. It would specialize in the suc-

(Please continue on page 8)



She'll be your "Dream Girl"
You'll "Bewitch" her with it

Daring
"BLACK
MAGIC"



"DREAM GIRL" She'll look alluring, breathtaking, enticing, exotic. . . . Just picture her in it . . . beautiful, fascinating SEE-THRU sheer. Naughty but nice. . . . It's French Fashion finery . . . with peek-a-boo magic lace. . . . Gorgeously transparent yet completely practical (washes like a dream . . . will not shrink). Has lacy waistline, lacy shoulder straps and everything to make her love you for it. A charm revealing Dream Girl Fashion. . . . In gorgeous Black.

SAISON GUARANTEED
or your money back.

DREAM GIRL FASHIONS, Dept. 41
318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey
Please send me DREAM GIRL gown at \$9.95. If not entirely satisfied, I'll return within 10 days for full cash refund.
() I enclose \$9.95 cash, check or money order, send postage prepaid (I save up to 90c postage). (You may get it at our store too!)
() I will pay postman \$9.95 plus postage. Check size wanted:
32 34 36 38 40 IN BLACK ONLY (If you don't know the size send approximate height and weight)
Name
Address
City State



Heaven
Sent
Oriental
Magic



Out of the pages of the Arabian Nights comes this glamorous sheer Harem pajama. You'll look beguiling, alluring, irresistible, enticing. You'll thrill to the sleek, clinging wispy appeal that they will give you. He'll love you for transplanting you to a dream world of adoration centuries old. Brief figure hugging top gives flattering appeal to its daring bare midriff. *Doubled at the right places*, it's the perfect answer for hostess wear. Billowing sheer bottoms for rich luxurious lounging. He'll adore you in this charm revealing Dream Girl Fashion. In wispy sheer black.

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DREAM GIRL FASHIONS, Dept. 215
318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey
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Daring Bare-back
She'll be entranced with it



Your Dream girl will be an exquisite vision of allurements, charm, fascination and loveliness in this exotic, bewitching, daring bare-back filmy sheer gown. It's delicate translucent fabric (washes like a dream) will not shrink.
Have Paris at home, with this cleverly designed halter neck that ties or unties at the flick of a finger. Lavishly laced midriff and peek-a-boo bottom. She'll love you for this charm revealing Dream Girl Fashion. In exquisite black sheer.

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or your money back.

DREAM GIRL FASHIONS, Dept. 315
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() I will pay postman \$9.95 plus postage. Check size wanted:
32 34 36 38 40 IN BLACK ONLY (If you don't know the size send approximate height and weight)
Name
Address
City State

(Continued from page 6)

cess stories of California men, he said, and would emphasize the means they had used to build up their businesses.

He said they had chosen me and my business to be written up in the first issue and asked for my story. I told him what I could. Then, when he asked for pictures, I produced one of myself, one of the bakery truck I started out with and one of the seven trucks I have now.

At this point he told me that, since the magazine was just starting up, he was asking the featured business men to cover the cost of making cuts from those pictures that were to be used in the magazine. The cuts, he said, would be returned to me when they were through printing.

Well, by now I was flattered enough to go along with him, so I handed over sixty dollars to have the cuts made. And that is the first and last I have heard of the magazine and my sixty dollars.

James B. Atkinson
San Francisco, California

There Was a Crippled Crook

Of all the things I ever wished for or wanted to be, one of those was certainly not a disabled veteran—not even with a donation of a chicken farm, specially built car, pension, etc. I have always been all out for the disabled boys, either through group charity or private donations or visits to hospitals; but sometimes one gets a jolt that makes a difference in one's charitable views. For instance, like what happened to me:

One sunny morning I was dusting my living room window sills and, on glancing down the quiet street, I noticed a young man who seemed to be half walking, half dragging himself along. I felt a surge of pity go through me, was glad I was upright and whole and strong, turned back to my work, and promptly forgot him. (That's how cruel the world and I are.)

A few minutes later, responding to a knock at my door, I confronted this same young man. He said he was selling magazine subscriptions, and showed me his identification discharge papers from the Paraplegic Hospital in Van Nys, California. His face twitched and contorted as he talked and his right hand was very stiff, as was one knee. I tried to keep the pity off my face as I explained to him that I didn't need any magazines at that time. But he was so persistent and so brave about his misfortune, which he seemingly tried to ignore, that I invited him in and looked over his list.

Most of the magazines he listed were unknown to me, but I was determined to buy, so I picked two, one of which was a well known woman's magazine.

I signed the order slip, made out by a Hollywood circulation company, in the amount of \$8.00, for two years of each magazine. And the young man thanked me and inched his way out so painfully slow, but so happy that I was in a good mood all the rest of that day.

After many weeks had passed, and no sight of any magazine, I sent a postal card to the circulation company, the address being on the receipt. No reply. In the meantime I became suddenly ill and forgot the whole thing until I returned from

the hospital and was up and around. Then I wrote them a letter, which came back to me, marked "not there."

I naturally assumed my money was gone, but a thing like this had never happened to me before, so I tried to be an amateur detective. I wrote to the Veterans' Administration in Washington, asking them if they could locate the young man for me, giving them his name and the information I had.

The Veterans' Administration answered my letter. They couldn't help me, however, as they required serial, number, etc. in order to locate this man. So that left me nowhere.

Undaunted, I started again. I wrote to the circulation department of the woman's magazine. In short order I received a very courteous reply, advising me that investigation would be made and that they believed an adjustment would soon be forthcoming. They also cautioned me in the future to subscribe directly from them, and said, to amend for my loss, they would send me a copy each month until such time as the adjustment would be made. Very fine of them, I think, since they certainly were in no way responsible.

As for the rest of my money, I shall merely write myself down in my book of experience as one of those that is born every minute.

And so you see, vet, the next time you shamble to my door, though you be as honest as Old Abe himself, I can't take that chance. My husband, too, is a veteran, and living expenses are as high for us as they are for the next family, so I can't throw five dollar bills in the wake of every sad story I hear. So please excuse me while I gently close the door in your face, and go make my contribution in some other way!

Emilie Hrabec
Chicago, Ill.

Well Armed

Dear Sir:

Here is a hint that may save somebody some money. It is designed to put a crimp in about any house-to-house racket.

I put the telephone number of the loca' Better Business Bureau on the cover of my phone directory, right below the numbers of the Fire and Police departments.

Now, when an agent makes me an offer that I think sounds too good, or an alms solicitor tells a story that is too sad, I leave the visitor on the front porch while I check with the Bureau. I usually make the phone call under the pretense of going after my money.

Thank goodness I didn't have to learn my lesson the hard way. The letters in this department have taught me to be wary.

W. Clarence Mabon
Lincoln, Nebraska

Light-Fingered Partner

Dear Sir:

It was a big gamble when my husband started a long-distance transfer company in a strange locality. But we mingled wholeheartedly with the townspeople, gave them our best and conscientious service, and our business flourished. All would have been well had he not made one almost fatal mistake.

(Please continue on page 108)



deafness

Nearly Cost Me MY JOB!

... until I discovered this
**New Electronic
Way to Hear!**

Nothing can ruin a man's business chances more surely than loss of hearing. People get the idea that you are growing stupid, slow-witted and old—ready for "the shelf."

But I stubbornly fought the idea of wearing a hearing aid. I rebelled against that unsightly "button in the ear"—against dangling battery wires and clumsy battery packs.

Then a little book fell into my hands and changed my whole life overnight. The book told how the new Beltone Phantomold actually *bides* deafness—how a tiny,

one-unit Beltone recaptures hearing a totally *different* way thru the miracle of modern electronics. And **NO BUTTON SHOWS IN THE EAR!**

Today I can hear clearly again—even faintest whispers. No more office mistakes and misunderstandings because I "couldn't hear." Thanks to the new Beltone, I can again hold my own with *anyone*—in business or anywhere else!

If you are hard-of-hearing, don't resign yourself to the handicaps that deafness brings. Send for the valuable **FREE** book on what Beltone is doing for the deaf! **No cost, no obligation. Do it now!**



Beltone

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ONE-UNIT HEARING AID**

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Mail For Free Book on **DEAFNESS!**

Beltone Hearing Aid Co., Dept. 320E
1450 W. 19th St., Chicago 8, Ill.

Please send me (in plain wrapper) **FREE** booklet on **OVERCOMING DEAFNESS** without a button showing in the ear.

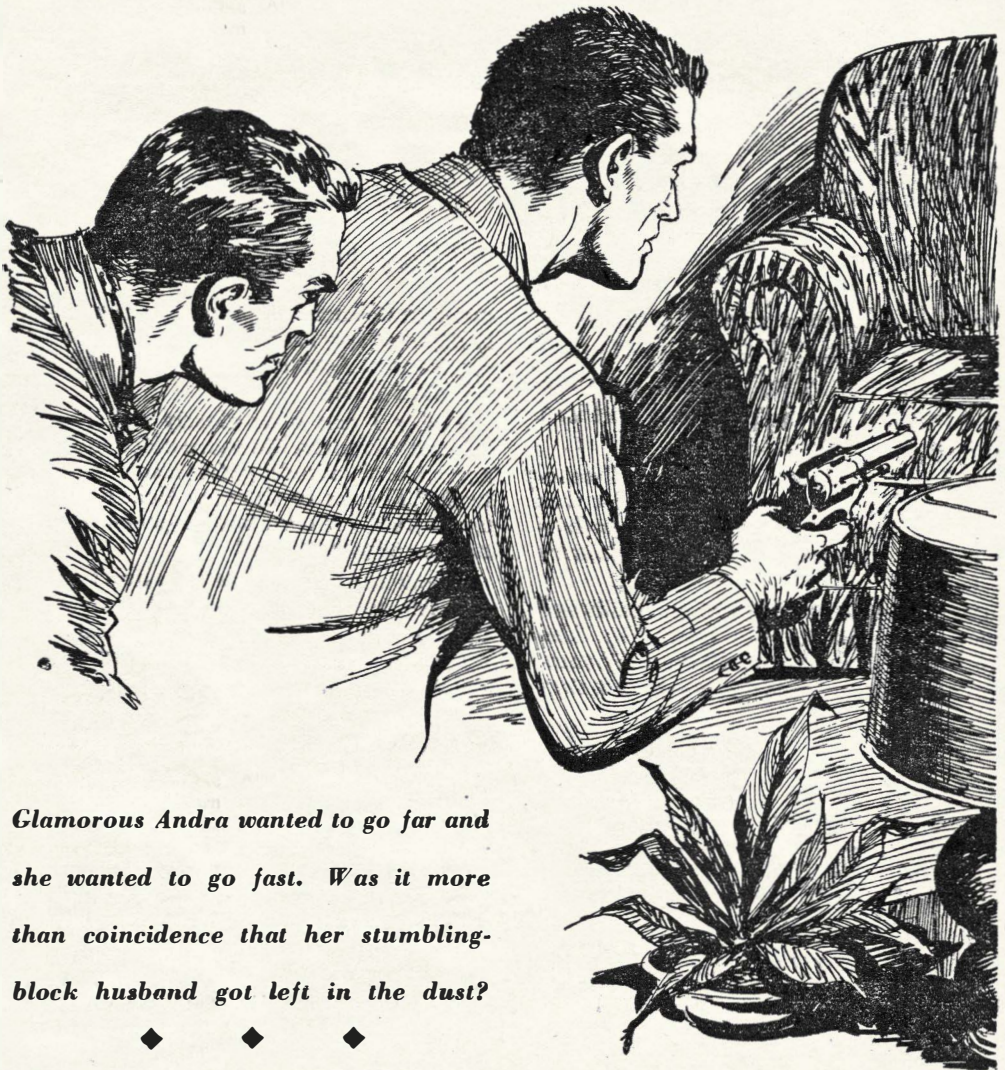
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Address.....

Town..... State.....

THE GIRL WHO WANTED MONEY

By **JOHN D. MacDONALD**



Glamorous Andra wanted to go far and she wanted to go fast. Was it more than coincidence that her stumbling-block husband got left in the dust?



CHAPTER ONE

Mourners' Bench

SOMEbody had made a bad guess about the direction in which the city was going to expand. When I found the place, after ten o'clock on a hot August night, it turned out to be a duplex on a corner lot. There were lights in one half of it. The street light was just strong enough to disclose cracks in the pale stucco walls, some broken roof tiles. The neighboring lots were full of tall grass and noisy bugs. The nearest house was in the next block, and down the line there was a cluster of houses and some green neon saying GRILL.

I pulled into the drive, turned off the lights and motor, got out and stretched some of the mileage ache out of my bones. The near half of the duplex was obviously empty. No curtains, a broken window.

◆ ◆
His face was the face of a
trapped animal . . .



Taut Novélette of
Suspense

◆ ◆ ◆

There was a common porch, with a small railing to divide it into halves. I pushed on the bell button and couldn't hear any answering buzz or ring inside the house. I thumped on the door. I could see a little of the hallway through the glass half of the door. Telephone table, arched living room entrance to the left, stairway dead ahead.

A girl came out of the living room, frowning at the front door as she walked toward it. I could see at once that she was Cal's sister. Same snub nose and rusty hair. From the neck down there was no resemblance. Cal had been as rangy as I am. This was a little girl, at least in height and around the waist. She had on a yellow cotton dress.

The porch light came on over my head and I couldn't see in any more. There was enough of a pause for me to know that she was looking me over. I smiled at the opaque glass. It was supposed to be reassuring. Maybe it was. She opened the door.

"Yes?"

"You must be Celia Barlow. I'm Dib Hutcheon."

I don't know what I expected. I didn't expect her to ram her face against my chest, grab up two handfuls of my white shirt and start to shake all over.

"Hey!" I said. "Hey!" I patted her shoulder.

She lifted a tear-tracked face. "I'm sorry. Come in, Dib. I can't call you Mr. Hutcheon. Cal never did."

As we went in, I said, "There's no point in telling you I'm sorry."

"You got here fast, Dib."

"I pushed along."

We went through the arch. The second girl got up. I knew her too. From the picture Cal had lugged all over the Pacific. Andra Barlow. Mrs. Calvin Barlow.

The photographer had played a dirty trick on Cal. He'd taken Andra's picture in a strapless dress and then cut the picture off before it got down to the dress. It used to drive Cal nuts. I looked at Andra and I could see why. The face was okay, not too special, but nice. Flat cheeks and wide green-gray eyes and a sulky-soft mouth. The body was, to be discreet, terrific. It didn't need anything to help it. All it needed was something to cover it up, and even so, it was still a menace.

"This is Dib Hutcheon, Andy Barlow."

"Nice to meet you," the body said. The voice was low and soft and controlled.

"I was just telling Celia how sorry I am, Andy."

"It has been—a dreadful shock, of course. You'll stay here with us. I hope."

"Before I decide, I think we'd better have a talk."

We all sat down. I sat on a couch, at right angles to the fireplace. It was an ugly fireplace, of tan and black brick. The room was furnished adequately, but not well. Celia sat beside me. Andra sat facing us, long legs crossed.

"I'll get drinks. Bourbon, Dib?"

"With water."

"Me too, dear," Andy said, "Please."

I could hear Celia in the kitchen, chunking ice onto glasses. Andy said, "The funeral was this morning."

"I'm sorry I missed it."

She lowered her voice. "Please understand, Mr. Hutcheon, that getting you out here was distinctly Celia's idea. I don't think anyone can do a thing."

Celia came in with the drinks. She said, with a tiny edge in her voice, "I suppose Andy's told you that wiring you was my idea."

"I'm glad you did," I said.

"The wire didn't tell you much," Celia said. "I wouldn't have wired you at all, but the day before Cal—died, he was acting odd. He told me that he was mixed up in something. He told me that if anything went wrong, you ought to know about it. I guess he considered you his best friend."

"He was mine," I said.

Celia's stubborn face screwed up all of a sudden. She thumped her fist on the edge of the couch and said tensely, "Lord! To be shot in the back and thrown into the ditch like—like an animal!"

"Celia!" Andra said sharply.

The tension went out of the smaller girl. Her fist opened. "I'm sorry," she said in a far-away voice.

Andra got up and went over to a table. She looked through the papers, brought one back and gave it to me. It was four days old, an afternoon edition.

"This will save time," she said.

THE murder had rated a page one spot, two columns under a flash picture of Cal sprawled in the ditch in his shirt sleeves,

the back of his shirt black. A motorist had found the body, just inside the city limits, not more than a mile from this house in which I sat.

"The body had evidently been hurled from a passing car," the account read. "The time of death is estimated at about two a.m., an hour before the body was found and reported to the police. Mr. Barlow's car was found to be parked at his place of business, the Barlow Construction Company. The motive is believed to have been robbery.

"Mr. Calvin E. Barlow, a native of this city, graduated from Pelvey Engineering Institute in 1939. After graduation, he worked for two years in Buffalo, New York, for a construction firm, and then joined the Navy as a CB. He served until December of 1945, and was discharged as a Lieutenant, Senior Grade. After his separation, he married Miss Andra Cummins of Buffalo, New York, and returned here to Walkerton to found the Barlow Construction Company, which employs fifteen persons and does semi-experimental low-cost housing. He is survived by his wife; his sister, Miss Celia Barlow; a brother, Thomas F. Barlow, who lives in Melbourne, Australia. The funeral will be from the Marsh Funeral Home on Friday at 10 a.m."

I tossed the paper aside. "Is that the police theory? Robbery?"

Andra said, "Lieutenant McGelvie spoke to me yesterday. He seems quite nice, and quite anxious to help. His idea is that the thieves were going to hold Cal up at the construction company offices. He was working quite late Tuesday night. But they didn't grab him until he came out to his car. They forced him into their car. Cal probably tried to put up a fight. That is what he would have done. And they—shot him. There was no money on the body. His wallet was gone. I haven't any idea what amount he had on him. It couldn't have been very much."

I turned toward Celia. "You said he told you he was mixed up in something. Is that right?"

"She could have misunderstood," Andra said quickly. "Celia is quite imaginative at times."

"I didn't misunderstand at all!" Celia said hotly. "Those are his words. He said, 'Cel, I'm mixed up in something that might

turn out to be unpleasant. If I make a bad guess, get hold of Dib Hutcheon.'"

"Have you told that to the police?" I asked.

"Of course. They nodded pleasantly and patted me on the head. I *know* it wasn't robbery. I think Cal expected you to dig around and find out what it was, Dib, and find out who killed him and why."

"That sounds pretty dramatic," Andra said.

I glanced over at her. Her eyes were faintly amused. "Even corny," I agreed. "Man rushes to avenge best friend. Almost medieval, isn't it?"

She flushed. "I didn't mean it that way. But it would be a shame for you to chase around after wild geese. I suppose you have a family and a job of your own."

"No family. And a job I can leave."

"What sort of a job?" Andra asked.

"I own a small investigating agency. Mostly we do skip-tracing on contract for the big finance companies. It's called Finance Research, Incorporated. Routine work. It will run whether I'm there or not."

"My goodness!" Andra said, with a faint trace of acid. "A private eye!"

It was my turn to flush. "If I were one, I'd have to be licensed, and I'd have to have a blonde on one arm and a case of rye in the other. Do you have any idea of what Cal could have gotten mixed up in?"

Celia frowned and pursed pretty lips. "Gosh, he was too busy to do anything except work, eat and sleep. It's been touch and go with the firm ever since he started it. He didn't have much capital, you know. He's just barely been able to meet his notes as they've come due. Anybody who tells you the way to get rich quick is to build small homes is touched in the head."

"He could have made more," Andra said bitterly.

Celia defended Cal hotly. "Yes, if he'd wanted to charge all the market would bear. Stick some guy making sixty a week with monthly costs of eighty or ninety bucks."

"They would have sold at that price, and what happened from then on wouldn't have been Cal's worry, Celia."

"Not any direct responsibility, I grant you that, but he would have felt that he was doing wrong. And the way he was operating, things were getting better all the

time. He wasn't going to be frozen out like some of the fly-by-nights who put up shoeboxes with skimped materials."

"Girls, girls," I said softly.

They both leaned back. I turned to Celia again. "What do you do?"

"Teach kindergarten to the fanciest little collection of monsters that ever crept out of a Charles Addams drawing. When Mom died, Cal insisted that I come and live here, it being so lonely out here for Andy."

"He was going to build the perfect house for us," Andra said softly. "He was always going to build it 'next year'."

"A refill?" Celia said.

"No thanks. Look, would I inconvenience you by moving in here? I can go to a hotel in town."

"Don't even think of it," Andra said. "There are three bedrooms, two up and one down. The downstairs bedroom is all fixed for you." She paused, leaned forward, supporting her chin on her palm, fingers curled against her cheek. "Why are you doing this, Mr. Hutcheon?"

"I'm not sure there's anything I *can* do."

"Aren't you evading the question?"

"I don't know as I completely understand the reasons myself. Maybe the best reason is that Cal would do it if the situation were reversed."

I was looking at Andra with a bit more respect. It wasn't fair for nature to have doled out brains too. But it has apparently happened. People who are inquisitive about motivations are never dull in the mental department.

Celia suddenly gave a shuddering yawn, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. She looked apologetic. "I haven't been sleeping too well."

I stood up and said, "I better get my bag."

Andra came out with me. Celia went back to turn on the lights in the bedroom. I opened the luggage compartment and hauled the suitcase out. "What on earth is it?" Andra asked.

"Jaguar."

"That must be a nice little agency you own, Dib."

"Frankly, I can't afford this much car. It's a sort of vice."

She ran her fingertips along the fender flair. "Nice vice. Go fast?"

"An honest hundred and twenty."

I glanced at her as she stood in the starlight. Her shoulders were back, feet planted wide, hair paled to silver in the night. "You'll have to take me out in it, Dib. I love to go fast. Do you want to take it to the other driveway? I can get the keys and we can put it in the stall."

"The night air won't hurt it, Andy."

I CARRIED the bag in. She went ahead of me, leading the way. There was a door at the rear of the hall, a corridor that led past the kitchen to a small bedroom and tiny adjoining bath. Celia was turning the bed down.

There were two narrow windows, a shallow closet. I set the bag down. Celia said, "I'll be valet, Dib. Go in and have a nightcap with Andy and I'll unpack you."

"I'll leave the tip on the bureau," I said, grinning at her.

We went down the hall. "The kitchen is the place for nightcaps," Andy said. I sat at the kitchen table. She made the drinks at the sink, her back to me.

She said, "It's good to have a man in the house. This neighborhood gives me the terrors at night. It's pretty forlorn. You ought to see it in winter, with the wind screaming down from Siberia."

She set three drinks on the porcelain top of the table and sat down, facing me. The overhead light was strong. There was no blemish on her face, no roughness of skin, no faintest enlargement of pores. It was as smooth as some new and clever sort of plastic. It was surprising to notice that she wore no makeup. She ran the tip of her tongue along her lower lip, and the moist lip picked up highlights that glistened.

Her eyes, I saw, were not a true green. They were hazel, with green flecks that radiated from the pupil. In that light her hair was the precise shade of golden-tan that you see in beach sand when the sun is right. She was about twenty-six. There was a watchfulness about her, a look of being very self-contained. You would never know this girl's thoughts. She would never betray herself.

"Inspection passed?" she asked in a low voice.

"Was it that obvious? Sorry."

"Guilty on both sides, I guess. Cal talked about you a lot. I had an entirely different impression. I thought you were much older,

and probably one of those jolly-boy types. You look a little like that Indian on the nickel when he was much leaner and much younger."

I pinched my slightly over-sized nose, "I'm one eighth Sioux, so that makes it a good estimate."

Celia came out and plumped herself down in the chair at the end of the table, scooped up her drink. "Gosh, I don't think that room is going to be very comfortable on a night this hot, Dib. I'll leave the kitchen windows open and you leave the bedroom door open. It'll make a better draft. What will you do tomorrow?"

"The place to start is at the company. Who is in charge?"

"A person named Quinn," Andra said, curling her lip. "A perfectly horrible man. Poor Cal adored him."

"Who was Cal's lawyer?"

"Brace yourself," Celia said, giggling nervously. "It's a female. Elizabeth Timbo. She looks like Mussolini with long curly gray hair. But terribly smart, they say."

Andra set her glass down with a decisive click. "It's midnight, kids. I'm off to bed." She stood up lithely, came around the table, kissed Celia on the cheek.

"Take some of those pills, Andy," Celia said.

"I think I'm too tired to need them. Night, Dib. We're glad you came. I mean that."

I noticed that she left the glasses for Celia to rinse out. I heard the stairs creak as she went up, heard the distant click of a latch as a door shut.

"She seems to be taking it pretty well," I said.

Celia avoided my eyes. "Andy's a strong person, Dib. Very strong. Let me fix you another drink."

"A light one."

She brought it back and took the chair where Andy had sat. Her eyes were a clear deep blue. She had the true redhead's complexion, the skin almost transparent at the temples, a spray of rusty freckles across the bridge of the snub nose. She wore the rusty-red hair long, tied at the nape of her neck with a length of yellow yarn which matched her cotton dress.

"It hasn't been easy for you, living here?" I asked.

"I'm used to being a fifth wheel, Dib."

"You know, we had it all set, Cal and I. I was going to come back with him and marry his kid sister. I guess he wrote you, didn't he?"

"He was always trying to arrange my life," she said hotly.

"It might have been a better idea than the one I had, Celia. The marriage I made lasted exactly five weeks."

I finished the drink, took the glasses over to the sink.

"I'll take care of those," she said. "You go to bed. You've had a long trip." She came up beside me. I bent and kissed her cheek lightly, squeezed her shoulder.

"Good night, Cel."

She looked up at me. The blue eyes were solemn. "Good night, Dib. And—thanks." As the blue eyes began to fill with tears, she turned away abruptly.

The shower stall was so narrow I kept thumping my elbows on the wall. Celia had been a good valet. She had emptied the toilet case, neatly arranged the contents on the medicine cabinet shelves.

The closet door was ajar when I came out of the bathroom. I saw the fishing tackle. I took a rod case and sat on the edge of the bed. I fitted the glass casting rod together. It had a lot of whip.

I remembered the letter from Cal. *When I can get some time off, Dib, you're going to come over. I've got a lake I'll blindfold you and take you to. Big-mouth bass up to twelve pounds, believe me. We'll get drunk and tell lies and eat those bass.*

I knew why I'd come. I don't make friends easily. That makes them exceedingly precious. Cal had been my best friend in the world. Someone had shot him in the back. He suspected that something like that might happen, and had told Celia to get hold of me if it did. It was a sacred obligation.

I whipped the rod through the air. It made a whistling sound. I pulled it apart. The noise was like a cork coming out of a bottle. I put it back in the case and back in the closet with the other rods, the tackle box, the reel boxes.

With the light off, I lay on the bed, the ash tray on my chest, the cigarette glowing red as I dragged on it. I butted the cigarette, put the ash tray on the night stand and rolled onto my side, facing the window. The stars were bright.

CHAPTER TWO

Strictly Business

WITH the first movement of the bed I came awake. I did not move. I kept my breathing regular. That knack of waking up all at once, every sense alert, completely conscious of time and place, is, I often think, the only heritage from the eighth strain of Indian blood. I caught the scent at once. A fresh scent. Flowers.

The hand touched my shoulder lightly. "Dib!" she whispered.

I turned onto my back. The dying moon slanted through the window, full against Celia's face.

"What is it?"

"Dib, it's after three. I haven't been able to sleep. I've been fighting with myself. I question of loyalty, I guess." She wore a light-colored robe that came high around her throat.

"Something you should tell me, and didn't want to?"

"Yes," she breathed. "Maybe it isn't anything. Cal was killed at two a.m. Wednesday morning. It was Monday evening that he spoke to me. When I came back from school Tuesday, Andy was acting—odd."

"In what way?"

"Inattentive. Far away. Lost in thought or speculation or something. She didn't hear anything I said until I repeated it, and then she woke up with a little start each time. I've asked her about it. She says it was my imagination. But, Dib, I *know* that she knows something she hasn't told me.

"Cal came to dinner Tuesday night. He was in a hurry to get back to the office. It was the last time I saw him alive. They went in the bedroom and shut the door. I couldn't hear what they said. I didn't try to. But Andy sounded shrill, which isn't like her. Then Cal stormed downstairs and slammed the door when he went out."

Celia paused, then went on, "After I'd done the dinner dishes, Andy came down. She read for a while and went to bed early. We didn't worry about Cal. He often worked all hours. Then, about three thirty, they—phoned us and told us. One of the policemen in the cruiser knew Cal by sight.

Andy identified him officially. They took him to the police morgue to get the . . . bullet, and then he was taken to Marsh's. We got back here at about nine o'clock Wednesday morning. Andy didn't come out of her room until nearly midnight Wednesday. I told her about sending you the wire. She was so angry she frightened me a little. Dib, I don't know what to think. I'm frightened."

I took her hand. Despite the heat her fingers were chill. I said in a low voice, as calm as I could make it, "Celia, Cal had a good reason for wanting me to come. I'll find out what the reason was. Suppose when I find out, it hurts Andra?"

"I—don't care."

"Tell me about the two of them. How was it with them?"

"Andy likes nice things. Cal was driving himself hard. And she was like—like a drug or something to him. All she had to do was look at him across the room, in a certain way. And then you could feel it in the air, like a sort of static electricity, a sort of tingle."

"I'm glad you told me about how she acted Tuesday. Celia."

"It makes me feel guilty."

"Your first loyalty is to Cal."

Her hand had warmed in mine. I remembered the look of it. A square, capable hand. She pulled it free and stood up. "I hope you can get back to sleep."

She seemed to drift out of the room. I heard one stair creak, and listened, but did not hear the door of her room close. Some of the flower-fresh fragrance remained in the room, slowly dispersed. . . .

Andra came down to breakfast at nine when Celia and I were on our second cups of coffee. Andra's face had a drawn look, as though she had slept poorly. Her greetings were purely mechanical.

Celia said, "I never see her in the mornings when I teach. She says it's better that I don't."

Andy smiled a bit grimly. "I'm not at my best before noon."

"Celia's coming along with me this morning, Andy," I said. Celia gave me a look of quick surprise. It was the first she had heard of it. Andra merely shrugged.

I backed my Jaguar out. Celia's only comment on it was, "Gosh, it sounds like a big boat."

"I think I'll see Mr. Quinn first. Make like a girl guide."

The day gave promise of damp, enervating heat. We had to go through the center of Walkerton to get to Barlow Construction. It was a city of about a hundred and fifty thousand. Heat glistened and shimmered off the chrome of the Saturday morning traffic. Cars cruised endlessly, searching for an empty meter.

I glanced at Celia sitting on my left. Her lips were tightly compressed. I knew how it looked to her, the world going on as usual, as though nothing had happened. She turned toward me and smiled, made a gesture as though holding a steering wheel.

"Feels funny sitting on this side and not driving. And goodness, the way people stare!"

"That's why you buy foreign cars. To be stared at. It's compensation for some sense of inner security."

"You never feel insecure, Dib. Say, what does Dib stand for?"

"The whole thing, bless me, is Dibney Decateur Morgan Hutcheon."

"My goodness!"

"They gave it to me when I was helpless."

"Turn left under the underpass, Dibney."

"Look, I trusted you. Let's go back to Dib."

BARLOW CONSTRUCTION was a shed-type building in the center of a cinder lot surrounded by wire hurricane fence. Two trucks were parked in the yard, red trucks with Barlow Construction Co. written in blue and white on the doors.

"Come in and introduce me," I said.

A girl was typing behind a plywood fence. She was a pretty, fresh-faced girl, her hair a cap of brown curls. She stood up quickly. "Hello, Celia," she said.

"Hi, Jenny. Meet Mr. Hutcheon. Jenny Berlin. Can we see Quinn?"

A man came to the door of the small office. He was massive with a head too small for him, a weathered nut-hard face, balding head, quick black eyes. At Celia's introduction he shook hands over the gate in the plywood, eyed me dubiously.

"Mr. Quinn, Mr. Hutcheon was one of Cal's best friends. He's helping me out. Me and Andra. He'd like to talk to you, if you

don't mind. Dib, I'll wait out in the car."

Quinn ushered me into the small office. He was very reserved, almost wary. He refused a cigarette, sat down facing me across the desk.

"What can I do for you, Hutcheon?"

"Just brief me a little. I'm assuming Mrs. Barlow owns the business now. She'll expect me to advise her as to what she should do, sell out or keep on with it."

Quinn slumped in his chair and looked at his heavily ridged fingernails for a moment. He said, "Let me make my position clear, Hutcheon. I don't get along with Mrs. Barlow. Never have. I owe it to Cal to stick around and clean things up as best I can. If she wants to sell, I'll stay until the place is sold and see if the new owner wants me around. If she wants to keep it, I'll leave as soon as I can turn over the details I handle."

"Which do you think she ought to do—not as Andra, but as Cal's wife?"

"If she sells, she'll get nothing. If she keeps it, she'll lose whatever she has to put into it."

"That bad?"

"There's nothing wrong with this business that twenty-five thousand dollars wouldn't fix, Hutcheon. Take a look at that map on the wall beside you. That's our new development. Crestwinds. Twenty houses, to sell at twelve-five, land included. Finishing them one at a time would cut out net. The savings come from doing all the foundation work at one time, all the framing at one time, all the wiring at one time and so forth. At that rate, we'd make about twelve hundred per house. Our costs would be eleven three per unit."

Quinn leaned forward. "The houses are forty percent complete. Rains have held the workup. Cal owes thirty thousand total. He was trying to pull through, by guess and by God, and maybe he would have made it. I don't know. It looked like he'd make it until land was bought out that way for a war plant. That made our land more desirable—and cut our chances for an extension on our note.

"We've got enough to meet payrolls for another three weeks. Then a note comes due. Twenty-thousand bucks. The bank is no fool. When we can't meet the note, there'll be no extension. They'll take over the land. Cal knew we were going under.

This was the big gamble, and it wasn't working out. The guy had a haunted look for weeks. He wouldn't have taken this big a risk except for that—that female pushing him all the time. With him dead, the suppliers are going to come down on us like vultures. They already have. You don't have to believe me. Go see Harvey Michaels. He's the accountant."

"Is there any other way out?"

He gave me a shrewd look. "Yes. One that Cal would never have taken. Bancroft Builders would be glad to take over Crestwinds, bail this operation out of hock and give somebody a nice fat sum for the privilege of taking over the land, the houses the way they stand, and the stock of materials. They'd finish the houses off as cheaply as possible and set the price around sixteen thousand or better. Get it, too."

"Then isn't that the logical answer?"

"Not what Cal would have wanted, certainly."

"How much can you get out of Bancroft?"

"Figure it out. Total sale price of three hundred and twenty thousand. A hundred thousand outlay to finish the houses. Plus fifty, roughly, to bail us out. It's a case of dickering."

I stood up. "Thanks for your help, Mr. Quinn."

"Don't mention it. Let me know what she decides as soon as you can."

Celia, in her tan linen dress, was standing beside the car. Off we went, with me interrupting her directions to give the report on what Quinn had said.

We found an empty meter near the center of town. Elizabeth Timbo, of the firm of Bettinger and Timbo, had her office on the tenth floor of the First National Bank Building. We both went in. The girl checked and said we could see Miss Timbo in ten minutes.

Miss Timbo was exactly as described, except that I expected a booming baritone instead of the piping soprano with which she made us welcome.

"Dreadful thing," she said. "Just dreadful."

"I'm a friend of Cal's," I said, "and I came here to help the girls in any way I can. Part of helping them is to find, if I can, some reason why this should have happened to him."

"That's the province of the police, isn't it?"

"Largely, Miss Timbo. However, there's the chance that it might have some relationship to his business, his financial difficulties, or his legal affairs. I understand the police are sticking to a motive of robbery. I happen to know that Cal was in bad financial shape. Do you think, Miss Timbo, that Cal might have taken some risk in order to improve his financial condition?"

She put her big elbows on the desk. "What sort of a risk?"

"Let's just say an extra-legal risk."

SHE half shut her eyes. "Mr. Hutcheon, I am not naive enough to believe that people are either honest or dishonest. I happen to know that Calvin Barlow was being pushed pretty hard. He'd invested a lot of effort in his company."

Celia said, with heat, "Cal would never do anything wrong."

"There are degrees of right and wrong, my dear," Elizabeth Timbo said. "I wouldn't want to be quoted on this. It's hard to guess what a desperate man might do. I don't believe Calvin Barlow would go out and search for a chance to make a large piece of money too easily. But if it should have fallen into his lap . . ." She shrugged beefy shoulders.

"Would you say that might make more sense than a robbery pitch?" I asked.

"You are an insistent man, Mr. Hutcheon. Again, without wanting to be quoted, I would say that it does make more sense than a robbery 'pitch', as you term it."

I offered cigarettes that were refused, tapped one on my thumbnail and lit it. "We can go just one more step, Miss Timbo. Do you know of anything in Cal's business affairs that might lead to such a situation?"

"I was contacted indirectly by Bancroft Builders, hinting at an offer of forty thousand dollars. They would take over the Crestwinds project in toto, leaving Calvin Barlow with all his equipment and his office. I relayed that offer to Mr. Barlow. It only infuriated him. He said that he wouldn't listen on the basis of forty thousand, or two hundred and forty thousand. He was a very stubborn man."

"What was your advice?"

"I went a bit further than I should have, perhaps. I got a status report on his situa-

tion from Harvey Michaels, and told him of the indirect offer. Harvey seemed to feel that Bancroft Builders would go as high as sixty to seventy thousand, and that Cal ought to take it, but he said that Cal never would. He called him, if I remember the exact words, a super-ethical fool, and a visionary."

"I don't want you to betray any professional confidences, Miss Timbo, and I don't wish to pry. What is the status of his will?"

"As Mrs. Barlow already knows the status of the will, I believe it might be more proper if you were to ask her."

"I know how it reads," Celia said quickly. "If the business is continued, with Andy running it. I am to get one third of the net. If she decides to liquidate it, I get one quarter of the proceeds of the sale. She gets the house and all other possessions. That hasn't been changed, has it? That was made over a year ago."

"No, my dear," Miss Timbo said, "it hasn't been changed."

"Who is the executor?" I asked.

"The First National Bank, Mr. Hutcherson. I have already begun work on it. The first weekly notice will be published Tuesday. The judge of the probate court has already set the date for the hearing. I talked with Mr. Hees of the bank this morning. He intends to have a conference on Monday with Mr. Quinn and Harvey Michaels, and advise them as to how to handle the reports to the executor in the interim before the will is probated. The hearing is set for four weeks from next Tuesday morning."

"Will Quinn go on with the construction at Crestwinds?"

"He will be advised to take only those steps necessary to prevent damage to construction in progress. He will be advised to order no new materials except absolutely necessary, and to lay off all non-essential employees during the interim. In other words, it is important to maintain the financial status-quo during the interim period."

"Thus prejudicing the profitability of the company, Miss Timbo?"

She smiled a bit sourly. "That is debatable. There are no penalty contracts."

We thanked her. She was quite gracious. At the door I thought of one last thing. I turned to her. "Could you tell me just when you received this indirect offer from Bancroft?"

"Of course. A week ago today."

"When did you tell Calvin Barlow about it?"

"Last Monday morning, Mr. Hutcherson."

"Doesn't it seem a little strange to you, Miss Timbo, that Calvin Barlow should have died within forty-eight hours of refusing to play ball with Bancroft?"

