

ALL STORIES  
COMPLETE



FEB.

15¢ DIME  
**DETECTIVE**  
MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYING

NON

CASH WALE'S  
BRAZEN  
GHOST

by

PETER PAIGE



TALL,  
DARK AND  
DEADLY

by FREDERICK C. DAVIS

JOHN D. MAC DONALD

ROBERT TURNER

AND OTHERS

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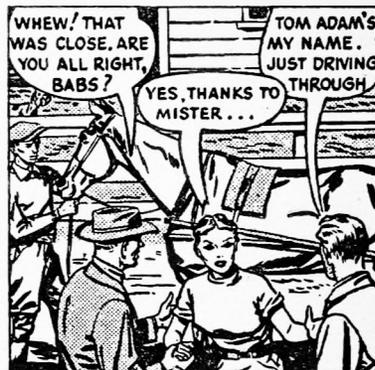
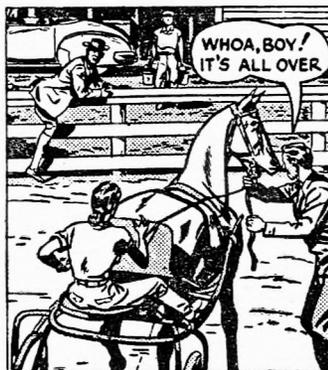
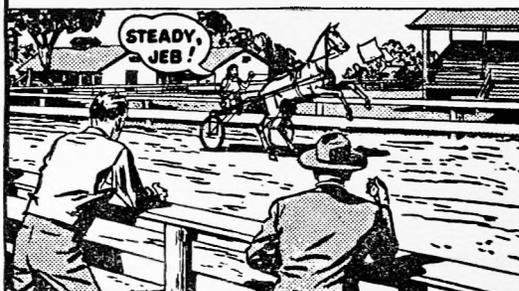
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# TOM STOPPED THE RUNAWAY AND THEN...

WATCHED BY HER DAD AND A PASSERBY,  
"BABS" WEBB IS GIVING HER FAVORITE TROTTER  
HIS MORNING WORKOUT WHEN...



ALL STORIES COMPLETE 

# 15¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION  
EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

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**Vol. 56      CONTENTS FOR FEBRUARY, 1948      No. 2**

---

**1—ACTION-PACKED DETECTIVE NOVEL—1**

- Tain't healthy to haunt with—*
- Cash Wale's Brazen Ghost**-----Peter Paige    **6**  
Even as a homicide-hot phantom, Mama Wale's little boy Cash had to take a fier on one last slay-ride.

**2—THRILLING SUSPENSE NOVELETTES—2**

- He slays 'em in the aisles 'cause he's—*
- Tall, Dark and Deadly**-----Frederick C. Davis    **42**  
At last I would get what was coming to to me. . . .
- Black ink on the ledger and—*

- Murder on My Mitts**-----Robert Turner    **74**  
I was riding high in the chips—until my favorite girl was crucified on my dollar sign.

**4—DRAMATIC CRIME-ADVENTURE SHORT STORIES—4**

- So tall you can't get over 'em—*
- High Walls of Hate**-----John D. MacDonald    **30**  
Stand-in convict Forbes was now free—to settle the tab with sables-loving Sally.

- It'll send you out of this world—*
- Homicidal Harmony**-----Johanas L. Bouma    **36**  
Do-re-mi-mad Danny boy blew his horn off-key—and hit high murder.

- Slater got a shroud when—*
- Murchison Got a Gun**-----Fenton W. Earnshaw    **61**  
And decided to throw a killer-diller party for his slave-driver boss.

- Strike me dead if I see—*
- Black Spots of Doom**-----L. S. Goldsmith    **68**  
The urchin, the cops, the doctor—all were hunting for Mary's killer. . . .

**AND—**

- We want to know if you're*
- Ready for the Rackets**-----Bill Slater    **73**  
The lowdown on currently popular swindle schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win \$5.00 at the same time.

- The March Thrill Docket**-----    **29**  
Heralding John D. MacDonald's feature novel, "With Soul So Dead."

- Criminal's Cop**-----Jimmy Nichols    **41**  
How a bungling flatfoot got his man.

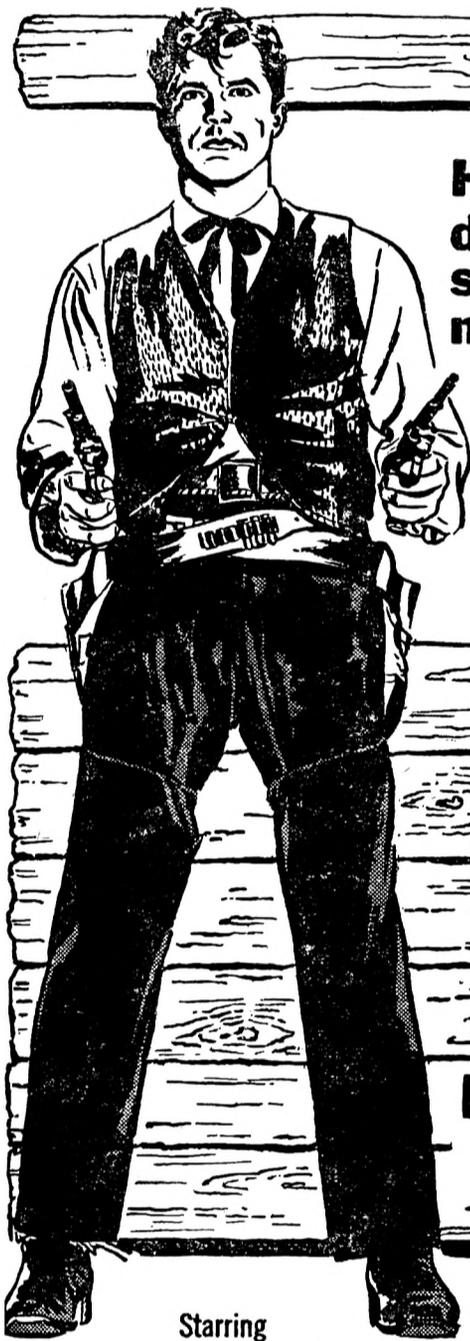
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**Warning!**  
NEVER TANGLE  
WITH  
**The MAN  
from TEXAS**

He  
didn't  
say  
much...

**HIS GUNS  
TALKED  
FOR HIM!**

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MAN  
FROM  
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*Haunting California for its health, Cash Wale's homicide-hot ghost got taken for a slay-ride—with a ticket to the local gas chamber . . . or the New York fry-chair.*

**Action-Packed  
Detective Novel**



**By  
PETER  
PAIGE**

# CASH WALE'S BRAZEN GHOST

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Corpse From Nowhere

**D**EAR PETE: The guy in the maroon car didn't know it, but the luckiest thing he ever did was stop and offer a lift to the pair of tramps who stood on the Dodge Road south of San Luis Obispo.

By that act he saved his own life.

On the other hand, he probably killed the two tramps. I say "probably" because

• • •

I said over my shoulder: "You burn me—I burn him."

that's an issue which is still in doubt.

What he saw when he braked his car were two dust-covered men in work clothes—but there all resemblance between the two ceased. The big guy—well, you know who I mean, Pete. He wore shoulders like cannonballs and his head was like a chipped cue ball. Instead of brows he wore lumps of scar tissue. Instead of ears he wore twists of flesh. His flattened nose was trying to press back into his face, causing his upper lip to protrude a little.

The little tramp—well, you've certainly seen me, Pete. It's been called a "sharp" face by the handful of citizens I ever called pals and a "rat" face by most of the public. The hair is giving way on top, and I think



it was one of those syndicated gossip-peddlers who said God forgot to put blood in my lips.

The kid in the maroon car gaped at the Big Guy, then turned to me. "Going into Oceanville?"

"Sure," I turned to the Big Guy. "Get in, Slugger."

We got in.

The driver studied us in the rear vision mirror as he drove. He had to do this in installments because the road coiled and rose and dipped like a cord dropped loosely over a cluster of ant hills.

A redhead. He wore a billion freckles, a pair of pale blue eyes and practically no nose. Give him almost six feet, about a hundred and seventy pounds, dress him in a cream-colored sweater and cream-colored slacks—and that was our driver.

Through the mirror I watched the question reach his lips.

"Fighter?"

I said: "Once upon a time."

"You his manager?"

"More or less."

He concentrated on a hairpin curve, then volunteered: "I'm Don Clawson."

I said: "This is Slugger Dugan. I'm Casey Wilson."

Clawson nodded.

The Big Guy had been staring bleakly at nothing. Now he turned the punch-battered face toward me and dipped one lid in a slow wink. I watched Clawson catch that in the mirror.

He said: "Dud Thrasher puts on fights in Oceanville every Thursday. I could talk to him for you."

I scowled at the sparkle that entered the Big Guy's eyes.

"Not interested," I said. "We're looking for legitimate work. Ranch work."

The kid nodded, then waved toward the right. We were passing a group of five low brick buildings scattered around a patch of bare countryside. "That's my ranch," he said.

"What do you raise—rocks?"

"Mushrooms. Me and my dad."

"You mean people make a business of it?"

He laughed. "Lots of people eat 'em, Wilson. Dad's up in San Jose now lining up a new distributor. I drove him up as far as Salinas."

He stopped talking then because the road demanded all his attention. It ran along the edge of a cliff that gave us a terrific vista of the Pacific to the right. To the left was nothing but sagebrush crawling up a mustard-colored hillside. The wind pouring from the west howled around the car like a banshee.

We swooped into a wooded hollow that was almost as shadowy as night, then burst up into the open again, turning west toward the gigantic orange poised over the watery horizon. A shadow blotted the car briefly as a small plane zoomed over us in the same direction. The road started climbing then. The countryside here was barren and desolate, and the dirt road was warped by ruts.

It became an unpleasant ride for about ten minutes. Coming down a winding grade, I could see an occasional white frame house. They began thickening. I leaned forward and tapped the cream-colored sweater.

"Let us out here, Chum."

"I stop at the filling station at the Fresno Road anyhow, Wilson."

"Here, Chum. We like to stretch our legs and look around when we hit a new town."

"Okay."

He braked alongside the road and we piled out. I said: "Thanks." The Big Guy nodded his thanks. Don Clawson regarded him with open curiosity.