She laughed with what appeared to be quite genuine mirth. "My dear Mr. Hutcherson, you have quite a flair for drama. I suggest you visit the Bancroft people. They are clever businessmen, but they are not criminals."

I put another nickel in the meter and steered Celia into an air-conditioned drug store. We sat in a booth and had cokes. She looked pale and upset.

"Dib, do you think there's any connection?"

"Celia, three weeks ago in Los Angeles a woman was killed for the money she had in her purse. One dollar and eleven cents. Cal wouldn't sell out to Bancroft. Quinn said that Bancroft, with an outlay of one hundred and fifty thousand, plus whatever they paid for the privilege, could finish and sell those houses for three hundred and twenty thousand. Suppose they paid seventy thousand to Cal. Their profit would be one hundred thousand dollars. That's a hell of a way from one dollar and eleven cents."

"But it seems so . . ."

"Cold? Murder isn't always a hot-blooded thing, Celia."

Her hand trembled and her knuckles were white as she lifted the coke to her lips. I said quickly, "And then again, Celia, the police may be right."

"I'd—almost prefer to think they were, Dib."

CHAPTER THREE

Sun and the Siren

WHEN we arrived back out at the house, there was a police cruiser in the yard, a stocky white-shirted man leaning against the shady side of the house. He nodded absently. We went in. Andra sat with a handkerchief balled tightly in her hand. An open-faced young man with a deep tan, a rayon cord jacket, pale slacks, a black brush-cut like a skullcap, stood up and nodded at Celia.

Celia said, "Hello, Lieutenant. This is Mr. Hutcheon, Lieutenant McGelvie."

His handshake was firm. "How do you do, sir. Miss Barlow, I stopped by to tell you that we've got a bit more to go on. Mr. Barlow went to the bank just before it closed Tuesday afternoon. He cashed a fifteen-hundred-dollar check on the business account. We've tried to trace his movements after leaving the bank, and we're fairly certain that the money, or at least most of it, was still on him at the time of death, provided he didn't leave it here at the house. Mrs. Barlow has searched for the money, and is certain it isn't here."

"Lieutenant," I asked him, "was there any sign of a struggle, either on him or in the yard at the office? Do you think he got into the other car willingly?"

McGelvie shrugged. "It could have been at the point of a gun, of course."

"But somebody had to be pretty familiar with his movements?"

"I wouldn't say that. He worked alone at the office there almost every night."

"The lock on the office door is pretty flimsy, Lieutenant. And the safe they've got in there is so old it's got a flight of faded ducks painted on the front of it. I suppose they keep petty cash in there. Wouldn't it seem more logical for thieves to force him back into the office and clean the place out, maybe tie him up and leave him?"

He gave me a look that was a bit pitying. "Look. We have troubles. You know what the average age of the armed robbery pickups around here is? A little under eighteen. Kids don't handle a thing in the logical way. That makes them awfully tough to pick up, sometimes. Barlow bought cigarettes. He could have flashed those bills. It was easier to grab him. Don't make it complicated, Mr. Hutcheon."

"What did he want the money for?" Celia asked.

"I questioned Quinn over the phone, Miss Barlow. He doesn't know. He thinks maybe Mr. Barlow was going to try to pick up certain supplies for cash early Wednesday morning."

"Did your lab get anything from the examination, Lieutenant?" I asked.

"One thirty-two slug, pretty badly mashed. No other marks or bruises except what he got falling out of the car."

Andra spoke as McGelvie moved toward the door. "Thanks for coming and telling us, Lieutenant," she said in her soft voice.

"That's all right, Mrs. Barlow. We're keeping a check on the bars to see if anybody shows with too much money. That's our best chance."

He went out and the cruiser backed out, moved slowly away. Celia said, "I better get some lunch together."

"I'll take you girls out for lunch. How does that sound?"

"Thanks, I'd rather not go out," Andra said.

"It's no trouble to get something here," Celia said. She went on out into the kitchen.

I sat and looked at Andra. She was half turned in the chair, her hands placid in her lap, one leg tucked under her.

"Quinn wants to know what you're going to do about the firm," I said bluntly.

She turned her head slowly. "He does?"

"If you keep it, he doesn't want to stay. He said so."

"He can take his personal belongings and move out right now," she said coldly.

"That won't work. You don't own the place yet. That's the executor's decision, until the will is probated. Then you're on your own."

"I'll sell it. I want to get out of this desolate town. Nothing ever happens here. Ever, Dib."

Her eyes looked green again. They were smoky-sullen, and kiss-stamped lips were pulled a bit up from small, even white teeth.

"A cruise to the south seas or something?"

"Or something," she said. "I'll sell this house and sell the firm and get out. Fast. Go where there's music and moonlight."

"Expect to get much from the firm?" I asked.

She didn't answer for long seconds. "That's just like Quinn, isn't it, not to tell you about Bancroft wanting to buy the new development."

"Oh, do they?"

She smiled suddenly. "He must have told you. Otherwise you would have assumed Bancroft was a he, not a they."

"You're very quick. Miss Timbo mentioned it, and mentioned that Cal would rather have gone broke than put Crestwinds in the hands of Bancroft Builders."

She looked down at her lax hands. "Dib,

you knew Cal well. He was a dreamer. He wanted to change the world all by himself. The world is a big place. It's better to live by the rules than try to change the rules, wouldn't you say?"

I shrugged. "There's something to be said for a lasting reputation."

"Is there? The Bancrofts own hunting lodges, speed boats and Cadillacs. Cal lived here, and drove a '46 Plymouth coupe and worked fifteen hours a day. He was always too tired."

She did a trick with her eyes. The glance moved from her slack hands to the rug, moved slowly across the rug to my feet, moved even more slowly up until my eyes were in the way. Her lids looked heavy. She took a deep breath and let the pent-up air out with a tiny sighing sound that mingled with the tick of the mantel clock, the noon-time song of the locusts.

She did not take her eyes away from mine, and I knew what Celia had meant by a way that Andy had looked at Cal. It created a strong tingling current in the room, and I felt the accelerated thud of my pulse. I took my cigarettes out as casually

as I could. I took one before thinking to offer her one. I held the pack out, one eyebrow raised.

"Please," she said. There was a clink of dishes from the kitchen.

I took the pack over. She made no attempt to lift her hands, merely tilted her head back and looked at me. I stood like a fool with the cigarettes and then took one from the pack. She lifted her chin and I placed the cigarette in the corner of her mouth. She watched me with amusement. I was about to light the cigarette, and I knew that my hand would shake and she would be even more amused. I tossed the book of matches into her lap. I went back to my chair.

"Did he have any insurance?" I asked. My voice was harsh.

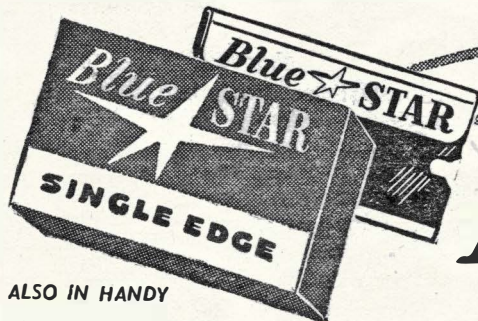
"He kept up the GI policy. That's ten thousand, isn't it? Then there's another five, paid up, and an accident policy that pays ten thousand in case of accidental death. I've got to find out whether it applies to this sort of an—accident."

She lit her cigarette, inhaled deeply, sent the smoke in two plumes from her nostrils.

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"Come and get it," Celia called. . . .

LUNCH was an oddly silent meal. At the end of it, Andra announced that she was going to take a nap. She went upstairs. I helped Celia with the dishes.

"What are you going to do after this is over?" I asked.

"Go on teaching my monsters."

"School in the summer?"

"This is more of a nursery school, Dib. When the regular session starts next month I was going to go back to teaching kindergarten here. Now I don't know. There isn't much to hold me here in Walkerton. I don't think Andy'll stay around. I'm sort of at loose ends."

"No guy?"

She looked at me with an odd little grimace. "I'm in the process of getting over a guy, Dib. I think I can do it better away from this place, where there isn't the constant risk of seeing him on the street. I couldn't quite cut through the apron strings. He and his mother are too happy together."

"Sorry," I said.

"Don't be. I'm not as bad off as if I'd married the two of them. I almost did. Look, this afternoon I have to go call on the parents of my best monster."

"Want a chauffeur?"

"No, I'll take Cal's car. The insurance agent says I can drive it and still be covered. What are your plans?"

"Two people to see. Bancroft and Harvey Michaels. I don't know how good Saturday afternoon is going to be."

"Why don't you phone? Harvey's on the pad, and you can look up Bancroft. Their offices are on Randolph Street."

She went off to change her heat-wilted dress. I couldn't get an answer from the Bancroft offices. I debated trying the home phones listed, and decided Michaels could probably tell me which one I should contact. I called the number on the front of the pad. Michaels answered. He had a pleasant voice. I introduced myself and told him that I wanted to talk about Cal.

"Look, fella. I'm making out a hell of a tax statement and it has to be in the mail by late afternoon. Along about five I ought to be ready to take my little red eyes out into public. My car's in the shop. You got something you can pick me up with? Good. Five o'clock at the Shelton. That's a run-

down old apartment hotel on Burroughs Avenue, near Stillwell. Come right up to the second floor. I'm in two A. We'll take our problems to an air-conditioned bar. Sound all right?"

"Sounds good. See you at five."

I went into the living room from the front hall and looked at an old magazine for a few minutes. Celia came down the stairs. She waved as she went out.

Even with the sunlight closed off, the house was hot. My clothes were damp. I went restlessly into my room, stripped, took a long cold shower. As I stepped out of the shower I heard Andra calling me outside the door of my room.

"Yeah?"

"I'm leaving a pair of Cal's swimming trunks here in the hall, Dib. Put them on and come out and get some sun with me. I'll be out in back. Bring something tall and cool with you, hey?"

I heard her walk away. I toweled myself, went and picked up the trunks. They were pale green and had a blue sailfish on the right leg. The fit was all right. In the kitchen I found some gin, limes and ginger ale, and fixed up a couple of tall stiff gin bucks.

The ice tinkled nicely as I carried them out into the back yard. She had a navy blanket spread on the grass near the clothesline. She had worked on that tan. It was golden, and much darker than her hair. She wore a lime yellow terrycloth bandeau, abbreviated trunks of the same material. Sprawled there on the blanket she looked like a great tawny cat.

She sat up, flipped the sand-colored hair back away from her eye and reached for the glass. She took long swallows. "Mmm," she said, "Thanks."

I sat down beside her. She stared at me. "Office pallor, eh?"

"The original indoor kid."

She finished her drink, her head tilted back, eyes closed against the sun. "I'll get the next drink," she said. She rolled over onto her face, reached behind her and unhooked the terrycloth top. She shoved a bottle of suntan oil toward me. "Now be useful, Dib. Smear my back good." She pulled her hair out of the way.

The oil had been heated by the sun. I set my drink aside, poured a pool of it into the palm of my hand, smeared her back quickly and thoroughly.

She had her face in the blanket. "Rub it in, darn it," she said, her voice muffled and petulant.

It was a smooth, golden, well-muscled back, the crease deep between the shoulder blades, then shallowing down toward the flat small of her back and narrow waist before the out curve of hips. I was lost in the sun-torrent, in the oiled smoothness under my hand. She turned her face toward

of ice as she came back. I took the glass. The drink she had made was stiffer than the one I had made. The first swallow was rough. But the sun had brought thirst. The rest of it went down easily.

She was shaking me. "Dib! You're turning pink. You better come in."

"Must have fallen asleep," I mumbled.

"Here's a fresh drink, Dib," she said, pressing the glass into my hand.

I sat up. My face felt tight. The skin pulled as I yawned.

She stood up and picked up her blanket and folded it, picked up her empty glass and the bottle of oil. I finished my drink and followed her into the kitchen. After the glare of the sun, the kitchen was like a midnight cellar. I groped for the sink, set my glass on the drainboard.



She sat up, flipped the sand-colored hair back away from her eye.

me and the look of amusement in her eyes brought me out of the spell of rhythm. I wiped my hand on the grass and recapped the bottle.

"That should do it," I said.

I FINISHED my drink and stretched out on the towel I had brought. The sun shone red through my closed eyes and I masked them with my hand.

"You better use some of the oil, Dib," she said.

"I won't be out here long enough, thanks."

The sun was like a drug. From a remote distance I heard her move away, heard the slap of the screen door, and later the tinkle

I padded toward my room and at the door, Andy, who had come quietly along behind me, caught my arm. As I turned around she came into my arms, steamy warm from the sun, oil-moist, sun smell in her hair, lips seeking and burning and tart with lime, tall warm girl and the lime-yellow bandeau pressed hard against my chest, and the room making a slow dizzy wheeling compounded of sun and gin.

In the back of my mind a small cool forlorn voice was complaining that this was Cal's wife and Cal had been dead only a short time.

But the voice wasn't very loud and it was

very far away. Then suddenly she stiffened in my arms and said, in a harsh whisper, a word she shouldn't have known. She slid out of my arms and her feet padded down the hall. I grew conscious of the sound of the car in the drive. The motor died and the car door chunked. The screen door slapped.

"Anybody home?" Celia called.

"I'll be out in a minute," I called. My voice sounded husky and funny.

I took another shower. I used a hell of a lot of soap, and then tried to take my skin off with the towel. I still felt dirty.

I went in and looked at my watch on the bureau. A few minutes after four. I put on a fresh white sport shirt, tropical slacks. I was burned, but not badly. It might make sleeping a little uncomfortable, but by the next morning it would be a faint tan rather than a series of blisters.

Celia was in the living room. She gave me a cool look, and returned to the newspaper she was reading.

"Get the monster straightened out?" I asked.

"I believe so," she said in an extremely chilly way.

"What's eating you?"

"Not a thing, Mr. Hutcheon. Your research methods are your own affair."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Next time ask her not to leave her blanket and suntan oil on the floor outside the door of your room. I thought you were . . ." The blue eyes misted.

"Were what?"

"Cal's friend," she said. She flung the newspaper aside. Her feet stamped fast on the stairs, ran down the upstairs hall. The door of her room made a sound like a pistol shot.

Guilt is a matter of intent. And I was certainly guilty. My lips were still numbed by the gin. I picked up the paper and tried to read for a time. By twenty of five neither of them had come downstairs.

I sighed and drove away from there.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Merry Widow

THE SHELTON, as Michaels had mentioned, was run-down. It was of dark red brick. There may be uglier types of architecture. I doubt it. It had

spindly minarets on all four corners, and perpendicular bulges that seemed to have no particular purpose.

The lobby was dim and smelled oddly like damp seaweed. The desk clerk was running an adding machine. He didn't look up as I walked through to the staircase. Two A was in the front, and the door was open. I knocked on it.

I recognized Michaels voice as he called, "Hutcheon? Come in and sit. Be right with you."

From the small sitting room, in which was a huge flat-top desk and a green metal filing cabinet, I could look through the bedroom and into the bathroom where he stood stripped to the waist, scraping his chin. He grinned at me. "Come on in here, Hutcheon, and keep me amused."

I sat on his bed, facing the bathroom door. He didn't fit my idea of an accountant. He was big, blond, hefty through the shoulders. His stomach was flat and the muscles crawled in his arms as he shaved. Except for the fact that his features seemed to be crowded together in the middle of his face, giving him a moon-like look, he would have been quite pretty. Movie pretty. Male fashion and pretty.

"Glad you phoned," he said. "Getting that claim off makes me feel like celebrating, and my little black book is a washout these days. The ladies are away on vacation."

I didn't answer. He gave me a quick perceptive glance and said, "Maybe I'm being stupid. Cal was your very good friend, wasn't he? Maybe you don't feel at all festive."

"Festive enough."

He sloshed the lather off his jaws, buried his face in a towel, then came out of the bathroom. I stood up to shake hands with him. He had a good two inches on my six feet and, I guessed, a good twenty-five to thirty pounds.

As he took a shirt out of the bureau drawer, he said, "Glad you've got transportation. The best joints are outside town. I miss my car. Funniest damn thing you ever saw. It's a convertible, and the only way I can figure it is that somebody tossed a cigarette out of a window, right into it, Wednesday morning. The insurance covers it, and they got the fire out fast, but it burned up the upholstery, wiring under the dash, floor mats. Did a hell of a job."

He tucked the shirt in, fastened his belt. "Let's roll, Hutch."

"They call me Dib."

"I'm Mike, Dib. You know, that makes you sound more familiar. I've heard Cal talk about a crazy guy named Dib."

He slapped my shoulder as we went out, turned and yanked the door shut. He stopped at the desk and asked if his reports had made the mail collection. The clerk yawned and said they had. He whistled softly as I headed toward the Jaguar.

"Now this is something!" he said. He listened appreciatively to the burble of the exhaust as we pulled away from the curb. "Take your first two rights and stay right on the main drag, Dib."

"Where are we going?"

"A joint called Larry's. I keep his books. I think you'll like it. No TV, no juke, and a friendly crowd. I kept trying to take Cal and Andy out there, but Cal couldn't get away."

"He was working pretty hard, I understand."

"He was killing himself, the crazy red-head. I'd say he lost fifteen pounds in the

last year. And it wasn't doing him a damn bit of good."

"Would he have been able to pull out of this last project of his all right?"

"Crestwinds? Not a chance. But he wouldn't believe me. I'd show him the figures in black and white, and he still wouldn't believe me. I tried to get him to take an offer for the whole project, but it was no dice."

"Who killed him, Mike?"

We were at a light. I looked over at Mike. He shrugged. "Beats me, Dib. Some crazy gun-happy kid, probably."

"It leaves Andy quite a problem, doesn't it?"

"She's got a level head, Dib. She'll let me advise her and let Betty Timbo yak at her, and then she'll go use her own judgement. Don't quote me, but I don't think she was the right gal for Cal. He should have had a quieter kid."

Larry didn't look like much. It was a big raw cinderblock building with a gravel parking area, very few windows. We went in the door marked *Bar* and I was pleasantly surprised. It was a high-ceilinged,



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paneled, air-conditioned room, full of talk and laughter.

Mike said, "All the crowd comes here."

At the other end of the long room was a huge disc set into the floor, a platform that revolved slowly. In the center of it a girl with a lovely body and an ugly, battered, charming face played a small piano. Around the edge of the revolving disc, and on the disc itself were small Victorian couches, just large enough to seat two, each with a low coffee table in front of it. I counted fifteen of them, and about six were occupied by couples.

We went up to the big bar, and Mike introduced me to a number of men. They all seemed to like him, and to be glad to see him. When the small piano was turned so that the girl faced the bar, she carried the beat with her left hand, gave Mike a mocking salute with her right.

More people kept crowding into the place. Everyone seemed to know everyone else. Mike nudged me with his elbow and cocked a thumb toward the revolving couches. "If you ever want to talk anybody into anything, Dib, that merry-go-round does a hell of a job of lowering resistance."

"I'll remember that. Mike, I want to ask you something."

"Shoot."

"I want to talk to somebody at Bancroft, somebody who can say with a certain amount of authority how much they might pay for Crestwinds. Who would you suggest?"

"Young Al Bancroft is your boy, if you can stand him. Take a look at him. The one with the brunette in the red outfit. In another minute they'll be facing us as they come around."

Al Bancroft had a lean face. From the nose up he was handsome. But the mouth was weak and petulant, the chin vague. He sat scowling down at the old fashioned in his hand. He wore a yellow linen sport jacket, an open shirt. The brunette was pretty in a vacant, wide-eyed way.

"That his wife?"

"He hasn't got one. That's a new item he's with. I haven't seen her around. Al plays the field."

"How is he doing, in a business way?"

"Not too damn good, I hear. His old man is on a vacation. A long one. Bad heart. Al and Dick, the kid brother, are running the

works. They aren't making too good a showing."

"If they take over Crestwinds from Andra, they'll do better, eh?"

"Sure. A lot better. They'll slap the houses together and, with that new plant going up out beyond there, they can charge all the market will bear—something that Cal would never have done."

"In other words, that's a motive for Al."

Mike punched my shoulder. "Look, fella. A wad of money is one thing. Killing a guy is something else again. A lot of something else."

THE younger set of Walkerton were out in force. The merry-go-round was full. The bar was two deep. I nursed my drinks. I thought of a few more casual questions to ask Michaels. The questions weren't important and neither were the answers. Al and Red Dress left the merry-go-round and a waiting couple nipped in and grabbed the couch.

Al and Red Dress were having a heated argument. She was pale with anger, but her eyes still had a wide vacant look. They were headed toward the door. Suddenly she swung her purse at his head, holding it by the long shoulder strap. Al Bancroft ducked it, put his hand, splayed, against her face, and pushed. She sat down abruptly with a heavy boomp, mouth a-gape, scrambled up and founced out, hips swinging.

Al stared after her for a moment, combed his hair back in place with his fingers and sauntered over to the bar. Everybody started talking again, all at once, and avoided looking at Al.

"Can we work up a conversation, Mike?" I asked.

He shrugged and I followed him over. Al greeted him without pleasure, looked me over without interest. His eyes were a silver gray. They held all the animation of the last two tired oysters in the bottom of the stew.

"Meet Dib Hutcheon. Good friend of Cal Barlow's, Al."

"Hi," he said. His hand was limp.

"I understand Cal was an acquaintance of yours, Mr. Bancroft, being in the same business and all."

"I wouldn't know him if I saw him on the street, friend. He was strictly small time."

"I understand he was a good builder."

Al smiled mirthlessly. "A good foreman, maybe. Hardly a builder, friend. A builder makes it when he can. Barlow underpriced and overbuilt everything he sold."

I was trying to keep calm, but he was making me hotter by the second. "That doesn't stop you from wanting to take over his Crestwinds development, does it?"

"He fell into that. He got the land cheap, before the electronics people bought half of that end of the county, friend. That doesn't make him a good builder. That just makes him lucky. Sure I want to take it over. Who wouldn't?"

"Do you want to make an offer? I'll tell his wife."

He gave me a long look. "No thanks, friend. I've had a look at her. I think I'll go talk to her myself. That's one fancy piece of merchandise."

Mike was quick. He locked my arm before I had it cocked. Al gave me a faint, supercilious sneer and turned, putting a shoulder in my face.

We moved away. "I should dearly have enjoyed busting him one, Mike."

"A lot of people have tried that, Dib. He's aching for a beating. But somehow he never gets beat. He can fight like hell, and he's quick as a cat. I got your arm about one tenth of a second before he knocked you kicking, believe me."

"How did he get a personality like that?"

"Old Bancroft tried to give the kids everything in life he never had. Then one fine day he took a good look at them and saw what he'd done to them and he put them to work. In Al's case it was too late. Dick isn't quite so unpleasant."

A few moments later I saw Al walk out. I went to the door to see what he was driving. He came out of the lot in a big gray convertible, moving slowly toward the highway. He had a smug smile on his face. The girl in red was sitting beside him, blowing her nose into a hanky.

When I went back to the bar, the piano had stopped. The girl with the cute ugly face was talking to Mike. "Molly, meet Dib Hutcheon," Mike said, "Molly Dane."

Her voice was a deep husky rasp. "Hello, Dib. I get to get off that oversized phonograph record every once in a while. I get seasick."

"I like the way you play," I said.

She gave me a wise look. "All the time I hear that from guys who don't know a flatted fifth from a music rack. You like my music or my tight dress, bub?"

"Molly has a funny habit, Dib," Mike said. "She can't stop saying what she thinks."

I said, "I like your tight dress *and* your piano. Most women pianists don't have enough left hand. You and Mary Lou Williams do. Your fingering is nice and crisp, but you dress up the music with too many runs and trills."

"Bub, you just won yourself a music rack. I'll bring it around before breakfast. I don't like the lace I add either. But the management wants it nice and gooeey. Say, Mike, when do I get dated again? Next Ides of March? They tell me I had fun Tuesday night. Did I?"

"You had a gay, gay time, my love."

She winked at me. "This joint is closed Tuesdays, and I always manage to work up a howl. Mike plied me with bourbon last Tuesday. Know where we ended up? Sitting on a park bench in the gray, gray dawn. I told Mike the park looked sort of unfamiliar and what part of town is it in. Turned out it was in Brock City, hundred miles south of here. And I had to report here at four to make with the cocktail tinkle."

She was a very intriguing item. Not more than twenty-two or three, I judged. Her hair was brown with reddish glints, shoulder length, softly waved. Her nose had either been broken, or it had come that way. One corner of her mouth tilted up and one eye slanted more than the other. There was something simian about her face, but her outstanding characteristic was a barely concealed joy in living, a bouncy gusto, a reckless, restless hell-of-a-time attitude. And the strapless cocktail gown she wore clung to a figure that belonged in a pin-up on a barracks wall.

"Tuesday I can't, hon," Mike said sorrowfully.

She gave me a long solemn wink and said, "Are you on the hook yet, junior?"

"Tuesday is fine," I said.

"I gotta go play for the people. I'll expect you at five. Mike will brief you on where." She strode off, with a glinting smile back over her shoulder.

Mike grinned. "Don't get the wrong im-

pression, Dib. There's nothing easy about her, and nothing cheap. She likes laughs and fun. A wrong pass and she'll freeze on you. A grand gal, believe me. Here, I'll write down the address."

"I don't know how I got into that. I came here to . . ."

"I know. To nail whoever killed Cal. I don't think less of you for it, Dib. But actually, it's police business. This isn't a bad town. Why don't you just relax and have a little fun before you go back?"

"It's an idea. But I want to check on just where Al Bancroft was on Tuesday night."

"Because he's a jerk?"

"And because he has a motive, Mike."

He thumped my shoulder. "Sorry to break this up, but I've got a dinner date with a client with a tax problem. I can call a cab. You stick around here."

"No point in it. I'll drive you back to town."

I DROPPED him off, found a place to eat. By the time I got back to the house the late dusk shadows were deep. The house was locked and the car was gone and the lights were off. I tried the door and then sat on the front steps.

There was enough breeze to make it comfortable. The wind whispered in the tall grass of the lot across the way. I watched the first star appear, and made the usual trite wish. A few blocks away a bus chuffed its air brakes, then droned on. A few minutes later I made out the tock-clack tock-clack of feminine heels heading toward the house. The street lights came on suddenly, as the heel sounds grew louder. She passed under one of the dim lights and I saw that it was Celia.

She came up the walk, gave a little gasp as she saw me. "You startled me!"

"Sit down. It's a nice night."

She sat on the next step above mine. I lit two cigarettes, handed her one.

"Thanks," she said.

I was silent a long time, thinking of Celia, and the new extent of her reserve. "Is confession good for the soul?"

"Spare me the desolate details, Dib."

"No details. None to relate. It started with a spot of sunbathing, and some drinks that were stiffer than they should have been. A bit of business with suntan oil. Then

boom. I was met considerably more than halfway. My guard was down. You drove in and broke it up before it had time to get anywhere. My scruples might have started operating at any point. I don't know, actually."

She put her hand on my shoulder, tightened her fingers a bit, then took her hand away. "I was silly to get so stuffy about it, Dib. Actually, I don't suppose it matters, one way or the other."

"It does matter. It's very interesting. Look at it this way. She was upset before Cal was killed. We know now that it could have been because Cal refused to accept the offer that would have given her, for the first time, the money she wanted to have, the nice things she wanted to buy for herself. That argument you heard could have been about that very question, Celia.

"But there's something else. Cal said he was mixed up in something. Maybe he sensed that he was in danger. Maybe there was an unsuccessful attempt on his life. Let us imagine for a moment that Andra was in on the unsuccessful attempt, and helped plan the successful attempt . . ."

"Oh, Dib!" she said in a small voice. "No!"

"Go along with me for a moment. I come here to try to unravel it. It scares her. She can see and sense that I am on your side, rather than hers. There is considerable friction between you two. If you want to blind a man you can throw acid in his eyes. That's one way. Or you can blind him with a woman. It's just as effective. He can still see, but the ability to reason properly from what he sees is impaired."

"Do you think she would go at it that coldly, Dib? I mean, maybe it is the sort of thing where she can't—help herself."

"Baby, I'm not that irresistible. I think she made a mistake throwing herself at me that way. It gives me cause to think. And don't think that blanket business was an accident, Celia. She could have grabbed it as she ran to her room. That was left there for a purpose—to keep us far enough apart so we wouldn't compare notes. Andy never does anything without a purpose. That, I'm certain of. She's a watcher, a waiter, a schemer. Does she know Al Bancroft?"

"I don't believe so, Dib."

"We've got to find out what warned Cal. What did he do on Sunday?"

Her voice was wry. "Worked, of course. He went out to Crestwinds to check construction against the schedule."

"How did he act Sunday night?"

"Remote, as usual. Troubled, I guess. You see, the rains held things up for so long and . . ."

"More troubled than usual, Celia?"

"He could have been. I actually thought he was a little sore at Andy. He wanted her to go out to Crestwinds with him, but she said she was sick unto death of the whole affair and hoped she'd never have to drive by it again, even."

"Was that typical?"

"She usually went with him. Maybe it wasn't."

"After he left for Crestwinds, did she make any phone calls?"

"I don't know. I had a Sunday date and I left the house. What are you getting at?"

"I don't know. Cal was a pretty trusting guy. Something had to happen to alarm him. Maybe it happened on Sunday, either in the office or out at the project. Is it built up out there?"

"Heavens, no! It's as wild as can be."

"If somebody wanted to kill him, that might be a good place, eh?"

"It sounds crazy, but maybe it would be a good place."

"Let's go out there in the morning and poke around, Celia."

"Okay. I think Andy's coming."

Car lights came down the street. The car slowed. As it turned into the drive the headlight beams swept across us. She drove it into the garage, then came walking around to the front of the house.

Her voice was sleepy, relaxed. "Hello, kids."

"Hello, Andy," Celia said with a trace of stiffness.

We got up and went into the house. The house lights made us squint. Andra stretched and yawned. Her small white teeth looked sharp and her tongue curled upwards like a cat's. She looked vaguely ruffled, her sand-shade hair a bit tousled. She wore a tailored white tropical suit, with three buttons on the jacket. The jacket dragged down on one shoulder because it wasn't buttoned properly. She saw me staring at her. She gave me a look of sleepy



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insolence, and then unbuttoned the jacket.

She yawned again, voluptuously. "Night, kids," she said. Her step was slow and heavy on the stairs.

As soon as the bedroom door at the top of the stairs had clicked shut, Celia leaned heavily against my chest. I put my hands on her shoulders. She was trembling.

"Oh, Dib," she moaned.

"She could just as well have worn a sandwich sign with large print," I said, tasting the anger in my throat.

Celia looked up at me, her cheeks tear-tracked. "Was she with him?"

"With the guy who killed Cal? Very probably."

"I hate her, Dib!"

"Is that in the nature of a discovery?"

"I guess I always have."

We could hear the distant roar of a shower upstairs. We went out into the kitchen. Celia sat at the table, her chin on her fists, her eyes far away.

I said, "She isn't worried any more. Something has made her certain that she doesn't have to worry any more."

"If we'd only followed her, Dib."

"How about a walk?"

She stood up quickly. "I'd like that."

We walked for a long time. We didn't have much to say. I felt no urge to make conversation, and our silences weren't strained in anyway. Back in the house I kissed her at the foot of the stairs. A light kiss, and a friendly one. She didn't look back as she went on up to her room.

It took me a long time to get to sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

Of Shots and Suicide

SUNDAY morning was damp and gray, with low scudding clouds and a feeling of oppressive weight in the air. The climate didn't do much for Crestwinds. The earth, left raw by the graders, had soaked up moisture. The twenty houses, on respectably ample lots, were situated on a gentle crest some hundred feet from the highway. The blacktop drives had been put in to enable the trucks of supplies to drive up to the sites.

The conception was clever. The houses were identical, but so designed that there was a choice of three ways of facing them.

It gave the houses that look of individuality sacrificed in so many low-cost housing projects.

The houses were framed but, as yet, doorless and windowless. I parked in the drive of the nearest one. We got out. I knew from Celia's pallor, from the puffiness under her eyes, that she had slept as poorly as I did.

"I don't know what we're looking for," I said.

"Pretend you're Cal, Dib. You'd want to check on each house."

It took a long time. There were a lot of houses. We found nothing. Nothing at all.

On the way back to town Celia said, "Of course, they were working Monday."

"Who bosses the men on the job?"

"A little man named Arka. Tom Arka."

I phoned him from a drugstore booth, while Celia sat at the counter with a Coke. It took him a little time to understand who I was, and then he was cooperative.

"Did you find anything odd at Crestwinds Monday morning, Mr. Arka?"

"Funny you mention that. Some daffy guy, maybe hunting out of season, put a couple of holes in number twelve. Splintered a stringer and put a hole in the plaster. We fixed it up. Anything wrong?"

"Which is house twelve, Mr. Arka?"

"We count from the end nearest town, Mr. Hutcheon."

I thanked him and ducked his questions and hung up. When I told Celia, her lips tightened. We drove back. It didn't take much looking. I found where the plaster had been patched, where a section of two by four had been sawed out and replaced. It was in the back of house twelve. The bullets had hit at chest level. One had gone through a low wide window. I looked across the field behind the house. There was a second ridge, higher than the one the houses were on, and covered with scrub growth.

"I think it was a rifle," I said. "See that pile of cinderblocks? Say that this first shot went through the window, probably missing Cal pretty closely. He was frozen for a moment, and then dived behind the blocks. The rifleman tried to get him on the fly. That accounts for the second shot landing here, a bit lower and closer to the cinderblocks."

We both stared at the second ridge again, and I knew she was as conscious as I of the

isolation of this place, our exposed position. She moved closer to me.

"There won't be anybody potting at us," I said, "because nobody knows we're here, except Arka. Want to take a walk up there?"

She gave me a slightly frightened smile. "Sure, Dib."

It was an easy walk. From the top of the second ridge every house in the project was visible, a little over two hundred yards away. Infrequent cars sped along the highway.

I went ahead, trying to imagine how I would select a place if I wanted to shoot someone near the houses. On the far side of the ridge, and down a fairly steep hill, was a second highway, running off at an angle toward the distant airport. There were any number of places where a car could pull off. A gray convertible, maybe.

I'm no woodsman, no tracker. I looked for the proverbial broken twigs, or grass mashed flat, or gleam of brass cartridge case in the grass. At the end of my search I could have been convinced that no one had been here since the Indians.

We went back and sat in the car. The windshield was misted. It wasn't quite raining, but felt as though it soon would be. I lit her cigarette.

"Now we know something new," I said. "Now we know why Cal was worried. Somebody tried to kill him, and he knew it. Item—why didn't he go to the cops?"

"That would have been the logical thing for him to do, Dib."

"The only thing that would have stopped him would have been a nasty sneaking little hunch that Andra might have had something to do with it. I think he wanted to ferret it out himself, find out the score, and then face her with it. On Monday, Timbo filled him in on motive. The cash offer from Bancroft. That plus his insurance. I wish we had a tape recording of that quarrel you almost overheard, Celia."

"Dib, I hate the way it's all beginning to fit together, to make such a nasty, dirty picture. It makes me feel as if I could wash and wash and never get really clean again, as long as I live."

"Is Quinn a bachelor?"

She stared at me, and her eyes widened. "You mean—?"

"Maybe that mutual dislike isn't any-

thing more than an act—you can't tell."

"How can we find out, Dib?"

"Look how well it fits! He'd know just how easy it would be to ambush Cal at this place. Cal would have his guard down, probably get into Quinn's car at the office without any question. The thing to do is find the connection between Andra and Quinn. We'll need help. Who knows Quinn well?"

"Harvey Michaels knows him pretty well, Dib."

"Mike is in the clear. He was with a girl named Molly Dane the night Cal was killed. Shall we trust him?"

"I think we can, Dib. He'll help us."

MIKE was still asleep. He answered the phone on the sixth ring. I said we'd come up and he said he'd meet us at the coffee shop across the street from the apartment hotel in twenty minutes.

When we got there he was in a booth in the back. He was jovial, even about his hangover. Celia said, "Tell him, Dib."

As I started, Mike's face grew solemn. He put his fork down and let the eggs and bacon grow cold. He never took his eyes from my face until I had finished. Then he whistled softly.

"Quinn, eh? Lord, Dib, it certainly seems to fit, doesn't it?"

"You can see the angles. They pretend to hate each other. Here's what will happen. Andra will have to associate with Quinn. They'll be slick about it. They'll discover that they really didn't hate each other at all. Everybody will applaud. After a decent period, they'll get married.

"Andra's motive was money. Quinn's motive was to get hold of the company and Andra, and incidentally a fair chunk of cash. You see, Mike, they've been relying on everybody falling for that hate routine. Once you look behind it, it shouldn't be too hard to tie them together. Somebody will have seen them together. Somewhere, sometime, they must have been careless. You can check on Quinn easier than we can. If we nose around, he'll get suspicious. You are his friend."

"I still can't believe it!" Mike said softly. "Old Harry Quinn. It just goes to show you."

"Andra is a pretty enticing prize to find in the bottom of your candy box, Mike," I

said. "She could have induced a nice case of temporary insanity in Quinn."

"Strictly no good, only Cal couldn't see it," Mike said. "Look, we've got to use our heads. Andy will have been clever, you know. It isn't going to do any good to nail Quinn and slip up on Andra. And there's always the thought that Andra merely hinted, and Quinn took over. What do we have to think about? A rifle. A thirty-two pistol. A back-check on his movements. You don't know where Andy went yesterday?"

"Haven't got the faintest idea."

"Quinn lives alone. A furnished room in a cheap section of the city. It would be nice to find something of Andy's in his room, wouldn't it?"

"Don't you think we ought to have the police help, Mike?" Celia asked.

He smiled at her. "Not enough to go on, honey. They'd laugh at us. We've got to have a little more before that McGelvie will take us seriously. Look. Let me plot a course. I don't think so well in the mornings. Let's all do some independent thinking and get together later in the day. The right answer may be for all of us to pay a call on Quinn and face him with it. He might break. If so, his confession would implicate Andra."

"He doesn't look like the breaking type," I said, remembering the coolness and control in Harry Quinn's eyes.

"Go on home and keep an eye on Andra. I'll phone you there, kids. If she goes out, follow her, if you can, without warning her."

We went back to the house. Andra, in a blue robe, was in the kitchen drinking coffee. She seemed scrubbed, brushed, alert. "Slept like logs," she said complacently.

"Are you going out later, Andy?" Celia asked, her voice very casual.

"I don't know. I don't think so. Where have you people been?"

"Just driving around," I said.

"I've decided," Andra said, "to close up this house. I can't sell it until the will is probated, but I certainly see no reason for staying out here in the fields. I'm going to move into a hotel in town."

Celia stared at her. "That costs money, Andy."

"I don't think I have to worry about money. I had an interesting phone call

while you were out. A Mr. Bancroft. He's loaning me a little until the insurance and other things come through."

"You aren't going to sell Crestwinds to him, are you?" Celia asked.

"Don't be foolish, darling. What else could I do with it?"

"Cal wouldn't."

"Cal wasn't applying logical thought to the problem. I've accepted Mr. Bancroft's tentative offer. He's stopping around this afternoon. We settled for eighty-two thousand, five hundred. That will include the office building, name, good will, trucks and so on. I told him it was a deal provided he'd fire Quinn."

I avoided looking at Celia. It had sounded entirely too pat.

Andra smiled at Celia. "And of course, darling, your share will come to twenty-one thousand, six hundred and twenty-five—before taxes, of course."