"Doesn't he ever say anything?"

"Can't," I explained. "That's why we stopped fighting."

THE kid nodded sympathetically. He waved and drove down the road. We watched his dust rise in a cloud that completely hid the maroon car. The dust suddenly settled, revealing the car parked at the filling station about half a mile down the road.

"Nice guy, hagh?" the Big Guy asked.

"Most local yokels are nice guys," I said. "Now let's get down to business. What's your name?"

"Slugger Dugan."

"What's mine?"

"Ca-Casey Wilson. How's 'at, Cash?"

"Casey, you lamebrain—Casey!"

"Hokay—Casey."

"Now how do we go into town?"

The Big Guy's tiny eyes squinted in concentration. "Foist we split, Ca-Casey. On account ya don't wan' us spotted togedder comin' in. I go in foist an' fin' the post office an' jus' stan' waitin' until ya come along an' gimme the high sigh. I foller ya until ya look inna winda of a chow joint. I go inna chow joint an' eat an' keep eatin' slow until ya come back wit' the score. Hokay?"

"Fine. Now suppose someone talks to you?"

"I don' say nuttin', Ca-Casey."

"Suppose it's the waitress?"

"I jus' put my finger someplace onna menu-an' give 'er a wink, hokay?"

"Suppose the law nabs you?"

"I don' say nuttin'. I clam like I'm dum'."

I reached up and patted his shoulder. "That's the story, Pal. Hit the road."

He started toward the filling station and I yelled: "Hey, you lummoX! Not that way!"

He stood stock still a moment, then snapped his fingers, waved, scaled the barbed-wire fence to the right of the road and cut straight across a sort of rocky pasture.

I looked at my watch. It was six-thirty. The sun was melting into red clouds stretching along the rim of the ocean. A coolness was entering the air. I was feeling a bit hungry, a bit uneasy—the way a hunted man is bound to feel when he approaches a new town.

The Big Guy was out of sight. Don Clawson's car was a dust cloud again, going around a bend beyond the filling station.

I checked the ammo in my Colt .32. I wedged the revolver under my belt. Then I straddled the fence on the left side of the road and slowly made my way into Oceanville. . . .

So help me, Pete, that is all that happened on that ride in Don Clawson's car. You have it here word for word, look for look—almost breath for breath.

Can you read a fantastic kill riddle in that much?

Stick around.

In order to get this picture, you have to leave the Big Guy and me as we entered the town of Oceanville in our necessarily careful way.

You have to go back a few minutes and park with Don Clawson at that filling station down the road.

The dour-faced attendant stretched his mouth as much as he ever did when he smiled, about an extra sixteenth of an inch.

"Saved me a peek at my watch," he drawled. "Half-past six."

The redheaded kid glanced at his watch and grinned.

"One minute shy, Glenn. Whatever she'll take."

Don Clawson got out and stretched and watched Glenn Yates bring the hose nozzle to the tank. He spent a few minutes in the gent's room. When he emerged, the dour filling-station operator was rubbing a rag across the windshield.

"Just happened to notice your dad wasn't along, Don," Yates commented, stuffing the rag in his coverall hip pocket. "Funny how you take something like that for granted. Here I've seen him settin' in back so quiet every day for a couple of years now, when I came around back I yelled in the window: 'Evenin', Mr. Clawson!' He wasn't there. That'll be two thirty-three. Want me to check your oil, Don?"

Clawson grinned. "I guess dad's pretty quiet at that—around strangers. He's spending a few days in San Jose. Let's skip the oil tonight, Glenn."

He stepped behind the wheel and lit a cigarette and puffed on it until Glenn Yates emerged with his change. Then he waved and drove off down the road toward his home. . . .

**W**ELL, there you have it, Pete. Could you put those two scenes together and solve a murder puzzle from them?

You have all the known facts—except the murder itself. But that's not important. *Because according to every bit of evidence the police could fit together, at the moment Don Clawson was driving the Big Guy and me past the ranch he was also breaking open his father's skull with a tire iron and hurling the corpse to the road from the moving car!*

Fantastic?

Stick around, Pete. This gray thing I'm pinning to the page is one of my hairs that resulted from my brooding in this scramble!

Let's get back to six-thirty, when Don

Clawson was pulling away from the filling station and the Big Guy and myself were wandering into Oceanville.

Shift the scene to that cliff overlooking the Pacific between the mushroom ranch and the filling station. Get down to a ledge on that cliff where an eccentric artist known as Zello was painting the sun as it dipped into its nightly bath.

When I say this Zello was eccentric, I mean he was a gaunt man who made it a point to wear a blue beret and striped Basque sweaters and who spoke in glittering images that usually made sense to nobody but himself. A weirdie of the old school.

He had been making sketches of the sun for an hour before he heard Don Clawson's buggy roll by—and in that hour he had heard no other passing car.

Immediately after he heard us go by in the Clawson's car he heard—and these are the wierdie's own words, Pete: "*A drawn out sigh in space, like a cosmic whisper—a whisper of death!*"

"And at first," he went on, "I thought it came from within me, an exquisitely fashioned response of my soul to the macabre spectacle of Solaris entering his molten grave.

"But then I became aware of an altered quality. The whisper suddenly changed to a groan, like the groan of a man in great agony."

Zello clambered up to the road that ran above the cliff. He stood there with the wind flapping his Levis against his lean calves and gaped down at an elderly man lying prone in the weeds alongside the road.

The man no longer groaned—if he had groaned at all. He lay face down with his knees drawn up beneath him and his arms flung forward and the gray hair behind his ears glistened with a raw splotch of scarlet.

Zello didn't touch him. He made no effort to learn whether the man was alive or dead. His explanation—and these are his own words again—was: "Violence is an outrage against Man's dignity which I cannot tolerate. I cannot gaze at it or be near it or even think of it, which is why I never paint people, merely Things. Things are violent, yes—but in a clean, cosmic fashion that exalts my aesthetic essence."

The weirdie had a motorcycle hidden in

a patch of nearby brush. He rode like a banshee to Glenn Yates' filling station and reported his discovery in disjointed phrases, then drove on to the shack he rented along the shore and proceeded to swab his gullet with bourbon.

They found his painting materials on the ledge later.

Glenn Yates was no weirdie. He was a tall man with the bitter face of a guy who had to put out ten dollars' worth of work for every buck he earned. He phoned Doc Pederson, the local coroner. He phoned Sheriff Jeb Holderness, who lived in Oceanville, and he phoned Sam Adams, who was Chief of Oceanville's eight-man police force.

—You wouldn't think a yokel collection like that would have any police savvy, would you, Pete? But these guys went about their jobs as if they wrote the book. I mean this local gang was right on the ball.

They reached the body at six forty-five. It was in the position Zello had reported it. It was definitely a body.

They used flash bulbs and had it photographed where it lay in the weeds. They photographed the weeds, which had been crushed for several feet where the body hurtled through them. On the following day they chucked a hundred and fifty pound dummy into similar patches of roadside weeds from cars going at different speeds and decided this corpse had been dropped from a car moving between forty and fifty miles an hour.

They all knew the corpse; old Thomas W. Clawson, the father of the redhead who had given us the lift. A clout from behind with a "blunt" instrument had made him a corpse.

At about six forty-five Doc Pederson checked the reading on a rectal thermometer against the reading on an air thermometer, performed a little simple arithmetic and told Sheriff Jeb Holderness: "He's been dead fifteen to twenty-five or thirty minutes, Jeb. Say sometime between six-fifteen and six-thirty."

They photographed the tire marks in the dust of the ruts and noted the right rear tire of the last car to pass was a Silverstreak and the left rear tire was a Universal.

The inquiry moved ten miles to Glenn

Yates' filling station where Glenn Yates shrugged sorrowfully and said: "Don Clawson, Jeb."

"No other cars, Glenn?" Sheriff Holderness asked.

"Not on the Dodge Road, not in an hour. Unless you consider Zello on his motorbike."

"Was Don alone, Glenn?"

"It struck me peculiar and I mentioned it. He said his dad was up San Jose for a couple of days."

The inquiry moved two more miles to the cottage on a street of cottages where Don Clawson and his wife lived. It was seven now and growing dark, but not too dark for Sheriff Holderness to note the rear tires of the maroon car parked in front of Clawson's home were a Silverstreak and Universal.

A deputy called Holderness to where he was holding open the right rear door of the maroon car.

"Under those rags on the floorboard, Jeb," the deputy pointed.

Holderness lifted the oily rags and gaped at the object they had concealed; a stained tire iron.

Later, laboratory tests were to prove the stains were bloodstains, human bloodstains which matched the blood of old Thomas W. Clawson. To make it even more damning, a few tiny grey hairs caught in the dried blood matched Tom Clawson's hair!

And the final touch—the only fingerprints on the lethal tire iron belonged to young Don Clawson!

Fantastic?

There it is, Pete. Solid evidence. The body had to be thrown from a car—and the only car was Don Clawson's. The body had to be killed with that tire iron—and it was in that same car.

Look at the time element. Thomas W. Clawson was killed while the Big Guy and I were riding in the Buick. I described that ride for you. We didn't see the guy. We saw no tire iron. We witnessed no kill.

And yet, according to evidence solid enough to push a citizen into a gas chamber, during that ride Thomas W. Clawson had to be bumped, chucked from the car—and the bloody tire iron had to be dropped at our feet!

## CHAPTER TWO

### Working Interlude

TAKE it to the living room of Don Clawson's cottage, Pete. Picture the redheaded kid pacing up and down and suddenly blurting: "Jeb, there *has* to be another way! I left dad in Salinas. He was going to ride the bus to San Jose while I went over to Monterey to see some people. I tell you the last I saw of him was at the coffee counter in the bus depot in Salinas."

"You heard the facts," the sheriff said quietly. "Tell me how else your pa, could have been killed."

"I don't know how else. All I know is I didn't do it!"

"Try to figure another way to explain our facts, Don."

The kid dropped in a chair and sank his freckles into his palms. The sheriff and Police Chief Adams exchanged glances over his head—and then Don Clawson looked up and said haggardly:

"It's like being smothered, Jeb. I can't think. All I know is—"

"Aside from these facts," the sheriff cut in, "look at the general picture, Don." Sheriff Holderness was a big man with a face that made you think of Lincoln, the same model T front concealing a sixteen-cylinder brain. He was giving the kid a lot more rope than a New York cop would have given him under similar circumstances. "Look at the picture," he urged. "You never got along well with your pa. Ever since you came back from the war it's been one rumpus after another."

"That has nothing to do with it!" the kid flared. "I had a chance to fly for TWA and dad insisted I dig into the business. I did, and he changed. He became—"

"Tight-fisted?"

"Okay. But nothing that could lead to murder, Jeb. I could have walked out any time."

"I'm afraid there's more to it," the sheriff said. "Your pa didn't fancy Mona, did he?"

"Leave Mona out of this!"

"Sorry, Son. You can't keep family secrets in a small town. Where is she now?"

"I said leave Mona out of this!"

"Nobody can be left out of a murder, Son."

He made a break then, young Don Clawson. The poor sucker was caught in traps inside of traps, from the old bread and butter trap through the older marital trap—I'll get to that in more detail later—to this trap opening under his feet.

He brought a looping right from the floor and didn't pause to watch Sheriff Holderness stumble back over the coffee table. He was ramming a deputy with his shoulder and racing for the door. Adams and the other deputy were on the far side of the living room, clawing at their holsters.

Don Clawson flung open the door and plunged headlong into a chunky man coming in.

They stood pressed together like that in the doorway.

"Just came up from Pismo, Don," the chunky man said. He was elderly, with gray dabs at his temples, pince-nez perched on a bony nose, and an air of solemnity.

Before the young redhead could reply, three lawmen descended on his back and bore him to the floor while the chunky man leaped backwards in astonishment.

"That about settles it, Son," Sheriff Holderness panted, rising to his feet and brushing his knees. "If you was determined to prove your guilt that would be your first step."

But young Don wasn't listening to him. Young Don lay on his back on the floor and laughed. It was part hysteria. Mainly, it was sheer relief. Words bubbled out with his laughter.

"You fellows had me so rattled I swallowed all you said and my mind blanked in panic. Let me up. I'll be all right now."

They let him up and he sat on the arm of the settee and lit a cigarette with trembling fingers.

"I don't have to find another theory to fit your facts, Jeb. When I came over the Dodge Road this evening I had passengers. Hitch-hikers. Two ranch hands coming to Oceanville looking for work."

"Glenn Yates said you were alone, Don."

"He didn't see 'em. They got out about half a mile up the road. Said they wanted to stretch their legs and size up the town on foot. They ought to be around town

now. You couldn't miss the big guy; an ex-pug. Heavyweight. I can even give you their names. The pug is Slugger Dugan. The little fellow is—Wilson. Casey Wilson."

Holderness nodded thoughtfully.

"I'll go along with you on that for awhile, Don." He turned to the chunky man. "You representing him, Judge?"

The chunky man said, without looking at the redhead: "If Don wants me. But if he wants me, he must keep his mouth shut from this point on." The attorney turned to Don Clawson. "You understand that? If you have anything to say it will come from my lips only."

The lad grinned.

"Just find the two fellows who rode with me, Judge. They'll do the talking!"

He was so wrong!

**P**ETE, did you ever hear of U.S. 101? It's the coastal highway that runs from Seattle to San Diego. It's a busy highway, jammed with trucks, busses and touring cars.

In fact, from where I sit writing this I can see a narrow stretch of it between two baby mountains that are smaller than the mountain on which this cabin is perched.

It's not difficult to imagine some of those tourists listening to the same news broadcast that's coming out of the radio we found in this cabin:

*"A network of armed men is blocking all the roads and trails of central California, and conducting house to house searches, and field to field sweeps in this all-out effort to capture the escaped killers."*

Us, Pete.

They're after the Big Guy and me. It's about ten in the morning now. The Big Guy spotted hounds through the field glasses we found in this cabin, hounds racing ahead of a posse. They're about ten miles from here—up the side of another mountain.

There's a creek to stop the hounds. Even if they send the dogs up and down both banks, it'll take a canine Houdini to pick up our trail past that creek.

We rode out of it on the backs of a couple of surprised cows!

But like the man said; all the roads are blocked and they're swarming over the countryside like ants, and the only way out

of this trap is up—but we forgot to bring our wings.

All because we thumbed a ride!

I was telling you about U.S. 101. Getting back to the time Zello was gasping his story to Glenn Yates, I was standing on a little patch of U.S. 101 that most cars whizzed past at sixty or better.

Which should give you an idea of Oceanville.

I stood with my back to a drug store and faced a street that ran three blocks into a long pier that pointed like a black finger toward the horizon where sun, clouds and ocean had melted together into an orange haze.

There were a couple of dozen stores, motels, filling stations and seafood restaurants extending up and down 101. About fifty cottages straggled up the mustard-colored hillside behind me. A couple of hundred cottages were spread up and down the coast between 101 and the ocean.

Mainly the town consisted of those six square blocks I faced. When I prowled them, I was surprised to learn Oceanville was a lively little burg. Despite its small proportions it had a movie, a bowling alley, a roller-skating rink, a dance hall, several bingo parlors, pool halls and slot-machine emporiums. Every other store seemed to be a bar and at the head of the pier stood a block square carnival—although most of its booths were closed and most of its paraphenelia lay shrouded in gray canvas.

The streets were packed with white ranchers, Mexican harvest hands and Filipino fishermen. What tourists I spotted packed the many seafood restaurants.

I found the Big Guy holding up a red brick wall of the post office. He answered my wink and trailed me by about half a block until I paused to study a menu on a plate glass window of a seafood joint that went under the name of the Abalone Inn.

I continued to study the menu while the Big Guy ambled inside. He seated himself at a red and white checked table and raised a menu and studied it until a plump waitress came over. He fingered his menu. She spoke to him. He shook his head and pointed to his mouth, then pointed to the menu. She nodded and walked to the rear. He glanced around at the dozen-odd other diners, then brought his gaze to me on the

sidewalk still menu-gazing and winked.

I walked back to the drugstore and bought a paper. There were three jobs open for baby sitters, one job for a filling-station attendant, an opening for an usher and five calls for laundresses.

I entered the largest pool hall on the main drag and selected a sixteen-ounce cue from the rack. A tall man with a green eyeshade over a sad face approached me.

"Alone, Friend?"

I glanced around. Four Filipinos were having a grim time over a snooker table. A gang of kids were horsing through a sloppy game of rotation. Two large hunks of meat in work clothes were shooting a drunken—but skillful—game of straight pool. The fourth and last table was empty, although half a dozen gaffers sat quietly on a bench against the wall.

There was a curtained doorway in back. When a man entered it, I spotted a round table surrounded by card players under a cloud of gray smoke.

"Don't know anyone around here," I told the sad-faced man.

"Want me to play with you?"

"Sure."

He put a card in the time-clock on his counter, punched it and handed it to me. He brought a cue from behind the counter.

"Anything special, Friend?"

"I like eight ball."

HE RACKED a diamond of balls on the green baize and nodded to me. I broke the rack without dropping any balls. He proceeded to clear that table, sinking the eight ball in his own corner with a two cushion shot that left the cue ball exactly where the eight ball had been.

"I used to like eight ball," I said.

A grin flickered briefly across his face.

"This is my business, Friend."

"Mine's working on ranches. Looking for work on ranches, to be technical."

"Wrong season, Friend," he said, shaking his sad face. "They finished lettuce a while back. Artichokes won't come up for a month."

"Any fishing out of here?"

"Seine fishing. The Filipinos do most of it—and they dive for most of the abalone. Most everybody gets clams."

"What's left?"

His sad face regarded me sadly.

"This is mainly a resort town, Friend. From June through September. Along about May there's work plumbing and painting and carpenting. Things like that. But this is off season. Shoot another?"

I racked the diamond this time and he barely skinned the corner ball. His cue ball kissed two cushions, then nestled into the rack, barely disturbing it.

"Tell you what," he said, straightening. "You could see Bud Thrasher. He owns most of the carnival. He runs the ball-room and handles the rink and bowling alley, not to mention some bars and this place."

"Big man around here, hey?"

"Bud's usually building or promoting something. I'd say he was a pretty big man, Friend. Your shot."

I slammed the cue ball into the rack and three balls dropped. I circled the table to line up the cue ball with the four ball which teetered on the lip of a corner pocket. I circled into one of the weatherbeaten giants at the next table just as his cue touched a ball.

Then I picked myself off the floor.

I mean that hulk had a backhand on reflex. A huge guy, with a dirty scowl etched on his face by wind, sun and years of hard work—and a pungent bouquet of stale beer issuing from his bitter mouth along with a lot of bitter words.

These as he advanced on me as I was picking myself up from where his backhand had slammed me.

His balled fist blurring toward my eyes took on the dimensions of a basketball—and stopped inches before my eyes. It became a lax hand as pain and incredulity screamed from his eyes.

He didn't believe it. He tried again.

This time his fist bounced away faster than it came. His jaw jerked to the right. His other approaching fist leaped back. His jaw snapped to the left.

He began reeling backwards, bringing up his hands to ward off the muzzle of my Colt .32 that was whipping agony into his hands and face.

I dropped to a crouch and spun, bringing my Colt's muzzle up toward the other hunk of meat who was aiming the business end of a twenty-ounce cue at my head.

This one's eyes blinked at my revolver. He let the cue come down slowly until it

rested on the table. He stood looking into my eyes.

Then he ripped a dollar from his wallet and let it fall alongside his cue. He walked around the table and helped the other hunk of meat to his feet. He scowled:

"Le's get outta this damn town, Joe!"

They staggered out the door together without looking back.

I dropped the Colt back under my belt and glanced around at the tableau of motionless, staring figures. I spread my palms helplessly toward the sad-faced man. He nodded thoughtfully.

"Joe had no call to hit you, Friend. That—" he nodded toward my belt—"was pretty fast."

"Pretty fast!" a bullfrog voice boomed from the curtained doorway behind me. "That was just about the fastest thing I ever saw!"

The man in the curtained doorway looked almost as much like a frog as his voice sounded. Swollen blue eyes bulged from a mass of spongy fat. The lower you looked the more he bulged. His gray slacks had tent-like dimensions. The flesh of his arms quivered loosely where it emerged from the rolled sleeves of his white shirt. He carried a gray jacket under his left arm and wore a gray Homberg on what seemed to be a nude head.