Celia's face froze. She walked out of the kitchen into the living room, pulled a chair around and sat down so that she looked out the front windows.

After hours that dragged by, after a meal of chops and salad, Al Bancroft arrived. When Celia saw him coming, she went up to her room.

Andy let him in. He looked smug. He glanced at me and said, "Hi."

Andra smiled at me significantly. "You won't mind, Dib, I'm sure?"

I STALKED out with the torn remnants of my dignity. I went through the kitchen to my back hallway, shut my door firmly with me on the outside rather than the inside. I worked my way back into the kitchen and got as near the doorway as I dared.

"If this doesn't carry you, Mrs. Barlow, you can get more any time."

"This should be enough, Mr. Bancroft. You understand, of course, that I'll have Miss Timbo represent me and handle the sale just as soon as the estate is settled."

"I understand. Say, what's this with Quinn? I asked around. He's a good man, I understand."

"It's a personal matter, Mr. Bancroft. If you hadn't given me your word you'd fire him, I don't think I'd want to promise to make this sale to you."

"A personal matter, eh?"

"Nothing important. Once we were alone

in the office. He called me something he shouldn't have."

Al's voice deepened. "Was it too accurate?"

I heard her gasp. Then she laughed. "That might have been it, you know."

"Which hotel are you going to, Andra?"

"Some place that isn't too fussy, where I can have a suite and some freedom and make my own breakfast. I was thinking of the Shelton."

"It's sort of run down, isn't it?"

"You'll have to come and visit me there, Mr. Bancroft. Maybe you can give me some ideas about decoration."

"I'll be around," he said.

I heard the stir as they got up. There was a long, odd silence. Then Andra said, in a low voice, "Aren't you taking quite a bit for granted, Al?"

"Not too much, I'd say."

Their voices faded away as they walked to the front door. I went back to my room and shut the door quietly. I stretched out on the bed, dozed off without any intention of so doing. A tap on the door awakened me. I looked at my watch. It was nearly five.

Celia said, "Dib? Mike's here."

I came out, knuckling my eyes. She said in a low voice, "Andy's napping."

Mike was pacing the living room. He came quickly over to me. "Got something," he said in a low tone. He held out his hand. On it was a flattened 32 caliber cartridge case, one that had been ejected by an automatic.

"Where did you get it?"

"On a hunch I went to where Quinn lives. His car was out in the alley. It wasn't locked. I found this under the edge of the floor mat. Then he came out and damn near caught me in the act. I've got a borrowed car. I went back to it and followed him. He went into the office and he's there now. Let's get hold of McGelvie and have him meet us there. Put the heat on Quinn. This ought to do it."

I glanced at Celia. She nodded. Mike headed for the phone in the hall. He kept his voice low. They gave him another number to call. He dialed again, and we heard him tell McGelvie where to meet us. McGelvie apparently put up no argument.

As the bucket seats on my car will only handle two, the three of us went in Mike's

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borrowed car. He pulled over to the curb half a block from the Barlow Construction Company building. An old sedan was in the lot.

"Still there," he said, with satisfaction. "We'll wait for McGelvie."

It was ten minutes before McGelvie came. He saw us and pulled over, parked ahead of us and came back as we were getting out of the car.

"What's up?" he asked.

Mike took over. "Mr. Hutcheon, Miss Barlow and I, Lieutenant, are convinced that Quinn killed Barlow. We suspect that Mrs. Barlow may have been implicated. Here's what I found in Quinn's car. We want to ask him about it, or better, have you handle it for us. He's inside the building now."

McGelvie stood hesitantly for a long time. "Motive?"

"Mrs. Barlow is a pretty good motive for Quinn. And as far as she is concerned, Lieutenant, Barlow wouldn't sell out Crestwinds to Bancroft and make some money. Now she can sell to Bancroft. In fact, Miss Barlow tells me that Mrs. Barlow has already made a tentative offer to sell it and the company to Al Bancroft for over eighty thousand dollars."

McGelvie bounced the bit of brass up and down in his hand. He shrugged. "I'd like more preparation, but come on. We'll give it a whirl."

Quinn didn't answer the knock. The door was unlocked. We walked in and stopped. The swivel chair had gone over with Quinn. The automatic was a few inches from his hand. Celia walked blindly out into the other room as McGelvie knelt beside the body.

He looked up with a grimace. "Right up into the roof of the mouth." He took a long slow look around, then got to his feet and backed away.

"Who killed him?" Mike demanded.

"Teeth aren't touched," McGelvie said. "So, there's only one answer. He gave it to himself. I better do some fast phoning."

"Dead long?" Mike asked.

"I'm no expert. Half hour, maybe."

Suddenly there was the sound of quick heels crossing the bare board floor of the outer office. The pretty fresh-faced girl I had met, Jenny Berlin, appeared in the doorway. She stared at us. She stepped forward, leaned across the desk and looked

down. She pushed herself erect, tottered and fell. I lunged for her and caught her, carried her over to the dingy couch under the window. Behind me I could hear McGelvie telephoning, his voice cold and cryptic. Celia came in and helped me with Jenny Berlin.

We brought her out of it just before the doctor arrived. She had begun to sweat profusely. "Intense emotional shock," the doctor muttered. "Know where she lives?"

"Yes," Celia answered in a small voice.

The doctor took out a hypodermic, swabbed her arm, injected it neatly. "Get her home and put her to bed. Keep an eye on her."

"I'll stay with her," Celia promised.

Lab men had crowded into the office. Flash bulbs popped. McGelvie said, "I guess we won't need Miss Barlow right away. Sergeant, run her and Miss Berlin wherever they want to go. Myers, pick up Mrs. Barlow and take her downtown. Michaels, you and Hutcheon come with me."

CHAPTER SIX

The Fatal Yawn

I MADE a long statement. Mike made a long statement. All that time McGelvie and two other men were closeted with Andra in McGelvie's office. The lights had gone on and there was night rain outside before Andra came out, white-faced, chin high. McGelvie, for once, looked beaten down. His collar was open. He came and sat on the edge of a desk and hung a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. Mike and I looked at him expectantly.

He gave us a weary smile. His eyes were tired. "You boys had a nice idea. But it didn't work out that way."

"You let her go?" Mike said hotly.

"Nothing else to do. Couldn't trip her anywhere. Seems Quinn was always trying to corner her and make a fast pass at her. That's why she didn't like him. Last few weeks he's been phoning her, saying obscene things over the phone. She didn't tell anybody. Didn't want to make a row. Knew how much her husband depended on Quinn. It's pretty certain that Quinn fired those shots at Barlow, then later gave it to him in the back and dumped him out of the car last Tuesday night. Crazy jealousy. Mrs.

Barlow told us fifty times that she's never seen Quinn outside the office. I believe her."

"When Quinn phoned her," Mike said, "couldn't she have—sort of urged him to do something?"

"We've got no proof, Michaels, and

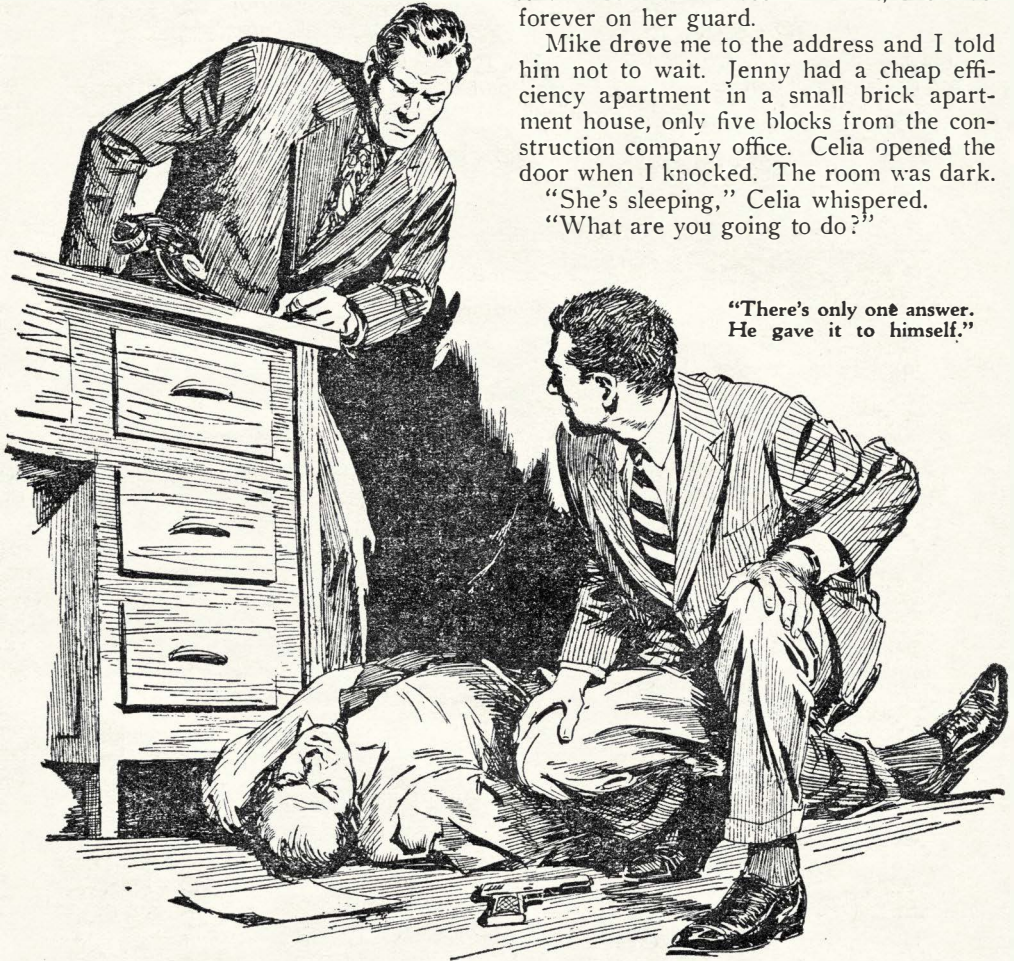
Wait a bit. I'll see if I can find it."

He came back with the address and I wrote it on the back of the card on which Mike, the previous evening, had written down Molly Dane's address. I would be calling Molly Dane and begging off. There was no more reason to stay around Walkerton. If Andra had been in on it, she'd be forever on her guard.

Mike drove me to the address and I told him not to wait. Jenny had a cheap efficiency apartment in a small brick apartment house, only five blocks from the construction company office. Celia opened the door when I knocked. The room was dark.

"She's sleeping," Celia whispered.

"What are you going to do?"



"There's only one answer. He gave it to himself."

that's a hell of a thing to say about a woman without proof."

Mike flushed. "Maybe we've been carried away by our own theories, Lieutenant."

He shrugged. "It didn't do any harm. She's in the clear. I guess I was carried away myself by that robbery idea I had."

"Do you know where the Berlin girl lives?" I asked.

He stood up. "We got it in the files.

"Stay here with her. Dib, what happened? What did they find out?"

I went in with her. We sat in two chairs by the windows. Jenny Berlin was sleeping on a studio couch that opened into a bed. I could just make out the pale outline of her face, her dark hair against the pillow. In a low voice I told Celia all that had happened.

She was silent for a long time. She said, "Now Andra will really hate us."

"I don't suppose it matters much."

"I suppose not. I don't think we'll see much of her from now on, Dib."

"Maybe she wasn't in on it at all."

"I can't feel that certain. Somehow, I know she was."

We sat for a long time in the darkened room, hearing the drugged breathing of the girl. "Jenny had quite a reaction," I said.

"She told me many times that she liked working for Cal and Quinn. I suppose Cal's death was the first shock, and then this was a little too much for her."

"Nice kid."

"Awfully nice, Dib."

"Are you going to sit up all night?"

"No. I'm going to take off my shoes and lie down beside her. There's enough room."

"I'll pick you up in the morning. Nine or so?"

"All right. Are you going—back there?"

"I guess it's safe. I guess I'm off her list. I'll lock my door, maybe."

"She has a perfectly foul temper, Dib."

"I'm a big boy now. See you in the morning, honey."

I went back to the house. No Andy. I waited until I got sick of waiting, then pried off a screen and climbed in. I had some cereal and went to bed.

A car motor awakened me much later. It was four a.m. by my watch. I looked out the window. It was Andra. She seemed unsteady on her feet, but happy. She hummed in a throaty way, stomped through the house, hummed her way upstairs and banged her door shut.

I parked the Jag near Jenny's place at quarter to nine. Jenny was up. She was chalk pale and her eyes were enormous. Every few moments a dry, aching sob would catch in her throat. Celia looked as if she had been clubbed across the head.

Celia pulled me into the apartment, pushed me toward a chair. Her voice was thin and fast. "Dib, we've been talking ever since she woke up at six. I want you to hear her story. You don't mind, Jenny?"

"I—don't mind, Celia."

"Tell us about Harry Quinn."

"I was in love with him and he was in love with me. I know he was a lot older, but that didn't matter. He was gruff because he was shy. We were to be married. He said we should wait and find out

whether his job would last. Nobody knew about it. We were very careful in the office."

"Did he have any reason to kill himself?"

"His health was perfect. He'd just had a checkup. Harry would never have killed himself."

"Where was Harry a week ago yesterday?"

"We left early in the morning. I made a picnic lunch. We left at six and we didn't get back into town until after dark."

"Where was Harry the night Cal was murdered?"

"The police asked him that. He lied to protect me. He said he went to bed early. He was here in this apartment from the time he left the office until two thirty in the morning. I had two big steaks for us. He—loved steak. He finished his own and half of mine." Her eyes clouded and she went to the windows, stood with her elbows cupped in her hands, her shoulders hunched, as though she stood in the rain.

Celia looked at me, her eyes a blazing blue. "Now what do you think!"

"Give me a chance to think." One minute all the pieces were up in the air, flying around my head. And then they settled into a pattern.

"Is there a phone here, Jenny?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I'll be back," I said.

I WENT out and called Miss Timbo. I said, "You informed Cal of the Bancroft offer on Monday. You heard of the offer Saturday. Did you inform anybody else before you informed Cal?"

"Yes. I told Mr. Quinn about it, on Saturday at about nine thirty. I think it was Mr. Barlow wasn't in the office." I thanked her and hung up.

I phoned Mike. I told him I had to have some work done on my car. I asked him which garage he patronized. He told me.

I went back to the apartment. Jenny confirmed a guess. Mike had dropped in the office on Saturday morning about ten and talked to Quinn for a while. Jenny wanted to come with us. She said she would rather do anything than be left alone. So we brought her along, even though it was uncomfortable for the third person to ride in the car. We went to the garage.

Mike's car was on the top floor, pretty

well stripped. I talked to the man who worked on it.

He said, "Sure, a cigarette would do it. If you dropped the cigarette into a puddle of gas on the seat. That thing really blazed, brother. But I don't ask questions."

My next stop was at the desk of the Shelton. The room clerk checked his records. "Yeah, we're usually filled up. Mr. Michaels is holding one for a friend." He winked at me. "He's been paying the rent on it."

"A tall blonde friend with a suntan?"

"Brother, I haven't seen a thing."

I went back out and made my report as I drove to the address Mike had given me for Molly.

I introduced the girls. Without any preamble, I told Molly, quite bluntly, what was on my mind. She sat down as though somebody had hit her.

"I like my fun," she said, "but not in the kind of dose I had that night. Frankly, I passed out, and not on too many drinks either. I laid it to a weakened condition. It was his bourbon. Sure he could have

slipped something into it. I wouldn't be able to tell from the taste. I hate the taste of bourbon so bad I hold my nose while I drink it. I have a vague memory of half waking up. I was on a back seat whipping through the countryside, under a blanket, with Mike driving."

"You see," I said, "you're his alibi."

She was very sober. "That, my friend, is not quite to my liking."

"Will you help us?"

"Not Molly. Molly plays piano, not Dick Tracy."

Jenny spoke up. She kept her voice low, practically a monotone. History of Jenny Berlin and Harry Quinn. She finished and the room was silent.

"Now will you help?" Jenny asked.

Molly stood up. She paced in a long-legged way. "It's out of my line. Besides, what guy is going to let somebody stick a gun in his mouth?"

"We can figure out something," I said.

Molly cocked her head on one side, half shut her eyes. "Please, folks. Don't run Molly in on this. Besides, I'm dead for sleep."

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She gave a terrific yawn that threatened to dislocate her jaw.

I jumped up. "Suppose a lieutenant of police asks you to cooperate?"

She grinned. "Then it will be out of my hands; won't it?"

Celia came into McGelvie's office with me. He looked tired and bored.

I sat close to McGelvie. I managed to slide the cap pistol from the dime store under the edge of my thigh. Celia yawned.

I said, "Lieutenant, if I can show you how that wasn't suicide, will you play along with us on one last wild goose chase?"

He sneered politely. "You must have quite a theory."

Celia yawned again, so thoroughly that she made a little yowling sound. I watched McGelvie's jaw muscles tighten. He tried to hold it back. Too late. His mouth gaped and his eyes squeezed shut. When his teeth closed again, they closed on the barrel of the cap gun. He was the most astonished man in the world.

"What the hell?" he grunted.

"Quinn had been working hard. A yawn is a pretty contagious thing, even to somebody who has had plenty of rest. Michaels called on Quinn. He didn't go by as he said he did."

"Michaels! Now listen to me . . ."

"Shut up, Lieutenant," Celia said briskly, "and listen to Dib."

He stared at her in surprise. I went on with my story.

IT WAS crowded in Molly's small bathroom. A sergeant named Myers, Lieutenant McGelvie and myself.

McGelvie had the place near the door, which was ajar. Myers had his equipment set up. As McGelvie nodded, Myers set the needle gently on the blank disc.

Mike said, "Where the hell is the fire, Molly, my lass? You sounded urgent over the phone."

"Oh, I'm an urgent kid. Sit down, Mike. I need some money."

"I can loan you a little, I guess."

"Oh, this would have to be a gift, Mike. Would five thousand be too much?"

He roared with laughter. "What kind of a joke is this?"

"Oh, it's some joke. It's all about a girl who passed out in your car, but not so far

that a lot of memories haven't come back to her. Funny memories. And then that fire. Mike, does a fire burn blood off a car seat?"

"That's a funny question."

"How funny can you get, Mike? I saw you get together with a blonde Saturday, Mike. I got a headache and begged off from work. I've been nosing around. That blonde gets a nice piece of money soon, doesn't she? Barlow's widow."

Molly was good. Her voice was full of teasing, and greed.

"What are you trying to say?"

"Mike, honey, don't be dull. You killed Barlow. Hell, I heard you do it, and I saw him in that ditch."

There was a long silence. He said in a low husky voice, "You don't knock out so easy, do you?"

"What do you care? That blonde has enough money for both of us. And don't tell me she wasn't in on it."

"In on it? It was the blonde's idea."

"When do I get the five thousand, Mike?"

"Never, Molly," he said softly. "Never."

There was an old, thumping sound. McGelvie tore the door open and ran into the next room. I followed him. Mike's face was the face of a trapped animal. Molly lay on the rug, stirring weakly. Mike smashed the door open. McGelvie took careful aim and smashed his knee beyond repair. . . .

That was four months ago. Yesterday Michaels was electrocuted. Andra drew twenty years, thus proving the effects of legs on a jury. And this morning a letter came. For me. I read it, then flipped it across my breakfast table to Mrs. Hutcheon. She read it and winked at me.

She said, "How many women are there in your life anyway, Dib?"

"You don't have to worry about that one."

"Why not?"

"Events sort of soured her. She's happy enough, doing the work she likes."

My girl stood up. I finished my coffee, glanced at the letter again. Funny how precise and neat Celia's writing was.

I decided that I was glad Molly had wanted to get away from Walkerton. A face like that. First it's ugly. Then it's cute. And one day you wake up and find out that it's beautiful.

FORGOTTEN KILLER

Jerry was scared, plenty scared. For disaster was sitting on the front porch with a banjo on his knee, and only Jerry knew.

"That's right," he said kind of proudly, as if he were famous. "I'm Ronnie Smithers."



THE big detective sat there at his desk staring at me and drumming his fingers on the desk-top. Behind him on the wall the minute hand of the clock moved and you could hear it tick. That's how quiet it was in there; you could hear the clock and you could hear the noises of the street, the autos and buses and the whistle of the traffic cop through the open window.

I got up and said, "Maybe I'd better go home now."

"Sit down, kid," the big detective said. "Sit down."



By PHILIP WECK

I sat down.

The detective got some papers out of a drawer and rustled them around.

"It's getting late," I said. "I got lots of things to do."

"Just sit down, kid," the detective told me. "The captain will want to talk to you."

So I sat there for another ten minutes.

Then, finally, the door on the left, the one marked *Chief of Detectives*, opened and the little detective came out.

"All right, kid," he said. "The captain will see you now."

We went into the captain's office. It wasn't much better than the one I'd just left; the walls needed paint and the floors were worn and the desk and chairs were scuffed up pretty bad. The captain was a big, fat man. I've never seen anybody as fat as he was. His hair was mussed up, a dirty gray, and cigar ashes were all over his vest.

He was talking on the telephone, and I took a chair across from him and waited. The detectives sat down, too, on a bench along the wall.

Finally the captain hung up and folded his hands on the desk in front of him and stared at me.

"Okay, kid, what's this all about?"

"It's nothing," I answered. "It's nothing at all. I just thought maybe you'd heard of this Ronnie Smithers and you could tell me something about him."

The captain nodded his head slowly as if he knew all about this. Then he picked up a pencil. "What's your name and address?"

I told him: "Jerry Bestor. Seventeen. 3032 Stephens Avenue."

"You go to school?"

Yeah, I was a junior in City High School. But what was this all about? Why did they have to know all this?

"You play on the basketball team, don't you?"

I said, "Yeah."

The captain fiddled around with the pencil. "Look, kid, you're clean. You got a good reputation. You don't want to get in a jam, do you?"

I said, "No sir, I sure don't. I just wanted to know. I thought maybe this Ronnie Smithers had a police record or something and you could tell me."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you want to know?"

Well, he had me there. I did a lot of fast thinking before I could dream up an answer, and then it wasn't very good. "I just heard his name, that's all."

"Where did you hear it?"

"Well," I said slowly, "some of the fellows were talking."

"What fellows?"

He sure was pinning me down. "Just some fellows, that's all. On the bus. I really couldn't tell you who they were."

"And what made you think Ronnie Smithers might have a police record?"

I made it up as I went along; I didn't want to tell them the truth. "The way they were talking, see. They didn't say anything definite about him, but the way they were talking made me think so."

The captain scratched on a sheet of paper with his pencil. "And you came in here and asked if he had a police record because you were curious. Is that it?"

I said, "Yeah, that's it."

WITH one eyebrow sort of half-raised, the captain looked over at the two detectives, and then down at the paper on his desk. After a minute he went on, his voice low and tired.

"Kid, remember what I told you about not getting in trouble. Just keep that in mind all the time. A young fellow like you gets in a jam and before he knows it his whole life is a mess. He's ruined everything; he's made a lot of people sorry they ever knew him. Don't you forget that."

I said, "No, sir."

He sat there and waited. Nobody spoke. It was sort of as if they were expecting me to say something.

But I didn't.

Finally the captain said, "Okay, Jerry, you can go now, I guess."

"Thanks, Captain." I got up and walked to the door.

"Just a minute," the big detective called out.

I stopped.

"Anything else you want to tell us, Jerry?"

"No," I said. "Nothing else."

I went through the other office and down the corridor to the elevator. Not until I was outside on the street did I realize that they hadn't answered my question.

Well, it didn't make much difference, I figured. Something sure was fishy. I could tell from the way they acted.

And what was I going to do about it?

I took a bus home. Francie, my sister, had dinner waiting for me; it was almost five o'clock by the time I got there. But she didn't ask me where I'd been. She was all excited about something else.

I shoveled my way through the hot dogs and sauerkraut while she talked about the weather and about Mrs. Smith next door who had rheumatism and about her boss and what he'd done that morning. Then, finally, when she was pouring the coffee, she said, "Are you going out tonight, Jerry?"

"No," I said. "I've got a lot of homework."

"You can catch up on it later. Why don't you go to the movie? There's a good picture on."

"I saw it."

"Well, why don't you go over to see Buzz? Maybe you could study together."

"Buzz is sick. Look, Francie, is that big slob coming over again tonight?"

She got mad. She always got mad when I talked about him like that. "Yes, he is coming over! And don't call him a slob! He'd pin your ears back if he ever heard you."

"With what?" I asked. "His git-tar?"

She said, "He has something important he wants to talk about and I thought it would be nice if you'd leave us alone."

I felt sick. I felt shaky in the pit of my stomach and my hands were perspiring.

"Francie," I said, "are you going to marry him?"

She didn't answer, so I grabbed her by the shoulder and turned her around to face me.

"Are you?"

Her face got red. "If he asks me."

"I wish you wouldn't," I said.

That got her mad, too. "And why not?" she yelled. "I'd just like to know why not! He's a perfectly decent, hard-working, intelligent young man. I'd like to know just one reason why I shouldn't."

I didn't have any reason—at least any that she wouldn't laugh at. I said, "Just give me a couple of days. That's all I ask; a couple of days. Then you'll have your reasons."

"You and your crazy ideas! Don't you

try any of your funny stuff, Jerry! I'm warning you!"

For a minute I thought she was going to cry, she was so mad. At any rate, I decided I'd better shut up.

After the dishes were done I went over to Sally's just to keep Francie happy and we listened to her record-player and cracked the Latin book a bit. About ten, when Sally's old man was giving me dirty looks, I went back home.

It was a nice, clear night with a lot of moonlight. Half a dozen cars were parked along our street and from the corner I could see Ken's fancy convertible, with the top down. They were still in the house, I thought.

I was wrong, though. They were on the porch, sitting on the swing way back where it was dark and no one could notice them from the street. Francie called me over as soon as she saw me.

"I want you to see something, Jerry," she said.

It was a ring, on the third finger of her left hand. I'm not much of a judge of sparklers but that one was mighty big. It must have set him back plenty.

I JUST stared at it. Where does a guy working on an assembly line get the money to buy a ring like that? Where does he get the dough to drive a nice car like he did?

I thought maybe I knew. I was so sick my hands were shaking and I had to lean against the railing of the porch. I could remember the old man telling me to take care of Francie before he died. Take care of her! And I should let her marry this fellow?

Francie asked, "Aren't you going to say anything?"

I stammered around a bit and finally I blurted out, "Well, gee, that's swell, congratulations," and they laughed.

"We're going to be married in two weeks," she said. "On the seventeenth."

After a minute I realized they were waiting for me to say something else. So I asked, "How about a song on your guitar to celebrate, Ken?"

That made them laugh again but I didn't care. Ken agreed. "Okay, but just one. It's pretty late."

"I'll get it," I told him.

The guitar was in his car where he al-

ways kept it, the big hana. Our front porch is behind a lilac bush; when I got the guitar I was hidden from them on the swing. I opened up the case and took another look at the label I'd seen there the day before. Maybe it was all a bad dream, I thought. Maybe I'd made a mistake when I read it.

But I hadn't. It was still there and it still read, *This guitar is the property of Ronnie Smithers.*

Another label beside it said, *Sol Miklis, Musical Instruments. 1126 Third Avenue, New York City.*

I closed the case and took it up on the porch, and Ken played and sang "The Blue Bottle Fly" real soft so it wouldn't disturb Mrs. Murphy next door.

But I wasn't listening. My hands were wet again while I watched him, and I was thinking about this Ronnie Smithers business.

You see, I wasn't quite sure. I had a pretty good idea, and from what had happened at the police station, I knew that idea wasn't far from wrong. But I couldn't come right out and accuse him.

All I was positive about was that the name Ronnie Smithers was familiar; I'd heard it before. And I hadn't heard anything good about it. It made me think about Dillinger and Baby-Face Nelson and all those gangsters the old man used to tell me about.

What was this fellow who said his name was Ken York doing with a guitar that used to belong to Ronnie Smithers?

What was he doing buying expensive diamond rings and expensive automobiles while he worked on the assembly line?

I almost asked him right then and there. But when he finished the song and reached down and grabbed Francie's hand and squeezed it, I changed my mind.

All he'd have to do was say he'd bought it second-hand or found it and Francie would believe him. And she'd be mad at me for asking. And what would it prove? If he really was Ronnie Smithers, would he tell the truth?

I mumbled something about homework and went up to my room and sat at the desk by the window and tried to think it out.

Was this Ken York really Ronnie Smithers? And if he was, who was Ronnie Smithers? Why did I think he was a hood or a gangster? Why did the cops get so ex-

cited when I just mentioned his name?

And also, if he wasn't Ronnie Smithers, where did he get all the dough he was splashing around?

For a long while I just sat there staring out the window. I was probably crazy, I decided. Ken was a good guy and I was borrowing trouble. And then, suddenly, I realized that a man was standing there on Mrs. Murphy's front lawn, half hiding behind a tree.

He was hidden so well that I hadn't noticed him before. He might have been there all evening, so far as I could tell. He didn't move; he didn't do anything but stand there behind the tree, looking over toward our house. It kind of scared me.

While I watched him, I could hear Francie and Ken on our porch, saying good night, I guess. Finally Ken came down the steps and got into his car and drove off.

The stranger moved then. He walked fast and quietly, like a shadow, to a car parked across the street, and he got into it and drove after Ken.

And when he drove by, past a street-light, I got a look at his face. He was the little detective I'd talked to that afternoon.

The cops were tailing Ken.

I SAT there staring out of the window. Downstairs, Francie was locking the door; pretty soon I heard her coming up the stairs. I couldn't talk to her then. I doused the light and climbed under the covers and pretended that I was asleep when she opened the door of my room and peeked in.

What was I going to do? The more I wrestled with the problem, the more I realized that there was only one answer. I had to find out who Ronnie Smithers really was. And there was only one place where I might be able to find out.

I got up real early the next morning and left a note for Francie about having some special studying to do at school. Then I took a train for New York; it's only an hour's ride from home and I had just enough dough for a round-trip ticket with a buck left over for carfare and lunch.

I've been in New York lots of times and I didn't get lost trying to find the place I wanted. But I did walk right by it a couple of times. You see, I was looking for a fancy music store. Sol Miklis' place wasn't

fancy at all, and it wasn't a music store. It was a hock shop, dirty, and gloomy, and dark.

It had a long counter along one side with accordions and saxophones in one showcase and watches and rings and stuff like that in another. On the opposite side were suits and overcoats hanging on a rack. The place had only one window, in front, and a door leading to the back. I guess it hadn't been swept or mopped in months; it was filthy and you could smell the dust. A little bell tinkled when I opened the door; the place must have been a hundred years old.

A lady was sitting on a stool behind the counter.

"Whaddaya want, kid?" she asked when she saw me.

I walked over to the counter and pretended I was looking at one of the accordions.

"You got something to hock?"

I said, "Well, no, not exactly."

"Stole goods we don't deal in. If it's yours we look at it."

I didn't know how to ask what I wanted so I took my wristwatch off and handed it to her.

A man came through the door in the back, a tall, skinny man with a face that should have been on a corpse. It was lined and wrinkled and it had a dead, ugly, gray-green color.

"A watch; he says it's his own," the woman said.

He walked up to her and she handed him the watch. But he hardly even glanced at it.

"Three bucks," he said.

Three dollars! The big gyps! It was the watch we won in the state basketball tour-

nement the year before and it was worth fifty anyway.

He turned it over. My name was engraved on the back with the business about the state championship.

"This your name?" he asked. "Jerry Bestor? That you?"

I said, "Yeah, sure. Look, maybe I don't want to hock that watch. Maybe I want something else."

He looked at me bleakly, with his little, black eyes. "Well, what do you want, sonny?"

So I told him right out. "I'm trying to find Ronnie Smithers."

The man's expression didn't change a bit. "And who's Ronnie Smithers?" he asked. "I should know?"

I said, "Sure, you know him! Don't kid me, Pop, you know him."

The man shrugged. "You wait," he said. Then he handed the watch to the woman and shuffled off toward the back room.

"Sol!" the woman cried.

He didn't even turn around.

"It's only a boy!" she cried. "Sol, don't; he's only a boy!"

But the man went through the door into the back room without slowing down.

She was frightened; I could see it in her eyes.

"You!" she said to me. "Get out of here! Go on, get out!"

I was so surprised I couldn't move.

"Hurry!" she said. "Please!"

But I was stubborn. "Look, lady, I've got to find out about Ronnie Smithers."

She bent over behind the counter and when she straightened up she had a gun in her hand. She pointed it right at me.

Boy, that barrel was big enough to toss

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

SENSATIONAL NEW **TING**
CREAM FOR
FOOT ITCH
(ATHLETE'S FOOT)
- REGULAR USE HELPS
RELIEVE ITCHING - SOOTHES
BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED
PEELING TOES -
AIDS HEALING
AMAZINGLY!

FIRST
USED
IN HOSPITALS
NOW
RELEASED TO
DRUGGISTS
GUARANTEED

TING MUST
SATISFY YOU IN
A WEEK - OR
MONEY BACK!



IN LAB TESTS
TING CREAM
PROVED EFFECTIVE
IN KILLING SPECIFIC
TYPES OF
ATHLETE'S FOOT
FUNGI ON
60 SECOND
CONTACT!

EVEN IF OTHER PRODUCTS
HAVE FAILED TRY AMAZING
TING CREAM TODAY!
GREASELESS, STAINLESS
ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 60¢ A TUBE




a basketball into. And her hand didn't waver.

"Get out!" she said. "Now!"

So I got out.

I didn't know where to go. I walked up Third Avenue for a while and then I had a coke in a drug store. I thought maybe I'd better go to the cops. But then I remembered what had happened when I'd gone to the cops at home.

I could go back to the Third Avenue hockshop. But that lady meant business. I'd never find out anything from her and I'd probably walk right into some kind of a jam.

So I finally took a train for home. I was stymied. Something was mighty fishy about this deal. I couldn't let Francie walk into it; not now I couldn't. There was only one thing left. Ask Ken what it was all about. Let him know just what I suspected and see what he said. Maybe I'd be able to tell if he was lying.

So I went home. Francie was still at work, of course, and I wrote a note saying, *I've gone to talk to Ken York* and left it in the mailbox. Then I hopped a bus and rode over to the plant where Ken worked. It was half-past four; the plant lets out at five.

But Ken didn't show. I waited by the main gate until almost everybody had left and he didn't come along. Finally Harry Markson ambled by and I asked him where Ken was.

"Ken?" he said. "I dunno, kid. He called up and said he had to go out of town for somethin'."

I was beat. I couldn't do anything about it that day. And maybe by the next day it would be too late.

LET me tell you, I was frightened. But not as frightened as when I got on the bus to go home. Because just before I got on I bought a newspaper and opened it and looked at the headlines as soon as the bus started to move.

There it was, right on the front page:

*New York Pawnbroker
and Wife Murdered*

Sol Miklis, the story said, and his wife, Annie, were found shot to death in their pawnshop a little after noon today . . .

Sol Miklis murdered! And Ken out of town!

And Francie—where was she? What if they'd decided to elope? What if I was too late to do anything about it now?

I wanted to scream at the bus driver to hurry up, to get me home as fast as he could. But I didn't; I sat there shaking, with the sweat dripping off me—a cold sweat, not the kind you get in a good workout.

The lady sitting beside me said, "What's the matter, son? Are you sick?"

I couldn't answer her. I just looked away, out the window.

We rode on and it seemed like it took an hour to go one block. But at last the bus turned down South Street, past Ken's apartment.

And there was his big, fancy convertible, parked in front.

He was back!

I jumped off at the next corner. I don't know just what I planned to do—tell him to stay away from Francie, maybe, or call the cops on him. At any rate, I ran all the way back to his apartment and right upstairs and into his place without even knocking.

It was a small apartment and there he was, sitting on the edge of the bed with his guitar on his lap and a sappy smile on his face.

"Hello, kid," he said. "What's up?"

I said, "Ken, you did it, didn't you?"

He grinned. "Sure, kid. Sure I did it."

"Why?" I asked. "Why did you kill them?"

With a funny expression, he got up and put the guitar on the bed.

"Kill who?" he asked. "What are you talking about, kid?"

"Miklis! Sol Miklis!" I shoved the newspaper into his hands. "Why did you do it, Ken?"

He read the story.

"Take a seat, kid," he said, his voice dead serious.

I sat down.

He reached into the inner pocket of his coat. Maybe this was it, I thought. Maybe he'd come out with a gun.

But it wasn't a gun. It was a piece of paper.

It was a wedding license.

"I went to the county seat for that," he

said quietly. "I didn't kill anybody, kid."

He meant it. And he looked like he was frightened a bit, too.

I said, "Then you're not Ronnie Smithers?"

"Good heavens! Where did you get that idea? What's the matter with you, kid?"

I was going to tell him then. But I didn't get a chance. Because the door opened and a man walked in.

I'd never seen a man who looked like that before, and I hope I never see one again.

He was tall and a little stooped, kind of young looking but with lines in his face. The worst part, though, was the color of his skin and eyes. The skin was a dead, pasty white and the eyes were cold, hard gray. The cold gray of a fish's eyes. They looked right through you, like he didn't even see you; like he couldn't see, almost, but you knew he could. He was wearing a big leather jacket, too big for him, and a pair of khaki pants.

Quietly, he closed the door behind him and stood there, glaring first at me and then at Ken.

"Hello, Ken," he said.

"What are you doing here?" Ken asked.

He didn't answer. Instead, he saw the guitar on the bed and he picked it up.

"Betsy!" he said. "My old friend Betsy! I ain't seen her in eight years."

He strummed a couple of bars on it.

Then he looked at me and he said, "You're Jerry Bestor, aren't you, kid?"

I couldn't talk; I couldn't move.

HE PUT one hand in his pocket and brought out my watch and a slip of paper. It was the note I'd left for Francie.

"You done forgot that Annie had your watch, kid," he said. "It wasn't hard to find you with what's on the back of it and with Ken's name here in the phone book."

He tossed them both in my lap and the watch bounced off onto the floor.

"I reckon I come to the right place," he said. "I've been lookin' for both of you."

"What for?" Ken asked. "What do you want?"

"All I want," he said, "is a little peace. That's all. A little peace and quiet. But they won't let me have it."

He sat down on the edge of the bed, still holding the guitar in one hand. "It's the

cops, see? And the wise guys. I hate the wise guys worse than I hate the cops."

He looked at me.

"You're the one who got wise, kid. I don't know how, but you did."

He took a gun from his pocket, a great big gun, bigger than the woman's, bigger than my whole fist.

"So I got to kill you, kid," he said.

"You're Ronnie Smithers!"

"That's right," he said kind of proudly, as if he were famous. "I'm Ronnie Smithers."

I said, "But who are you? What did you ever do?"

The smile went out of his face. It had a sharp look, a hard, cruel, sharp look.

"Who's Ronnie Smithers?" I asked.

He got up and walked over close to me.

"You're fakin', kid! You're lyin' in your teeth! Everybody knows Ronnie Smithers."

"Honest," I said, "I don't know. I never heard of you. What did you do?"

He scraped the barrel of the gun across my face.

I could feel the front sight digging into my skin and a moment later the blood was dripping down to my collar. It was a long, deep, burning feeling, like a floor burn from basketball, only worse.

"You're lyin' in your teeth!" he said.

Over on the bed, Ken said, "Don't hit him again, Ronnie!"