The head, hat and all, bobbed at me.

"You the feller I heard Sorrowful talking to? About a job?"

"That's him, Mr. Thrasher," the sad-faced pool shark said.

Thrasher's head bobbed at me again. "Want to talk to you." He waddled past me and out the front door. At the door he looked back. "Coming?"

I looked around at the still-staring statues and asked Sorrowful: "What's the tab?"

"Mr. Thrasher owns this place, Friend. No tab."

I said: "I'll concede this game to you, Friend."

"Thank you, Friend." He nodded gravely.

Thrasher was waiting behind the wheel of a sedan parked at the curb. It was dark now. The street lighting wasn't very good. There was a chill in the air which made the red and green neon signs up and down the street sparkle.

I slid into the seat alongside the fat man and gazed somberly down at my hands on my knees.

They were trembling.

**O**KAY. It had been a bonehead play. Don't you think I know it? But you know me, Pete; you know I could never stand a big man's hands on me. His back-hand was reflex—but my Colt digging into the vulnerable parts of him was reflex also.

I don't have to tell you how that reflex was developed during the years I peddled my heater to one Bootleg Big after another. And then, when Mr. Roosevelt spiked Mr. Volstead's law against human nature, how I went on cultivating it by peddling my rod and private-eye license to citizens with problems too hot for the law and too delicate for the big agencies—until that business over the Komansky blue-white sent me away from Manhattan a jump ahead of the cops who wanted me for killing—among other people—the only woman who ever gave me goose pimples.

You can't suddenly kill a reflex, Pete. But it was a hell of a way to call attention to myself a few minutes after hitting a new town!

Now I sat with my hands unsteady on my knees and heard the fat man croak: "New York?"

"I didn't say that," I said.

"I said that," he said.

"Omit the biography," I said.

Those bulging orbs bulged at me.

"Touchy, hey?"

I said: "Listen, Pally. I'm a drifter. I want to linger long enough to pick up some moss. Let's stick to employment."

He nodded. "Mainly, I like your style, Drifter. You don't back down. Every now and then someone comes along and makes me back down. I'm not a very brave man, Drifter." He shrugged. "You can see for yourself. I'm not equipped for it. See what I mean, Drifter?"

"Wilson," I said. "Casey Wilson."

"That's it, then, Casey. Sometimes a manager goes around town layin' bets against his own boy. This is a small town and while I don't mind a man turning a buck as he sees fit, I can't afford to have that kind of publicity and remain in Oceanville. So far, none of it's come out—

but who can say about the near future?"

"Who indeed?" I shrugged. "Is that what you want—a bodyguard?"

"More than that, Casey. I have enough big boys around town who'll do me little favors, but there are always bigger boys—and I've never in all my life seen anyone as fast with a gun as you in there."

"I'm looking for a real job," I told him wearily. "Something that'll keep the law out of my hair."

But Thrasher held up a pudgy palm and slowly closed it.

"How can Oceanville law get in your hair," he leered, "when it's in there?"

"Then why can't they do your fronting?"

"You ought to know better than that. It's too obvious. What do you say, Casey? Fifty a week and a cut in this and that."

I watched my hands become steady on my knees and wondered why this always happened to me. A psychologist once told me it was true of a lot of little men who grew up in tough surroundings. They found ways to compensate for their lack of size and grew up into nasty little warts, and a good percentage went on to utilize their nastiness for bucks—like me.

I told Thrasher: "I've a buddy along."

"What's he do?"

"Uses muscles. But no fights—he's been in there once too often. He's dumb—literally dumb. I do his talking."

"I can always find jobs for muscles," Thrasher nodded. "Bring him along in the morning. I'll be at the ballroom around eight. He can help set up the seats for the wrestling. I pay thirty-five a week for roustabouts."

"Good enough," I said, sliding back toward the street.

I slid into a drunken blonde trying to crawl over me into the sedan. She lurched back and squinted at me with eyes that wore too much mascara. Even in that dim light I could see she wore too much lipstick, too much rouge and powder. Her print dress was too tight and too short. Her breath was too whiskey-laden and her voice too hoarse.

"Can't you make up your mind where you're goin'? For gossakes, can't you?"

From behind me Bud Thrasher's voice rumbled: "Mona! What you doing here?"

She staggered back a little and placed

two palms on unsteady, but neatly turned, hips.

"Mona, what you doin' here?" she mimicked. "I'll tell you what I'm doin', Mister Loose-Lard Thrasher! 'Go home,' you said this mornin'. Back to that redheaded mouse an' his lousy fifty a week. Send Mona home to scrub the lousy floors and wash the lousy clothes and cook the lousy supper—an' to come runnin' the nex' time you snap your blasted fat fingers, Mister Blubber-Gut Thrasher!"

Thrasher and I left the sedan together by opposite doors. He waddled around the front of the car and gripped one of the blonde's slender arms.

"Honey, you've a load on. Take it easy. You don't want a scene."

She wrapped her arms around his thick neck, toppling his Homburg to the pavement, showing his rounded skull was indeed nude.

"All I want is you, Cuddles! Just you! Not that redheaded penny-pincher! If you make me go back, I'll die, Cuddles! I swear I will! I'll die!"

She buried her mascara into his shoulder and sobbed. I raised his Homburg from the pavement, and he took it over her quivering back.

"Got a place to stay, Casey?"

I shook my head.

"See Sorrowful when you're ready. Tell him I told you to see him."

I said: "Thanks. See you in the morning, Cuddles."

His, "Wise guy!" bullfrogged through the night after me.

It was real dark now. My stomach was accusing my throat of treason as I made my way back toward the Abalone Inn. But I didn't feel too badly. In only an hour I had found two jobs and the prospect of a place to live, which just about filled my spiritual and physical needs. My life had become that simple, Pete—I thought.

I rounded the last corner—and had to use a ton of will power to force the Colt back under my belt and flatten into the shadow of a wall.

They were wrestling the Big Guy from the door of the Abalone Inn to a white police sedan parked at the curb; four big men hanging madly on to his arms and a fifth man behind him, slamming a blackjack repeatedly down on the Big Guy's skull!

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Silent Witness

THE police sedan swept past me and I had a swift glimpse of the Big Guy still wrestling his captors. I took a few steps toward the Abalone Inn, then flattened into the shadows again.

This time two men were emerging with a familiar redhead in cream-colored sweater and slacks. He wasn't wrestling them so much as arguing with a big man in civilian clothes. He was yelling at the big man!

"Find the other one, Jeb! I told you the big one couldn't talk. Find the other one, Casey Wilson. He'll tell you!"

"I went along with you as far as I could, Don," Jeb said quietly. "Now get in the car."

They piled into a black sedan. I stayed flat against that wall as it rolled past me; then I walked slowly to the Abalone Inn and looked through the plate glass at the confusion inside.

The Big Guy had given them a tussle. Why not? He once gave Dempsey a fifteen-round tussle the fans still remember with gestures. Waitresses and cooks were righting overturned tables and chairs and sweeping debris from the floor. People at the other tables had abandoned eating for excited gabble. A man in a khaki police uniform stood with his back to me, talking to the plump waitress I had seen serve the Big Guy.

I turned away from the plate glass and the man standing behind me said:

"Casey Wilson?"

A grayed, chunky man, wearing a pince-nez on a bony nose. His tie was black against a white shirt. There was white piping on the vest of the black serge suit he wore. He had asked me a question, but his manner made it a statement. I mean the man was sure of himself.

I looked at him.

"Thought you wouldn't be far," he nodded. "That's why I waited. They have your friend on several misdemeanors."

I kept looking at him.

"The redheaded man," my interrogator asked, "Don Clawson—he gave you a lift this evening, didn't he?"

I continued to look at him.

"The police claim Don murdered his fa-

ther around the time Don claims he was giving you a lift," the man said slowly. "That's why they interrogated your large friend. He refused to talk. Don said he was unable to talk. They brought him pencil and paper to write answers, but he wouldn't do that either. And there was no question about his being unable to read and write. He had been reading the menu.

"He merely sat there and stared straight ahead," my informant went on quietly. "A deputy shook his shoulder in an effort to arouse your friend. Your friend knocked him out." The man smiled grimly. "Your friend's fist traveled less than a foot.

"After that they all piled on him, but it took almost ten minutes to subdue him. They'll book him for disorderly conduct, assault, resisting arrest, being a dangerous and suspicious character and so forth. I may be able to do something for him. But first I want you to do something for my client. Don Clawson, the lad who gave you the lift—if he did—is my client. My name is Yates; William B. Yates. People in Oceanville call me Judge. Will you testify for Don?"

I shrugged. "The Big Guy—Sluggo Dugan. What'll they do with him?"

"The usual thing. Hold him for trial. They'll fingerprint him now and arraign him in the morning. The calendar is pretty crowded with misdemeanors. If he pleads not guilty at the arraignment, his trial won't come up for a couple of weeks. I may be able to arrange a fast suspended sentence. What do you say?"

What could I say? In two weeks the Big Guy's fingerprints would be back from Washington and then it wouldn't be a question of a few misdemeanors. It would be a question of frying to death on the Ossining griddle.

I said: "The kid gave us a lift. I checked the time when he dropped us. Six-thirty."

Yates nodded thoughtfully.

"It's incredible," he murmured, more to himself.

"What's incredible?"

"If what you say is true, then how did—?" He checked himself and shook his head. "That's not important. What's important now is you. We have to dig into your background a little; prove where you've been and why you were bound for Oceanville, check your references—and so

forth." He caught my expression and his eyes behind the pince-nez widened. He shook his head: "No?"

"No," I breathed.

"That's bad!" he murmured.

"Bad for your boy, maybe," I shrugged. "I'm a drifter. Things have happened here and there. If the value of my testimony depends on establishing my background, that ends it. My testimony is worthless."

YATES glanced up and down the street. We were alone in the semi-darkness, out of the glare from the Abalone Inn.

He said: "I'm afraid it's just as bad for your large friend—and you."

A voice I never heard before asked: "How do you figure that?"

It was my own voice crawling around the lump in my throat.

"Don's testimony has already placed you and your friend with him in the car. If your testimony isn't good enough to prove his innocence, his testimony is bad to drag you to the gas chamber with him—as confederates."