He swung the gun at Ken. "I'll hit him when I damn please! You tell him who I am! Go ahead, tell him!"

So Ken told me. "Ronnie Smithers is a dead man, kid. A dirty, murdering, yellow rat who's supposed to be dead. He broke out of Sing Sing and the story is that he was hit by a bullet from a guard and died later."

Those cold, ugly eyes went from Ken to me and they were even colder now, smaller, glaring at me and yet not even seeing me.

"I'm the only man who ever broke out of the death house," he said. "Everybody knows Ronnie Smithers, kid. I killed four people; everybody knows me."

"We used to play in the same hillbilly band; that's how I knew him," Ken said. "But he wasn't a killer then. I don't want any part of him now. Sol Miklis was his cousin; I wish I hadn't bought that guitar from him after Ronnie went up. But I had

a lot of dough then; I've still got some of it."

"I killed a cop and a guard at Sing Sing," Smithers said. "I killed a man in a filling station and an old lady in a candy store. I killed Sol and Annie; that makes six. And I'm goin' to kill you two."

He sighed a little; he almost sounded sad.

"But nobody's goin' to know it," he went on. "Nobody's goin' to know I killed Sol and Annie and you two. That's why I got to kill you; nobody can go to the cops and tell 'em I'm still alive."

I said, "Sol and Annie didn't. Why did you kill them?"

"They let you get away, didn't they? They got careless and let you get away and then Annie wouldn't hand over your watch. Nobody holds out on Ronnie Smithers."

Ken said, "You're still a murdering yellow rat, aren't you, Ronnie?"

Ronnie Smithers put the guitar on my lap.

"Hold this, kid," he said. "One of you tells me he never heard of me; the other tells me I'm yellow. I've had enough."

He turned the gun toward Ken and raised it just a bit, a little bit, until it was pointed right at Ken's head.

That was when I smashed him on the wrist with the guitar, just before he fired.

The bullet skidded into the floor and I dropped the guitar and grabbed his wrist before he could shoot again.

He let out a bellow and his other hand, his big left hand, went around my throat.

Tighter and tighter it squeezed. Everything went red in front of my eyes, then black. Somehow I knew that Ken had jumped on him and we tumbled to the floor, but that hand didn't let go of my throat. And I couldn't let go of the other hand with the gun in it. If I did, we'd be dead, Ken and me. I hung on while the black

curtain closed down over my eyes and my brain loosened and whirled around and around and I could hear trains roaring and whistles blowing and a rumble that filled my ears and grew louder and louder and louder.

Then, somehow, the rumble wasn't quite so loud; the darkness had changed into a light gray and somebody tapped my shoulder and said, "You can let go now, kid."

It was the big detective, the one I'd talked to in the captain's office. I looked around. Ronnie Smithers was lying on the floor, out cold, and Ken and the big detective were prying his hand off my throat and the room was full of cops.

All kinds of cops. City cops and state cops and uniformed cops and plainclothes cops. Even a couple from New York, I found out later, and a couple of FBI men.

The cops had never believed that Ronnie Smithers was dead; they were still looking for him. The big detective had been tailing me ever since I'd mentioned Smithers to them and the little one tailing Ken because they'd found out he spent a lot of time in our house and they didn't believe that bunk I'd told them. They'd followed me to New York and Ken to the county seat, and they both hung around outside waiting when we went into Ken's place. When they saw Ronnie show up, they called everybody else and surrounded the joint. They went in when they heard Ronnie's shot.

Well, they patched up my cheek and hauled Ronnie away, and after I'd explained everything they let us go.

First, though, one of the FBI men said, "There's a reward out for this guy, kid, and some of it ought to go to you."

I said, "Good." I tried to grin but I couldn't on account of the bandage on my cheek. "Good. I need it. I've got to buy a wedding present mighty soon."

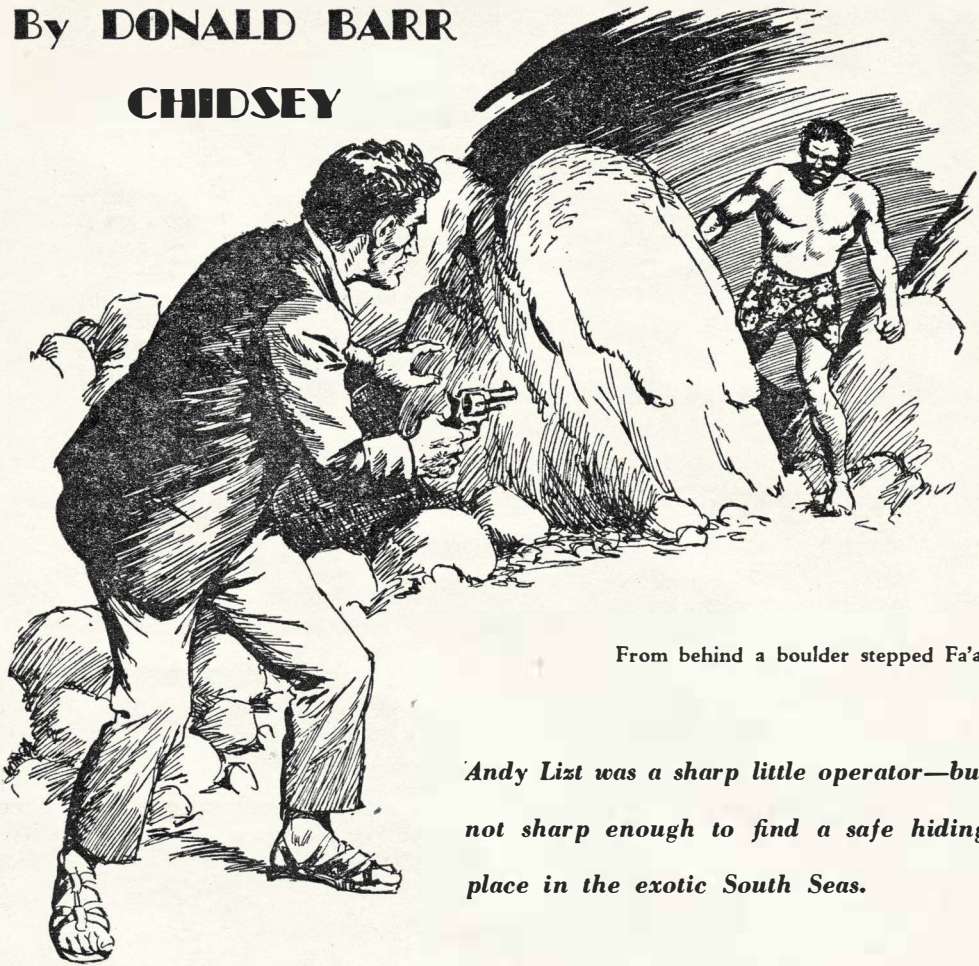
NOT IN THE BOOK

In Washington, D. C., yeggmen broke open an office metal cash box which had a sign on it reading: "Please make note of all monies added or taken from petty cash. Must have for bookkeeping records." But the mean old burglars didn't do it.

Instead of taking water to a fire, the fire department of Cromer, England, took the fire to the water. A blazing tree was in an inaccessible spot, so the firemen cut it down and dragged it, still burning, to the fire engine on the road.

By **DONALD BARR**

CHIDSEY



From behind a boulder stepped Fa'a.

Andy Lutz was a sharp little operator—but not sharp enough to find a safe hiding place in the exotic South Seas.

INCIDENT AT OPUNOHU

THE peaks that fringe Opunohu Bay rise in spires and abrupt pinnacles, spectacular, theatrical, unlike anything else in the world; but Andy Lutz, though he had lived in their shadow for three months, was not interested in them.

He was a small man, unexpectedly pale, with a ferret face. He always wore, besides shirt, trousers and sandals, a coat. This was to hide his revolver.

Tense, wary, he walked with a careful step. Amid scenery celebrated even in that land of sensational natural beauty, his interests were man-made. He was watching the launch from Papeete, which had just touched at Harry Mason's and was now headed for the outer lagoon. Had it brought mail? Lutz had no interest in that. Nobody knew that he was down here—or at least, he *hoped* nobody did. Passengers? Not

likely. Not many people visited Opunohu Bay. Tourists sometimes made the trip on the launch, the *Taporo*, just in order to circle the bay and see the famous peaks; but they didn't come ashore.

What Litz really sought—and what the *Taporo* had almost certainly brought, in addition to canned goods—was gossip. The launch had been fast to the dock for no more than a few minutes, but a lot of talking can be done in that time, and Harry Mason and his enormous servant Fa'a would by now be conversant with the more important of the recent doings elsewhere. In the South Seas, one vast whispering gallery, you live on word-of-mouth news, on rumor and gossip. You eat it, breathe it. Even the glummiest do. This man Litz was standoffish, suspicious, surly; but he was human.

He rounded a clump of hibiscus and came upon Harry Mason's. It was a trim cool house, made of pandanus thatch and bamboo, with a high peaked roof. Two men, Mason and a stranger, sat on the veranda. The stranger, big, genial, wore American clothes. He waved to Litz.

"Hi, Andy! Come on up."

Litz's nerves had never been good. Almost instinctively he reached for his revolver. Then he caught himself. No sense giving away the fact of the weapon's existence. And he'd been seen. He could hardly turn and run now.

He strolled the rest of the distance with what he hoped was nonchalance. He returned Mason's greeting. When he was introduced to the newcomer, one Arthur Reese, he nodded impersonally.

"You called me by name?" he said politely.

"Why not?"

"I don't think I've ever seen you before in my life."

"I don't think you have. I never saw you before, either. But I knew you right away from your pictures."

"Oh?" Litz laughed as easily as he could and dropped into a chair. "I didn't know I was famous."

Harry Mason said he'd make a drink. Fa'a was busy bringing up crates of food from the tiny dock, carrying three or four crates at once as though there were mere suitcases.

"It's pretty early for a drink," Litz said.

"It's never too early, Andy. Soda or water?"

"Well, water, then."

"Water for me too," said Reese.

When the host had gone inside, the two men looked at one another. It was very quiet. The water gave little love-slaps to the pebbles of the beach, and a few querulous goonies made complaint, circling high. The sun was hot, though low.

"Who are you?"

Reese smiled sleepily. He was a man who would ordinarily be wearing tweeds, a pipe-smoker.

"The insurance company," he answered.

"Oh."

"If you want to know how we did it—But it was routine."

"Save yourself the trouble."

"Nobody squealed, if that's what you're thinking."

"You wouldn't tell me if anyone had anyway."

"No, I guess you're right, at that."

THEY fell silent as Fa'a passed. What a man! In a scarlet *pareu* of flowered design, and nothing else whatever, he was magnificent, something to set sculptors agog. Six feet four, bronze, muscular, Fa'a was not young but without any stoop or softness. Nothing about him sagged, nothing flapped. He had high dignity. His gait, despite bare feet, was a king's.

"You understand, Andy," Reese resumed when the giant had gone, "we just want those bonds back, the Apperson bonds. That's all. We're not interested in prosecuting you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"We know you didn't steal them, only bought them from the party that did. In the nature of the thing it would be awkward to cancel those bonds, even if it was possible. I won't go into that. You know it perfectly well—or you wouldn't have paid what you did for them. You figured on laying low out here until things got quiet, and then maybe getting rid of the bonds back home for almost as much as they're worth."

Harry Mason came out with drinks. He was a quiet, middle-aged man, a somewhat mysterious man, who never asked questions. But then, not asking questions is a

habit, and a commendable one, among whites in that part of the world.

"It's been one hot day," Mason said.

"The heat has funny effects on some people," Andy Lizt said sourly, not looking at Reese.

Fa'a came back up the slope, carelessly toting a load three men would have staggered under. Andy Lizt nodded to him.

"Sometimes, Mason, that man gives me the heeby-jeebies. He's so big! And I never can talk to him, because I don't know the language. Don't know any French either."

"Oh, Fa'a's all right. He may not be much of a cook, but he's good at keeping the local gods appeased. Fa'a," Mason went on after studying the fire of his cigar, "as near as I can make out, is some sort of hereditary *tahuarahi*, or high priest."

"You don't mean to say these natives still practice the ancient religion?"

"Only Fa'a. The others are superstitious enough, but they profess to be Christians. Fa'a's made of sterner stuff. He's the keeper of a *marae* back of your house, Andy. High up, in an extinct volcano crater there. You've probably never even heard of it, much less seen it."

"I never go walking."

"So I've noticed. But if you should ever climb to this place I'm talking about, I'd advise you to do it some time when you're sure Fa'a is good and busy down here. I wouldn't be responsible for what he might do if he ever found anybody there."

"You mean," Reese asked, "he actually performs rites?"

"Yes, he does. I've watched him. He thought he was alone, of course. Otherwise he probably would have taken me to pieces."

"But you yourself said he's practically as faithful as a dog."

"He is. But a dog can go mad."

Fa'a appeared without a sound and said something to Mason. There was no expression on his face. Mason nodded, and talked to him for several minutes in Polynesian. The native inclined his head gravely and went back to the kitchen.

"We live such a simple life, sometimes it's hard to keep Fa'a busy. But he's got plenty today. He'll be at it till after dark."

"Tell us more about this ancient temple," said Reese.

"Well, I was only there once, and I didn't hang around long. It isn't safe. But as near as I can figure it out, it really is the site of a *marae*. Fa'a's evidently restored it. He's even got a *toere* up there."

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"And what may a *toere* be, please, professor?"

"A drum made out of one piece of wood covered with sharkskin. This one happens to be made of *ura*. It's only beaten when there's to be a blood sacrifice."

"Oh, now, see here!"

"Oh, I don't mean Fa'a cooks missionaries up there! But I do miss a chicken now and then, sometimes even a small pig. And whenever that happens I'm practically sure to hear the *toere* sounding away up there, that night. It goes *wum-wum-wum, wum-wum-wum.*"

"Matter of fact, I've heard that," Lizt admitted. "It gives me the willies. But at least I'm glad to learn it's real."

"Sure. It's right back of you. Let me get you another drink."

"Not for me, thanks."

"You, Reese?"

"I don't mind."

ONCE again the two guests were alone. Andy Lizt glared at Reese, who leaned back in his chair and half closed his eyes.

"Now, don't start trying to make a deal, Lizt. This is a touchy matter with the company. A hell of a lot more than just the money is involved—though I'll admit there's plenty of that, too."

He fetched some printed forms from his pocket. They were in French, and copiously besealed and beribbioned.

"The company went to a heap of trouble over this case, Lizt, before I even got aboard that freighter. We can swing a lot of pull when we need to. And not just in Frisco—all the way over to Paris. I've got papers here, Lizt, that mean I can call on any gendarme or government official anywhere in the group to help me. I've got the right to search your person and property and every place you've ever even visited here. Even the governor himself couldn't stop me."

Mason returned, with a couple of highballs. He did not appear to have heard anything. Lizt wondered what the two had been talking about, here on the veranda, before his own arrival. Had Harry Mason found out about this man Reese's occupation? Not likely. One thing you could say about Mason, he knew how to keep his trap shut. He made it a policy never to ask questions.

Now Mason expressed concern when he saw Lizt rise.

"Stick around, man! And take that coat off. What in the world do you ever wear a coat here for anyway? Here—"

Was he perhaps a bit tight? Playfully he tried to take off Lizt's coat. Lizt slipped away. Mason persisted. Lizt laughed, maybe not too convincingly, and said he really must go.

"I'll be seeing you," said Reese. "Soon."

Lizt acted his part, sauntering; but in fact, such was the state of his nerves that immediately after he had rounded the clump of hibiscus he broke into a run.

He was still running, if not as fast, when he reached his hut half a mile away. Unaccustomed to exercise, he panted heavily, and his face must have shown the strain. All the same, he did not hesitate. He went right to where he had buried the Apperson bonds and dug them up again. So obvious a place would no longer do. This man Reese was nobody's nitwit; and the outfit he worked for had plenty of resources.

The Apperson bonds were in an oiled silk bag, carefully sealed. Lizt counted them, through the bag, with his fingertips. They were all there. They made up a package about ten inches long, four inches across.

Properly speaking, there is no jungle on Moorea; but there is some tolerably thick woodland. Mostly it's open country, rocky, jagged, steep. Andy Lizt, panting more heavily than ever, did not dare to proceed in a straight line to his destination, a hidden extinct crater encircled by fantastic Stoneheng-like boulders and sometimes known locally, when it wasn't called by its native name, as The Tiara. He chose a circuitous course, seeking cover, going up ravines, along gulleys, through patches of wood. He never paused. He was panting and sobbing but he never paused.

Andy was used to low-ceiled places, and smoke. Furtive, speaking from a corner of his mouth, he was a whisperer in doorways, a fixer. Fresh air horrified him. And he had never known anything like this.

He slid, dislodging stones. Again and again he fell to hands and knees. It was dark among the trees, which stood around him—candlenuts, *vi* trees, *fajfais*, *ora* trees with their tangled grotesque roots—like menacing Druidical priests.

(Please continue on page 110)

BYWAYS OF CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON



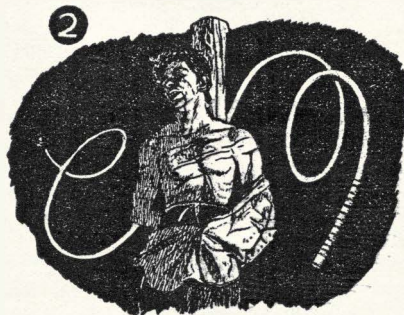
Among murderers, John Bolton bears a unique distinction—what happened to him would be roughly equivalent to betting that the favorite in the Irish Sweeps would come out ahead running backwards—and winning. John killed his wife, put the blame on a neighbor of exemplary character—a quiet sort of bird who, in John's estimation, was due for a blowout.

John's reasoning was completely correct. The neighbor in question had picked just this night for high revels—the only trouble was that at the moment John killed his missus a couple of cops were sitting on said neighbor's head, writing out summonses for disorderly conduct while intoxicated. This gave John's patsy a better alibi than John himself had, and, when John heard about it, something snapped.

He's now in a hospital for the criminally insane.

They do everything a little differently in France—even betrayal of LA PATRIE. In the important year of 1909, with the World War I looming on the horizon and Germany's unparalleled espionage system running amok in Europe, French naval authorities were thrown into a near-panic—some enterprising soul had swiped its key code. Shortly, however, they received an anonymous demand for 150,000 francs for its return and arrested the code-napper—one Charles Benjamin Ullmo, a midshipman—who would have cashed in much more handsomely and might have escaped detection entirely if he'd turned his coup over to the enemy.

Asked why he hadn't, he was horrified. "And betray my country?" he demanded. He got about a quarter of a century on Devil's Island, to figure it out.



Arrested and charged with murder for their part in the Boston Massacre—in which five citizens had died—the fate of a handful of captured British soldiers in Revolutionary Boston, 175 years ago, seemed hopeless.

But the public opinion which had started the Revolution, and which wanted the redcoats' execution, also assigned them an able American lawyer—and he won their acquittal. His name—John Adams, a signer of the Declaration, and later president of the U. S.

It happened during the war, near an army camp in southern England. A lady in her middle years was found murdered on a lonely lane. Only clue to the identity of her killer was a love letter in her purse, American in its idiom and signed with a nickname. The author of the letter was eventually proved to be a Private Hale Sillick, of the U. S. Army—but he had never met the dead woman, didn't know how to identify her killer. Private Sillick apparently had been helping less gifted comrades by writing love letters to order and had helped so many that he didn't remember the one that had lured a woman to death.

He was, of course, exonerated of all guilt in the killing. But he never wrote a love letter again.



◆ *When newscaster Jack Moorland happily mixed a blonde with his martinis—he didn't know he was keeping a corpse waiting.* ◆

CHAPTER ONE

Blonde in a Bar

I TOLD the bartender, "A little salt on the ice, then a half spoon of olive brine." He took care of that, poured in dry vermouth, then corrected any previous mistakes with a goodly portion of gin.

Then I said, "A lemon twist."

He dropped a lemon peel into the glass shaker. "I'm new here, sir. I guess the last guy knew how you like 'em."

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"Canned." He leaned over confidentially. "Waitress trouble." He snorted. "Hell! You know women!"

"Were you speaking of me?" From a few feet up the bar came a low, throaty chuckle. I traced it to a blonde sitting at the bar, smiling through the smoke of a cigarette she was lighting. She must have



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Rapid-Fire

Crime

Novelette

By **HANK NAPHEYS**

"You have a lot to tell me," Willy said.



**SLAYER,
COME BACK TO ME**

just come in. My eyes traveled down and stopped at one nylon leg crossed over the other. There was no sense looking away, so I didn't.

The bartender moved along the bar toward the blonde.

She said, "I'll have a martini just like—" She stopped and waited. When I looked up, a tiny hint of a smile flicked over her lips. "I've been trying to jot down your recipe," she told me. Her eyes dropped to a little notebook on the bar. "If you don't mind telling me—does the olive brine or the salt come first?"

"The salt on the ice starts the melting, like when you throw salt on an icy sidewalk," I said. I watched her jot that down.

When the bartender brought her martini, I asked him, "Any messages for Jack Moorland?" That was me. There wouldn't be any messages. I was just hoping the name might act on the blonde like the salt on the ice. She might have heard a newscast.

She had, and came up with the right question. "Are you *the* Jack Moorland?"

I made a modest gesture. The bartender gave me a dirty look and started polishing glasses.

The blonde leaned over. "Why, I just listened to your broadcast before leaving my apartment. The story you tell at the end is always very interesting. Where ever do you get all the ideas?"

"They just come to me," I lied, "begging to be told. Listen in tomorrow?"

Her smile was dazzling. "I wouldn't miss it for anything."

It was too good. She was even easier to take than martinis. We had four. We were Maris and Jack now—nice and chummy. But I had a feeling something was missing. Maybe she just liked my brand of cocktails, and that was that. Okay with me.

After the fifth I said, "I've got to be on my way, Maris." I managed a smile. "Well, I'll see you around."

She flashed big blue eyes up at me. "I'd really like to try my hand at putting a martini together."

I didn't say anything, just looked at her, trying not to howl. Then I suggested, "Well, my office isn't far from here. I share it with another fellow. And I believe in mixing pleasure with it. Otherwise it's like any other business office."

"I'm sure that would be all right, Jack." She got up.

I nodded as I picked up my change and cigarettes. We went out together.

In the sunlight of the street I really got a good look at her and she stood up under old Sol as well as under General Electric. And her dress might have been put on with an air-brush.

Her hand slipped under my arm as we walked along. About every man we passed nearly twisted his neck out of joint.

THE entrance to my building has a Moorish effect. The lobby is a chunk right out of old Granada. Even the cigar stand was set into a Moorish arch. Behind the cigar stand was a lone telephone booth.

Maris nodded toward this, saying, "I've got to make a personal call, Jack. You go on up and I'll be right with you."

"Eight-oh-six," I said and began to wonder if this was the brush-off.

She gave my arm a little squeeze and swayed over toward the booth. I got into an elevator and went up to the eighth floor. There was no name on the glass panel of my office, just the number. I tried the door and found it unlocked. That meant that the fellow I shared it with was in. Not so good.

The setup was simple: a small reception room with two private offices. My partner in the lease was a newscaster on the same network. The door of his office was closed. I went into my own cubicle and made a quick check on the liquor cabinet. Everything was there to build martinis, including a small ice-making unit.

It was then that I heard the racket in my partner's office. He sounded boiled as an owl, lurching around, bumping furniture. I was on the point of going in to see about it when the noise stopped. He'd passed out—I hoped.

I took a tray of ice cubes over to the washstand and whistled as I thumbed the cubes out of the rack.

The crash in the next office jarred the floor under my feet. A chair or a bookcase must have toppled over. I quickly dried my hands on a towel and went to the door. I opened it—and froze right to the door.

The man in there was not my partner, and he was not drunk. He was Harvey Kane, my old sidekick in the E.T.O. days.

The last time I'd seen Harvey Kane was when General Patch was launching his Normandy breakthrough. Harvey and I had been pretty good friends. Now he was leaning heavily on my partner's desk. Harvey's skin was gray, his whispering lips bloodless.

"Where—is that blonde, Jack?"

I reached out and grabbed his arm. "She's downstairs in the lobby, making a phone call. What—"

Harvey said hoarsely, "She's calling in her playmates. They play rough, Jack." He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. His coat fell open. His vest was one dark, sodden stain.

"Good Lord, Harvey!"

His eyes opened. Then he talked with that deep breath he'd taken. "Listen, Jack." He handed me a small, flat cardcase. "Jack, I found this cardcase in Hitler's bedroom at Berchtesgaden—kept it for a souvenir. . . . When you can safely do it, give it to the F.B.I. I started to—and you see what happened. I just made it here."

I picked up the heavy chair he had knocked over. Then I gently eased him into it. His dull, lost eyes held mine. "Don't let anyone know that I'm here, or that you have that cardcase—or you'll never live to reach the F.B.I."

"Harvey—" I made him as comfortable as possible—"you need a doctor. I'll phone."

He even smiled a little at that. "You'd be wasting your money. . . . I don't know what that cardcase means, but it's dynamite." He grasped my arm with a convulsive jerk. "Jack—her footsteps. . . ."

I heard the clicking heels in the corridor.

Harvey nodded jerkily toward a small clothes closet. "Get me in there—quick!"

The high heels in the corridor were coming nearer. Maybe I was a little rough with Harvey—but Harvey wouldn't mind, now. I'd seen death too often not to recognize it. Harvey's body was in the closet and the door closed when the clicking heels stopped. I quickly got out of the room and closed the door behind me.

I WAS halfway across the little reception room when Maris opened the outer door. She gave me a bright smile.

"Here I am."

I walked over to her. "Look, glamour

gams, I'm just an average guy. Why should a dazzler like you pick on me?"

The warmth of her smile made me forget everything but Harvey Kane's body in the next room. Then she said, "Maybe it's your devastating cocktails."

I flourished an arm toward my cubby. "Here's where newscasts and martinis are born."

She stepped in, walked over to the big leather divan and eased down onto a cushion. I sat beside her, let my right arm drape around her shoulders. She seemed to like it.

I said casually, "I'll whip up the martinis in a minute. First I want to tell you a little story about them. There's an old friend of mine who was quite a hound for them. Before we went overseas together I tried out my martini on him. He was my first convert." I sighed. "Harvey Kane sure liked those martinis."

My arm sensed her tension. Her head moved until her face was turned up to mine.

"Jack, you said *was*. Didn't your friend come back from overseas?"

I looked steadily into her eyes. "Last time I heard from him he was in Berchtesgaden. That was after V-E Day, so Harvey wasn't killed overseas. I didn't realize I used the past tense."

The longer I looked, the more guileless her eyes seemed. My fingers tightened tentatively on her shoulder, close to her neck. I probably could choke the truth out of her.

She had the instinctive defensive reflexes of a cat. Her body grew taut but her eyes stared unblinkingly into mine.

The outer office door opened. I took my arm from around Maris and got to my feet. The door to the reception room was open. I reached it at the same moment as my visitor. He was small, tawny-haired, and wore a well-tailored brown suit.

The newcomer asked, "Aren't you going to invite me in?" as he tried to brush past me.

I planted my feet and he bounced back from me. His yellowish eyes flicked up to mine for a second, then he stared at Maris. He wasn't carrying a hat. His hair was so sleekly pomaded back from his pretty face that I half expected to see it drawn into a bun on the back of his neck.

Maris called from the divan, "Hello, Willy. Meet Mr. Moorland, the newscaster." Then she said to me, "Willy Mauch is a friend of mine. I took the liberty of inviting him over."

I stepped back, bowing Willy into the office, saying to Maris, "Don't tell me that Willy has a weakness for my cocktails. A strong martini would blow off his ears."

Willy's mean yellow eyes promised me that he'd remember that one; then he snapped at Maris, "I have no time for nonsense. Tell me, did that other person contact Moorland?"

Maris shook her blonde head. "No one has been near Jack." She gave me a long, speculative look before saying: "Willy, this may be coincidence, but Jack mentioned Harvey Kane's name a few minutes ago."

Willy took a flat automatic from a shoulder holster, advanced with short mincing steps. "You have a lot to tell me, Moorland. There are no coincidences."

He kept coming at me. I waited till I had him where I wanted; then things happened fast. He'd never heard of the Ranger course, and the automatic went flying in one direction, Willy in the other. He stumbled back against the wall, rebounded from it. I chopped a mean blow to the base of his throat. Willy went down and tried to swim on the rug. I put out my toe and flipped him over on his back.

I said, "Look, Willy, tell me what all this is about or we'll run through the rest of it. I took all the lessons."

Maris' voice was gently mocking. "Don't look now, Jack, but I've got the gun." Her voice hardened. "And you, Willy, get out of here. You're too damned bullheaded. Giles won't like this at all."

The mention of Giles made Willy tuck his tail between his legs. He got to his feet and made an exaggerated show of dusting off his natty suit, never once looking at me. Then he called me a name.

It was a fighting name in any man's town, and a good excuse for murder where I come from. I didn't think Maris would shoot, so I went after him. He scurried out the door and jerked it shut after him. Just before I reached the door, Maris called out coolly:

"Another step, Jack—and I will."

I looked over my shoulder. Her eyes told me that she meant it, and the way she

held the automatic told me that she wouldn't miss. I faced her and tried to control the black anger in me.

"Thanks, Jack," she said huskily.

"I'll get him," I said evenly. "I killed rats like that for three years. That was a job—this'll be a pleasure."

Maris completely ignored my outburst. She was all business now, and her gun was steady. "Where does Harvey Kane come into this?"

"You should know the answer to that. When you mentioned Harvey's name just now, it lit a fire under Willy's tail."

"I hope," Maris said, "that you have sense enough to cut out the wisecracks and realize that I'm not kidding around any more."

That was fine with me. I told her, "Now we'll understand each other. But here's another thing, glamour gams—because I was dumb enough to fall for that lovely knee you poked under my nose doesn't mean that I'm dumb all the time. Right now I'm as smart as hell. You picked me up in that grog joint because you knew that Harvey figured on meeting me there. How you knew this, I don't know. I didn't even know it myself. But everything that's gone on around here adds up to that."

She nodded slightly. "Go on, Jack. You're good."

"Good? I'm terrific. Now—why didn't Harvey meet me? Maybe he was detained. Maybe he was killed."

She couldn't cover that involuntary jerk of her shoulders.

I took a step toward her. She backed a step. I laughed at her. "All right, I'm going out of here. If you're going to shoot, make your first shot do the trick, or I'll make you eat that gun." I turned my back to her and walked out into the reception room.

"This is it, Jack—" And she meant it.

CHAPTER TWO

A Lad With Corpse Appeal

THE corridor door was suddenly thrust open, and Maris laughed at my nervous reaction. Some girl! One minute she was sure-as-hell going to shoot me; the next, she was laughing at me.

Then she called out, "Come in, Giles."

I turned and faced the outer door. Giles was a beautiful boy with soft skin and bright brown eyes. His purple suit was a bit on the sharp side; his shoes glistened and his green felt was set at a rakish angle. His left arm cuddled a nose-lapped Pekingese; in his right hand was a needle-barreled Luger.

The dog worried me more than the Luger. If the little pooch got loose and started sniffing around the offices, there'd be trouble.

Giles nodded toward the closed door of the next office and asked Maris, "What's in there?"

Maris held the automatic at her side as she walked around me and swung open the door. They both looked in. The Pekingese chose that moment to rake at Maris's arm.

She drew back quickly and glared at Giles. "I told you never to bring that dog around me."

Giles ignored her, looked toward me inquiringly. "Mr. Moorland doesn't object to Wang Ling Foo, I'm sure."

"Me?" I asked pleasantly. "Why, I'd just like to kick its face in."

Giles' limpid eyes changed to brown ice. His upper lips quivered in a snarl. He was a reasonable facsimile of the pooch.

I enjoyed a warm glow. I seemed to have the knack of touching off these boy friends of Maris.

Maris put in quickly, "Oh, all right, Giles, but don't let it run around. His nails ruin my nylons."

"That's a damned shame," Giles said testily. But he held onto the Pekingese.

The pooch had other ideas. Its little black eyes were darting toward the other office, and it was setting up a struggle to get to the floor. I had heard somewhere that dogs can sense or smell death. Well, matters were bound to liven up—fast.

Giles was having a time holding the tiny dog, using both hands now, cooing to it and trying to keep the Luger out of the pooch's face. This would have been a good time for me to mix with Giles, if Maris hadn't been holding the automatic on me. But I did manage to casually place myself in the open doorway to my partner's office.

It seemed that Giles' muscles, rigorously trained on combing his wavy hair, weren't equal to the mighty struggles of Wang

Ling Foo. The pooch twisted free and bounded to the floor. It made a hopping beeline for the next office.

As I was standing in the doorway, the dog seemed to be coming straight for me. My dimly remembered sandlot days did me a good turn. I scooped up the hurtling ball of brown fur in a shortstop catch. Then I got a good grip on the wiry, struggling little devil and headed for my own office. Giles and Maris followed me.

Over my shoulder I said chidingly to Giles, "You heard what the lady said about her nylons. I'll put your little darling in my clothes closet. He can gnaw on my old golf bag." The pooch was yapping for all he was worth and trying to sink his mean little teeth into my hand. I opened the closet, skidded the pooch against the back baseboard and quickly shut the door.

When I turned I saw a little smile lurking in the corners of Maris' lips.

Giles was biting the fingernails of his left hand; his right was holding the Luger. He muttered: "That Wang Ling Foo should attack a man! Never before has he done that. There must be something in this place that infuriates him."

MARIS sat down on the leather divan. Willy's automatic was still in her hand. Giles took his puzzled eyes from the closet door. He delicately spit a piece of fingernail out of his mouth and said, "Perhaps we, the three of us, can come to an understanding. Mr. Moorland is a sensible man."

Maris shook her head vigorously. "No, he isn't. If you hadn't come in when you did, Giles, I would have had to shoot him."

"Yes, I know," Giles said. "I was listening at the door to learn if you should weaken, my dear. Then I timed my entrance." He bowed. "You would have shot him. Splendid." Giles flicked another worried look at the closet door with its muffled yapping. "But there must be something here that—"

I quickly butted in with: "Look, Giles, what is this understanding you're talking about?"

Giles lowered his voice. "Your friend Harvey Kane took a certain wallet from Berchtesgaden. This wallet was misplaced and lost by its owner in the confusion of having to leave Bavaria. Kane kept it as

a personal trophy of the war. It is our good fortune that he did not turn it over to American Intelligence officers, as he undoubtedly should have done."

He sighed. "We've been a long time tracking down Harvey Kane." He glanced at the girl. "Maris was the first to tackle Kane—and she was too anxious. Kane realized what we were seeking. Belatedly he started for your Federal Bureau of Investigation. He never got there." Giles saw the way my jaw tightened.

He waved his hand airily, saying, "Don't hold it against Willy. I would have shot Kane myself. Or Maris would have. Anyway, Kane's next move was to phone you at your broadcasting station. As a matter of fact, Willy again caught up with Kane when Kane learned that you were at the tavern. Willy shot Kane again but lost him in the crowd that gathered."

I kept my voice very even. "But what is this understanding you're talking about?"

"Simply this," said Giles. "Should this wallet come into your possession, I will pay you five hundred thousand dollars for it. This money is now in a suitcase checked in a public baggage room. You will have no delay in getting it. That is the understanding, Mr. Moorland."

I had to exert every ounce of will power to keep from patting my pocket. That would have been my dying gesture. Harvey had said that the cardcase was dynamite. I felt as if I had an atomic bomb in my pocket.

I looked at Maris and then at the automatic in her hand. That gun had killed Harvey Kane.

Giles said, "Do we have an understanding, Mr. Moorland?"

I had the answer ready. "Yes—with one condition."

Maris sat forward and stared at me. Giles stopped chewing his fingernails. A tension gripped both of them. They nodded for me to go on. I said, "I'll agree to your terms—if Harvey gives me the wallet between now, this minute, and midnight tonight. After midnight you'll have to shoot me to keep me from going to the authorities."

A suspicion grew in Giles' eyes. "Why the time limit?"

"Giles!" said Maris, her voice edged

with impatience. "Can't you see through him? The time limit is for his wounded friend. If Harvey Kane doesn't show up by midnight, Jack will figure that Kane is dead." She got to her feet, putting the automatic in her handbag. "Let's get back to that tavern where Kane can see Jack."

Giles walked toward the closet to get his yapping pooch. He said to me: "I'll be within sight of you both all the time."

"Now that we're all so understanding," I asked, "what is in that wallet to make it worth a half million dollars?"

Giles lifted his Luger to emphasize his words. "You can never know that—and live."

THE tavern was crowded now. Maris and I had just enough room to squeeze up to the bar. Maris ordered Scotch and water; I called for bourbon poured over ice cubes. I drank martinis only with my friends.

When we were at this bar earlier in the day, there had been no lack of spontaneous conversation. Now, we hardly said two words. Maris could have put her knees up on the bar and it wouldn't have bothered me. Well, I guess it wouldn't.

Giles was in a booth up near the front door, sharing a beer with Wang Ling Foo.

After my fourth bourbon I said to Maris, "I'm going to liven up the party with a little jive. Excuse me." I walked to the back of the bar and stood in front of the tiny alcove housing the juke box.

Pretending to be reading the list of songs, I slipped out the cardcase Harvey had given to me. It was made of black leather and monogrammed: *A.H.* My fingers were shaking when I opened it. In one of the compartments I found a card printed in German with the name Adolph Hitler written on a blank space line. It reminded me of lodge card which proclaimed the undersigned was a member in good standing and had paid his dues. In another compartment was a piece of paper with handwriting in German.

This paper had a list of names or places on it with notations in numerals beside each one. What this paper might signify had my hands more shaky than before. It might mean that Hitler was alive. And it might be a clue to where he was hiding, if he was alive.

It would be the news sensation of the age. And the scoop was mine—if I lived to tell about it.

I slipped the case back into my pocket, brought out a nickel and selected *I'm a Big Girl Now*. When I rejoined Maris at the bar I said, "I just happened to think of something. Do you think that Giles meant a wallet when he said wallet?"

She gave me a tolerant glance. "Now, Jack, you don't have to make conversation. Let's just sit here and drink."

I shook my head slowly. "I wasn't making conversation. I was just wondering if Giles could have possibly meant a cardcase when he said wallet."

"Why?"

"Well," I said, "some while back Harvey Kane sent me a cardcase. There was no letter with it, saying it was for me, or that I was to keep it for him. So I've just held on to it."

Maris' eyes were searching, probing. "Have you—got it now?" When I nodded, she asked the question which could have upset the whole works. "How long have you had it?"

"A while," I said. Then I shrugged. "Maybe it's nothing at all. There's an *A.H.* monogram on it—but of course, that doesn't mean that it belonged to—"

Maris came off the stool as if someone had thrust a hot poker through the seat. She faced me squarely and tried to read my eyes. "Take me to it," she said breathlessly.

"I'm not going to bring Giles to my apartment," I said flatly. "I'd never live it down."

Maris' half-smile quickly faded. Her eyes became probing, measuring. She asked, "How can we elude him till I see the cardcase?"

I nodded back toward the end of the bar. "There's a storeroom just to the left of the little girls' room. The storeroom has a window which leads to a four-foot drop to a concrete alley. Across the alley a door leads into the ramp of a garage on the next street. I've used the route before."

"To get away from admiring females?"

"Get going," I growled. "I'll be right behind you."

Maris swayed easily along the bar and turned into the lighted storeroom. I was right at her clicking heels. I quickly closed and bolted the storeroom door. No one

else was in the room. There was enough hard liquor stacked along the walls and on the floor to keep the tavern going for five years. The window was clear of cartons. I crossed to it and raised the sash.

Maris raised her skirt, briskly stepped up to the window and wiggled through. I tried not to watch her, and stared moodily, angrily at my shoes.

We made the alley all right. Just as I was lowering the window from the outside I heard running footsteps in the barroom. That might be Giles. I grabbed Maris and hurried her to the door of the garage. I had barely opened the door a crack when a car hurtled down the ramp and zipped past us.

I said, "We'll have to risk those cowboy garage hands. Keep to the far wall and follow me up."

No other cars came along, and we reached safely the inside concrete stairway leading to the street.

CHAPTER THREE

A Stiff in Time

MY APARTMENT had two and a half rooms and was used only when I worked, slept or entertained in it, and was furnished accordingly. A typewriter desk, comfortable chairs, comfortable couch and so on.

Maris hardly let me get the door closed when she asked breathlessly, "Where is it?"

I said, "I take it that you mean the cardcase?"

She was good. Even though she was as taut as a drawn wire, she gave me a dazzler of a smile. "Yes, the cardcase."

"This way," I said, leading her into the bedroom. "Take a load off the gorgeous pins while I rummage around."

Marie sat on the edge of the bed. I looked through the drawer in the night table, then I walked around the bed behind her and opened the top drawer of the chest. Her head followed me around. Keeping my hands in the drawer I selected one of my big handkerchiefs and opened it carefully. Then I looked over my shoulder at her, nodded toward the night table, saying, "Have a butt."

While she turned away from me, I took the large handkerchief from the drawer.

Maris saw that there were no cigarettes on the night table. She was halfway around, turning back toward me, when I whipped the handkerchief over her head from behind. Her startled scream was muffled as I pulled the gag tight.

Her hands flew up to the gag. I caught both of her wrists and roughly pulled them behind her. Her boy friends hadn't been gentle with Harvey Kane. Grasping both of her wrists in my left hand, I slid my belt out of my trouser loops. In a few seconds I had her wrists lashed behind her back.

She lashed around on the bed with the speed of a cat and raked at my face with her spiked heels. I jumped back as one heel grazed my chin. If I hadn't been in a hurry it would have been fun playing her game. I grabbed one corner of the bedspread and pulled it off the bed. She came with it in a tangle of flashing hose and billowing cloth.

That was how I managed to get both of her ankles snugly imprisoned in the crook of my left elbow. Then I pulled off my necktie and bound her ankles together. That done, I tossed her back onto the bed and wiped sweat off my forehead. She was the most compact package of atomic energy I'd ever tackled.

Now she lay there, still struggling and glaring pure hatred at me. But I wasn't finished yet. When I picked her up in my arms I had grabbed a bushel of wildcats. Luckily the big chair I was heading for was only a few feet away. She would have wriggled free and broken her back when she hit the floor. I dropped her into the big chair and made her fast to it with towels from the bathroom. When the job was finished she looked like a muffled Arabian girl.

But those big blue eyes of hers were now eloquent. They said and promised things her lips would never have said. The thought of Harvey Kane's body was just about the only thing that kept me from untying those towels. I was sweating more now than during the scuffle.

Then I took the cardcase out of my pocket and showed her Adolph Hitler's personal identification card. When the fact penetrated her head that I had had the cardcase with me all the time, she turned into a veritable tigress. The big chair, ponderous as it was, rocked perilously at her fran-

tic efforts. Finally, she gave up from sheer exhaustion.

Once again the soft blue eyes lost their sparks and became eloquent. I picked up her handbag and transferred Willy's automatic to my hip pocket. Then I sat on the edge of the bed to inspect the contents of the handbag. I saw a letter addressed to her at Stuart Towers, Apartment 2D. In a welter of cosmetics I came upon a small green-leather address book. Under "Giles" I found a telephone number but no address. There was no entry for Willy. I looked over at Maris. Her eyes were pleading in desperation now. They had the sincerity of a racked soul. Muted sounds whispered from her gag.

I GOT up, put her address book, keys and her letter in my pocket. I hefted the fatal cardcase and pocketed that. Then I glanced at the blonde.

Maris had fainted. I couldn't believe it. I went over and raised her eyelid. She was out cold, no faking—she had plain fainted. I put on another necktie and belt and went out of the bedroom, closing the door.

In my living room I looked up the office of the F.B.I. With a last glance at the closed bedroom door, which didn't make me feel so good, I left my apartment.

Down in the lobby, two men walked over to me. They both were quietly dressed young fellows. Their hands were held loosely at their sides.

The one nearest to me, a redhead with a freckled nose, said, "We're Federal men, Mr. Moorland."

"I was just going to your office," I told them.

They didn't say whether or not they believed me. The redhead took a wallet from his pocket and showed me his Department of Justice card. His name was Michael Ferris. He nodded toward two chairs in the lobby. "Let's go over there, and you can tell me what's on your mind."

The other man stepped into the self-service elevator and started up.

I asked Ferris: "Where's he going?"

"To your apartment," he said, looking steadily at me.

I shrugged. "He'll find somebody up there. She—ah—"

"We know all about her," said Ferris. "Now what did you want to see us about?"

We sat down. I didn't feel so good about Maris being picked up by the F.B.I. I shouldn't have given a good damn, but I did. So, not feeling like indulging in a lot of gab, I took the Hitler cardcase out and handed it to Ferris.

Even a trained shock-proof guy like him couldn't help the sharp intake of his breath. His eyes bored steadily into mine. "This is it, eh?"

"I don't exactly know what the hell it is all about. Harvey Kane gave it to me."

"Where is Kane now?"

"I don't know," I answered truthfully enough, in a spiritual way.

"When did Kane give it to you?"

"Before those daffodils barged into the mess."

Ferris finished it for me. "Then you had this cardcase since the time they came to your office?" He whistled softly. "You had a narrow squeak, Mr. Moorland."

I asked, "What will happen to her?"

"It's out of my hands, Mr. Moorland."

I tried again. "And what about those pistol-packing babies? Can we hang 'em?"

"They will be deported, maybe imprisoned." He lowered his voice. "They might resist arrest."

I had a better idea but I wasn't letting Ferris in on it. Then I said, "The way I figure the cardcase—it might lead to where Hitler might be hiding."

"It might. But you keep your thoughts and hunches off the air till the department gives you clearance."

"It'll be the scoop of the age," I said. "I can write my own ticket from here on."

Ferris said pointedly, "We could hold you—to insure your silence."

"Why don't you?"

"Washington has no desire to inconvenience a man who might be rendering his country a great service. Besides you have been checked from your public school days right up to your army discharge." He tapped his pocket. "Anyway, without this cardcase to back you up, what could you say?"

I got up. "Then I can go about my business?"

"Yes, if your business doesn't take you back to your apartment."

I shook my head, saying nothing.

Ferris offered his hand, gripped mine; then he went to the self-service elevator.

Leaving the lobby, I tried to kid myself into thinking how good I felt because I had the sensational news scoop of the age—of any age. Somehow I didn't feel like a damn big hero.

THE lobby of the Stuart Towers was a gallant array of tapestries hanging from lances, a fake fireplace and heavy, straight-backed chairs. The elevator door was closed and the car somewhere in the shaft, so I went up the stairs to the second floor.

Maris' apartment was a neat, three-room layout with semi-modern furniture. There was the faint, subtle scent of her everywhere. The gathering dusk outside gave the living room a very pleasant effect of shadows and perfume. I felt sort of foolish holding the automatic at my side.

I checked the three rooms, closets, under the bed and behind the divan. Back in the living room, I went over to the wall light switch. My finger was just about to flick the switch when I heard the key being inserted in the lock.

I froze there, my left hand lightly resting on the switch and my right holding Willy's automatic. I kept the gun at my side out of sight; for if the intruder was an F.B.I. agent, I'd be in a ticklish spot.

The living room was quite dark by now. I heard the bolt being turned. The door opened a crack, letting in light from the corridor. A hand came in and groped for the light switch. I grabbed it and yanked. The newcomer came into the room, stumbled to his knees on the rug. The startled gasp and rakishly tilted hat told me the intruder was Giles. I pushed the door shut and snapped the light switch.

Giles rolled over on his back, his Luger half out of his armpit holster. When he saw my automatic centered on his belly, he decided to be good. He pushed the Luger back into his holster and got slowly to his feet. The little smirk on his pretty mouth indicated that he thought he had put over a fast one on me by keeping his Luger.

When he had completed an elaborate brushing off of his natty suit, he said, "I trust you have made good use of your time since you left the tavern."

"Yep," I said. "Very good."

Giles' brown eyes were boring into mine. "I just came from the neighborhood of your apartment house. It is loused up with Fed-

eral agents. So I guess you didn't go there."

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I've seen Harvey Kane."

Giles thrust out his open hand toward me. "Did you get that wallet?" he asked.

"Sit down," I said. "I'm doing the talking this time. Go on, sit down."

Giles perched himself on the edge of a chair. His eyes focused on the automatic in my hand. "That looks like Willy's gun."

"It is," I agreed.

"Maris had it—" he started.

I nodded to that. "I persuaded Maris to give it to me. Then I showed her a cardcase—a little black-leather cardcase monogrammed with an *A* and an *H*."

Giles' eyes became very bright. "Where is Maris now?"

"She's gone to get some money," I lied. "By the way, the price has gone up. Maris has raised your offer by two hundred and fifty Gee's."

Giles demanded hotly, "Where is she getting that kind of money?"

"Look, Giles," I said, "There's a hell of a lot of important money that would like to know where Hitler is hiding."

"Now wait—wait, Moorland." Giles came out of the chair. I motioned him back with the automatic. When he was down again, he went on, "Deal with me, Moorland. I'll double the price. You can trust me." He stopped, licked his lips. "Have you got the cardcase with you?"

"No," I said. "Harvey Kane still has it. When I get the money, I'll call him. By the way, where is Willy?"

Giles started to say something, changed his mind and began to chew his fingernails. "There can be no possible mistake about the wallet?" he asked finally.

"It's not a wallet," I said. "It's a cardcase with some sort of identification card with the big cheese's name scrawled on it. There's also a piece of paper with names on it—and numbers."

Giles gripped the arms of his chair, his eyes now burning like live coals. "That's it! Moorland, forget Maris. Come with me. I'll double the original price. One mil—"

"We'll wait for Maris," I said flatly. I sat down, crossed my legs and let the automatic point casually in Giles' direction. "Don't interrupt me. I want to think."

I sat there and watched Giles sweat bul-

lets. He was getting the same pleading look in his eyes that Maris had had when she was tied in my chair.

It was easy to watch Giles sweat—when I thought of Harvey Kane.

The doorbell rang.

GILES nearly jumped a foot out of his chair. He figured that it was Maris; she'd ring if I had her keys. I figured that it was the Federals coming to bust up my little play. But I hoped that it would be Willy.

Keeping Giles in my range of vision, I went quietly over to the door and flung it open. Willy had one hand on the outside doorknob, his other hand raised to press the buzzer again. I waved him in with the automatic. Frustration, anger and then surprise flicked across his sullen features. The latter came when he saw Giles quietly sitting in the chair.

I grabbed Willy by his necktie and pulled him in and around so that I could keep Giles in view. Then I kicked the door shut. The automatic jabbed urgently into Willy's stomach, and I said: "Get 'em up, louse."

He licked his lips, but he put his hands up. I patted his pockets and took a neat Mauser from his jacket pocket. Then I pushed him into a chair near Giles. I pocketed the Mauser, still keeping the automatic handy.

Giles said to Willy, "Maris crossed us. We're waiting for her now. Moorland will get the wallet—cardcase—from Harvey Kane when—"

Willy shook his head. "Kane hasn't got it. He's dead up in Moorland's office closet."

Watching Giles' face was better than a movie. He tried to speak several times before he managed: "Then—then Moorland saw Kane *before*—?"

Willy bit off the word with a vicious snap: "Yes!" He jerked his head toward me. "Moorland had it before we saw him. He had it all the time." His voice rose to a screech. "He has it now!"

Then they sat there, looking at each other; their eyes telling each other that they were two against one—that one of them should die for the Fuehrer.

I went over to Maris' phone, removed the instrument from the cradle and dialed Police headquarters with my left hand.

I said in a thick voice, "This is Giles. Willy Mauch shot Harvey Kane." I cut off the connection. Then I laid the automatic down on the desk, gripped the phone again with my left hand, poised my right over the dial. My head was lowered but I could see that Giles and Willy had jumped to their feet. Willy was staring at Giles.

But Giles was going for his shoulder-holstered Luger. I waited until I saw the stock coming into view; then I pressed my hand over the automatic, tilted the muzzle slightly and let go. The crash of the automatic swallowed my words. "For you, Harvey."

Giles took the slug right between his bright brown eyes. His Luger bounced on the floor at about the same time he did.

Willy started to duck for the Luger. His descending jaw met my ascending foot. Willy never heard me, but I told him anyway. "That's for the name you called me."

I wiped the automatic and put plenty of Willy's fingerprints on it before I curled his fingers around the grip. Next I took out the Mauser I had taken from Willy. For good luck I gave Willy a bang on the head with the barrel. This gun would find its way to the bottom of the East River.

Before I left the apartment, I took the phone off its cradle and dialed police headquarters. When they answered, I mumbled, "Willy—shot—" I dropped the phone. Then I bent over and rubbed Giles' hands over the instrument and let it lie beside him. Then I got out of there—but fast.

At a tavern near where I lived, I packed away three martinis. They were plenty good but I guess I didn't have the zest for them. I started to order the fourth, changed my mind and walked out.

My apartment house looked very serene. No one seemed to be lurking about. I didn't feel like going in, but I had to get started blocking out my news story. The best damned double-barreled scoop of the age, that's what I had.

Letting myself into the apartment I saw Ferris sitting in my favorite chair. He nodded pleasantly.

"The police, with whom we have been working, have taken one Willy Mauch for the double killing of Harvey Kane and a man named Giles. Harvey Kane was found in your office by cleaning women. You are in the clear, as Willy Mauch's gun killed

both men. Of course, you will be called upon to make a formal statement."

I fished a cigarette from my pocket, got it fired. "What happens to the girl?"

"Oh, her," said Ferris off-handedly. "She's been working with us. She came to us from Washington."

I took that without blinking an eye. I guess that my system had absorbed all the surprises it could take. I asked, "Where is she?"

Ferris spread his hands. "Perhaps her next assignment will be in Buenos Aires—perhaps Saigon."

Funny, but I felt lousy and good at the same time. "Anyway," I said, "I'm glad those two fancy mutts will never get their hands on her." Then I jerked my thumb toward my typewriter. "Well, I've got my hot scoop to keep me warm. When do you figure I can tell the world that Hitler has been found?"

"You can't," said Ferris gently. "There was nothing in that cardcase to tell where he might have gone—or if he is alive."

"A bust?" I asked. "All this horsing around and killing for nothing?"

Ferris looked down at his hands. "Not exactly. There *might* have been another paper in that cardcase—and some unsuspecting G. I. *might* have it." He got to his feet. "We must start all over again." He picked up his hat. Then he smiled lopsidedly. "Well—good luck."

We shook hands, and he went out.

I puzzled over that good luck business as I went to my typewriter. Tomorrow my listeners would hear how Cortes' horses roamed through the West.

A throaty voice asked from the kitchen, "Which comes first, the salt or the olive brine?"

I turned my head and just sat there staring at the dark kitchen. The first thing I saw emerge was the blonde hair, then the legs. I said, "Hello, Mata Hari."

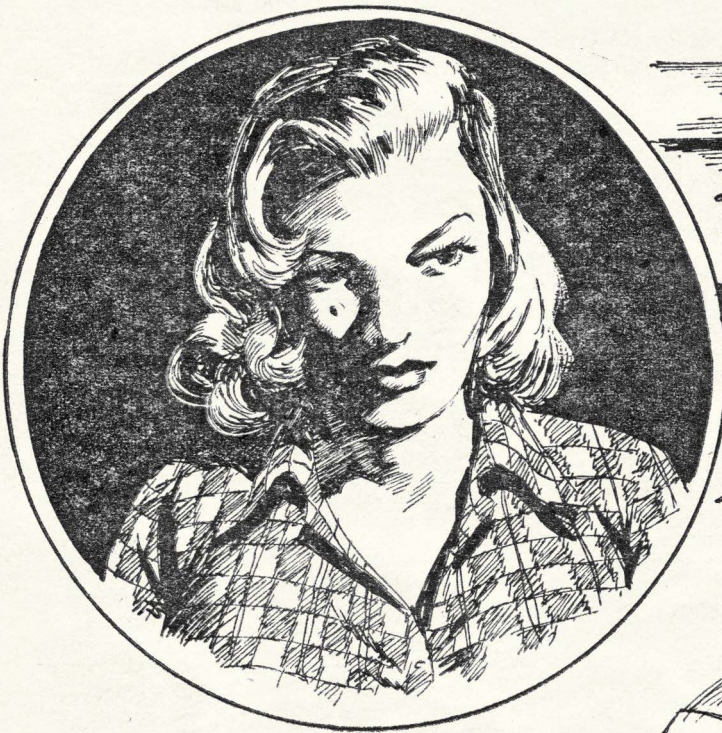
Her grin was disconcerting. "Jack, will you please help me with these martinis? I've got to catch an early morning train, and I want to get the knack of these cocktails before I leave."

"The salt first," I said. "It melts the ice." I got to my feet. Well, the Justice Department had wished me luck. "Here's to it," I said.

THE END

THE HIGH COST OF CHIVALRY

Exciting Novelette of the
Wild Florida Keys



CHAPTER ONE

The Derelict Dinghy

THERE wasn't any mirror over the back of the bar. There was a big plate glass window, and through it you could see the white beach and the great placid sweep of the Gulf of Mexico. A pair of porpoise were rolling and snuffing in the swath of Moonlight. The men sitting next to me were talking about somebody named Necker, who'd been found shot to

death that afternoon on Longmans Key.

"Had more lead in him than a box of pencils," one of them said with relish. "He was a big-time gambler or something. The radio said the cops tried to pin it on Leo Kearney in Miami, but they didn't get to first base. He was out fishing in his yacht off Lauderdale."

But the other man was bursting with his

He was at the kitchen window. He whirled and his gun roared . . .



By LARRY HOLDEN

Poachers and liars and a pretty girl's troubles—all these the game warden could handle. But what was he supposed to do with the wise guys who were using their hunting license—on him?

own type of information. "That's the way," he said. "Those big shots always have an alibi. But talking about fishing, you should have seen the wife's brother and the catfish this morning. Laugh! Say . . ."

The two women at the other side of them, their wives, probably, had their troubles, too. "Joe keeps talking about moving down here to Florida to stay, but I said nothing doing. Folks down here don't have the hustle they have in Michigan, and there's the bugs . . ."

I was so busy getting an education that I almost missed the girl. She came through the doorway with a sick, worried look on her freckled face and made straight for the phone booth beside me at the end of the bar. She was wearing blue jeans rolled to the knee and a plaid shirt, but even in that unfeminine getup she looked terrific. I wondered how she'd look in a bathing suit.

I twisted on my stool and watched her drop her nickel into the box. "Is this the sheriff's office?" I heard her say.

I lost the rest of it because just then the fisherman beside me exploded with honest Michigan mirth. His brother-in-law had probably just caught another catfish. His wife screamed delightedly, "Honest to goodness, Joe, to hear you talk!"

I made faces and ground my teeth at them. Now, I'm not normally so nosey about freckle-faced blondes with worried expressions. You can see them by the dozen any day in the week shopping in the butcher store. But don't ask me what was special about this one. Maybe it was the way she wore her freckles. All I know is that I wanted to hold her hand and tell her not to worry any more.

She hung up with a bang, and when she came out of the booth, her blue eyes were crackling. She stood there indecisively for a moment, just long enough for me to give her an eager grin and say, "Something the matter?"

She was mad enough to talk to anybody. "I could wring his neck!" she cried indignantly. "I told him it was life or death. He should be ashamed of himself."

I agreed that he certainly should be. "But," I added, "with the state-wide gambling investigations, the sheriff is a busy man. Maybe I can help. I'm the fish and game warden around here. I'm supposed

to be on vacation, but I'll be glad to do anything I can."

She looked down at her trembling hands and gave a rueful laugh. "I'm shaking all over," she said. "I wish somebody would help."

It seems she'd been fishing in Manatee Pass down at the end of Anna Sola Key, and she'd seen a boat floating, bottom up, in the pass. After ten or twelve frantic casts, she miraculously managed to get her hook into it. She worked for an hour getting it ashore, and I could believe it. The tide runs through there at fifteen miles an hour, and reeling in an overturned boat is a job for Charles Atlas. Anyway, it turned out to be a little ten-foot dinghy with a pair of stubby oars caught under the seat and a short fishing rod loosely tied to one of the oarlocks.

"Boats don't turn over by themselves." Her eyes had that sick, worried look again. "Somebody was in that boat when it overturned. The fishing rod proves that."

"Did you tell that to the sheriff?"

"Of course."

"What did he say?"

"He said," she said bitterly, "to take the oars and fishing rod home with me, and if nobody came to claim the boat, I could keep it."

"Did you hear any cries for help?"

"N-no. I called out, too, but I didn't get any answer. That darn sheriff!" Her indignation got the better of her again. "Why doesn't he come out and investigate?"

I didn't want to tell her that if anybody had gone overboard there, he certainly wouldn't be in the pass any longer. He'd have been swept out into the gulf, an hors d'oeuvre for the white shark that had been seen harging around there. Or with the turn of the tide, he had been carried back and was probably bobbing around the hundreds of tiny islands in Lower Manatee Bay.

The sheriff had a whole county to cover, a county almost one hundred percent surrounded by the gulf, rivers, creeks, bays and bayous. Small boats were found floating loose every night, and if he investigated one tenth of them, he'd have more deputies on the water than there were catfish in it.

I slid off my bar stool, took her arm and

steered her toward the door. "We'll take a look," I said. I didn't tell her how hopeless I thought it was. "My name's Ahearn, by the way. Marty Ahearn."

"I'm Dinah Carew."

THE road ended about a hundred yards south of the gin mill, and from there it was a two mile hike along the deserted beach to the pass.

The moon was bright and we did not need the big flashlight I had brought from my car. The first half mile was pretty tough, littered with the big trees that had come down in years past when the gulf ate into the shore and undermined them. They had to be climbed over and squirmed under, and that was why the southern end of the island was empty except for two small cottages at the point. That part of Anna Sola was never going to open up until somebody came along with enough money to clear away that fallen forest. No one even used the wonderful beaches down there, except the kids once in a while.

We were a half mile from the pass when I spied a light down there.

"Somebody's there," I said to Dinah.

"Oh, that's the Hapes," she answered. "They stayed to watch in case anything—turned up."

"Who are the Hapes?"

"They rented one of the cottages at the pass. I have the other one. Lew and Margie Hapes. He's from New Jersey. He sells bowling alleys."

I said, "Oh," wondering what kind of man it took to sell bowling alleys. Probably the same kind of guy it took to sell bridges and locomotives.

He turned out to be a skinny little bright-eyed eager beaver in white duck pants, a loud sport shirt and a captain's hat. His wife, a plump brunette with bags under her eyes, sat on the side of the dinghy and fanned the mosquitoes away from her face with a gaudy straw hat the size of a tractor tire.

The Coleman gasoline lantern, set on an orange crate, lit the scene with a fierce white light and flung sharp black shadows into the night. The little white crabs scuttled around the perimeter, watching everything with inquisitive black eyes. It was like a scene from a horror movie.

Lew Hapes jumped to his feet as we

came up and shouted, "Ahoy," in a reedy voice, and Dinah ran to meet him.

"Was there—did you see anything?" she cried breathlessly.

He shook his head. "Not a thing, baby." His bright eyes flickered over me in a way that was more clinical than curious, and for some reason I got the idea that he resented my being there.

Dinah introduced me, and we shook hands. That is. I shook his hand, and he unenthusiastically permitted me to wag it. He didn't like me. It's always a bit of a shock to find that somebody doesn't like you for no reason. I decided Hapes must have something on his mind. Maybe he thought I was going to try to take it away from him. He was very shifty about it and kept it hidden behind a little insincere smile.

"We've been chumps, Dinah," he sounded about as off-hand as a shoplifter with a pocketful of stolen nylons. "Me and Margie got to talking. Know where this boat came from?" he kicked the dinghy. "Longmans Key. The dock over there. This afternoon we saw some kids raising hell in it, and they turned it over. They tried to turn it back, but they couldn't, so they left it that way. It must have come loose and drifted out."

He was lying, and it was me he was lying to, because he kept watching me from the ends of his eyes to see how I was taking it.

"It's a half mile across the pass from here to the point of Longmans," I said mildly. "That's pretty far to see. Sure it was the same dinghy?"

"What's a half mile?" he said quickly. "I got twenty-power binoculars. And sure I'm sure it was the same boat. It looked the same and had the same name." He twisted his head and read the name on the stern. "Am-a-lie-is. Same name, same boat." He smiled smugly. I hadn't caught him on an easy one like that.

The name wasn't *Am-a-lie-is*, but that didn't make any difference. That was just the way he pronounced it. It was the *Amaryllis*, a pretty fancy name for a dinghy. As I read it, it rang a bell in the back of my mind, but it didn't ring loudly or insistently enough for me to open the door. All I could think of was that he was lying, and he must have a reason for it.

I gave Dinah a sharp, quick glance. She had swallowed it whole without licking off the sugar.

"Well," she said with obvious relief, "I'm certainly glad that's off my mind. I wouldn't have slept a wink tonight, thinking about it."

"Yeah," said Hapes blandly, looking at me. "Too bad you had to come all this way for nothing, Sheriff."

"I'm not the sheriff," I said. "I'm the game warden."

"The game warden? Say, just the man I've been wanting to meet. Maybe *you* can tell me where to find some fish in this man's ocean, heh, heh, heh. How's about a drink, Warden? Come on, Margie, let's go up to the house and build the man a drink. He's had a long walk."

I let him run on, because by this time I was pretty damn sure he had something up his sleeve, and I wanted to see if maybe it would fall out where everybody could take a look at it.

Margie pushed herself up from the dinghy, grumbling, "It's about time. I'm being et alive."

"Let's pull it up on the beach a 'little,'" I said to Hapes, "or high tide'll carry it off again."

He said, "Sure, sure," and gave me a hand with it.

It wasn't a big boat, but it was still a load to drag up the heavy sand. We took it up about ten yards and Hapes started to get uneasy, looking back over his shoulder at the distance to the water.

"Ain't this far enough?" he complained.

"No," I said. "Tides get pretty high around here."

We dragged it another twenty yards, and from the way he glowered at me, I could see he could cheerfully have beaten me over the head with an oar for taking it this far from the shore. I didn't know why he was sore, but he sure hated my guts at that minute.

WE DROPPED the dinghy, and he walked angrily ahead toward the two cottages built side by side up in the dunes. I heard him say waspishly to Margie, "Guys like that make you sick. Since when's the tide come up that high?"

Dinah walked beside me. She started, "I'm sorry, Mr. Ahearn—"

"The name's Marty," I interrupted. "And what are you sorry about—that nobody's been drowned?" I grinned to show her I didn't mean that, even remotely.

She grinned back. "You know what I mean, bringing you all the way down here on a false alarm."

"A pleasure. In fact, I'd like to do it more often."

"It's a long walk—Marty."

"Oh, I've got a little fifteen-foot power boat. I can come up around the bay side of the island, and that's an idea. Suppose I pick you up tomorrow morning about ten or so? I'll show you where the trout hide when the tourist season opens."

"You mean I may actually catch one? I'd love it."

"It's a date."

We followed the Hapes into the living room of their cottage, and he grudgingly made us a drink. All he had wanted, for some reason of his own, was to get me away from the dinghy. He had done that, and now he wanted to get rid of me. For good. He yawned in our faces, blinked his eyes with feigned sleepiness, and made pointed remarks about how good it was going to be to hit the sack.

I spied his telephone on the extension table against the wall. "You know," I said carelessly to Dinah, "it would be a good idea if you called up the Anna Sola *Herald* and put the dinghy in the lost and found."

Hapes almost sprained his larynx swallowing his drink hurriedly to say, "No need of that, Dinah. I'll row it back where it belongs on Longmans Key in the morning."

"You'll never get across the pass in a dinghy," I told him innocently. "The tide'll be running out, and three weeks from now you'll end up on the coast of Mexico. Better let the man who lost it take the responsibility of getting it back himself."

He couldn't think of a fast answer to that one, and he almost strangled himself trying to keep from hating me out loud. I was a little sore myself, to tell the truth. He was a nasty little man who thought he could put anything over on anybody, and when somebody got in his way, he looked vicious enough to spit.

I picked up the phone myself and called Ralph Hanson, the publisher of the *Herald*. If for no other reason than to needle Hapes, this was one ad I was going to be sure

was going to get in the paper without delay. Ralph grumbled a little because the classified forms for tomorrow were locked, but in the end he called me a few profane names and promised to see that it was in the morning edition.

The ad ran something like this:

FOUND: a dinghy. Owner can have same after proper identification. Dinah Carew, c/o General Delivery, Anna Sola Key.

That made Hapes so mad that he actually stamped out of the room, slamming the door, and Margie glared at me as if I had poisoned the baby's formula.

Dinah, of course, was completely bewildered by all this. The atmosphere in the room had suddenly congealed at about fifty below zero and, for all she knew, it was right in the middle of a friendly drink.

I finished my drink standing and gave Margie a bland smile. "Thanks for everything," I said. "I hate to break up the party like this, but it's past my bedtime."

She didn't answer, but her look told me that if I never got out of bed again it would be a break for the general public. Dinah said hastily that it was past her bedtime, too, and reached the door ahead of me.

I walked her over to her cottage, twenty-five feet to the west.

"I can't figure it out," she said uneasily. "What happened to Lew and Margie? They were so friendly, then all of a sudden they weren't at all."

"Probably just sleepy. You know how it is. Uh—keep an eye on the dinghy, will you?"

"For heavens sake, why?"

"Oh, I don't know. I got an idea that maybe Lew was thinking of taking it home as a souvenir."

"That's silly."

"Oh, I don't know. He was wearing a captain's hat, and maybe he wants something to be captain of."

I looked down at her and suddenly the desire to kiss her was so strong in me that she must have felt it, for she said hurriedly, "I'm sorry you have that long walk back alone."

"I'll tell you what," I said, "you walk me back, then I'll walk you home, then you

walk me back. By then it'll be time for breakfast and after that we can go fishing."

Always leave them laughing. I felt good as I walked up the beach with the little white crabs scuttling ahead of me. I didn't give a damn if Hapes took the dinghy and traded it for a handful of parimutuel tickets. I turned once and waved, and Dinah waved back from the porch of her cottage, which proved that she had been watching me, or something.

It was a grand night—but, for some reason, I found myself hoping that she made a habit of locking her door when she went to bed. Silly.

CHAPTER TWO

Stay Way From My Door

I WAS actually up before eight the next morning, and singing before breakfast, if you can picture that. It was one of those swell not-too-hot cloudless days that Florida turns out by the hundreds. I had a room in the Siesta Inn, and below my window the whole Gulf of Mexico spread out with hardly a ripple; then suddenly a hundred yards of it sparkled and foamed as a school of mullet raced by to keep a rendezvous with the fishermen's nets at Cortez. An echelon of pelicans came sailing out from the shore, hovered over the school for a moment, then peeled off one by one, smashing into the water like dive bombers, each coming up with a wriggling sea food dinner in his beak. A two-masted schooner, probably out of Tampa bound for the West Indies, moved slowly toward the horizon, drifting as lazily as an idle thought on a sunshiny Sunday afternoon.

As I walked toward my shower, I whistled *California, Here I Come*, and laughed.

Breakfast was pan-fried trout, apple pie and coffee in the village lunchroom. Going across the street to the drug store to pick up the paper, I felt a little prickle as I saw Lew Hapes duck into the phone booth at the rear. He irritated me the way a cat snatching a goldfish out of a bowl behind your back annoys you. I dawdled at the counter, counting my change, watching him.

He was having a very spirited conversation. I could see his right hand gesturing, and his head kept bobbing on his skinny

neck. I would not like to have been the person to whom he was talking. You could see by every movement he made that he had somebody where he wanted him and was rubbing it in.

I was reading my newspaper on the sidewalk when he came trotting busily out of the drug store. He actually jumped when he saw me standing there. He bared his teeth in a kind of smile and hurried up the street. He had a neck like a piece of rope. I would love to have tied a knot in it.

I went in the opposite direction toward the dock where my boat was tied up. I was whistling when I came to the end of the dock. I stopped whistling though my lips remained pursed. My boat was gone. Stupidly I looked around, but I didn't see it until I looked down, and there it was on the bottom, seven feet down. I saw red.

Ed Miller was standing in the doorway of his bait shack when I came charging down the dock.

"Who's been fooling around my boat, Ed?" I yelled at him.

"Whattaya mean, Marty? What happened?"

"Somebody opened the cock and let her sink."

"For the luva mud!" he gasped. He turned and looked up the street, scratching his head. "There's been nobody on the dock, Marty, except a little guy who—"

"A little guy with a neck like a piece of rope?"

"Well, now that you mention it, he was kind of scrawny. He—hey! Hey, Marty!"

I was sprinting up the street and I didn't stop. All I wanted was to get my hands around that neck of Lew Hapes. I didn't even stop to wonder why he had sunk my boat. I caught sight of him trotting hurriedly up the beach toward the point. I yelled. His startled face showed over his shoulder. His jaw hung open in a moment of fear, and then he turned and fled toward the half mile belt of fallen trees.

I gained on him with every leap, but still he got into the tangle of trees before I caught up with him. It wasn't just trees in there. It was overgrown with sea grape, and the mangrove, in its march to the sea, made a jungle out of it. I bulled my way through, swearing. Once I got Hapes on the clear beach on the other side, I'd have

him inside of a quarter of a mile of it.

He knew that as well as I did, but he was just a little smarter than I was. He must have been hiding behind the tree roots that had up-ended just beside the vestigial path, ten feet high and matted like a hermit's beard. I didn't even hear the swish of the club or the blackjack or whatever it was he hit me with. My head just suddenly exploded in glittering fragments and I fell forward, clawing at the darkness.

When I recovered consciousness, I was sitting up and the gnats and mosquitoes were buzzing around my face. I tried to move my hand to swat them away, but it didn't move. Both of my hands were tied behind me. Not only that—they had been lashed around a mangrove sapling, which I'd first have to uproot before I could get out of there, and there was nobody who could tear up a mangrove sapling with his bare hands. Their roots stand above the ground like spider legs, but an electromagnet couldn't grip tighter. Something had been plastered over my mouth, and from the puckering feel of it, I knew it was adhesive tape.

He had dragged me pretty far east of the overgrown path, for, looking through the leafy tangle, I could barely see the water of the gulf sparkling in the sunshine. There wasn't any sunshine where I was tied. It was all shadow—and every kind of insect that could bite, bore or sting.

FOR the first fifteen minutes I savagely and senselessly fought my tied hands, expecting, I suppose, by sheer strength and fury to tear them loose. No one who has never been tied up before actually believes he can be bound so securely that he cannot escape. Anger alone will burst his bonds; strong rope will fall from him like cotton thread.

Well, anger wasn't enough, and Hapes hadn't bound me with rope. He had taken my cowhide belt. I sat there panting and sweating, and the sweat drew insects in clouds. The gnats were just a nuisance. All they did was walk on me, but the mosquitoes were hungry. If it hadn't been for the breeze, they'd have drained me in an hour, but thank God the breeze was coming in strongly from the gulf, and it drove the whole buzzing, biting swarm of them back into the mangrove swamp that covered nine

tenths of that end of the island. It was the lull when the breeze died that was bad.

My wrists hurt pretty badly from the twisting I had given them, so I just sat, blowing the insects from my face as best I could, and waited awhile, for sometimes exploring bunches of kids did come wandering through that jungle.

I had time to think about Lew Hapes. He hadn't sunk my boat out of meanness, because that wouldn't get him anything but a punch in the nose, and Lew had impressed me as a sharp little rodent who did things for better reasons than that.

So he had sunk my boat to keep me from using it. No. That wasn't good enough: it was only part of it. The mere fact that he had sunk it told me that he knew I was coming down to his end of the island that morning to pick up Dinah. That sounded more like it. He wanted to keep me away for awhile.

No matter how many dates you have with how many girls, you just don't walk away and leave your boat sitting under seven feet of water. Salt water. You raise it, and a fifteen-foot boat with a mahogany hull and a sixty-horse inboard motor can't be raised and emptied like a cup of coffee. You need machinery, and that takes time.

So, after those brilliant deductions, I decided that he wanted to delay me, not keep me away forever.

But why? Was it something about the dinghy? It had to be, because that was the only point on which we had come together. But what the hell was so important about a dinghy?

Something started to nag just outside the reach of my mind. Something about the dinghy. Not the way he had acted and lied—something else. But whatever it was, I didn't find out then. I'm not the kind of guy who can think of something merely by putting his mind to it, but friend, I'm telling you, I almost exploded trying.

I made a few more tries at wriggling my hands free, but the leather just bit into the bone, and unless I pulled my hands off, it was no dice in that direction.

A few times I heard voices on the northern side of the jungle—feminine voices and the laughter of children—and if I could have cried out, I'd have been free in five minutes.

It was becoming brighter in there where

I sat, and there were splashes of sunlight all around me. The sun, I realized with a start, was almost directly overhead. That meant I'd been there at least a couple of hours—and I was likely to be there a good many hours more.

And if the wind died down and the mosquitoes came back, I'd be dead before anybody got to me.

But there was another thing, and my stomach coiled at the thought of it. I had gotten in Hapes' way, and he had taken care of me. There was still Dinah. Suppose she got in his way?

I leaned back against the sapling and tried to think. It gave springily against my weight. I looked up. It was about ten feet high and about as thick around as a clarinet, with pencil-thick branches and an umbrella of leaves at the top. I bounced against it experimentally and it whipped to and fro in the air over me. Whispering a brief prayer, I heaved myself to my feet and lunged forward. My bound wrists slid up a few inches and now the sapling was bent over my head at a slight angle. I lunged again and gained another few inches. The sapling bent farther and the leather slid more easily over it. Up to the umbrella of branches and leaves it was painless, but now I had to drag my hands through that. Closing my eyes and setting my teeth, I thrust forward as hard as I could. I felt the branches whip and tear at my face, and my hands felt as if I were dragging them through a triple fence of barbed wire. But suddenly I pitched forward, and the sapling whooshed upright behind me.

Panting, I lay still for a moment, then staggered to my feet and lurched toward the open beach. I lay on my side and, squirming and heaving, pulled my tied wrists down under my buttocks, then lifted the hoop of my arms over my legs. I tore at the knot in the leather belt with my teeth, and once the strain was off it, it came loose all in a piece, and I stood there shaking my hands as if to shake the lacerated pain out of them.

NOW, if I'd had any sense, I'd have gone back to the village, called the **sheriff** and gotten myself a couple of **deputies**. But not Ahearn. No, sir! Hadn't I just wriggled out of a trap with **brawn and brain**? Hadn't I just proved myself **smarter**

than Lew Hapes? I didn't need any deputies. All I needed was to have my head examined.