"Just like that!" I breathed.

"You are probably not familiar with police procedure in a homicide," he said. "When they have a man they can link to a corpse through chains of evidence, they tend to resist any conflicting evidence. In a case like this they would hammer at your credibility. If they uncovered facts in your background detrimental to your character—a criminal record, for instance—they would regard your testimony as the effort of an accomplice to free a murderer."

"You don't have to tell me homicide procedure," I said. "Anyhow, whether my testimony would stand up in court or no, I tell you now that the kid didn't bump his old man or any one else on that ride. Which gives us another angle in this deal."

"And that is?"

"Turn up the actual killer."

Judge Yates laughed.

"You propose to turn detective and—"

He lost his girlish laughter as his face followed his shirt to within inches of my face; his shirt bunched in my fist. I let him spend about thirty seconds studying my eyes.

"It stopped being funny when they slapped the Big Guy in the can," I told him softly. "He's been punched too often. He

needs fresh air and plenty of room for exercise. If getting him out means I have to track down a loose killer, then I'll track down a loose killer. Catch?"

He spent some more time probing my eyes with his eyes. Then he breathed: "I almost believe you can do it."

I breathed back at him: "I can do it."  
"How?"

"Listen to answers and put the pieces together. I've done it before. I'm way ahead of the law. I *know* your boy is innocent!"

The restaurant door opened and the uniformed cop emerged. A beefy guy with a loose mouth, he held a handkerchief to the side of his jaw.

"Can y' tie that, Judge?" he whined. "All I done was touch the guy's shoulder!"

"Some people go off the handle like that, Sam," the attorney said, stepping back from me and straightening his shirt into his vest.

"Yeah. But why pick on *me*?"

The cop shook his head and wandered away toward the main drag. I looked at the chunky lawyer.

"Don't use your hands on me again, Mr. Wilson," he said quietly.

"Don't laugh at me again," I told him in the same tone.

He nodded gravely.

"Would you care to come to my house, Mr. Wilson? I can supply you with most of the answers."

"Sure."

We rode the six blocks in his car.

It was quite a house. The walls were redwood logs set in clean looking cement—except for the west wall. That was almost solid plate glass giving a sort of Berchtesgarden view of Oceanville and the Pacific beyond.

We sat in the living room, facing each other across three big logs burning in a red-brick fireplace. He sipped a tall glass of ale. I nibbled some sandwiches. You can't drink and think.

He gave me most of the answers, the stuff I gave you, how Zello found the body, how the law traced the murder weapon to Don's car.

Now we were digging deeper into the background.

"What was the setup between Don and his old man?" I queried. "I mean in terms of motive."

"Bad. The war caught Don in the mid-

dle of an agricultural course. He became a transport pilot. By the war's end, piloting was in his blood." The attorney glanced at the picture over the fireplace and smiled. "I can understand that."

The picture resembled him a little; a young guy with a bony nose in a leather flying helmet and a fleece-collared jacket.

"Your son?"

"No. Myself. That was during the first war. What I mean to imply is that I appreciate a man who tasted flying losing his appetite for mushrooms."

"But old man Clawson couldn't appreciate it, hey?" I cut in.

"Precisely. Don actually had an offer for TWA when he got out, but Thomas pleaded with him to stay—even went so far as to promise to pull out and leave Don the business after a year. That became what you might call the bone of contention later—that and Mona."

The name teased my memory.

"Mona?"

Yates' bony nose wrinkled in distaste.

"Don's wife. A blonde tramp, if I may speak freely."

"Go ahead," I grinned.

"SHE drooled smutty songs into a microphone in Bud Thrasher's place. Utterly immoral. It was she who prevailed upon Don to accept Thomas' offer." The attorney smiled grimly. "That's ironic in a way. It was because of her that Thomas refused to relinquish his hold on the business at the end of the year. Don still can't see Mona anyplace but on a pedestal."

"Mona," I mused aloud. "Not a stacked blonde who puts on makeup with a trowel and wears dresses a size too small—and boozes?"

"You've met her?"

"She seemed to like Bud Thrasher."

"You've met *him*?"

"It's a small town. I've even met you."

He smiled. "Of course. Well, that's it. Motive. The D.A. will make a lot of the arguments between Don and Thomas regarding the transfer of ownership."

"Let's dig into this Zello character," I said.

The lawyer smiled. He had a peculiar smile. The mouth curved up at the ends in a bow, exposing only his lower teeth.

"Utterly harmless," he said.

"Nobody's harmless in a kill," I argued. "It's his story he found the body after we passed. Why couldn't he have put it there himself?"

"How could he have thrown it to leave a trail of crushed weeds?"

"He could have dragged it."

"Well, how could he have gotten the tire iron into Don's car?"

"Easy," I shrugged. "He had a motorcycle, didn't he? And he drove into town even before the law reached the body. He had plenty of time."

Yates regarded me wide-eyed.

"You know, Zello doesn't make such an implausible suspect at that. But how would he get Thomas Clawson back from Salinas so fast?"

"Was the old man in Salinas?"

"That's where Don left him at noon."

"It'll take some digging," I conceded. "Zello is only one possibility. That clown at the filling station is another. His yarn about no other car along Dodge Road in an hour might be punctured."

A flicker of annoyance crossed the attorney's face.

"That clown happens to be my brother Glenn."

"A lot of men's brothers have dabbled in homicides," I said dryly.

Deepening annoyance brought the lawyer to his feet.

"Listen, Wilson, I'll go along on any reasonable hypothesis—but the only tire tracks found on that road happened to have been made by Don's car. That's a fact. Let's face it."

"The only tracks that were examined," I said, rising also, "were in the ruts near where they found the body. Traces of an earlier car would have been covered by Don's car. If your brother—"

"Forget my brother!" William Yates roared. "If you're going to base your amateur investigation on the assumption that every witness lied, why stop with Glenn? Why not assume Doctor Pederson's estimate was also a lie—that Thomas had actually been dead fifteen hours instead of fifteen minutes? Why not suspect Sheriff Holderness of the murder—or me?"

"Why not?" I grinned. "Where, for instance, were you at six-thirty this evening?"

He got his teeth into his temper then.

He chewed it and swallowed it and came up with a wry smile as he dropped back to his seat.

"I'm sorry, Wilson. You have, you must admit, a most irritating manner. To cancel this absurdity, at six-thirty-five I happened to be phoning Sheriff Holderness from Pismo Beach, a good fifteen miles south of here. Twenty-five miles south of where they found Thomas Clawson. In fact, it was while he was at the phone that Sheriff Holderness learned of the murder—which is how I happened to return so early. Bud Thrasher gave me a lift from Pismo Beach in his car. Is that satisfactory?"

"If it checks out it should be," I shrugged.

"What do you propose to do now?"

"See Zello." I said.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Yates offered.

"Sure. You were Tom Clawson's lawyer. You can dig into his business dealings and find out if he pulled any fast ones on anybody. Know what I mean? Dig for motives."

Yates laughed mirthlessly.

"I don't have to dig for that, Wilson. Thomas Clawson was the most unscrupulous, unethical, miserly and arrogant businessman in this section of California. I can cite a hundred names of people he abused in his business dealings one way or another—heading the list with myself."

"That's a big help!" I scowled.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *The Devil and the Deep*

I STEPPED over a puddle formed by a dripping outside tap, walked around the motorcycle canted against the warped wall of the shack and banged my fist twice on a sagging door that was even more warped than the wall.

I listened. There was nothing to hear but people stirring in other shacks in the vicinity and the nearby sound of breakers crumbling on sand.

It was eight-thirty now. The night had grown cooler. A billion chips of ice sparkled in the deep blackness overhead. Somewhere nearby a man and woman started calling each other names in a mixture of English and Spanish.

I knocked again, and this time something stirred behind the sagging door. I kept knocking, until slivers of golden glare appeared through gaps in the door and wall.

The door was flung open.

"Well?"

The man swaying in the doorway was all of six feet. His Levis were rolled halfway up his lean calves. He wore a red striped Basque sweater and his brown hair writhed out in all directions. I asked:

"Zello?"

"Who wishes to see Zello?"

"I come with a few questions, Pally."

"Zello is wearied of answering questions!"

The door slammed—on my foot. It bounced open again. I bounced in with it and we waltzed around the interior of that shack a little. He suddenly slumped to the edge of an unmade cot and buried his face in his palms.

"Violence! Violence! How I detest it!"

I closed the door and looked around. The place was neat, if not gaudy. Sort of a one-room apartment, with a curtained corner that turned out to be the bathroom. Another corner held a well scrubbed stove, kitchen table and shelves stocked with food-stuffs. A third corner was filled with art materials. His paintings were scattered around the walls; landscapes, seascapes, still lifes. They seemed a bit crude, their coloring a bit wild—but what do I know about Art?

I faced him over the back of a chair and said: "This won't hurt, Pally. All I want are a few answers about Thomas B. Clawson."

His face rose from his palms. The soft brown eyes belonged on a girl. His nostrils flared wide from a thin nose. His mouth was very wide and straight. The color of his face was mahogany.

"That damn capitalist!" he said.

"You don't like capitalists?"

"Do you?"

"That's not the point. Did you dislike this one enough to clobber his brains in from behind?"

"Why kill the dead?" he countered with a French shrug.

"Come again?"

"All capitalists are dead," he said. "They're merely too stupid to lie down and be buried."

I said: "I don't want to argue about Communism. All I want is—"

"Zello is no Communist!" he cut in. "Zello is an Anarchist!"

"And you're the lad who can't stomach violence?"

He regarded me with contempt.

"Anarchists don't condone violence. We simply believe Man has enough dignity and self respect to conduct himself decently without laws."

"That I'd almost buy," I grinned at him. "I'll be around in the morning to sign up. In the meantime, how about old Thomas?"

"The storm troopers have already been here to ask me that. They found me sleeping. They threw water in my face and slapped my cheeks and poured hot coffee down my throat and awakened me and asked me their stupid questions, and I told them. Look!"

He sprang to the corner full of his art materials, pulled a canvas off an easel and held it out for me to see; sort of a tomato about to sink into the ocean.

"I was sitting on the ledge and painting this," he said. "I heard a car pass. Almost immediately after, I—I—" he groped for words with his rolling eyes—"I had a— an experience. Do you understand? I was not certain I actually *heard* anything. It may have been an extra-sensory perception within me. Like a massive sigh in space. A whisper—like a whisper of death. And then—a guttural moan."

He returned the canvas to the easel and faced me with his palms spread wide.

"What else can I say?"

"Was it Tom Clawson who moaned?"

"How could I tell? The west wind was already filling my ears with sound."

"I don't know how you could tell. Did you kill him?"

"Of course I killed him! Him and all his dirty capitalist friends! I, and people like me, are their living consciences. By our mass-will they shall all perish in the flames of Man's hate!"

"I mean with a tire iron," I said wearily.

"Zello abhors violence!"

I SAID: "Let's not get on that merry-go-round again. Okay, you heard this sound. You climbed up to the road and saw old Thomas. You hopped your trusty bike and rode to Glenn Yates' filling sta-

tion on the road. What happened there?"

"I told him about it."

"What was he doing?"

"Yates?" Zello shrugged. "He was lacing a basketball. I left him at the phone."

"Then where'd you go?"

"Home. Here—" He waved his long arms around. "This humble sanctuary from a vicious world."

I said: "No, you didn't."

"Of course I did!"

I drew the Colt from under my belt and balanced it in my palm and watched horror creep into Zello's eyes.

"What you did," I told him softly, "was drive to the street where Don Clawson's car was parked. You planted a bloody tire iron under some rags on the floor of the car—and then you came to this sanctuary from the corpse you manufactured. Isn't that a little more like it, Zello?"

"No!" he whimpered, backing away from me. "No—nothing like that at all! I came here—here—" He backed into the door and spread his arms wide as if my accusation were crucifying him. "I've told you everything—everything! I was painting. I heard a—"

"A whisper of death," I said wearily.

His eyes and mouth opened wide as if this was a startling observation.

"A whisper—" he breathed.

His eyes rolled up. He dived toward my feet. I mean the guy suddenly came down to the floor as if he was made of cardboard.

I gaped at the splotch of scarlet growing among the red stripes of his basque sweater.

My eyes jerked from his back to the door where blood dripped off the long blade jutting through a crack in the door.

I stepped over him and looked down at

the dripping blade. I put my foot to the door. I kicked. I followed my Colt out into the chill night.

I saw—the night.

Other tumble-down shacks loomed in the blackness. The billion ice chips continued to sparkle overhead. A cold wind curled around my neck and ankles. Nearby that couple was still cursing each other in English and Spanish.

I walked carefully around the shack. It stood on a bluff about ten feet over the beach. I stood with my back to the shack and scanned the long stretch of sand and surf—and saw nothing that moved except for each wave as it died in a welter of foam and became a silvery sheet crawling up the sands and dying again.

Back in the shack I fingered Zello's pulse.

He had no pulse.

I used my handkerchief on the back of the chair I had touched. I used it on the door, inside and out.

I picked up a stick and spoiled my footprints in the mud around the pool formed by the dripping tap. I backed away from there, spoiling my footprints with the stick as I went. I backed around the shack and down to the beach and walked to where the sand was soggy and waited for a sheet of foamy wave to wash the mud from my shoes.

I walked north along the beach, passed the shrouded carnival and passed most of the houses on the other side of Oceanville.

Three small planes stood anchored to the hard sand of the beach there; cubs of some kind. There was a weatherbeaten sign I practically had to kiss to read:

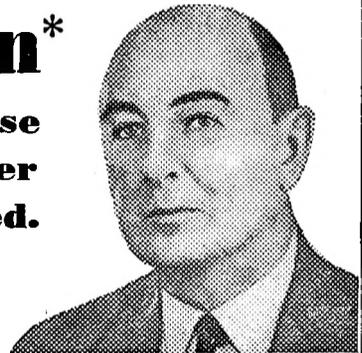
*Fifteen Minutes for Five Dollars*

## Timothy P. Sexton\*

**has switched to Calvert because  
Calvert makes a smoother  
Old Fashioned.**

\*of 707 People's State Bank, Indianapolis, Ind.

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey — 86.8 Proof — 65% Grain  
Neutral Spirits. Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City



*Don't Be a Groundhog All Your Life!*

There was a painted signature:

*Bud Thrasher, Prop.*

He had a finger in everything, that guy!

I walked around the planes and into the north side of Oceanville and asked a passing Filipino for the phone office. Then I made my way to the store which held the local switchboard.

The little gray-haired woman at the panel waved me away when I knocked on the door. I waved her to open the door. We did this several times until she put down her headset and approached with a wagging head and words I couldn't hear until the door opened—and then they were: "Young man, this office doesn't open until eight in the morning. Now, please—"

"Lady," I urged, "this is important. My wife's expecting down in Santa Barbara and they were supposed to put a call through to me here if anything happened. I can't wait until morning, Lady. Have a heart!"

She had a heart. It glowed all over her bird-like face.

"I'll see," she whispered breathlessly. "Wait here."

SHE fussed around the switchboard, then nodded at me and disappeared in back. She emerged with a sheet of paper and a frown. She fussed around some more at the switchboard, then brought the paper to the door.

"What did you say your name was?"

"Paige," I told her. "Peter Paige."

Her head shook sadly.

"I'm afraid there hasn't been any—"

The switchboard began to growl. She hesitated, then thrust the paper in my hand. "See for yourself. These are all the long distance calls we handled today."

She darted back to the humming panel and I studied the sheet.

There was, of course, no call for any Peter Paige. But, among the twelve calls listed, three interested me.

At 4:13 P.M. a Mr. Rafferty in Oceanville had phoned a Mr. Thrasher in San Jose.

At 5:03 P.M. someone in Salinas had phoned Mr. Glenn Yates in Oceanville.

And at 6:32 P.M. Mr. William B. Yates in Pismo Beach had phoned Sheriff Jeb Holdernes in Oceanville.

I handed the sheet back to the little old woman. She said: "I'm sorry, Mr. Paige. Is there any place I can reach you when the call comes?"

"I'll be back," I told her.

"I hope it's twins!" she beamed.

She's probably still hoping.

It was nine-thirty now, and my stomach was ready to swear that my throat was cut. I dropped into a side-street restaurant and dug into various trivia with a knife, fork and spoon. Abalone steak. You ever eat it, Pete? Unless you've been on the West Coast, you haven't. Tastes like a cross between chicken and steak. I had it smothered in onions and mushrooms—and it tasted like mildewed straw.

That tire iron in young Don's car baffled me. The corpse on the road at six-thirty wasn't too puzzling. It could have been walked there prior to becoming a corpse; or it could have been brought on a horse cross-country—or beyond from Zello's motorcycle. But the corpse there at six-thirty *plus* the fatal tire iron in Don's car at six-fifty was a conundrum that made me want to chew my nails up to my elbows.

The murder of Zello made no sense. The only motive was to shut him up. But what could he say that hadn't already been said?

I sat there and reconstructed my conversation with Zello, and the blonde waitress put a check face down at my elbow and said, "Thank you," and I asked her: "Why'd a man lace a basketball?"

She looked as if I wasn't quite bright.

"You always lace it after you blow it up."

She probably hasn't figured to this day why I left her a buck tip!

It was ten-thirty when I reached the filling station on the fork where Dodge Road ran into the Fresno Road a few hundred yards east of U.S. 101.

A tall, bitter-faced man was reading a parts catalogue in the glassed-in office. As I entered, he folded the catalogue in his lap and spoke over his shoes crossed on the desk.

"Something you want, Stranger?"

"Some information," I nodded. "You're Glenn Yates, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"Judge Yates' brother?"

He nodded warily.

I said: "When young Don Clawson stopped here this evening he spent a little

time in the gent's room, now didn't he?"

The bitter-faced man didn't nod then. He became like the middle carving on a totem pole.

I said: "Let me put it another way. I'm in the market for a basketball. I understand you have one. Care to sell it?"

He lowered his feet to the floor and rose on them. He towered head and neck over me. His hands looked as if they tore rubber tires to pieces each morning for practice and his face looked as if he wanted to pretend I was a rubber tire.

"What are you after?" he breathed.

"I already told you that. Information."

"Who are you?"

"One of the guys who rode with young Don this evening. He dropped us half a mile up the road. That's all it was. A ride from San Luis to within sight of this place. See what I mean?"

He didn't want to see what I meant. His thumb jerked toward the door and two words slid through his lips:

"Get out!"

I said: "There's no point getting excited. One man has been killed instantly because he happened to see you lace a basketball. It poses some interesting questions. Was he killed because you'd just blown up the basketball? Or was it because it was deflated before you blew it up? Or because you deflated it first? I mean, this can go on—but you know what I mean."

**H**E DIDN'T want me to get out any more. He wanted me to remain and be torn into little pieces. He lunged at me—and concluded his lunge a foot from where my Colt slanted up toward the middle of his huge chest.

I backed a little toward the door and said: "I changed my mind. You're not going to sell me that ball after all. You're going to give—"

I stopped talking then because I had backed into something hard that poked into my spine.

"Drop it!" a familiar voice rumbled in my ear.

I watched the homicidal passion erase itself from Glenn Yates' face, leaving the normal bitter mask. I said: "It's practically on a hair trigger. I drop it, it goes off."

"Turn it around and hand the butt to Glenn," the voice rumbled.

The hard object jabbed a little into my spine.

I swallowed a walnut that had appeared in my throat and said: "Uh-huh! I go, Glenn goes. You burn me—I burn him. Wanna bet I can do it?"

I watched a sheen of wet break out on the bitter face of the filling-station owner.

There was a throaty chuckle behind me.

"No bet, Cash Wale. You can do it. But then what would happen to Sailor Duffy when they learn he's wanted for murder back in New York?"

The voice rumbled on: "When I heard they had an ex-pug in the tank I went over for a look. Recognized him. That fingered you. Wale and Duffy went together like ham and eggs. Which puts you in kind of a spot.

"If you blast Glenn, I blast you and Sailor Duffy fries. You lose all around. You play ball with me, you may—I said *may*—pull out with Sailor Duffy while everybody still calls him Slugger Dugan. Playing ball with me means letting Don Clawson go to the gas chamber for killing his dad. That sort of puts you between the devil and the deep, doesn't it, Wale?" The hard object in my spine shook as a low chuckle sounded in my ear. "You can figure me for one or the other."