I started grimly up the beach toward the pass. I had remembered to put my belt back on, so my pants didn't fall down, but it was a wonder I had thought that far. I didn't know what I was walking into, and all I had was my bare hands. I actually got within a quarter of a mile of the pass before anything happened.

A man leaped up from the dunes to my left, stared at me for a moment, then came striding across the sand. He was a big man with dark, curly hair. He had on dark brown sharkskin slacks, and the collar of his figured sport shirt lay dashingly over the collar of his chartreuse jacket. His right hand was sunk in the pocket of his jacket.

"Hey, hold it there, mister," he called. "This is private property. You're trespassing."

I kept moving toward him. I said, "What's that?" and cupped my hand behind my ear.

He stopped eighteen inches in front of me and shouted, "Private property. Beat it!"

I cocked my head, grimaced and tapped my ear. "You'll have to talk louder," I shouted back. "Don't hear so good. Punctured ear drum."

He swore and reached out roughly to take me by the shoulder and turn me around. I smacked him right on the point of the chin as hard as I could. His face went slack and his eyes glazed, but he didn't go down. His hand pawed feebly at my face and I had to hit him twice before his knees crumpled under him.

I bent over him and jerked his right hand from his pocket. There was a gun in it. It gave me a very funny feeling in the pit of my stomach. I licked my lips and took it from his limp fingers, looking up toward the dunes. He had been doing something in there when I'd come up.

I plodded up slowly and cautiously. My heart lurched as I saw the figure lying inert in the hollow behind the dunes. It was female and my breath stopped until I saw the dark hair. It wasn't Dinah. It was Margie Hapes.

I ran over to her. She was lying on her back, and her hands and feet were tied with fishing line. There was a bloody gash

across her forehead. Her face was deathly pale, and she was breathing shallowly. I gently touched the swelling around the cut with my fingertips, and there didn't appear to be any broken bone, so she was probably just suffering from concussion and shock.

I cut her hands and feet loose with my pocket knife and made her as comfortable as I could in the sand, then jumped to my feet and ran back to the beach. It was all open, but there was no other way to the pass and Dinah's cottage. The mangrove had claimed everything but that strip of beach, and despite the cover it offered, you just didn't walk through mangrove—unless you wanted a broken leg, or to fall into a bog or get yourself bitten by a cotton-mouth or a rattlesnake.

A red-and-white speed boat came racing down the gulf from the pass. It circled behind me and beached so hard that the two men in it were thrown forward. They leaped out, splashed ashore and ran to the unconscious figure of the man I had knocked down. One of the men was Lew Hapes. The other was stocky and bull-shouldered and had the reddest hair I've ever seen.

If you lived in Florida and read the newspapers at all, you'd have recognized him immediately. It was Leo Kearny, the Miami gambler, reputed to be the statewide racket boss.

Bells began ringing all over my head. Loud bells, the great-grandfathers of the little bell that had tinkled in my mind last night at the sight of the dinghy named *Amaryllis*. There wasn't any doubt about that dinghy any more. I don't know how many times I'd seen in the newspapers and in the newsreels things like: *Gambler Leo Kearny Fishing in His Motor Yacht, the Amaryllis; Alleged Vice Lord, Leo Kearny, Entertains a Party of Friends Aboard His Luxury Yacht, the Amaryllis.*

The dinghy had come from the yacht *Amaryllis*. The day before, the police had briefly questioned Kearny about the shooting of another gambler, named Necker, on Longmans Key. Longmans Key was only a half mile from the spot where Dinah had hooked the dinghy. Kearny was supposed to have been fishing off Fort Lauderdale when the shooting took place—but the dinghy, found in the pass, put him undeniably at the scene of the killing. The

dinghy was the only hole in his neat alibi!

CHAPTER THREE

License to Kill

KEARNY did not waste any time trying to revive his friend. He took two steps toward me, raised his arm, and a short tongue of flame spurted from the end of it. The bullet kicked up sand a few feet in front of me. I fired back wildly, and both Kearny and Hapes dived for the sand. I fired another shot and sprinted toward the pass. Thank God Kearny was not a marksman. The level beach was a shooting gallery, and though I zigzagged as I ran, he should have been able to pot me sure—but he had probably never shot anybody at a distance over six feet.

I had a big lead on them when I reached the cottages. The first thing I saw was that the dinghy was gone. You could see where it had been dragged back to the water, but I didn't give a damn about the dinghy. I burst into Dinah's cottage yelling her name at the top of my lungs. I went through the three small rooms like a cat through a dog pound, then sprang through the doorway and ran for the Hapes cottage, casting one glance backward over my shoulder.

Kearny was still a hundred yards away, floundering heavily through the sand. Hapes, who could easily out-distance him, trotted at his side, nervously wringing his hands. He looked like a man who had grabbed the tiger's tail by mistake instead of a piece of rope.

Kearny fired another shot at me as I burst into the other cottage. The cottages were identical—living room, bedroom and kitchen. Dinah wasn't in any of the rooms.

I glanced through the window. Kearny and Hapes were a scant twenty-five yards away now and coming fast, for the sand was harder.

I sprang across the living room, frantically unbuttoned the screen that covered the window, and dropped to the sand outside. I didn't have any more time for running, now—but the cottage, like most gulf shore cottages, was set on concrete piers, which raised it about two feet from the sand. The opening underneath was partially masked by a hedge of hibiscus and

low-growing Spanish bayonet, and, risking being stabbed by the needle-tipped leaves of the Spanish bayonet, I wriggled through the shrubbery and under the house.

I heard their footsteps thunder on the wooden floor above me. They pounded from room to room. Kearny was swearing savagely.

"Maybe—maybe he ducked back into the other cottage when we came in here, Leo," Hapes stammered.

"Don't call me Leo, rat."

I heard Kearny heavily take three steps and stop, and I knew it was Kearny, because Hapes didn't have the weight to make the floor creak so. Kearny was at the western side of the house now, and I judged that he was standing at the window, watching Dinah's cottage.

"Who'd you say that guy was?" he snapped at Hapes.

"Just the game warden, Mr. Kearny."

"Just the game warden," Kearny mimicked fiercely. "Who else knows about the dinghy?"

"N-nobody. It was the girl that took it after I hid it. She was the one. Nobody else knew."

"But you blabbed to her, eh?"

"No. Honest I didn't, Mr. Kearny. I didn't say a word to her. I didn't even tell my wife it was your dinghy."

"Why didn't you call me last night instead of waiting till this morning?"

"I—I didn't think. . . ."

"The hell you didn't. You thought I'd be a little more anxious if I dangled for awhile; you thought you could up the ante. You thought you could squeeze ten G's out of me for it if I suffered a little more!"

Hapes gave a cry of pain, and I heard a thud as if he'd been knocked down.

Kearny said very softly, "Get up."

There was a little scratching, slithering noise as Hapes presumably obeyed.

"Here's a gun," Kearny purred. "Go on, take it, rat. Now you're going to walk over to that other cottage and flush that warden out of his hole. Go ahead—walk!"

Hapes whimpered, "Please—please. . . ."

"I'll be right here with my gun, Mr. Hapes. I'll cover you all the way."

"No, please!"

This time I heard the slap, followed immediately by another cry of pain from Hapes. But he had a gun now. Why didn't

he shoot Kearny? I didn't have to think that one over. He still thought he was going to get ten thousand dollars from Kearny for that dinghy, the hole in Kearny's alibi.

I heard the door open, heard Hapes fearful footsteps descend the wooden porch steps.

Peering through the shrubbery, I could see Hapes' legs now. He seemed to have no control over them. He staggered and lurched drunkenly, hardly able to drag himself toward the other cottage where he thought I was lying in wait with a gun.

Kearny called harshly, "Keep moving, rat!"

From the direction of his voice, I knew he was at the window again—waiting this time for me to show myself in Dinah's cottage.

How Hapes managed to totter across the open sand to the other cottage without collapsing, I'll never know, but he managed. He got as far as the porch, and I saw him give one despairing glance over his shoulder toward Kearny, then break into a panic-stricken run down the beach, away from both cottages. Kearny's gun roared twice, and Hapes jerked twice. He rose to his toes, did a sickening, flapping, disjointed little dance, then went down and lay still.

In the abrupt silence that followed, I could hear my heart thundering like a bass drum.

Then Kearny called out loudly, "Hey you, game warden. I'll make you a deal."

He waited. If I'd been in the other cottage, I'd have told him to go to hell, but as it was, I just lay there beneath the floor, trying to stifle my every breath so he wouldn't hear me.

He called out again, "You and your girl friend have my dinghy. Okay. You played it smart. But now's the time to cash in. I'll give you ten grand for it. Ten grand on the line."

I could imagine him straining his eyes, waiting with his gun, waiting for me to show myself in Dinah's cottage.

"That's a big piece of change, pal," he called. "You can do a lot with ten grand."

Sure, I thought, sweatily gripping my gun. I could buy myself the fanciest coffin in Florida.

When he called out again, I could hear the raw edge of murderous rage in his

voice. "Fifteen thousand, pal. Take it or leave it."

When there was still no answer, he laughed harshly. "Okay, pal, you asked for it. You didn't kill Falty down there on the beach, you know. He'll be snapping out of it, and we'll have you in a box."

I felt a cold dash of dismay. Of course I hadn't killed that man on the beach, and he would be snapping out of it. And sooner or later they were going to realize I wasn't in the other cottage. It wouldn't be long after that that they'd find me.

Kearney shouted, "Last call, wise guy. Yes or no?"

I STARTED wriggling out from under the house through the shrubbery again. Breathing heavily, getting a good grip on myself, I crouched beneath the window for a moment, then slowly stood upright and peered into the room.

For one horrified moment, I just stood there—for Kearny's red, furious face was no more than a foot away from mine with only the screen between us. He had crossed the room, obviously intending to slip out that window.

He let out a bellow and his gun exploded. My face was stung with splinters from the side of the house as the bullet blasted through, and I leaped sideways, firing one shot in answer. I tripped over something, and for an awful moment I floundered face down in the soft sand. I had tripped over the stubby pair of oars from the dinghy.

I scrambled to my hands and knees, then, bending low beneath the window level, ran for the front of the house—hoping that he'd expect me to dive for the cover of the shrubbery behind. I leaped noiselessly up to the porch and, flattening myself against the wall, forced myself to glance into the room through the window. I caught a glimpse of his bulk as he darted into the kitchen to cover the rear of the house. He had to get me now. I was as important as the dinghy, for I had seen him kill Hapes.

I inched to the front doorway, then slithered quickly into the living room. The kitchen door was still swinging gently. I tiptoed across the room on shaking legs. I licked the perspiration off my upper lip. This was it. This was the clutch.

I flipped open the door and quavered, "Okay, Kearny. . . ."

He was at the kitchen window. He whirled and his gun roared so fast that if I hadn't been lying flat on the floor, the slugs would have torn me in half. I shot him through the right shoulder.

Trying to disregard his groans, I tied him to the gas range, after hastily plugging the hole in his shoulder. Then I ran outside, yelling, "Dinah. Dinah!"

I thought I heard a faint cry in answer, but it didn't seem to come from anywhere.

I yelled, "Where are you, honey? Dinah!"

Then I heard the splashing. Staggering, dressed in her pajamas, Dinah came wading from behind a pin-point of a sea-grape covered island about a hundred yards out in the bay.

Sobbing, laughing, crying, she threw her arms around me and wailed, "Oh, Marty, Marty!"

I carried her in to the shore.

"You poor kid!" I said.

She managed a smile. "J-just give me a cigarette," she said. "I'm f-fine. I g-got the dinghy. I hid it out there under the leaves. You can't see it from here."

I lit her a cigarette. I don't know whose hands were shaking harder, hers or mine.

"You told me to keep my eye on the dinghy," she said, "so I did, and about six o'clock this morning, I saw Lew Hapes come sneaking out. He dragged it back to

the water, and he rowed it around to the bay side of the island. He hid it in the mangrove. He came back with the oars, then started up the beach toward the village. I thought it was funny, so I took the dinghy away from where he had put it, and hid it in that little island out there. Then all of a sudden, I got scared!"

"I'll bet you did!" I said with feeling.

"Marty, honestly, I was afraid to go back to my cottage alone. Lew's face had looked so awful, like a weasel. I knew you were coming for me at ten, so I just waited out there in the dinghy. Marty, it was terrible. Those two men came in the speed boat and Lew met them, and I heard them say they had flown to Bradenton from Miami in a plane, then they said something about the dinghy. The water carried their voices, or something. Then when they couldn't find the dinghy, they started to beat up Lew. Margie came running out of their cottage, and the man with red hair knocked her down. Lew was on the ground and they were kicking him. They didn't see Margie get up and run down the beach. Her face was bleeding. Then the dark man saw her and ran after her. . . . Oh!"

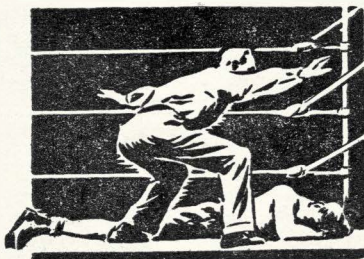
Her face went scarlet and she leaped to her feet, running toward her cottage.

I jumped up. "What's the matter?"

"Why didn't you tell me this was all the clothes I had on?" she cried.

THE END

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By
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"Don't move, copper! Don't reach for your gun or I'll kill you both!"

Sitting up with a slick chick like Ellen, Sergeant Howard figured, was as nice a way as any to trap a killer.

THE girl was twenty-three, but she seemed younger. She was thin, not very tall, and her face had a pinched and hungry look. Her eyes were dark and large. Her hair was quite black. She sat on the edge of her chair in Ben Howard's office at headquarters, her body tense, her

hands tightly clasped together in her lap.

Ben finished his telephone call, then glanced at her. He said, "Just a minute, Maria. Just a minute," and started making notes on the call. Notes which weren't important. He didn't look forward with any pleasure to what lay ahead. He knew almost exactly what Maria Baroni was going to say to him. And he knew what his answer would have to be.

The case against Tony Baroni was closed. A week ago the jury had brought in its verdict of guilty. Half an hour ago, the judge who had heard the case had passed sentence. Maria's brother would die for the murder of Eli Norton. There was nothing Ben could do about it. Nothing that Ben should do.

"Well, Maria?" he said finally, looking up.

"He wasn't guilty," said Maria. "He's going to die for something he didn't do."

"He held up the liquor store," said Ben Howard. "He struck Eli Norton over the head and Norton died of a crushed skull. There was a witness to what happened."

"She lied. Most of what she said was a lie."

Ben shook his head. Norton's clerk, Ellen Halstead, had been in the store at the time of the holdup and murder. After Baroni had fled, she had hurried from the store to find a telephone and call the police. Baroni had ripped out the telephone in the store. There was a chance, a bare chance, that someone had come in the store just after the holdup, had found Norton unconscious, and had struck him again. Ben had worked on that. He had walked off his feet working on it, but he had found nothing to support the theory.

"You're through with the case, aren't you?" said Maria Baroni. "You'll let my brother die."

"What else can I do?" Ben asked.

"You could work some more. You could find the man who's really guilty. You could refuse to give up."

The tone of the girl's voice had lifted. She had come to her feet, her body rigid. Her breath was coming fast.

"I did everything I could," said Ben.

But those were feeble words as Maria heard them, and Ben knew it. Maria's faith in the story her brother had told had never been shaken. Tony Baroni had insisted

that Norton was alive when he left the store. Alive and breathing and that his head was uncut. When Norton had been found by the police his head was crushed in a pool of blood, and broken pieces of a bottle were around it. Tony insisted he hit Norton only with his gun.

"I'll not stop," said Maria. "I'll not stop until I get at the truth!"

"You'll only make trouble for yourself," said Ben.

"And do you think I'm afraid of trouble?"

Her eyes were flashing; her head was lifted proudly, boldly, defiantly. She wasn't really a pretty girl but there was something awfully attractive about her. Some vital quality that made itself felt.

"No," said Ben. "I don't think you're afraid of trouble."

"Will you talk to him again?"

"Who? Tony?"

"Yes. And then see me again. Will you do that?"

Ben sighed. "All right, Maria. I'll see him."

BEN HOWARD was twenty-nine. He had joined the police force before the war. His army service had been brief. Shortly after his arrival overseas he had been wounded, shipped home, and discharged. The slight limp which stood in the way of further army service might have stood in his way as a police officer, if he hadn't been on furlough while in the army, and if the department hadn't needed men on his return. He considered himself lucky. Two years ago he had made the rating of sergeant and had been transferred to the detective squad. And he was doing all right.

A good part of the work on the Norton killing had been his responsibility. The case, really, had presented few difficulties after the identification and arrest of Tony Baroni. Ellen Halstead had witnessed the holdup and murder. A man named Dave Porter had identified a patched twenty-dollar bill found on Baroni as a bill he had paid to Norton an hour before. But that evidence really wasn't needed. Tony had confessed the robbery and assault.

He had insisted, however, that he had struck Norton only with his gun and that he hadn't robbed the floor safe, which was

open and empty when the police arrived. And his story and his sister's faith in him had driven Ben Howard to doing a lot of leg work which had been fruitless.

Nor would it help to see Tony Baroni again. Ben was sure of that even as he went to the jail and back to Tony's cell. He was sure of it as he faced Tony through the bars.

"What do you want, copper?" asked Baroni.

He was a short man. Stocky. Dark haired, just as his sister. But there was an ugly look in his eyes, and bitterness in the twist of his lips. This wasn't the first time he had been in a jail cell.

"Your sister wanted me to see you," said Ben.

"Keep away from my sister!" snapped Baroni. "She's too good for you."

"And for you, Tony," said Ben. "She still believes in you."

Baroni wiped a hand across his face. He turned away, then came back to where Ben was standing. "This time I didn't lie to her," he said distinctly. "I told the truth. You don't believe that, of course. You wouldn't take my word against the word of a pretty woman. But Ellen Halstead lied. I didn't make Norton open the floor safe. I didn't know he had a floor safe. I took what was in the cash register, and that was all."

Ben Howard had heard this before. There was a ring of truth in what Baroni had said, but he couldn't accept it. He had talked to Ellen Halstead. He had listened to her, looking deep into her eyes as she answered his questions. He couldn't believe she had been lying.

Ellen Halstead! He scowled. He wasn't wrong about this case. He was a fool to be swayed by Maria's faith in her brother. It didn't mean a thing.

"Tell 'em to take me away," said Tony suddenly. "Tell 'em to burn me. I'm sick of this world, anyhow. What's good in it? What chance would I ever have?"

"Tony," said Ben. "Tony, can you think of anything you haven't told me? Anything at all?"

"What can a man add to the truth?" asked Tony Baroni. "Get out, copper. Leave me alone."

Get out. And of course that was the thing to do. Ben went back to his desk. He did

some other work and tried to push the Baroni case out of his mind.

He was returning from dinner just as the flash hit headquarters. The flash reporting that Tony Baroni had escaped from the two deputies who were taking him to the station, enroute to the penitentiary.

Ben was startled at the news. He stood near his desk for a time, considering it, and then he went in to see the chief.

Nels Goldring had been a police officer for more than a quarter of a century. He was a big, heavy-set man with iron-gray hair and an ugly, scowling face. He was more even tempered than he looked. He didn't get easily excited.

"Well, your man got away, Ben," he said, looking up. "That is, he got away for a while. Have you any ideas?"

"One," said Ben.

"What's that?"

"Straight through the trial, Baroni claimed he was innocent. He said that the Halstead girl lied, that he didn't make Norton open the floor safe, that he got only what was in the cash register, less than a hundred dollars. When we picked him up he had only a little more than fifty dollars in his pockets."

"He could have ludder, the rest of what he got."

"And maybe he did, but there's always a chance he was telling the truth, and now that he's free, he'll try to get the person he blames for his conviction."

"I've sent men to cover the apartment where the Halstead girl lives."

"Pull them off, chief," said Ben Howard.

"Pull them off!"

"Sure. Baroni will spot them and hole up some place. He's smart. He's been playing tag with the police since he was in knee pants. Let me call on the Halstead girl. I'll call on her and stay there. Stay a week if I have to. Stay until Baroni shows up, or until you find him."

A slow grin broke across Goldring's face. He chuckled. "A nice job, huh?"

Ben could feel the rush of blood to his face. He shook his head. "Nothing like that, chief," he growled. "It would be a business arrangement. Let me go see her, talk to her."

Goldring stood up. He squinted at Ben Howard, then turned to the window and stood there for a moment, staring into the

street. "All right," he said finally. "Go see her. Talk to her. Call me up. But don't do anything to get yourself in trouble. Keep your nose clean, Ben. That's an order."

ELLEN HALSTEAD lived in a small apartment house in one of the older parts of the city. She had lived there three years. She was twenty-five and had never been married. She had come here from a small town in Iowa where she had been reared and where she had gone to school.

From Ellen and her landlord and a girl friend, he had learned a number of facts about Ellen. A great number of facts. Facts which looked good on paper, but which still didn't tell him much about her—about what she was really like.

This had been one of the puzzling things about the case. This feeling and an awareness of a strong, personal attraction toward her, which he had tried to keep hidden. She was tall, slender, blonde, beautiful. She had a nice voice, low and controlled. Her eyes were blue, direct, honest. She had answered every question he had asked her, and with never a momentary hesitation, yet he didn't feel as though he knew her.

Heading now in a taxi toward Ellen's apartment, Ben had to grin at himself. This plan, of course, was sound. But he was afraid it wasn't only the soundness of the plan which had made him suggest it. There was the matter of his own personal interest in the girl to be taken into consideration. If he had a personal interest in her. If that was what kept nagging at him.

The taxi stopped in front of the door to Ellen's apartment house. Ben climbed out and paid the fare. He glanced up and down the street without spotting anyone from the department. Perhaps the men sent here had already reported in, and been called off. Or maybe he just missed seeing them.

He entered the apartment house and took the automatic elevator to the third floor. He knocked on the door to Ellen's apartment, and as he stood there, awaiting her answer, he could feel the lift of a strange excitement. He wondered, abruptly, what Ellen would think. He honestly didn't know. And he was afraid, as he stood there, of a danger in it beyond anything Tony Baroni might try. A different kind of danger.

The door opened and he saw Ellen Halstead. She was wearing a blue checkered dress cut low at the throat, but not too low. A dress which fitted tightly at her waist and flared out around her hips. Just a house dress, but it looked awfully well on her.

"You!" she said when she saw him, and there was surprise in her voice. But not an unwelcome surprise.

"Yes," said Ben. "It's me again. May I come in?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant."

"It's only Sergeant," said Ben, grinning.

He stepped into the room as Ellen stepped away from the door. He had been here before several times. It was a small room, not too well furnished, but neat and clean and homelike. There was a davenport near the front window, two other comfortable chairs, a coffee table, a radio, a bookcase. The carpet was worn. There were pictures on the walls. Three pictures. All seascapes. But that's probably what a girl from Iowa would have picked.

"An official visit, Sergeant?" said Ellen. "Or unofficial this time?"

She was smiling and there was almost a challenge in the smile. As though she had expected an unofficial visit, but perhaps not so soon. She was smiling, and there were high points of color in her cheeks. Her hair, a dusky pale color, was short and curled close to her head.

"Official," said Ben.

"Why?" said Ellen, and suddenly her smile was gone. "I don't think I understand."

"Tony Baroni escaped about an hour ago," said Ben. "He broke away from the two officers who were taking him to the train."

Ellen's mind was quick. She got it. She caught her breath. "You—you think he might come here?"

"It's a possibility," Ben nodded. "He was bitter. You saw that at the trial. He insisted you lied about him."

The girl drew in a long, shuddering breath. She turned away, crossed to the table in the breakfast alcove, and stood there with her back to Ben. "I wish I had never gone to work for Mr. Norton," she said in a voice so low Ben hardly caught the words. "I almost wish I'd never left home."

"Every man on the force is looking for him," said Ben. "He may have been caught by now. If he stays out of our hands he may flee the city. It probably will never occur to him to come here. But he might."

"And that's why you're here?" said Ellen.

"That's why I'm here."

"What are you going to do?"

She had turned to face him, now, frowning.

"Wait," said Ben Howard.

"How long?"

"As long as is necessary."

"All night?"

"If I have to."

Color had again lifted into the girl's cheeks. She was staring at him, her look very direct. And Ben could feel a sudden, warm flush in his face which brought with it a quick annoyance.

"I'll not stay if you don't trust me," he blurted. "We can put men outside. And if we do, you'll be safe. But we won't have as good a chance of trapping Baroni that way as if I stayed in here. And let him come in, if he's coming."

"I can't have a man stay here overnight."

"I'm not staying as a man. If I stay it will be as a police officer."

Ellen bit her lips. Her face was still flushed. "I want to do what's right," she said slowly. "I want to do what I should. It's just that—"

Her voice broke off. She didn't seem to know how to finish what she had started saying.

Ben had the feeling that he was handling this very poorly. He crossed to the radio, a cabinet model. On top of it was a velvet runner and on the runner, between two book ends, were several books. Ben glanced at the titles. He picked up a key lying on the runner and laid it down again, hardly conscious of what he was doing. He was telling himself that he should have sent someone else to stay here, or that he shouldn't have come alone.

"Do I go to work tomorrow, or do I stay here?" asked Ellen.

"You go to work," said Ben. He clicked on the radio, then clicked it off. "You'll be covered, on the way, by men from the department."

"And what do you do?"

"Stay here. Baroni might enter the

apartment while you are away and plan on awaiting your return"

He turned to look at her, scowling, and aware of the fact that he was scowling. "Ellen, I may be out of here in an hour, or I might have to stay longer. If I have to stay, I'll behave myself. I promise that. Tonight, I'm a police officer. Nothing else."

"Benjamin Howard, police officer," said Ellen. And suddenly she was smiling again, and nodding her head.

IT WAS ten o'clock, and then eleven, and then midnight. Ben Howard had made his report to headquarters shortly after his arrival. Since then, he had heard nothing, which could only mean that Baroni was still at large. Perhaps, by this time, out of the city. Or perhaps hidden. Or perhaps even now making his way up the stairwell of this apartment house.

The possibility of a visit from Tony Baroni had overshadowed every moment he and Ellen had spent together, and all they had talked about. That, of course, and the strangeness of a situation like this. But they had done very well. There was no real tension between them.

A few moments ago Ellen had said, "I usually go to bed sometime during the night."

And Ben had answered. "I know. There's the room, over there. I'll use the davenport."

"It's lumpy."

"But I like lumps," Ben had grinned. "Night, Ellen."

Sitting on the edge of the davenport he had a cigarette and grinned. Then after a moment the bedroom door opened and Ellen looked out at him. She was wearing a dressing gown over her pajamas. It was a frilly dressing gown, tied loosely at the waist. Over her arm she had two blankets and a pillow.

"For you, Ben," she said, moving into the room.

Ben didn't move from the davenport as Ellen came forward. His grin disappeared. He watched Ellen lay the blankets on the davenport and then straighten, lifting her hands to touch her hair as she looked at him, a faint, hesitant smile showing on her lips.

"It might get cold," she said.

Ben nodded, watching her. *Get up, you fool. Take her in your arms. Any other man would.*

But he didn't get up, and when he spoke it was only to say, "Thanks, Ellen."

And then in another moment she was gone, and the bedroom door was shut and he was alone in the parlor.

He finished his cigarette and had another. He climbed to his feet and crossed to the radio and turned it on. And stood there, scowling. Ellen, he remembered, had once turned on the radio this evening during a lull in their conversation. But she had almost immediately turned it off. As he did now.

Back on the davenport he tried to make himself comfortable. After a while he slept, but not well. . . .

Ellen was cheerful in the morning. Cheerful and friendly and bubbling with good spirits. She made the coffee and fried eggs and bacon, promising to burn them. She did burn the toast, but made a joke of it.

"You get to do the dishes," she said to Ben. "I'm a working girl. And besides, I didn't ask you to stay all night."

Ben was able to laugh, and to discount some of the things which had occurred to him during the sleepless hours of the night.

"You might bring me a razor when you come home," he grumbled. "You're not going to like the way my jaw looks without a shave."

"I don't like it now," said Ellen. "If I ever marry—" She frowned and didn't finish the sentence."

They were still sitting at the breakfast table. Ellen got up. She reached for the coffee pot and came around to Ben's side of the table. She poured him more coffee, standing quite close to him. Ben could sense the warmth of her body. He stared at her arm. Slender, well rounded, faintly tanned. There was no man in her life, no man who counted. There had been one, back in Iowa, but he had been killed. She was over that now. She had talked of it last night in an almost detached manner.

"What will you do while I'm gone?" she was asking.

"Just wait," Ben answered.

She stood looking down at him thoughtfully, her eyes troubled at some unexpressed thought.

"Nothing happened last night," she said.

"No," said Ben. "Nothing happened." And he wasn't thinking only of Tony Baroni.

"While I'm gone," said Ellen, "I wish—"

Her voice broke off and her body went suddenly rigid. They were in the breakfast alcove which was really a part of the parlor. Ellen was facing toward the hall door. There must have been a click as a key turned in the lock, but Ben hadn't heard it, or heard the door open. Yet when he jerked

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By Shad Collins

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around, the hall door was open and Tony Baroni had stepped into the room.

THERE was a gun in Baroni's hand. It covered them. And the look in Baroni's eyes was ugly. Ugly, and hard, and violent. His voice, as it slapped across the room, was sharp with the man's reckless anger.

"Don't move, copper! Don't reach for your gun or I'll kill you both!"

Ben Howard sat motionless, his hand only inches from his holstered gun. He heard a voice, which must have been his own, saying, "Tony, this will get you nothing. Tony, wait a minute. Wait—"

"Shut up, copper," said Baroni. "Let the woman talk. And this time, it had better be the truth. It's the truth or a bullet."

Ben heard a crash behind him. He jerked a look over his shoulder. Ellen had collapsed, fallen against her chair, and rolled to the floor in a dead faint.

"Steady, copper," said Baroni. "She's faking. Throw some water on her. Get her up. She's going to talk."

He came forward as he said that, close to the table. He waved with his gun toward Ellen.

Ben moved around to where Ellen was lying. He bent over her, then straightened, lunging upright. His shoulder caught the edge of the table, lifting it, tilting it straight at Baroni. And behind it, shoving it, Ben drove forward. He heard the roar of a shot but where the bullet went he didn't know. Baroni sprawled to the floor, half under the table, and as he was twisting around, lifting his gun once more, Ben dived for the man.

He slammed Baroni's head against the floor. He did it again, and again. He kept on till the man went limp.

Ellen was sitting up now, looking pale, but her fall hadn't hurt her.

Baroni was right, he thought. *She was faking. But it was a smart thing to do.*

He turned and helped Ellen to her feet, holding her in his arms for a moment, conscious of her warmth and softness.

"Just give me a minute," whispered the girl. "Give me a minute and I can stand."

It was a nice minute, standing there with his arms around Ellen. But Baroni was stirring and there was work to do. Ben led the girl to the davenport and made her lie down. He handcuffed Baroni, then picked up Baroni's gun, unloaded it, dropped the

shells in his pocket and carried the gun with him to the telephone stand. He laid it there and then telephoned his report to headquarters.

Ellen was sitting up when he finished. She said, "Ben, I think I'd like a cigarette."

Ben brought her one and held a match for her. He glanced back at Baroni, who was probably conscious now, but hadn't said anything.

"Benjamin Howard, police officer," murmured Ellen, her hand on his arm.

"That's right," said Ben.

"You'll not be here when I get home from work."

"No."

"But you could."

BEN pulled in a deep breath. He looked at the girl, then looked away. He said, "Ellen, where is your birth certificate?"

"Why, in my bedroom," said the girl, surprised. "It's in a box I have in one of my bureau drawers."

"Are your insurance papers there too?"

"Of course. But why, Ben?"

"There was a key lying on top the radio last night," Ben said bleakly. "It's not there now. I want it."

"A key?" said Ellen. But the puzzled expression that should have been in her eyes wasn't there. There was something chilly in their blue depths. And the girl's body had stiffened.

"Quite a large key," said Ben. "A key to a safety deposit box."

"Oh," said Ellen. "That key." The tone of her voice was flat. "Why do you want it?"

"I want to find out what's in the box," said Ben. "I think I know what's in it. The money which was taken from the floor safe in Eli Norton's store. After Baroni slugged Norton and fled, you finished the job. You used a bottle on Norton's head, opened the floor safe to which you had the combination, took the money that was there and hid it, confident you could blame it all on Baroni. Later, you rented a safety deposit box to hide the money. If you had already had a safety deposit box, your birth certificate and insurance papers would probably be in it."

Ellen didn't flinch under this accusation. She shook her head and smiled sadly.

(Please continue on page 113)

A master of the calculated risk was Orville Esterhazy—who gladly invested ten years of his life for a . . .

HUNDRED-GRAND FUTURE

By RUFUS
BAKALOR



After he had paid his debt to society, he would retire to an agreeable climate where there were bright lights and lots of beautiful babes . . .

WHEN Orville Esterhazy started his "Retirement Fund," as he liked to think of it, he was acute enough to realize that certain calculated risks were involved. Therefore, he was somewhat disturbed, but not at all surprised, when the detection of his embezzlement proved too much for the heart of old S. E. Xavier.

Orville had begun working in the office of the Xavier Athletic Supply Company right after his graduation from high school. Old Xavier, who was respected in Muskellunge for his paternal interest in all young people, liked and trusted Orville. And Orville, who seemed to have a natural knack for handling books, eventually became Xavier's head bookkeeper.

After he had gained Xavier's complete

trust, Orville conceived the plan for his Retirement Fund, almost completely anticipating the consequences. By faking invoices and inventories over the period of a year, Orville managed to bilk the firm in the amount of \$102,857, which he kept, in bills of a moderate denomination, in a small strongbox he had acquired for the purpose.

Orville knew that some day his crime would surely be discovered. He also knew that he was constitutionally unsuited to playing the fugitive, and to abscond with his booty and have the police breathing on his neck was not exactly the kind of retirement he envisioned.

Therefore, he kept his strongbox ever ready for protracted concealment, and stood willing to serve out his prison term when apprehended. The idea being, of course, to reclaim his strongbox after he had paid his debt to society, and then to retire to an agreeable climate distant from Muskellunge, where there were bright lights and beautiful babes. . . .

When old S. E. Xavier called in an unsmiling C.P.A. with very clean fingernails to audit the books, Orville knew that the jig was up.

The problem of where to cache the strongbox, so that it would be safe from discovery while Orville languished in prison, was a tricky one. But Orville had had ample time to brood over the matter and, now that the moment was at hand, he knew exactly what to do.

On the outskirts of Muskellunge was a little-frequented woodland known as Waldron's Ravine. Orville had often played there as a boy and he remembered the dried-up, abandoned well that was sunk in the middle of it.

His plan was simple. He soldered all crevices of the strongbox to prevent any water damage. Then he treated the box with three coats of rustproof paint. As an extra precaution, he dipped it in parafin. These measures would keep the box and its contents safe from any foreseeable deterioration. When he got out of prison, he would raise the box again with a strong magnet, and be on his way to his gay new life.

Orville conveyed his well-protected chest or treasure to Waldron's Ravine on his little brother's coaster wagon. The ravine was deserted except for a few preoccupied braces of young lovers, who showed little

or no interest in contemporary proceedings. Unseen, Orville slightly raised the concrete slab that covered the well with an automobile jack, kissed his strongbox, lowered it gently into the well with a rope, and covered it lightly with dirt.

Then, setting his compass on a light visible at a street intersection, he paced off the distance and direction of the well from it, so that, come what may, he would know its exact location of his Retirement Fund.

Now he was ready to face with composure old Xavier, the C.P.A., and the Law.

THE C.P.A. was not long in discovering the irregularities in Orville's books; nor was Orville long in owning up to it.

Old Xavier and the district attorney were persistent in their questioning as to what had become of the embezzled funds. Orville explained that it was gone, all gone, practically every penny of it: the stock market, the horse races, hapless investments, and high living. He had had the foresight to fortify himself with several sets of silk underwear in proof of his extravagance.

They proffered deals of a light sentence if he would tell them where the money was, but Orville was convincing: the swag was irretrievably spent.

Orville was brought to trial and subsequently whisked off to prison for a stay of ten to fifteen years. The course of justice did not help old S. E. Xavier very much. Broken in business, spirit and body by Orville's treachery, he was escorted to his grave by a mourning populace.

The years in prison passed quickly for Orville. He was on his good behavior with an eye toward parole.

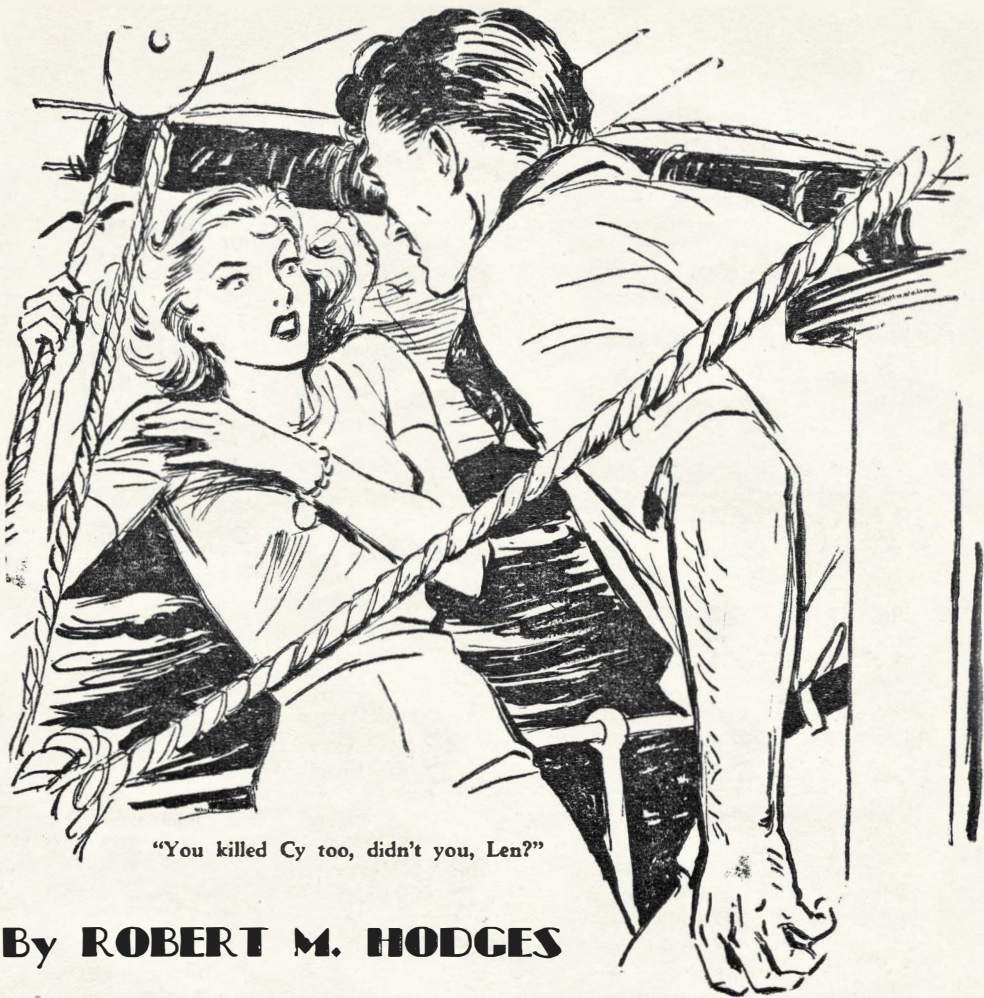
And no one would have suspected the existence of his cache, unless he had interpreted correctly Orville's smile of contempt when he overheard guards talking of their puny pension schemes.

Orville worried about the cache, of course. The possibility of seepage in the old well kept occurring to him; and he wished that he had set the strongbox in a wooden tub—well-caulked, of course—so that it would float. But, somehow, he was sure that everything would be all right.

In ten years, Orville was a free man.

As the train drew into Muskellunge station, he cautioned himself against undue

(Please continue on page 112)



"You killed Cy too, didn't you, Len?"

By **ROBERT M. HODGES**

JUST wait till she finds out today's her last day on earth. Just wait for that so-delicious moment. Oh, it'll be worth everything!

Look at her now, relaxed as a baby beside you. Dressed dashing in a white T-shirt, scarlet jacket and faun-colored slacks,

You've been pitied and persecuted long enough, Len. And now that Lil has thrown away your love—you're going to strike back!

WELL-SPRING OF MURDER

she is so small and slender she hardly dents the plump cushions of your sleek convertible. Watch the way the wind tugs at those abundant tawny curls. Whips the rich color into the face that's been too pale these past several months. And burnishes once more those level and candid blue eyes with their old half-dreamy sparkle.

Yep, quite a girl. So healthy and vital that an outing like this is bound to renew her zest for life. That enjoyment of life that you, too, savored to the full for a brief period, for the first time in all your thirty years. How many eons ago was it? It was when you first knew her, and it lasted for months. Longer than any good thing, any joyous thing, had ever lasted with you. But it should have lasted forever, and didn't.

Suppose you suddenly asked her how she'd feel if she knew that never again would she see such a day as this—or any other day? She'd glance at you quickly, disconcerted despite her cool poise—with that funny, probing look she used to give you, as though she could not understand you. Then she'd give a polite little grimace and say, "Oh, Len, you and your crazy jokes!"

Crazy? That might be argued. But no joke, sister. Thassa joke, son. Who was it used to wow 'em with that corn? Well, thassa no joke, son—uh, sister. . . .

There you go, getting your mind all snarled up again like a discarded ball of yarn. Control, man, that's what you need! Control over yourself like your mastery over this car, sweeping the two of you so imperiously down the highway. To a cozy spot in the Sound that tomorrow will be a smear of black headlines. About a girl so young, so beautiful. And so dead.

Here comes a cop! So what? You're just a guy out with his girl on a dream of a day in early summer. A day made for picnics and holding hands, and maybe for a few kisses. A day that once would have brought to a boil all the aching tenderness and searing yearning that you found out, too late, you had in you. But now something else has taken its place.

There goes the cop, rocketing by with never a glance. Good-by, trooper. If only he could read your mind. But he can't, and that's why you're laughing.

Hey, she's talking to you.

"Happy?"

So she thought that laugh of yours was an honest laugh. Trusting soul!

"Always happy with you." How true, though for unnamed reasons just now. But wait—a shadow touched her face then. Maybe *he* used to say that, in just that same way.

"What's the matter, Lil? Did I say something I shouldn't?"

"Of course not. I'm glad you're happy, Len. It's just that—for a second just then—I was reminded of something. Oh, the devil with it. The past, is the past."

"The past is the past." Repeat it after her. Sure, go ahead and be a parrot. Be anything, so long as she doesn't get upset, plead sudden illness, ask you to take her home. That would be—awkward.

But far from being restless or withdrawn, she seems to have edged closer to you. Lil being coquettish? That's one for the books. Yet you can feel the fine silken tinkle as fugitive tendrils of her hair plume softly against your cheek.

Watch it, boy! Don't go soft now.

No danger of that, though. Not with that hatred that's like a virus in your veins, a fever smoldering in every cell of your being. . . .

How can you live with that hatred molten within you like a frantic and unappeasable obsession? How can you look in the mirror and still see a face reflected there? You, who have lost face in crises big and little—and who lost face a few months ago as never before, all because of this girl and because of—*him*.

But people soon forget your loss of face if you eliminate those responsible for it. And that's no chore. It's a privilege, really a duty. Make the guilty pay and pay—but don't run any risks yourself. Revenge is sweet, but not when the gas chamber is the pay-off. But you'll see to it that Lil, too, get what's coming to her, just as *he* got it—for having left you faceless and defenseless before the whispered gibes, the secret sniggers of the community where you were born and grew up through the tortured years of childhood and adolescence.

Well, one guilty person down, and one to go. By tonight the score will be evened. After the deed—and after the act you'll put on before family, police, reporters; after the interrogation, the gruelling strain, the charged excitement of the limelight—you

can look in your own private mirror in peace and silently drink a toast. To yourself, Len. Yes, because the face you see then will be yours, back where it belongs, intact and—invulnerable from then on.

NEVER AGAIN will you be the ineffectual Len of long ago, stumbling crying home to mother, nose gushing blood and your one good suit a ruin because the school bully had contemptuously pummeled you before a savage pack of seventh-graders.

Never again the madly panicked Len who, waking suddenly in the smoke of a burning room, plunged like an insane creature from the window and dropped to the ground—heedless of your stupefied roommate whom you could so easily have dragged back to life again. Yes, you resigned from the fraternity that same week. And the next semester you transferred to another and distant college. For no man can live among his fellows day in, day out, in a world transformed by scorn into a bristling cake of sneers and smirks and stares like stone.

Never again Len, the buck private, who sweatingly waited for the signal to wriggle through the blasted terrain at training camp on the live-ammunition machine-gun course; and who then—remember?—couldn't move when the signal flashed. Simply—couldn't—*move*. Your arms, legs, your whole body, all were as though paralyzed. The other recruits, just as green as you, shoved off, mute, grim, fearful, floundering forward like primeval reptiles under the lethal curtain of steel. But you—well.

There was a bit of a stink, but pretty soon you were out of the army, with something called a PN discharge that nobody needed to know about—but that people probably gossiped about nevertheless. And you went into practice with your father who, after years of struggle, was now nearing the rarefied realm of six figures a year as an attorney.

Never again the Len who staged that hideous fiasco in court. Remember? It was the chance of chances to put behind you all the fear of forever waiting to see what cold deck life was going to deal from next

With the trial underway you were on your own, confident in a seasoned knowledge of law beyond your years. But once again it began to come upon you—the self

doubt, the dooming sense of inadequacy, the feeling of exiledom in self. You writhed inwardly at the impact of eyes, countless eyes, arrowing into your back. And again came the hopeless, muted cry within: *Oh, damn it to hell, what's the matter with me, what's the matter with me, what's the matter with me?* Then you passed out.

That night your father came to your room. He was worried and tried to conceal it, but you could tell. You'd seen that same distant, haunted concern on his shrewd, kindly face for twenty-five years and more.

"What is the matter son?"

"Nothing," you'd said, as always. Though you knew full well something was the matter, and knew that your father and mother and other people knew it, too.

"Some people are born with the armor to take life in stride," your father mused aloud. "And some have to develop it the hard way."

And some, you brooded silently, never acquire it. And so what happens to them?

"You've always been too reserved, too withdrawn from people, Len. They don't dislike you or have it in for you, the way you seem to think. You're unnaturally thin-skinned."

It was odd to be talked to and treated as though you were a child again. In another way, it was a relief; it was paternalism and somebody else shouldering your responsibilities. It gave you something to cling to, like your bed that you never wanted to leave.

"Try to lick it, son. Life's hard, but you're making it a lot harder for no accountable reason." And then your father's tones became grave, almost ponderously insistent. "Make life's terms yours—and beat 'em. Force yourself to meet people, to *be* people. You'll never be happy like—this."

Happy? Look at you today. You've never been happy, except for that idyllic interlude when you thought that you and Lil would be engaged and married. . . . But that night that your father had tried to reason with you, you'd held back the shameful, self-pitying tears. Until your father, forlorn with frustration, had left the room.

No, never again all that, or any of that, or any of the numberless episodes in between those larger, memory-tarnishing ones of defeat and a cumulative hopelessness. For at last you are fighting back at life and its

harassments of the overly-sensitive (and that means you; your mother and father have both said so, almost desperately, throughout the painful years). You are silencing your tormentors and becoming whole again, and soon the ectoplasmic whispers of derision will be stilled.

You are gaining face by the minute, Len. Never to lose it again. . . .

Quit brooding, idiot! Talk! Want Lil to think you're slipping your trolley?

"Hope you like the new boat, Lil." Be very casual now. "Dad's just bought it, and we can take it out for a spin on the Sound. Be a good place for our picnic, as I told you."

"Sounds like a dreamboat to me. Imagine—a cabin cruiser! When we launch her, do we make with the champagne and stuff?"

"No bubble water. Got some hardstuff though."

That brought another shadow to her face.

"Why, Len, I heard—I thought—"

Go on, finish it, you little witch. You thought I was on the wagon, are you scared I can't even hold my liquor decently. You, too, faithless Lil, an interfering busybody like all the others, with their phony solicitude, pretended concern in my welfare. Well, Len, you're a big boy now and you'll do what you damned well please. But choke off your fury now, boy. Don't let her see it. Purge your mind of that red haze that always descends there like a smoking curtain when anybody presumes to tell *you* what to do.

"You heard—you thought—?"

"Nothing, Len. What's with the boat business? Elucidate!"

Just too cute for words, aren't you, little Lil? We who are about to die are just too cute for words.

"Oh, Dad and I have talked for the past year about getting a cruiser instead of the little speedboat we did have. You know, something we could really get around in. Maybe take a trip down the Inland Waterway next fall."

"So we'll give it a sort of shakedown cruise this afternoon? I can't wait! I'm like you, Len—I love boats."

Look, there's a taut sheen of anticipation far back in her eyes, like a kid unwrapping a new toy. She has always loved the water, just as you do. Remember? The loneliness of water far out from shore; the peace, the

hush that no whispers can pollute, no reality defile.

AH, HOW happy you were last summer when she would share that solitude with you. When you'd take her out for spins in the little boat you had then. What a team you were for swimming—just the two of you together, away from vulgar beach crowds. Remember her stroking and fluttering effortlessly beside you, a tan wraith born to the Sound's cool caress? So feminine, she was; so fragile-seeming to be so unafraid of life. With her intelligence—her steel-shod will and strength—she was meant to heal you, to protect you. But she had turned callously to another. Remember, Len?

Control, man. You almost forced that guy off the road then.

"Sorry, Lil. Mind wandering, I guess. Bad habit." And how! From now on, no more distracting thoughts. From now on—act.

"We're almost at the cutoff." Be matter-of-fact now. Don't let the tension get you. "Think I could use a drink. Just one."

"Okay." Brightly. No reproaches this time. "I'll have one, too, Len. Just a teeny." Already searching in the glove compartment for the bottle and the nested fat cups of chromium.

"So you'll be barmaid, huh? We'll pull over here."

"Ooops! Sorry, Len." Lil dropped her bag. Bend down for Lil. Yes, you, Little Lord Fauntleroy Len. Pick up the lady's bag.

"D'you pack the kitchen sink in this bag, too? It feels big enough and heavy enough."

"Everything but. You know us women!" That smile of hers. A glittering, almost breathless quality about it, its candlepower incandescent. Once it would have warmed you, that smile—far more than the brimming cup she's offering you. Once.

All right, down the hatch. Then get going. You've things to do, man.

"Cheers, Lil!"

"*Salud.*"

Okay. Just a little stretch of highway now, and then the turnoff, the road threading through trees down to the smiling, the sparkling, the death-dealing deep of the Sound.

That drink's taking hold with real authority. Feel it? Like a relaxing other self lazily curling up inside you. But take it easy driving. Don't alarm Lil at this stage. Don't be too eager.

See—you've reached the yacht club almost before you realized you were here. And here they wait in changeless welcome—your friends, your only true friends. The streamlined cruiser that you know so well how to handle. And the beckoning Borgia of the Sound, waiting timelessly in gleeful, silent conspiracy with you.

Yes, death where is thy sting? Lil—poor, *poor* Lil—will find out soon enough.

Well, hop out of the car. Don't just sit there like a zombie. You weren't sabotaged by this sudden reluctance and nervousness the other time. Your heart was racing, true—as now. But you plotted with careful detail, and you acted with deadly dispatch.

Though afterward you wanted to shout your triumph exultantly before all the tragedy-numbered party: "Make *me* lose face, will he? Well, never, never again! From now on, no one trifles with me—ever!" But you said nothing like that, of course. You only thought it. You were as properly horrified and grief-stricken as the others. Especially Lil, of course. And you still had a job ahead of you. To dispose of Lil.

Now smile at Lil, waiting beside you in the car. "Must be spring fever, Lil. I don't seem to want to get out of the car."

"I feel sorta lazy, too. But let's board that wonderful new yacht of yours." Again the sparks of excitement pinwheeled in her eyes. "Lead the way, Leonard. Here, I'll grab the picnic hamper."

Easy? Like taking candy from a baby. Okay, water-baby, water-gypsy, water-crazy, water water everywhere and billions of drops to drown in. Lord, you can't wait! Just visualize it—her slim, weakening body thrashing against your greater strength and skill underwater. Her beauty, poise, assurance dissolving in a sudden inhuman blob of terror. And her breath a bubbling foam of mortal helplessness.

For that's the way it's to be. When you get out far enough you'll push her overboard. Then you'll jump in to save her. Only you won't save her. You'll drown her instead. But everybody'll think you tried to save her. Len, the hero.

Stop it, man! You almost fell then, lurch-

ing around the car like that. Your pulse is hammering like crazy. And what is this sudden unbidden murk swirling through your brain? Steady; steady now. Don't think any more. Just—*do*.

Just what the doctor ordered—the bottle. Take it along by all means. Your Dad won't have the stuff aboard, but your Dad isn't here now. You are, and you're boss.

Now—at last—you're aboard, and the motor's warming up and Lil is squealing her delight at the sleek trimness of the craft. A beauty, a real beauty. The boat. And Lil. Look your fill, Lil. Won't be long now.

Now, a quickie, while Lil's stowing the picnic goodies in the galley. A good, lo-o-ng pull. Taste strong? Natch. Didn't expect pabulum, did you?

What a wrestling match, gunning the motor, casting off, getting started. Why, you're sweating like a mule. It's just the nerve strain, the almost unendurable suspense.

There now. We're off.

"Here we go, Lil! Come on up, try the controls." You sound calm enough, though the strain is hideous. Nerves, will, muscles all seem to be betraying you. Nuts! Remember how easy it was to take *him*? Well, easy does it.

"Aye, aye, sir!" It's Lil, barging out on deck with not a care in the world.

You're on your way now, Len. Just relax. Let the horsepower that propels this craft of death churn you out, out, out, where the water's deep and there's nobody to see. Just the two of you in a perfect setting for the tragedy that has to be.

Like that book that was such a sensation years and years ago. *A—something—Tragedy*. No, it was *An—something—Tragedy*. Well, anyway, a man named Dreiser wrote it; you know that, even though you can't recall the title of the book, and that's odd because you always got A's in lit courses . . . in college, where you never seemed to fit, where you sensed whispers and cutting indifference, and where you retreated more and more into *you*. Into yourself, Len. Signing, one letter at a time and in faltering slow motion, your resignation from the human race of which you wanted no part. . . .

It won't be long now, Lil! Lil, woman you loved. woman who might have saved

you, woman who jilted you and made you lose face as never, never before. You've only minutes to live now, Lil—less than five, maybe four, three, two.

FUNNY, THERE seem to be two Lils now. And like twin phantoms they stare at you with urgent intensity, as though sensing something wrong. And something is wrong; every move you make is a will-draining ordeal. A growing numbness within you seems to be taking over command.

"Cut the motor," you say to the two Lils. They cut it obediently and the boat begins to drift. You're far enough from land now. This is the spot. This is it!

The Lils look at you. "You going to kill me, Len?" they say.

How'd she guess? Must be the way you're looking at her. No matter now.

"Yes."

The Lils are making crazy motions with their four hands. And speaking. "You killed Cy, too, didn't you—that night at the Currin's party? Everybody thought it a tragic accident at the time. Except me. They took your word for it—the police did—that Cy fell. But you pushed Cy, didn't you, Len? Over the bluff."

Smart apple, huh? Sure. Well, it was a pleasure to tell her about it.

"Yes."

"How you fooled people that night! And how you fooled me at first, the time I had to tell you, as gently as I could, that Cy had asked me to marry him and that—that . . . Anyway, you took the news well enough, or so it seemed. A sad, sweet smile of resignation, best wishes for my happiness and congratulations to Cy. No hard feelings—oh, no! But something about your eyes, your mouth, worried me. I know you, Len, far better than you realize. When we were—going together—you poured out so much of yourself to me—your frustrations, your defeatism, your tormented soul."

"Shuddup! Shut—up!"

"No, Len. Not yet."

How far away she sounds, like some spirit-voice. But as you gropingly piece together her spectral words, they burn like vitriol, leaving only a charred disfigurement inside the shell of your face and body. Words like *persecution complex* . . . *latent viciousness* . . . *homicidal outlet* . . .

Don't just drown her now. That's too good for her. Beat her, strangle her, tear her head off. Anything to escape those unescapable eyes that lance at you with an awful, unbearable pity.

So you gather your muscles to lunge at her, and suddenly she's shouting: "No! Don't shoot!" which makes no sense whatever, but then whatever does? But she's looking behind you—even you can tell that, Len—so turn, Len, quick! And you do, and you see the man in the companionway, a gun glistening naked in his hand, and something that looks like a badge pinned inside his coat that he's turned outside to you.

"Too late, brother," you say. "Too late." Not knowing in a sort of hopeless yet determined sort of way to whom you're speaking or what you're saying; just knowing that Lil's nailed you, that she plotted this—that after you called her and made the date, she arranged for a cop to hide in the cabin and watch you kill her.

Oh, suddenly you've got a bellyful of life. Life—nuts to it! But before you go you're going to get Lil, and before anybody can stop you you're on Lil and then she's in the water and so are you. Ah, feel the icy shock of this, your element. But there goes Lil, slick as an eel, kicking off slacks, ripping off her jacket. After her, man, quick!

But what is this feeble thrashing? This can't be you, Len, beating the water with such futile clumsiness.

"Something's—wrong." Did that gurgling gasp come from you? And suddenly life means something very precious indeed. "Help—me!"

"Help the man who took Cy from me? Help the man who brought me out here to murder me?"

"I can't—seem to—"

"Not with two doses of chloral hydrate in you, you can't. I dosed your first drink, then the bottle, knowing you'd sneak another. Two Mickey Finns you got, Len—just like in a book. And now, Len, some one else will take over." And sure enough, Len, a man's arm grabs you in an experienced and powerful lifesaver's grip.

Oh, well, let yourself be towed back to the boat by this fool. Fool, utter fool! Doesn't he know you'll plead—what is it that people plead when they want to escape the chair?

That word—what is it, Len?



To Jake Camp, feature writer, the ancient burial vault meant a spine-tingling story in the Sunday paper. When he explored it with private-eye Lee Fiske, neither suspected they might give the undertaker new business.



They didn't know they were being watched—by lovely Nancy Keeting, who didn't appreciate their presence in her ancestors' vault. She told them so in no uncertain terms—and then she suddenly fainted. . . .



Soon after, Lee acquired a stunning client who looked like a Hollywood star in Technicolor. She wanted him to find her husband—last seen at a meeting of the trustees of the Green Acres Cemetery.



In the old graveyard, a new grave was waiting for Lee. Picking up a stone, he faced a desperate killer. . . . Robert Martin tells the complete story in "Death Under Glass," in the Feb. issue, out Dec. 5th.

Blazing Murder Novelette

Satin-blonde Patsy Rinn's strip-tease was the most torrid thing in town—until something still hotter—and far deadlier—started cooking in that crowded theater.



DYING ROOM ONLY

CHAPTER ONE

Hot Stuff

BEN PEDLEY shifted uneasily in his ninth-row seat. He should have been getting a stitch in his side at Skid Ballou's burlesque routine, but the chief fire marshal couldn't work up so much as a grin.

It wasn't the fault of the show or the comedian. *At Ease* was a smash riot. Skid

had knocked the audience in the aisles early in the first act, had kept them rolling whenever he was on-stage since. Pedley had used the Coronet Theater's complimentary pass especially to see if Skid could still wow 'em as of yore.

Skid could; his loose-jointed gestures and the air of amiable idiocy with which he



Patsy swayed down to the footlights for the first throaty bars of her smash hit.

By **STEWART STERLING**

misunderstood everything said to him were good for the same shouts of hilarity that had put his name on the marquee of the old Palace back in the days when the marshal had first been assigned to theater inspection.

But in the spasms of laughter that rocked the house, Ben Pedley remained a glum minority of one, as restless as an engine-house Dalmatian at a false alarm.

It wouldn't have irritated the marshal so much if he could have put a name to what was bothering him. It must be that file of Cases Pending on his desk down at the Municipal Building; certainly there couldn't be anything here in the theater to disturb him.

Long years of contact with conflagrations, before and after, had developed in

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Pedley a warning sense of smell as acute as that of a hungry horse at oats time. But there was no indication of smoke here in this fire-trap—though there was plenty of heat on the stage.

Patsy Rinn, the satin-blond torch-singer, swayed down to the foot lights for the first throaty bars of her smash hit: *There's Only One Thing To Do*. Skid Ballou ogled the chorus and danced a step or two, off the beat. Back of the stars, evening-gowned ladies of line moved slim hips to the conga rhythm, followed Patsy's languid movements as she unhooked one shoulder strap and began the tantalizing strip-finale to Act One.

Pedley slid to his feet, made his way back up the aisle. Over at the side, under a red *Exit* bulb, he caught a glimpse of a shiny-visored cap, brass buttons. Pedley elbowed past the row of standees.

"Howzit, Tom? Everything okay?"

"All according to Hoyle. Standpipe, hose, sprinklers backstage, buckets, lights. Say, look—before the curtain gets down! That third cutie from the right. I bet she's caused more high blood pressure—"

"Yeah." The curtain dipped, rose, dipped again. The orchestra hit a peak on trombones and clarinets. A surge of applause swept over the house. The lights went up.

People poured into the aisles, laughing, babbling, pressing toward the lobby. Pedley saw none of them. He scowled up at the circled candelabra which gave the Coronet its name; an incandescent ring of bulbs high above the theater pit.

The illumination which beat down on the crowd thronging toward the rear of the theater was not clear and sharp; it wavered, shimmered like sunlight over a midsummer pavement.

"Tom!"

"Yeah?"

"You give it a feel, lately?"

"Before the curtain went up, sure."

"Hot air up there. Making the lights shimmy. Must be mushrooming from inside somewhere. Feel her, fast."

"Don't see any smoke, marshal."

"That's a break. Nobody else does, either. Don't broadcast it."

"No, sir."

"I'll be in the front office. Snap into it."

The marshal realized what it had been that he'd sensed before the curtain dropped—the

slight increase in temperature above the normal level of the crowded seats. In the summer he wouldn't have been able to detect that slight difference, not with the theater's cooling system on. Even now he had to depend on his eyes for proof. But it must be here somewhere—the red tongue of peril, licking out, hungry for victims.

HE STALKED through the chattering mob in the lobby, rapped at the locked door beside the ticket window. Nobody turned the key, but after a moment a ground glass panel swung back behind the iron grillwork and a plump red tomato of a face peered out.

"No more advance sale—"

Pedley held up a badge in his cupped palm. "Open up."

The face vanished. A lock snicked, chain rattled.

"Wish you didn't have to come around just when we're ready to close up, officer."

"I'm not a cop. From the Fire Department." Pedley closed the door behind him.

"That's another color of a horse." The box-office man smoothed back glossy hair with the tips of his fingers. "I thought you were going to do the License Commissioner's dirty work, make us tone down."

"Going to make you close down. But quick."

"Now listen—"

"You've got a fire here."

"Good Lord!"

"Don't want a panic, too, do you?"

"No, but—"

"Close up, mister. Grab that phone. Get your stage manager. Have Skid Ballou or somebody make the announcement."

The plump man snatched at the phone, spun the dial. "Hello? Claude there? Put him on. This's MacNemore. Hurry it up." He covered the transmitter with his hand, then asked, "Where's the blaze?"

Pedley moved around behind the ticket-rack, past the safe, to the phone-order desk. Rapidly he passed his hands over the plaster wall. "Not far from here. Feel it yourself. Wall's hotter than a radiator. Better hustle your records out of here."

"Hope we got time." Sweat began to make the red face shiny. "Hello? Claude? This's MacNemore. Listen, you got to get Ballou to make an announcement. . . . To stop the show. . . . Hell, no, I'm not stewed

... There's a fire chief in here with me—says the building's burning up. Morris left about ten minutes ago. Don't give me an argument—"

Pedley took the phone away from him.

"Fire marshal talking. You going to get Skid to spiel? Or do I do it?"

"Wait a sec. I'll put Ballou on."

The comic's deadpan voice drawled: "No sign of any fire back here."

Pedley growled: "You wouldn't know if the seat of your pants was burning."

"Ah, I'm not so hot as all that. What you want me to say?"

"Tell 'em there's been an accident backstage. No more show. All washed up. Save their stubs for a rainy afternoon. Get going!"

"On my way."

Tom stuck his head in the box-office door. "The east wall, Marshal. Right behind you. Paint's blistering already."

"I caught it, Tom. Punch your box. Don't run." Pedley turned to MacNemore. "Wait until the crowd gets going before you take your stuff out. If they see you leaving, someone's liable to start a rush."

The box-office man grabbed a suitcase, threw it on the phone-order desk, began to snatch bundles of tickets from the rack, toss them in the valise. "Don't let 'em pour water on the switchboard or the motors, or we won't be able to open tomorrow."

Pedley didn't take time to answer. As he edged through the lobby he could hear Ballou ad-libbing:

"... times when the old tradition that the show must go on has to be wrapped up in mothballs . . . hate to inform you that this is one of those times . . . unfortunate mischance . . . management will see your stubs are honored . . . appreciate your filing out quietly. . . ."

The marshal followed the east wall along the side aisle toward the stage. The plaster grew blistering to his touch. Still there was no smell of smoke and no tell-tale line of orange to indicate a blaze.

HE WENT past the C box, the B, stuck his head into the A box. Skid Ballou had finished his announcement, but calmly held his post at the center of the stage, spreading his palms with his usual blandness, shrugging with the familiar vacant buffoonery in answer to a couple of patrons

in the first row. The members of the audience who hadn't left their seats at intermission began to straggle slowly up the aisle.

Pedley went up a short flight of steps, through a door, found himself backstage in the wings. Two sweated stagehands hauled at a box of hand-props as if nothing had happened. Half a dozen chorus girls stood around trying to decide what Ballou's announcement had meant.

The east wall became suddenly cooler. Pedley hesitated. Was the flame burrowing back there under the floor somewhere? Then he saw a thin wisp of smoke. It drifted across the iron stairs leading up to the dressing rooms. It was no larger than the trailing plume from a cigarette—but smoking was strictly forbidden during a performance. Anyway, there was no one near the grayish feather of fumes. It came from a hole where an old gaspipe emerged from the wall. He ran up the stairs.

The varnish on the pipe-rail was already sticky; the sprinkler heads would be about ready to pop. He cupped the hands, called sharply: "Outside, everybody! On the street! Grab your clothes! Beat it!"

He reached the second floor. "All out! Double time! Hit the pavement! Hike, now!"

The dressing-rooms were already empty except for a maid gathering up an armful of fluffy costumes. She sidled past Pedley and on down the stairs.

A faint milky haze oozed out over the sill of a door at the corridor's end. Through the film he made out white letters:

KEEP OUT!

for

WARDROBE MISTRESS

O-N-L-Y

The door was unlocked. When he slammed it back on its hinges, a puff of hot air blasted at him. A layer of cottony smoke rolled lazily out around his knees.

The room was dark except for one glowing spot of orange on the opposite wall. It grew brighter in the second it took the marshal to get to it—stumbling over something hidden by the blanket of fumes at his feet. He stooped, felt warm flesh.

He dropped on one knee, got an arm beneath the girl, hoisted her over his shoulder

in the fireman's carry. As he staggered erect, a finger of flame reached out tentatively from the hole that had been chipped in the plaster, touched his ear with a fiery claw. If it hadn't been for the girl, he'd have been badly burned—but the body across his shoulders, though it must have been seared with the heat, hadn't even twitched.

He knew who she was before he got her out into the light. There was no mistaking the satin-blonde locks that lay across his chest. And he'd made too many rescues in his time not to recognize dead-weight when he carried it.

Patsy Rinn wasn't going to take any more encores. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Firebug Finale

THE clamor of brassy gongs and the throbbing of the pumps came distantly from the street; hosemen were piling through the stage entrance when Pedley got to the stairs.

"Cellar pipe," he yelled. "Up here. Get it through into the east wall. Back room."

One man whirled, raced back. Another clumped up the iron steps, dragging a canvas serpent past the marshal.

Tom was herding the stage hands out into the cement alley beside the theater; he ran to help with the girl.

"Monoxide get her, marshal?"

Pedley pulled a loop of pink striped fabric from around the comedienne's throat. "This got her." He dangled it from his fingers while he supported Patsy's shoulders; her head rolled loosely on his forearm. The peppermint-striped cloth was a girl's rehearsal romper. "Somebody noosed it around her neck."

"For crying out loud! Fire was started to cover up the murder, huh?"

"Might have been the other way around." Pedley reached out, grabbed an electric lantern from a helmeted man, flashed the beam full into the blonde's eyes. Her pupils didn't contract; no pulse throbbed under the curve of her jaw. "Looks like she's cold. Get the inhalator on her, anyway. Doc may be able to jolt her back with an injection. Heart hasn't stopped more'n a few minutes."

Skid Ballou lunged past a fireman carrying an extinguisher. The loud-checked suit was still crisp and natty; the comic's face still ruddy with makeup, his hair glistening with grease. But his eyes were red-rimmed and blood-shot; his lips grim.

"Pats!" He got his arms around her. "Pats, ol' keed!"

Pedley gripped the man's shoulder roughly. "Give her a chance."

Skid let go of her, touched her face with his hand as Tom lugged her out into the alley. "Don't horse me. She hasn't a chance. She's gone upstairs." His face hardened and the lines deepened under the grease-paint. "You won't go alone, Pats."

Pedley shook him gently. "Break out of it."

Skid looked at him as if he didn't understand.

"You been teaming up with her a long time." The marshal didn't make it a question; these two had been a team as long as show business could remember.

"A long time," Skid repeated mechanically. He seemed to bring Pedley into focus for the first time. "Yeah. We played a long run together. Big time. Orpheum, Poli's, Keith, Pantages." He added softly. "*Rinn and Ballou*. Still on the same bill. Next to closing."

The marshal tilted his head toward the alley. "It wasn't an accident." Booted firemen stumbled past dragging coupled canvas; men with crowbars plodded up the stairs. "She wasn't strangled—by smoke."

Skid nodded calmly. "I know." The tip of his little finger traced over his eyebrow penciling. "I know what happened. You don't have to tell me."

"I'm not telling you. I'm asking," said Pedley.

"Didn't you find him with her?" The comedian frowned up in the direction of the dressing-rooms.

Pedley shook him again, hard. "She was on the floor of the wardrobe room when I got to her. Who'd you expect I'd find with her?"

Skid put up a hand, loosened the grip on his arm. "Yeah. Sure. That would be the routine. He waited for her when she went up to change for the samba number." He moved toward the stairs hesitantly.

"Hold it." Pedley was curt. "Wall might cave any minute. You wouldn't know

what hit you. Not that you act as if you do, now. If you've an idea who choked the girl, say so." He dug his fingers into Skid's shoulder.

"You didn't see him—the rat's still up there!" Skid wrestled away, sprang for the stairs, took the treads three at a time. Pedley hurried after him.

A PUFF of black smoke blossomed out from the hall, enveloped the actor. The fumes stung the marshal's throat and nostrils, made his eyes stream. He groped blindly along the corridor to the wardrobe room. He collided with a blundering figure, but it wore a helmet and a rubber coat, carried an L-shaped nozzle.

Electric lanterns made a hazy light in the wardrobe room. Men chopped at the wall, forced a thundering stream down into the hollow partition.

"Benzine, marshal." A white helmet emerged from the pall; a voice shouted in his ear. "Going like hell down below somewhere."

"Yeah. Man run in here just now?"

"Didn't see anybody. Guy in the alley said they were all out."

"Okay." Pedley stumbled out over the pulsing hose, felt his way down to the wings and out into the alley.

A worried little man in shirtsleeves and a straw hat rushed at him. "Is that right? Skid says she was murdered!" He chafed his upper arms nervously, gnawed the stub of a cigar around in his mouth.

"Yeah. Where's Skid?"

"He came tearing down, just this second, and hotfooted it like crazy." He spat out a shred of tobacco. "I don't blame him. I'm going nuts myself. How'm I going to open tomorrow without Pats?"

"You the stage manager?"

"I wish to heaven I wasn't. How'm I going to replace my lead! Who'd want to knock off a swell trouper like Patsy!"

"That's what I want to know. Skid says he knows."

"Ah!" Claude hurled the stub to the cement. "That's the old bunk. Morris wouldn't pull a lousy trick like that."

"Morris who?"

"Snymin. The man who makes with the checks."

"Why's Skid think your producer might put Patsy out of the way?"

"Ah!" Claude squinted; his lips came up at the corners but it wasn't a smile. "Skid's cracked on the subject of Pats. For a long time she was that way about him. But here lately she's been letting Morris buy her breakfasts. What the hell; that's nothing new. It's been going on ever since the break-in. And Morris is nuts about her, too. Why would *he* hurt her, any more'n Skid?"

"Don't ask me. I'm no Answer Man. Was Snymin here tonight?"

"Earlier he was." The stage manager tugged distractedly at his lower lip. "He come around to tell me the count. About ten minutes before the curtain. I ain't seen him since."

"Say where he was going?"

"No. Hobe might know. Hobe Mac-Nemore, the houseman."

The white-helmeted man clumped out of the stagedoor, bellowed: "Gimme another two-inch." The battalion chief was getting on with his job; Pedley didn't seem to be making much headway with his. He growled:

"How about Skid? You see him go up to his dressing-room after the curtain?"

"Uh-uh." Claude shook his head. "Skid don't change for opening Two. He might have come out here in the alley for a butt, but he didn't go up. You're screwy if you think Skid would harm a hair of her head. He'd of cut off his right hand, sooner."

"Not saying he did. See anybody who did go up to the dressing-rooms?"

"Nobody. Only Pats. Most usually the babes swarm right up, but tonight they were all gassing about the closing notice. . . ."

"The show folding?"

"Not like it sounds. We been coining cash faster than the mint. Morris'd keep it on for months if he could. But it wouldn't click without Skid and Pats. And they're going—" he rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth—"they *were* going on the tank tour. One night stands around the army camps. For peanuts—and they been making anyway four figures per, both of 'em.

"So Morris, when he can't talk 'em out of it—why, he can't do otherwise than wrap the show up in mothballs. He just gave with the notices tonight. So nobody's in a sweat to dress until they chew it over. Except Pats." He glanced up at sparks cas-

cading over Broadway. "Morris was figuring on running the week out. We been turning them away every night. But now it don't look—"

"I wouldn't count on hanging the S. R. O. sign out again." Pedley's eyes were bleak. "It may take a while to get things cleaned up around here."

POLICEMEN hurried into the alley, shoved the stagehands out to the fire-lines. Pedley went backstage again, climbed the stairs. An emergency smoke-blower was clearing the air: three streams were being forced down inside the east wall. Clouds of steam billowed up through the hole that had been chopped through the roof.

Pedley searched the wardrobe-room, found a glass gallon jug with the cork missing. The label said:

SPOTZOFF
Keep Away From Flame
or Flatiron
Highly Inflammable

A dime-store screwdriver lay on a costume trunk: a white smear of plaster still stuck to the blade. He crumbled some of the plaster from the break in the wall, poured it into an old envelope, stuck it in his pocket.

Rows of costumes on the pipe-racks were dripping with water; he picked out another pair of the bedraggled rompers from a hook behind the door. He crammed the rompers in his pocket, hurried down and through to the boxes. Firemen were hacking at the east wall. Plaster and gilded woodwork littered the carpeted aisle. Red-helmeted men from the insurance patrol flung tarpaulins over the upholstered seats. Oily clouds of evil saffron gushed into the lobby through box-office door and grill.

Hobe MacNemore, wiping his eyes, leaned weakly against the easel bearing a full-length color photograph of Patsy Rinn. A smudge of soot streaked his forehead; his hair hung damply over his eyes. Between his knees was the suitcases; his pockets bulged.

"Safe," he coughed, wiped his eyes again. "Damn safe fell through the floor. I thought the whole building was caving in."

"You hurt?" asked Pedley.

"Scared, mostly." The houseman grinned feebly. "Another couple minutes, I'd have had everything out." He patted the suitcase. "Got most of it. Anyhow, we won't be needing these tickets anymore."

"No. But somebody's due to get a one-way ticket out of this." Pedley sidled past a hose-man into the box-office. No flame was visible; just a dull cherry glow from a gaping hole in the floor. The boards beneath his feet sagged spongily; he tripped over a box filled with sand, a tin dish; caught hold of the grill-work at the window.

"Old gas-pipes," the hose-man husked. "Junction with the main was right there under the safe. Beam burned through; down she went. That guy was lucky he didn't go with it."

"Can you hold her now?"

"Steam'll do it." The fireman pointed to a maze of piping and lead-covered cables beneath the floor. "Water's following them down from up above. If she'd got any more of a head start, though, it would've been lousy."

"Yeah." Pedley surveyed the wrecked ticket racks, the water-soaked strips of yellow, blue and purple pasteboard floating in a puddle at his feet. "Wouldn't have been so good if the crowd had been back in their seats before we caught it. Was the safe open when she went down?"

"Nah. One of the insurance boys is down puttin' asbestos over it, anyhow."

THE marshal backed out into the lobby. The stage manager was arguing angrily with MacNemore. A plainclothesman stood by with pencil and notebook. Claude wheezed up a thin trickle of smoke, choked out:

"We got to get hold of him, Hobe. Where the hell is he? He ain't at the Astor."

"Damn it, I don't know where he went." The box-office man fished a cigarette mechanically from his pocket, stared at it, threw it away without lighting it. "He didn't tell me where he was going."

The plainclothesman wagged his notebook at Pedley. "Hi, Marshal. Trying to get a line on Snymin."

Pedley tapped MacNemore on the shoulder. "Where'd the big shot generally go to eat, fella?"

"Hell, most any place around when he ate by himself." MacNemore looked out

through the glass doors at the red-enameled apparatus by the curb. "When he took—somebody with him, he usually went to the Beachcombers."

Claude said: "Maybe he hops over to Johnnie's. For a quick one. If he was coming back for Patsy, after."

MacNemore mopped his face. "He wasn't. You know he wasn't, Claude. You know they been scrapping."

"Hell, that don't mean nothing." Claudé was uncomfortable. "They was always squabbling over some little thing. That wasn't no reason for him to kill her."