Perspiration made my grip on the butt of my Colt slick. That walnut in my throat refused to be swallowed. Glenn Yates' big hands trembled a little on either side of my Colt. He looked as if he were having trouble with a walnut in his own throat.

I said: "You're taking a hell of a big interest in this, Cuddles. The last I saw of you, you were smooching Don Clawson's wife. Now you're angling him into the black exit."

Bud Thrasher's voice in my ear rumbled: "That's neither here nor there. Hand Glenn your gun, Wale."

I said: "With Thomas dead, Don inherits. When Don dies in the chamber, Mona inherits—which puts the mushroom business in your lap along with Mona."

"You don't have to convince me you're bright, Wale."

"I know why you killed Thomas," I said. "But why'd you kill Zello?"

The hard object became rigid in my spine. "Somebody stab the screwball, Wale?"

"You."

"Not me, Wale. And I didn't kill Thomas. Maybe Glenn did—although I can't see how. All I want is what's falling into my lap—which means I want you out of the way—and there's no law against blasting a man wanted for murder."

I said: "Okay, Cuddles. I'll deal. Angle a way to get the Sailor out of the tank and we'll blow."

The hard object jiggled against my spine.

"The gun, Wale. Give it to Glenn."

I studied the perspiring, bitter face glowering down at me and shook my head.

"I do that, what's to stop him from blasting me? And you? He's in this Clawson kill right up to his neck. Why not—"

"Give it to him, Wale!"

I said: "I don't have to give it to him. If you wanted to blast me, you'd have done it. But you don't want the Sailor and me exposed. Don's lawyers might twist the case around to claim we killed old Thomas, and Don might get away with a prison sentence, and nothing would drop in your fat lap." I wiggled my Colt at the filling-station operator. "Back up. Big Boy."

The walnut in Glenn Yates' throat had grown to cocoon proportions. He took a step backwards and I lurched to the right, snapping my Colt around toward Bud Thrasher.

I never saw Bud Thrasher.

I saw nothing—absolutely nothing—as if all the lights in the world suddenly blinked out.

Like that!

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *The Whisper of Death*

I'M GETTING writer's cramp, Pete. The Sailor is having a time watching the posse act baffled about the hounds acting baffled around the creek. That's about three miles from here, but even if the hounds manage to find our trail again they have a long zig-zag up to this cabin.

All we need for a break is night—about four hours from now.

I ought to leave a note of thanks to the owner of this cabin. We've used his cots and food. Water comes from a couple of barrels outside. There are seven barrels full of gas out there also—in case his car runs low when he drives up here, probably.

He might use this place as a hunting lodge.

It sits on the rim of the west slope. The east slope starts several hundred yards back, and it's all level pasture between; sort of a table-top mountain.

I'd still rather be tearing into a herring in Lindy's.

I was telling about the time the lights went out. It couldn't have been Thrasher—not with a gun in his fist. It may have been Glenn Yates. The guy had backed only one step. I was still within his reach—and my attention and Colt were away from him.

It makes no difference. One or the other clobbered me, and the next thing I knew the world had become a place that joggled me up and down and swayed me from side to side.

Cold air and stale smoke and second-hand beer fumes whipped into my face.

Two heavy bodies kept lurching into me from both sides.

My eyes opened on darkness that held the back of a man's head about a yard in front of me and a glass windshield in front of him and blackness punctured by occasional light glows that grew to dazzling intensities—then swept by, leaving total blackness beyond the windshield.

The hulk pressing into me from the left lay with his head thrown back, his eyes shut and his open lips bubbling with heavy breathing.

The hulk on my right, a flat nosed, thick-browed gorilla, was puffing hungrily on the last inch of a cigarette. He rolled down his window and flipped the butt into the night.

He called: "Hey, Sorrowful. How we gonna get past the border station?"

The driver spoke and I recognized the voice of my pool hall nemesis: "You two act liquored up. Splash some whiskey over his face and say he passed out. The lump on his head won't show."

I became conscious of the devil inside my head trying to dig his way out with a pitchfork.

The hulk on my right grumbled: "Then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"What'll we do with him in Reno?"

"We go right on through Reno. We're going to hole up in a little ranch Mr. Thrasher has outside Carson City."

The hulk on my right pressed hard against me as he dug into a hip pocket. He

raised a beer bottle to his lips, tilted his head back and gulped. When he brought the bottle down I shut my eyes. I felt his warm fetid breath replace the cool air on my face. Then cool air blew the warmth away.

"How long?" he grumbled.

"How long what?" Sorrowful called over his shoulder.

"How long we gonna be at that ranch?"

"Until Mr. Thrasher sends us word."

"Then what?"

"Then we turn him loose and go back to Oceanville."

"Suppose he gets the law on us?"

"Him? That's Cash Wale. He's wanted for murder."

"Then why go to all this trouble? Why not just bury him someplace. Who'll care?"

"Mr. Thrasher. He's paying for this. We'll do it his way. You getting hungry, Luke?"

Luke grumbled a reply and tilted the bottle over his face again. The other hulk continued to sleep. Sorrowful continued to drive. I closed my eyes and brooded about Sailor Duffy alone in the Oceanville tank.

The Big Guy would go on "playin' dum'." They'd get word on his fingerprints from Washington and he'd be extradited to Manhattan where he'd go on playing dumb through the trial, a trial in which he'd be convicted for helping me perform what the papers called the Cash Wale Massacre.

He would burn to death in the electric chair without opening his mouth once.

"Sorrowful." Luke's voice broke my reverie. "Suppose he snaps out of it at the border station?"

"What's the difference? He won't make a fuss. He can't afford a fuss."

Luke grumbled and tilted the bottle to his upturned face again. I felt him turn around and peer at me. His warm breath blew into my closed eyes.

I snapped my head into his face.

**SURPRISED?** The guy's roar nearly blasted me through the back of the sedan. His big hands clamped to his face. In order to do that, he had to release the bottle.

He released it into my waiting hand!

Then he stopped roaring. He may have even stopped breathing. I never found out.

He slumped heavily down over my legs and I was whirling madly to smash what remained of the bottle down at the other human hulk.

He was still sleeping!

The sedan was lurching from side to side like sheer crazy. I twisted around to gape at Sorrowful trying to manage the wheel with his right hand while he turned in his seat and tried to point something that glinted at me over his right shoulder with his left hand.

The silvery glint exploded into a sheet of raw flame that tore past my ear into the rear window.

At the same instant a huge diesel truck roared past us on the wrong side of the road.

Sorrowful lurched around to jerk the wheel hard to the right and keep us from plunging off the left side of the highway.

We skittered back across the pavement in time to avoid being smashed by the oncoming radiator grill of a bus. We steadied in the proper lane and Sorrowful brought that left hand over his right shoulder for another try.

He brought it into what was left of the beer bottle.

I tore the revolver out of his lax, bleeding hand and told him: "Let's stop, Friend."

We were wandering over to the left side of the highway again. By the time his foot hit the brake we were nosed into shrubbery on the road's shoulder.

The sleeping hulk awoke then. He came roaring up with a: "Hey!"

He lurched into the descending muzzle of the revolver and sagged back to the seat.

Sorrowful was halfway out the door when the revolver's muzzle descended on him.

He regarded me sadly, grew even sadder when his gaze dropped to his bleeding hand.

I nodded at Luke, motionless at my feet. I crawled to the front seat and said: "Drag him out, Friend."

Sorrowful croaked: "Have a heart, Friend."

"Drag 'em both out, Friend."

Sorrowful gazed mournfully at the headlights sweeping up and down the highway. We were about ten feet off the highway. They roared past us without slowing.

He dragged first Luke, then the sleeper. The sedan's headlights caught him standing

above them as I backed toward the road.

He may be still standing there for all I know. . . .

I don't know how many hours later—eastern sky glow was wiping the ice-chip sparkles from the night—I found myself driving once more along the road that coiled and dipped and rose like a cord dropped carelessly over a colony of ant hills.

I drove past the Clawson mushroom ranch and along the cliff that jutted high over U. S. 101 and the Pacific. I braked it there and switched off the headlights and tucked the revolver under my belt. I stepped out into the steady west wind and paced the rim of the cliff, peering down until I came over a ledge that cropped out about twelve feet below.

I sat on that ledge and toyed with a slender paint brush I'd found in some weeds that dropped from a crack in the ledge, and I watched daylight crowd the night back toward the west.

I was tired enough to sleep where I sat, but there were too many ideas chasing each other around the corridors of my mind—and I had to be awake for the arraignment of Sailor Duffy and Don Clawson that morning.

I sat there and watched three gulls swooping down over the beach below and tried to put the pieces together in a combination that would make sense.

Now, besides Thomas' body appearing like magic along the road overhead and the bloody tire iron appearing almost the same time on the car's floorboards, I had a basket to add.

I sat there and juggled the tire iron and basketball and this and that around—and suddenly I heard it!

Fantastic, Pete?

I tell you I sat there and heard a whisper in the air; like a massive sigh that sounded over the steady wind!

And after that—a groan!

I clambered back to the top of that cliff like a madman. I raced to the parked sedan and gunned the motor. I suddenly cut the motor off. There was no place to go—yet.

I had the last piece of the puzzle now, but it could wait. I could wait. I lit a cigarette and waited. . . .

Oceanville lay swathed in fog that had come rolling in off the ocean as I drove down into it. I parked outside the one-story

white building someone had pointed out to me the night before as the courthouse. A uniformed patrolman standing before the door waved at me, and I sat there with my fingers crawling toward the gun under my belt—until I realized I was in a No Parking zone, I waved at him and backed the sedan out of the zone and he shook his head sadly at me.

"They arraigning young Clawson yet?" I asked him.

"Been—for half an hour now."

I nodded and entered the door. A uniformed police sergeant sitting behind a desk glanced up at me.

"Courtroom?" I asked him.

He aimed a pencil toward the rear.

I pushed through two swinging doors and someone yelled: "*There he is! That's him, Jeb! Casey Wilson!*"

A MILLION pairs of eyes seemed to be gaping at me. The blue eyes over the white-clad arm pointing at me belonged to young Don Clawson. The eyes of the judge were hidden behind two disks of glass reflecting glow from the courtroom window. The eyes of Sailor Duffy, standing between two armed attendants, sparkled as a wide grin wreathed his punch-battered countenance.