"Kill her!" MacNemore whispered. "I thought you said she was—I thought you meant she'd been burned. . . ." His voice trailed away.

Pedley said: "What was the wrangle about?"

The box-office man muttered gloomily: "It was about her going on this tank tour with Skid, I suppose. It stood to cost Morris plenty jack, way we've been grossing. But you'll have to ask Morris. I don't want to get mixed up in it. I didn't know there was anything like murder."

The plainclothesman stuck the notebook in his pocket. "Best thing to do is put in an alarm for this Snymin, I'd say."

The marshal nodded. "While you're at it, get a description of Skid Ballou for the teletype, too."

The battalion chief stuck his head into the lobby, hollered: "Break it up. That wall's going."

They went out to the street. The plainclothesman made for a call-box. Claude wandered over to the group of chorus girls huddled against the fire lines. MacNemore hefted the suitcase dismally.

"I got to park this in a safe place. And grab me off a drink. I'm shot."

"You look as if you could stand a slug." Pedley turned away, swiveled around. "What's the insurance picture? House all covered?"

"Yeah. Not by Morris. Company that owns the property."

"Snymin have any protection for the run of the show?"

"Not that I know of. He might have. But he couldn't have gotten enough to make up for what he'll lose, now."

"No." Pedley agreed. "Where'll I find you if I need you?"

"Hotel Caldwell. Alden Street. But I'll be back when I've stashed this stuff." MacNemore sighed glumly, trudged off heedless of pools of water or the spray from leaky couplings.

Pedley melted into the crowd on the opposite side of the street, kept nearly abreast of the box-office man. MacNemore turned down Webster Avenue, went south a block, wheeled east. Halfway down the block he vanished into a *cul de sac* between a garage and a cheap, theatrical hotel.

The marshal waited a minute, followed him. Set back in the crevice between the buildings was a narrow green door. On it was battered lettering:

STAGE-DOOR JOHNNIE'S
Bar and Grill

He went inside. It was a small, smoky room with a dozen tables, a small bar, a row of booths at one side. The walls were covered with framed photographs and old theater programs. On the mirror behind the bar a trio of crude caricatures had been traced in white soap. Pedley recognized the outlines of a famous tragedian, a radio *spieler* on a quiz program.

There was no one at the bar except the bartender, a tall, bony man busy with a whiskey bottle and a glass. He filled the glass, set it over to one side, fizzed seltzer in another, nodded briskly to the marshal.

"Rum high," Pedley said. "Jamaica. Little lime." There was no sign of MacNemore. "Where is it?"

The bartender pointed toward a hall behind the last booth. Pedley sauntered over. He didn't go into the men's room. There was a phone booth just out of sight from the bar. The man inside was MacNemore.

Pedley leaned against the thin paneling. "Miss Rinn's apartment," MacNemore said into the mouthpiece.

Pedley waited. Nothing happened. After a long minute the box-office man muttered: "No, no message. I'll call back later."

The marshal was back at the bar by the time the door of the booth opened. MacNemore marched to the bar, seized the whiskey, had it halfway to his lips before he recognized the marshal.

"Well, I'll be! Did you follow me?"

Pedley sipped at his drink. "Yeah.

Thought there might be something you'd forgotten to tell me."

CHAPTER THREE

Embers of Hate

"I MIGHT have," MacNemore admitted. "I'm surprised I can even remember my own name after what's happened. But there wasn't anything I could have told you, anyway."

"Thought you might have recalled where Snymin'd gone."

"Uh-uh." The box-office man drained his glass, slid it across to the bartender. "Put a head on that, Johnnie. You stick that suitcase away where the mice won't get it?"

"Locked it up in the closet, Hobe." The bartender smiled wryly. "But there won't be room enough in there for all the tickets Morris'll have to refund on now. Some of them scalpers been cleaning up a hundred bucks a week in putting out those *At Ease* pasteboards six to eight weeks ahead."

"Don't worry. Morris'll make good on them." MacNemore eyed Pedley morosely. "I thought maybe he'd gone up to Patsy's place. But I just gave a buzz. Nobody home."

The marshal tried his rum. "Where'd she live?"

"Barclay Hotel." A fat tiger cat slunk around the corner of the bar, rubbed her whiskers against MacNemore's leg. "I don't know if Morris had a key or not. I'll call again in a minute." He bent down, tickled the cat's ear.

"She likes it here, Hobe," Johnnie said. "We must have a better brand of mice." He dropped a fresh scoopful of ice in the chaser-tumbler. "Say, is there anything to that talk about Morris and—you know?"

"What talk?" Pedley cut in before MacNemore could answer.

Johnnie polished the bar, lifted one eyebrow at the box-office man.

MacNemore scowled. "I can't stop him from sticking his nose in, Johnnie." His tone was bitter. "He's from the Fire Department."

The bartender lifted both eyebrows, pulled down the corners of his mouth. "Maybe I was talking out of turn."

"Be okay," Pedley growled, "long's you *keep* talking."

"It was just some of that stuff you pick up on my side of the counter." Johnnie found a piece of dried herring in an empty cigar-box, dropped it over the edge of the bar for the cat. "Somebody passes the word that Skid Ballou warns Morris to keep away from Miss Rinn, or else." He reached for Pedley's glass. "Refill—on the house?"

"Yeah. When'd this happen?"

Johnnie shrugged. "It only come down the line tonight. It's prob'ly the old bush-wah. Two guys make a play for the same dame, right away everybody thinks they're going to go gunning for each other."

MacNemore tightened the knot of his tie irritably. "I don't know about Skid. But Morris is too smart to go gunning for anybody. What's one frill, more or less, to a producer who could have pretty near his pick of the line?" He swirled the liquor around in the bottom of his glass disconsolately. "Anyway, they won't be scrapping over her anymore. That's certain."

Johnnie polished the bar vigorously. "It sounded like a lot of malarky to me. Ballou didn't have any right to stake out a Keep-off-the-Grass sign, did he?"

The box-office man looked up quickly. "Not unless you're old-fashioned. Skid married her. Years back, I heard."

PEDLEY fingered the envelope in his side pocket. "Is that right?" It had really been a team then, as Skid had said. *Ballou and Rinn, next to closing. . .*

"They've been split up for a long time." MacNemore took some blocks of tickets out of his coat pockets, stacked them on the bar. "Wasn't any divorce, according to the dope, but they weren't two-ing it. Or Morris wouldn't have fooled around her. Pile these in with the others, hey, Johnnie?"

The bartender gathered them up. "Worth ten bucks apiece yesterday. Tomorrow they'll sell for a nickel a thousand—to the junkman. Why you go to all the trouble of saving them?"

"Just so some wisey won't get hold of 'em, claim a refund, Johnnie. I didn't get 'em all, but nobody's going to bother with those I left swimming around on the floor."

Pedley laid a bill on the bar. "Why don't you ring that number again, MacNemore?"

"It's only been three or four minutes. But okay." The box-office man ambled away from the bar, watching Pedley out of the corner of his eye.

"Might shortcut us out of some trouble." The marshal strolled after him, caught up with him at the booth. "S'matter? Forget the number?"

MacNemore fumbled with the phone book. "Had it on my mind just a minute ago. . . ."

"Which one?"

"The Barclay." The box-office man grumbled. "It's Lexington something—"

"Try the other."

"Huh?"

"Try the number you were buzzing before." Pedley gripped the man's wrist, put leverage on it. "You were calling an apartment house, not a hotel."

"Leggo my arm, damn it. You're breaking it!"

The marshal increased the pressure, jammed MacNemore up against the directory shelf. "I'm not going to fool around with you." He reached around to his hip pocket, brought out a length of nickeled chain with a metal T at each end.

"Endridge nine," MacNemore moaned, "two four two six."

"That's better." Pedley kept his grip on the man's forearm, stepped sideways into the booth. He dug a nickel out of his pocket, slipped it in the slot.

"Traffic superintendent," he said to the operator. Then, "This is Fire Marshal Pedley. City, official, seven four eight. Who's your subscriber at Endridge nine two four two six?" He listened a moment. "Thanks a lot." He racked the receiver, let go of MacNemore's arm. "Unlisted phone for Miss Patsy Rinn at the Valencia Arms. Snymin wouldn't be up there, would he? You wouldn't have been trying to tip him off, maybe?"

"Listen." MacNemore's face was greasy with sweat. "I work for Morris. He pays me. Here this thing busts smack in my face. I don't know which way to turn. I have to find out. So I put in a call for my boss. Because I figure nobody else will know where to get him; he always kept that number strictly private. If that makes me a heel, so I'm a heel."

"It might make you an accessory, mister." Pedley propelled him toward the

street. The cat stiffened her legs, arched her back, leaned against MacNemore. He tripped over her, cursed thickly. "If it's being an accessory to stick up for your boss when he's in a jam, awright, I plead guilty. But lay off the strongarm."

"Pick your feet up." Pedley shoved him through the door. "I'm in a hurry. And I can't leave you behind. I may need you when I get uptown."

HE STEERED MacNemore down the street. To the north the sky was as lurid as on the nights when the neons were blazing full blast. An occasional sprinkle of sparks funneled high above the burning theater.

Traffic crawled; the crowd overflowed the sidewalks; new units of red-enameled apparatus roared across from the East Side, sirens shrieking.

Pedley hailed a taxi, gave the Valencia Arms address. "What's this about the show closing?"

MacNemore rubbed his wrist, glowering. "Skid put over a fast one, that's all. Probably told you he wants to do what he can to help the boys in camp. Yeah. Sounds very hundred percent. But he didn't mention hitting Morris for a two hundred boost in his weekly payoff before he made up his mind to sacrifice all for our soldiers, did he?"

"Hadn't heard about it," said Pedley.

"Or that Skid knew that if he and Patsy Rinn went touring the tanks it would throw the rest of the company flat on their backs?"

"No."

"There's a snapper to it, too. Skid knew better'n anyone that if he and Miss Rinn did a shuffle-off now, it would put Morris in a hole. That suits Skid swell—so that's the way it sets up. You can call it patriotism if you want to. For my dough, it stinks."

"The show's been cleaning up, hasn't it?"

"We did a clicko eighteen thousand last week."

"Your boss ought to have a little laid away for a wet day?"

"You'd think so." MacNemore stared out at the recruiting stand at Columbus Circle. "If you didn't know how costive it is to sugar a dame with a taste for stray hunks of jewelry."

"She put the bite on Snymin?" asked the marshal.

"Look, chum. I probably shot off my face too much to date. That's because Morris wasn't around to do his own talking. Why don't you wait and ask Morris what you want to know? If he's up here."

"You keep right on rolling along, fella. I'm like these poll gatherers. I like to get a consensus." Pedley poked an elbow into his companion's ribs. "Was Miss Rinn being enough of a drain on the bankroll to make your boss think about a way of cutting down expenses, sudden?"

MacNemore merely grunted unintelligibly, said nothing more until they reached the towering white swankness of the Valencia Arms.

Pedley led the box-office man straight to the elevator. The switchboard boy wanted to announce them via the apartment phone, but Pedley showed his badge, growled, "Up." After the car was in motion, he added: "Miss Rinn's apartment."

The elevator climbed up to the twelfth floor. "Twelve E, sir. I don't believe she's in."

"No." Pedley caught the flunky's arm. "She's not. And you're not out. Not where you could zip down and use that switchboard. Just drag along with us. And keep your mouth shut."

At the door of Twelve E he pushed the buzzer button, prodded MacNemore. "Speak your piece."

"Hell! You want me to stooge for you?" MacNemore growled.

"Just sing out that you want to see him, urgent. That's all."

Nobody answered the buzzer. Pedley held out his hand to the elevator boy. "Pass-key."

"It's—it's down at the board."

"Don't hand me that. You keep it on you. You wouldn't dare to leave it at the board while you roam around. Come on, make with the key!"

The flunky dug a key-ring out of his inside jacket pocket. "I'll most likely get fired for this."

Pedley didn't answer, slid the key into the lock, got the door open quietly. He motioned MacNemore on ahead, crowded close behind him.

Ten steps down the hall they came to a living-room door. There was a lot of

low-slung, white-corduroy furniture; a couple of polar bear rugs, some paintings of bleached bones on grotesque deserts. At the far end of the room was a huge Spanish desk—and at the desk a small, dark, dapper man.

He was cleaning out a drawer of the desk, stuffing little packets of letters into a fat brief case. He spun around in fright.

"What the hell is the idea, Hobe!"

"I can't help myself, Morris." MacNemore nodded toward the marshal.

Pedley went over to the desk. "I'll bounce it right back at you, Snymin. What the hell is the idea of cleaning out the desk in Miss Rinn's apartment?"

The theatrical producer snapped: "It's *my* apartment. It's been in her name. But I pay for it. I signed the lease. I own the furniture. I have a right to do what I please, here. Especially since Miss Rinn isn't coming here anymore."

"You're right about that." Pedley took hold of the brief case. "That's what I want to see you about."

CHAPTER FOUR

Fiery Vengeance

SNYMIN screwed up his features in a pucker of bewilderment. He then stared hard at Hobe MacNemore. "Who is this guy, Hobe?"

"Marshal from the Fire Department." MacNemore grimaced. "The theater's burning—"

The producer spat out a curse. "So that's the way they worked it! Weren't satisfied to put the show on the rocks!" He laughed harshly. "What the hell's the difference? The costumes and scenery'd only cost good cash to store anyhow."

The marshal took one of the letters out of its envelope. "You're too cagey not to have a policy covering your show property. What protection have you got against a charge of murder?"

Snymin opened his mouth, but no sound came out. It was MacNemore who blurted:

"Patsy was killed!"

"Murdered," the marshal corrected.

The letter was an old one, dated years back. It was postmarked Chicago and addressed to Miss Patsy Rinn, at the Valencia Arms. It began: "Dearest Pats:"

and was signed, "Yours for top billing, Your pal, Skiddo." He glanced up at the producer; the man's face was gray. Furrows lined the swarthy forehead. Still Snymin didn't speak.

Pedley took the torn pair of rompers from his pocket, held them out on two fingers. "Miss Rinn was choked to death. With these. By the same rat who gnawed a hole in your wardrobe room wall, poured in a gallon of benzine, set fire to it."

"Damn your guts!" The producer's voice was taut with anger. "Don't try to pin a crime like that on me. I may have done a few things I'm ashamed of, but I've never injured anyone in my life." He held out his hand toward MacNemore. "You know I wouldn't have done a scummy trick like that, Hobe."

"I told him, Morris. I told him you *couldn't* have done it." He bobbed his head, added hastily: "You came right up here when you left the box-office, didn't you?"

"Certainly I did," Snymin's lips slitted. "I didn't go backstage at all."

"What time'd you get up here from the theater?" the marshal asked.

"About quarter to ten. You can ask the boy in the lobby."

Before Pedley could turn to see if the flunky was still in the hall, a quiet voice said: "Skip the alibi, Morris."

Skid Ballou lounged in the doorway to the corridor. There was a heavy-calibre automatic in his fist; the muzzle swung back and forth in a brief arc covering the three men. "Yoti could get yourself an alibi, the way you've gotten most things you wanted. By paying for it."

Pedley took a deliberate step toward the comedian. "Cut out the vendetta business, Skid. This is up to the law. It's out of your hands."

The vacant smile drifted across Skid's face; he tilted the muzzle of the gun upward a little, held it out with elbow crooked, his finger tensed. "*This* is in my hands, though. It's as good as a warrant, any day." His face hardened beneath the makeup; his eyes were cold. "I don't want to press the button on you, mister. But I will, so help me, if you don't go over there against the wall. *Now!*"

Pedley backed away.

"That's the idea. Clasp your hands back

of your neck. So you won't get any notions about pulling a gun."

"Over beside him, Hobe," Skid said.

MacNemore obeyed with alacrity. The grotesquely savage figure of the comic slouched toward Snymin. "The dick wants to crack your alibi, Morris. Maybe you'll give out with the truth here in a minute. Lie down on the floor."

"Please, Skid!"

"Lie down! Face down!" Skid jabbed the gun at Snymin's belt-buckle.

Pedley gritted: "There's ten thousand cops looking for you now, Skid. If you try to settle this thing on your own, what you think your chance'll be to get away?"

The comedian made his lips smile. "One thing at a time. I'll take care of that after I've taken care of Morris. Down on the floor, you!"

Snymin dropped to his knees, pleading: "What good's it going to do her to shoot me!"

"I'm not going to shoot you, unless you make me. I got a better way. The gent over there wants a confession. This'll get it for him." He reached around to his hip-pocket, drew out a twelve-ounce bottle filled with colorless fluid.

PEDLEY guessed what it was before he saw the label: *Spotzoff*. He inched along the wall, away from the comedian's line of vision, tensed himself. But Skid caught the movement out of the corner of his eye, waggled the automatic in warning.

Snymin snarled: "What the hell are you going to do, Skid? Aren't you satisfied with taking my girl away and ruining me! Why do you have to—"

"Lie down!" Skid hit him across the side of the head with the pistol barrel. The producer fell down on his face, clapping his hands to his head. "Talk to me about taking Pats away from you! After what you did!" The comic held the bottle to his mouth, gripped the cork with his teeth, pulled it out. "It wasn't as if you'd ever really given a damn about her. You just wanted to have her around so you could show her off as a luxury you could afford. You gave her plenty of things, sure." He tipped the bottle up, drenched the prone figure with its contents. "But you never gave her what she wanted. She wanted you to marry her—you wouldn't." He tossed the

empty bottle across the room to a chair.

Pedley moved his right hand so that it rested on the front of his right shoulder.

"How could I marry her?" Snymin shrieked. "You wouldn't give her a divorce!" He rolled over on his side, cringing away from the silver lighter that Ballou took from his vest.

"She could have had a divorce any time she wanted it. Any time *you* wanted it." The lighter clicked, and a thin cone of yellow wavered as Ballou dropped to one knee. "You didn't care enough about her for that, Snymin. You were just playing with her—like Hobe plays with that cat of his. And when you found out she wasn't going to be satisfied with that, you told her you'd fix it so she'd never come back to me, no matter what else happened." Skid glanced at the marshal. Pedley's hand froze on his lapel; he couldn't tell whether the position of his fingers had been noticed.

"I didn't kill her, Skid!" The producer rolled over on his back, doubled his knees up, held out his hands to ward away the lighter. "All I meant was I'd keep her in the show and let you go!"

"Then you found out she was going to quit, too, and go on the circuit with me." Ballou bent over; the flame came within a foot of Snymin's drenched coat. "So you decided to get hunk with her by murdering her, hoping everybody would think she'd burned to death in the fire you started in your own house. Or maybe planning to frame me for the job. Now you're going to see how it feels, yourself." He lunged forward.

Snymin rolled away, screeching, kicking. "Don't, Skid! Gimme a chance—"

Pedley barked: "Skid!" He got his fingers on the butt of his service special.

The comedian didn't pause.

The marshal snapped: "You wouldn't want to make the wrong guy pay for what happened, would you?"

Ballou growled like an animal, deep in his throat. "I haven't got the wrong guy. You'll hear him admit it, in a second or so."

"Yes, yes, yes!" Snymin panted. His eyes bulged with horror at the luminous spire of the flame. "I'll admit anything you want. Only keep that away from me!"

Skid grinned wolfishly, pivoted around as Pedley stepped away from the wall.

"Man'll say any damned thing to save his life." The marshal jerked his gun free. "But you're going to punish the wrong man if you aren't careful with that lighter. Ask MacNemore if I'm not right!"

MacNEMORE looked surprised. "Me?" He let his hands fall at his side. "Don't ask me. All I know is Patsy was bleeding Morris for every lousy nickel she could get out of him."

Pedley snapped: "Put out the lighter, Skid."

Confused, the comedian hesitated a moment, then thumbed over the silver lid. The flame disappeared. Snymin began to hiccough hysterically.

Skid came to his feet; he kept his eyes on the box-office man but spoke to Pedley in the deadpan monotone: "What's the scenario, dick?"

"The cat." Pedley shifted his pistol so it covered MacNemore. "A minute ago you mentioned his pet cat. When I was in the box-office I stumbled over a cat's sand-box and feed-pan."

MacNemore looked puzzled. "Everybody knows I have a cat. So what?"

"The cat wasn't in the theater when the fire started." The marshal stalked to the box-office man, frisked him swiftly. "You'd taken him over to Stage-Door Johnnie's. So the animal would be out of danger. You didn't mind strangling a girl or risking the lives of the people in the theater—but you didn't want your cat roasted alive."

The box-office man frowned and snickered at the same time. "What kind of an act are you putting on? I promised to give Johnnie the cat a week ago."

"Yeah? Maybe you doped out your schemes a week ago, too. To cover up a steal from Snymin, maybe."

The producer staggered erect, propped himself against a chair. "The books—are all right," he hiccoughed.

"To date, maybe." Pedley watched fear creep into MacNemore's eyes. "How about a checkup on advance sales?"

The box-office man appealed to Snymin. "Tell the guy he's cuckoo, Morris. There isn't a penny unaccounted for—"

"You wouldn't have to account for advance tickets," the marshal said. "The books wouldn't have to balance until the stubs were taken in at the door. You could

Dying Room Only

fix that all right. Also, you could pick yourself off a few thousand by letting those scalpers Johnnie mentioned have a couple of hundred tickets a week. Eight weeks ahead—at four-forty a throw—it would amount to important coin."

Sweat crystallized on MacNemore's eyebrows. "The first time in my life anybody accused me of touching a dime that don't belong to me—let alone this other business of murder and arson. How could I expect to get away with a thing like that?"

"Maybe you planned to 'borrow' the dough you got from the speculators." Pedley fished in MacNemore's pockets, found nothing but a wallet with a few bills, some cards, a little change. "Lots of embezzlers start that way and wind up the hard way because something unexpected catches up with them. Like the notice of the show's closing put an end to your racket, probably. Only way out for you was something that would destroy the records in the box-office—spoil a lot of advance tickets so nobody could tell how many'd been sold. When the scalpers showed up for their refunds, Snymin would have to shell out without any way of telling whether he'd ever taken in the dough for them in the first place. If the fire didn't bankrupt him, that is."

"All this phonus-balonus," the box-office man whimpered, "because I gave Johnnie my cat to chase the mice out of his bar-room! You're screwier than—"

"There's more than that." Pedley took the old envelope out of his pocket. "Guy who did the job chipped plaster away from the wall in the wardrobe-room, knowing the theater well enough to figure the benzine would follow the old gas-pipes down through the wall to the box-office. You'd know that, having been house-man there. You'd also be able to lock the box-office for a few minutes and sneak out backstage during the finale—get upstairs to the dressing-room floor. I don't suppose you figured on Patsy's coming up so soon."

"I haven't been backstage for a week," MacNemore wept.

PEDLEY rattled the plaster in the envelope. "Maybe you don't know plaster's like fingerprints. The sand this was mixed with shows so many black grains per hun-

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dred, so many grains of red sandstone, so many pure quartz." He stopped suddenly and unfolded one cuff of MacNemore's trousers, coming up with a few white grains.

Something hurtled past Pedley's shoulder. It was Skid, clubbing his gun, smashing viciously at MacNemore's skull. The box-office man squeaked in terror, sank to the floor. The marshal grabbed Ballou's shoulder; wrenched him around, hooked a hard left to the comedian's jaw. Skid's head went back. Pedley hit him again, with more beef behind it.

The star of *At Ease* stumbled against a coffee table, stood swaying, dazed. His automatic bounded on the carpet. Snymin dived for it, but MacNemore was nearer. He scrambled toward it in a frenzy of fear, clutched it as the producer clawed at him. There was a muffled *cah*, a grunt of pain from Snymin—and a sheet of bluish incandescence that made a flaming halo around the producer's head and shoulders.

He screamed once as MacNemore tumbled back, gasping at the result of his shot. Pedley took a short step, put his weight into a kick that caught MacNemore flush on the point of the jaw. The murderer collapsed.

The marshal snatched one of the bear-ugrs, threw it on Snymin, grabbed him, rolled him over and over. He ripped the man's coat off of him, stamped out the flames, beat out the blazing shirt collar with his bare hands. Then he picked up the automatic, dropped it in his pocket.

"Skid," he said. "The phone. An ambulance. Jump."

MacNemore lay with his head twisted around on one shoulder, jammed up against the wall. Blood trickled down over his chin. He opened his eyes, squirmed around, got a hand up, felt of his jaw. "There wasn't any plaster in my cuff," he mumbled. "I didn't stand near the wall." He closed his eyes. "There was a trunk there in the way. I left the screwdriver on it. You tricky—"

"Yeah." Pedley scowled at Snymin's singed head. "You're a straight-shooter, yourself!"

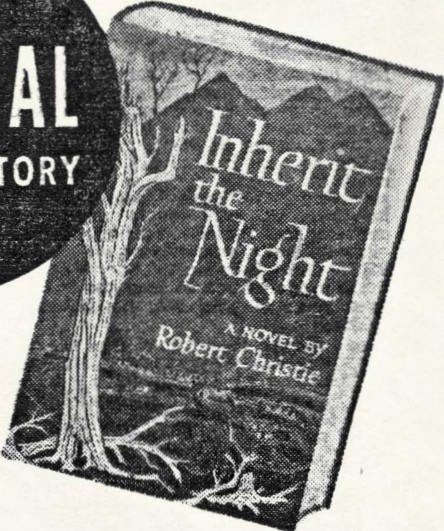
"You didn't compare that plaster, either. You didn't have time!"

"Time enough later." Pedley said. "Plenty of it." He licked a blister on his hand. "Time to burn, guy."

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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 8)

After two years it was too big an enterprise for one man to handle, so he agreed to take a former fellow worker as partner.

This man assured us he could easily get a G.I. loan. We wished to help an ex-service man, so an oral agreement was made until the loan went through. He was a likable chap, and he knew the ins and outs of trucking.

He knew the ins and outs of taking a fellow for a smooth ride, too. After three months a check flew into an empty bank account which he had access to. For one good sound reason or another he had not paid his half into the business, and suddenly he did not seem interested in doing so. He was vague as to his intentions but didn't seem quite ready to call it quits, either.

Later we discovered he had bought merchandise for the company that had vanished without a trace, and had also charged items without our knowledge. These, too, were gone. Since they were purchased in the company signature, we were held accountable. We couldn't prove that he was worth a cent—while we had assets, toppling though they were.

It was well that we called his hand when we did, for he had almost succeeded in having some trucks financed in his name. His intentions were to take over our position and territory, and he had succeeded in turning many of our customers against us. Luckily his plans fell through, for he needed the security our business afforded him for about two weeks longer.

We have been years winning back a good reputation and paying bills we knew nothing about, except that they are charged to the company—our company.

L. Briggs
West Point, Iowa

Education—The Hard Way

Dear Sir:

"What a *dope* to be taken in by that swindler!" How often we hear that remark—how often we make it ourselves. Somehow, when you have stepped into the role of the *dope who was swindled*, you change your tune.

Bob, my young son, shared my tragic experience. He was in high school when his father died. Our plans and Bob's hopes for his college education—his degree in Engineering—was the driving force of my life now.

Bob and I worked, denied ourselves, pooled our savings. Our goal was college, when he had worked one year after graduating from high school. We had everything planned. So we thought.

About two weeks after high school graduation, a well-dressed, well-mannered man of about forty came to our door. He was representing a school of engineering that was offering to brilliant young aspirants a college-supplement study-course. Bob wanted home extension-work until he could start college. The course this man offered seemed the very thing. There was individual instruction once a week at a certain place in our nearest city, as well as the materials for study at home. All at a very special rate. This was the last day of enrollment, so Bob and I decided, looking hurriedly over

Ready for the Rackets

the volume of data, that we had best take it. I signed papers and gave the money in payment.

The usual, sad story followed. Bob found no office when he went for his first instruction. There was no such place, no such school, we soon discovered. We reported the case, of course. But we had no case. We had been taken in. We had been swindled.

Our college fund is a shriveled pea now. I have learned a hard lesson. What my young son has learned stares in the face every honest person, demanding us all to take seriously this racket game.

Mrs. Hazel C. Parkhurst
Los Gatos, Calif.

Machine With Wings

Dear Sir:

One of the strange traits of honest people, I find, is that they neglect to look for dishonesty in others.

I was buying a typewriter on the installment plan from what seemed to me a small but reputable firm. The contract I signed seemed genuine. In fact, I signed several copies. When I had paid all but what I thought was the last installment, an employee of the firm called at my home demanding the possession of the machine.

An argument ensued in which I produced my copy of the contract to back up my statements. To my sorrow, I found I had signed an agreement to rent instead of buy. At any rate, that was what the paper I held stated.

There was nothing I could do. I gave up the typewriter.

Onagene Redwine
Sacramento, Calif.

The Old Oil

Dear Sir:

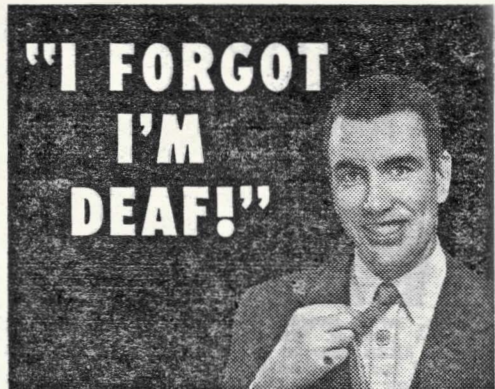
During the recent shortage of olive oil, I was approached by a casual acquaintance with the offer to sell me several gallons of pure olive oil. The price was reasonable so the agreement was soon made. Shortly thereafter the oil was delivered. Before accepting it, however, I sampled the oil and found it to be of good quality.

I was very happy over my fortune and soon thereafter I decided to empty one of the gallons into four-quart bottles. I had barely filled one quart when the oil ceased to flow from the can. I couldn't understand it, and though I turned the can upside down no more oil would come out. After more futile can shaking I took the container apart and found that a false bottom had been soldered near the top of the can. The bottom of the can, as you may suspect, was filled with pure tap water.

Needless to say my oily friend disappeared.

Joseph Cavallaro
Atco, N. J.

That winds up the roster of swindle schemes for this month, fans. We'll be back again soon with more of your tips on how to avoid being duped. Till then—look sharp and think fast!



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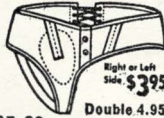
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Donald Barr Chidsey

(Continued from page 50)

The sun was far gone, reddening the peaks. The bay below already was dark. In the tropics there's little or no dusk; night comes suddenly, with a swoop.

The change was even more than usually abrupt to Andy Litz when he slithered over the lip of The Tiara and dropped into the crater. It was like entering another world. All sound was shut out, and it was very dark.

It wasn't much to see. This was no Angkor Wat, no Baalbek or Chichén Itza, this *marae*. At first glance it seemed no more than a childish jumble of stones, big ones and small ones, stones of all shapes. There were no bushes, no grass even. Yet somebody had been here recently: some of the stones were decorated with flowers, a few held rotting fruit. Not until later did you see the idols.

Covered with sweat, which had suddenly grown cold, and with his hands shaking, Litz lit a cigarette. When the match went out it was harder than ever for him to see.

He went to the largest stone, a central one, obviously a sort of altar, in fact the *vahimoarua*, the most breathlessly holy part of the whole layout, a fact he didn't know but could guess. Eyes flicking like those of a snake, he looked around.

They watched him, the old-time gods, and surely they didn't approve. There was an image of Taaroa in the likeness of a whale, carved of puupuu. In one wood or another, polished or dull, some sagging or leaning awry, others perkily upright, were the representations of Tane, Tu, Raa, Fatutira, Hina of the moon, the warlike Hiro.

Mauu, Tipa, Punuamoevai, Temeharo, they scowled. Where were the mortals who should be avenging this intrusion?

ANDY LITZ got down on his knees—but not in prayer. He found what he sought in that failing light, a hole under the altar. A stone covered it, and when he removed this and thrust in his hand, his whole arm, he found that the hole was long and deep. He got out the bonds.

"Wum-wum-wum! Wum-wum-wum!"

Even if it had happened far away, it would have startled him. But it sounded right next to him, no more than a few feet off.

Incident at Oponohu

"Wum-wum-wum!"

He sprang to his feet, spinning around.

As though this had been a signal, the thumping of the sacred *toere* ceased. And from behind a boulder stepped Fa'a.

The cigarette, which had clung to Lizt's lower lip when his mouth fell open, parted from the lip now and fell. The little man screamed.

Fa'a came on. There was no expression on his face. His enormous hands hung low, the fingers curved as though ready to grasp something. His great shoulders were hunched a little forward.

Lizt screamed again.

Fa'a came on.

"You touch me, and you're dead!"

Somehow Andy Lizt had found his voice. "One more step and I'll—"

Fa'a came on.

Lizt drew his revolver. He pulled the trigger once, twice, three times. There were one, two, three sharp clicks.

He pulled the trigger again and again. He was still pulling it, and sobbing, when Fa'a's arms went around him. . . .

When Lizt came to he was back on the veranda, and Mason himself was watching him anxiously. The moon was up. Nearby, obviously having just counted them, Reese was putting the Apperson bonds into his pocket. He smiled.

"I get it, I get it," Lizt muttered. "Psychological suggestion. Got me to act on it before I had a chance to think. And of course you didn't have any search warrant. I should have known."

Reese took out the beribboned, much-sealed papers.

"You were kind enough to mention that you couldn't read French. These just happen to be customs forms. Dolled up a trifle, of course."

"Have a drink, Andy," urged Mason. "You fainted. That drum stuff and the gliding approach, they weren't on the agenda. That was Fa'a's own idea, at the last moment. Just for the fun of it."

"He's got a swell sense of humor."

Fa'a came out with a highball on a tray. His face, impassive, might have been carved out of some native hardwood.

Lizt took the drink.

"I'm not sore. Maybe I'm glad. It was getting on my nerves, all this quiet. It'll be

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Donald Barr Chidsey

good to be back in Frisco, even if I do have to work. The only part I don't get," nodding at Fa'a, "is how come he's alive?"

"We took the cartridges out of your gun. That is, Mason here did. While he was pretending to get you to take off your coat."

"And I never felt it!" He looked at Mason. "Say, what did you do for a living before you came down here?"

"Those peaks are beautiful in the moonlight, aren't they?" Mason waved. "Ever see anything like them?"

"O.K., O.K.," growled Andy Litz, and drank his drink.

Rufus Bakalor

(Continued from page 84)

haste or excitement. He must be wary in reclaiming his Retirement Fund, plan it carefully, arouse no suspicions.

When he walked down High Street, the town was half-familiar, half-strange to him. He met people he had known, grown suddenly older now, and Orville talked uneasily with one and another on the street. There was little they could decently talk about, considering Orville's position.

But they all offered him the same bromide: "Bet you see a lot of changes in the old town, eh, Orville?"

Instinctively, he turned toward Waldron's Ravine. He walked slowly at first, then unconsciously quickened his step. Then he began to run, the phrase "a lot of changes in the old town" echoing over and over again in his brain.

When he approached the edge of the ravine, he covered his eyes with his hands, disinclined to verify a horrible thought. After a moment of indecision, he peeked out between two slowly separating fingers and saw it.

In the center of Waldron's Ravine, rising two stories high and squatting contentedly on seventy steel piles—not to mention an old abandoned well—was the magnificent S. E. Xavier Memorial Gymnasium.

Orville did not stop to read the dedicatory plaque. He headed straight for the heights of the Muskellunge water tower, hoping that, at least, they hadn't changed that.

The Cop With All the Luck

(Continued from page 82)

"You're wrong, Ben," she murmured. "Get me the key," said Ben stubbornly.

Ellen got up. She started forward, then stopped at the telephone stand and reached for Baroni's gun lying there. She got it up and aimed it straight at Ben Howard. There was no color in her face.

"It's an empty gun," said Ben. "But go ahead. Try it."

Ellen squeezed the trigger. She squeezed it again and again.

"Too bad," said Ben. "You could have shot me with that gun and again blamed a man's death on Baroni. Where is the key?"

From somewhere outside came the shrill scream of a police siren. Ellen stared at the useless gun in her hand. And suddenly her body collapsed and she dropped to the floor. This time she wasn't faking. . . .

Maria Baroni sat in a chair at headquarters, facing Ben Howard. She was smiling, and there were vivid lights in her eyes. "I just wanted to thank you," she said.

"Your brother's not out of this," said Ben, scowling. "He held up and robbed a liquor store. He escaped from the police, slugging two officers. He slugged Ellen Halstead's landlord in order to get a key to her apartment. And those are only a few of the charges we have against him."

"But he isn't guilty of murder," said Maria.

"No, it was Ellen Halstead who killed Eli Norton. We found the money she had taken from the floor safe in a safety deposit box she had rented. Less than fifteen hundred dollars. Why did she do it? Why?"

"For the money," said Maria.

"For fifteen hundred dollars?"

"That's a lot of money to a girl who works for wages. Perhaps she thought it was more. Or she could even have hated the man she worked for. She was attractive. Some men can't keep away from an attractive girl."

"Yes," said Ben, "she was attractive."

He sat at his desk, scowling, and remembering the feel of Ellen in his arms.

"I wanted to thank you," said Maria again.

"Yeah," said Ben. "Yeah." And then he added, "Benjamin Howard, police officer. Nuts!"



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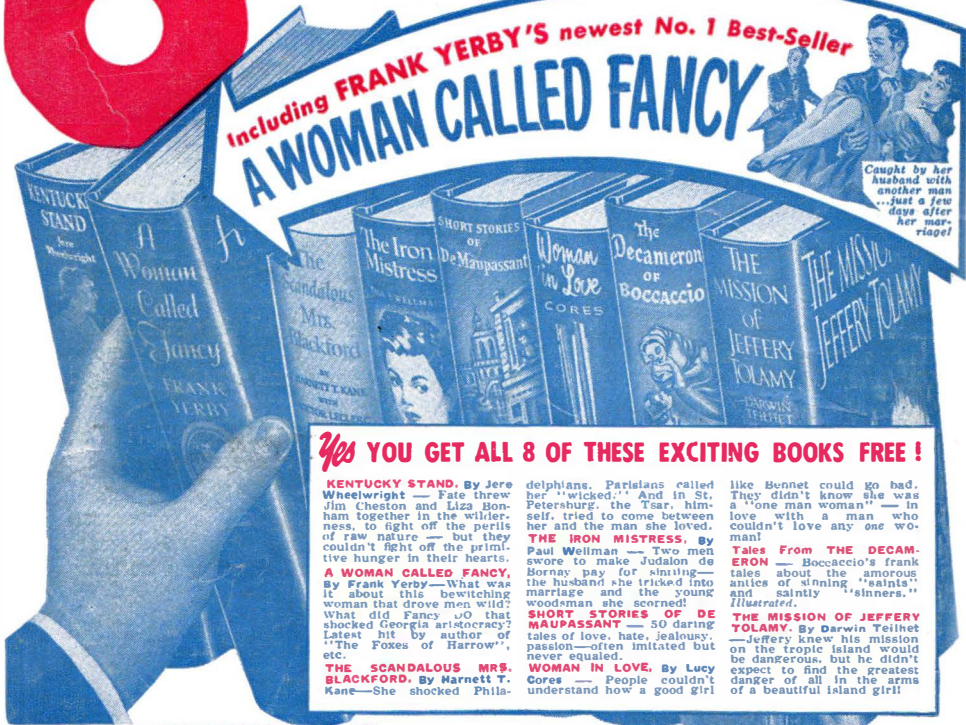
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