William B. Yates wore an unfathomable expression, standing next to young Don with pince-nez twirling in his fingers. Glenn Yates, who had risen from the witness bench immediately inside the wooden railing, wore a tight, bitter scowl.

The only other faces I recognized belonged to the Lincoln-like sheriff and Mona Clawson. She twisted in her seat next to Glenn Yates to regard me with open puzzlement. Her makeup was still applied with a trowel, but her dress—a simple navy blue outfit—was the right size, a concession to judicial dignity, probably.

There were only three rows for spectators and these were only partly filled. It was a small courtroom, jammed with the usual courtroom appurtenances; a bench with the governor's picture on the wall behind it, the witness box to the left and the twelve empty jury chairs to the right, the tables for prisoners and attorneys and the seats inside the wooden railing for witnesses, the clerk's desk and the bailiff's stand and the inevitable American flag.

The million pairs of eyes clung to me as I walked the aisle between the spectator's seats, pushed open the gate in the wooden railing and backed to the empty jury box.

Sheriff Holderness broke the silence.

"That correct, Mister? You Casey Wilson?"

I nodded, glancing around to inventory the visible artillery. Aside from the uniforms guarding the Big Guy, the chunky bailiff wore a hog-leg strapped to his side—and Sheriff Holderness probably carried a weapon under his brown civilian garb. And then, of course, there were the desk sergeant beyond the swinging doors and the uniformed patrolman on the steps outside.

The judge peered from the sheriff to me through horn-rimmed glasses. He turned to a slender, stooped clerk.

"Swear him in."

I said: "That's unnecessary. This is an arraignment and my only testimony is negative. On the other hand, I can tell you who killed Thomas Clawson. I can tell you how the body got to where it was found and how the tire iron got to where it was found."

William B. Yates set the pince-nez on his bony nose and drawled: "And can you tell us who killed Zello—shortly after you told me you intended to see him?"

"That, too," I nodded. "Zello was stabbed because he saw Glenn Yates lacing a basketball a few minutes after Zello found Thomas Clawson's body." I turned to the filling station operator and smiled: "That right, Glenn?"

Glenn Yates didn't want to say whether it was right or wrong. He wanted to sit there and resemble the middle carving on a totem pole, his knuckles showing white where his big hands gripped his knees.

Sheriff Holderness' eyes switched thoughtfully from the bitter scowl to me.

"Keep talking, Wilson."

I shrugged. "Put the pieces together. You see, I *knew* young Don hadn't killed his dad. It had to be someone else. And someone else had to plant that tire iron in his car and the best chance anyone had to plant the weapon in the car was Glenn Yates, when Don used the gent's room."

The judge frowned down at me.

"Young man, you made a bold statement. But you keep skipping around. You started to say why a basketball caused Zel-

lo's death. Now you shift to an assumption regarding the tire iron."

"I'm not skipping," I told him. "I told you how the tire iron got into the car. The basketball explains how Glenn Yates got the tire iron in the first place."

The Sheriff shook his head.

"That doesn't make sense, Wilson."

"As it stands, no," I admitted. "Not to you. But look at him." I pointed to Glenn Yates who now looked like the top carving on a totem pole. He had come slowly to his feet and his mouth hung open as if breathing had become painful to him. He stood glaring at me with his big fingers coiled like talons.

"Look at him!" I went on. "Partner to a foolproof kill plot—except for the accident that I happened to be riding with young Don Clawson—and the added accident that Zello saw the basketball after hearing a whisper in the air."

William B. Yates had crushed the pince-nez in a bony fist. He croaked: "Stop being so damned melodramatic, Wilson!"

"There's nothing melodramatic about what Zello heard," I told him quietly. "This morning I sat on the same ledge and heard the same noise in the air over the steady rush of wind in my face. But not being Zello, I knew damn well it was no premonition inside me and so I was on top of that cliff as the whisper changed to what could be taken for a groan.

"But it was no whisper—and no groan. It was a small cub plane gliding for a moment with its engine cut off—that *was the whisper!* And when the pilot gunned the engine—that *was the groan!*"

"A *plane!*" Sheriff, judge and attorney howled the word together.

"**W**HAT else?" I shrugged. "How else could Thomas Clawson get from Salinas, where Don left him, to where you found him? The killer was someone Thomas knew, someone who could get Thomas into his plane on some pretext. When he was sure Thomas would come along, he phoned Glenn Yates from Salinas to set up the kill. The call's on record: Salinas to Glenn Yates—at three minutes after five yesterday afternoon.

"After that the killer had a natural. Don Clawson ran a tight schedule. Every night at six-thirty he stopped at Glenn Yates' fil-

ing station and used the gent's room. All the killer had to do was circle the plane over the mushroom ranch until she saw the car pass, then glide down behind it and shove Thomas Clawson's corpse out to the weeds.

"An ercoupe can slow down to fifty miles an hour and glide a few yards over a road—and the evidence read that Thomas had been chucked from a car.

"Then the killer gunned his engine—Zello's groan—and flew over the car at a hundred and fifty miles an hour. We actually saw the shadow of the plane on that ride, but thought nothing of it.

"The tire iron was probably in the basketball before Thomas was chucked. The killer had ten minutes in which to stick it in a wide-nozzled tube, blow up the tube a little by mouth, close it and roughly lace the leather opening over it.

"Then it was a question of dropping the ball near Glenn Yates' station and flying straight for Pismo Beach fifteen miles south—twenty-five miles from the body—and establish a quick alibi."

"Me?" William B. Yates howled. "You're saying I did this?" He whirled toward his brother who continued to look like the top carving on a totem pole. "Glenn, tell him!"

Glenn didn't want to tell me. He didn't want *not* to tell me. It was all there in his eyes; the tumbling, twirling thoughts. He spread his big hands out wide and opened his mouth—and pitched forward into his brother as a gun blast smashed the silence of that little courtroom!

Inside the swinging doors stood fat Bud Thrasher with a smoking forty-five in his soft fist and a trembling wildness on his face.

"*Those two men!*" he roared. "The little one and the pug! Cash Wale and Sailor Duffy—*wanted for murder in New York!*"

He moved then, Bud Thrasher. He saw the Colt leap from inside my belt and moved as he never moved in his entire life. My muzzle centered on two wooden doors swinging loosely at the far end of the courtroom. Thrasher had disappeared.

Noise of a gun blast roared from behind the doors.

There was more shooting—further away—but my attention was riveted now on the frozen tableau inside the courtroom.

Glenn Yates lay crumpled in his brother's

arms. The bony-faced attorney was raising a palm off Glenn's back and staring dumbly at the smear of dripping scarlet.

Sheriff Holderness was gaping dumbly at the muzzle of my Colt aimed at him.

The judge was slapping his open palm on the bench and saying something nobody heard.

The two patrolmen who had been guarding Sailor Duffy lay motionless on the floor and the Big Guy was coming up behind the bailiff, who sat on a stool at his bench and goggled at me. The Sailor yanked his Positive from the belt holster, came up behind the sheriff and found an automatic in a shoulder clip and yanked that. He was becoming adept at this sort of thing, the Sailor.

Nobody else in that courtroom seemed to want to say or do anything. Don Clawson leaned to the rail of the witness box and gripped it as if it was going to tear loose and fly away from there.

I winked at him.

"You're clear, Kid. Stick around for the formalities—then ditch the dame. She was the gimmick to slide your mushrooms into Thrasher's lap. Let's shove, Sailor."

The handful of spectators didn't want to do anything but look. We backed to the swinging doors. I nodded to Sailor, then I hit one of the doors like a diving P-80—and came to the other side with my Colt aiming at the cop sergeant—who didn't seem to mind. He lay slumped across his desk, motionless.

I yelled: "Let's go, Sailor!"

He backed through the swinging doors, a weapon poised in each big fist, his expression imperturbable. I nodded toward the front door.

We began running.

The cop on the steps lay face down with a Positive a yard from his outstretched hand. I snatched it and herded the Sailor into Sorrowful's sedan and drove like a wild man through the fog.

Never mind the rest, Pete. We kept running. You can say that since you last saw us, that's been our story. We keep running—with interludes.

Never mind how the damn sedan ran out of gas on the Dodge Road and how we had to scramble on foot across country. How, after the sun melted the fog away, it be-

*(Please continue on page 96)*

# THRILL

# DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

# DOCKET



Regan, a War Department worker, was abducted, deliberately wounded and tossed into a ditch. He didn't know his attackers or have the faintest idea of what it was all about. . . . The radio, in the car of a kindly motorist who picked him up, blared out that Regan was wanted for—treason!



The FBI wanted Regan for selling atomic secrets to a foreign power. . . . The motorist dragged Regan out of the car and began to beat him. Regan grabbed a flashlight and conked the motorist. Then Regan, hunted by every decent citizen in the land, started a manhunt of his own.



Tracking the foreign agents who had framed him, Regan went to Marian Kail, his girl and co-worker in the War Department. When the Law swiftly and relentlessly closed in, Regan hid in her apartment. . . . The detective pointed his gun at Marian, saying: "Get over against that wall!"



Regan, in his desperate mission to clear himself, went to Jane Mace, another co-worker. Jane's answer was: "I'll help you, Regan—if the price is right. . . ." The complete story of Regan will be told by John D. MacDonald in his novel—"With Soul So Dead"—in March DIME DETECTIVE . . . published Feb. 4th.

# HIGH WALLS OF HATE

By JOHN D. MacDONALD



Sally said: "You couldn't  
kill me—because you still  
love me."

*Framed as prison stand-in for gay-blade Besterson, James Forbes was now free and bitter-anxious to hustle sables-loving Sally into tagging the double-crosser for undertaker's crepe.*

**T**HE NIGHT heat was a violent thing that reflected up from the pavements, bounced off the stone walls of the city. Sleep was a thing to be trapped and captured on the fire escapes, under the still trees in the park. The tires of the cars made a ripping, sticky sound on the asphalt.

James Forbes walked slowly through the streets of the city. He carried the coat to

the suit they had given him over his arm. The cheap white shirt was plastered to his body, outlining the lean strength of his chest and back. His sleeves were rolled up tightly over brown biceps. He wore no hat.

Over his head the neon hummed and flickered. *Bar and Grill . . . Eat . . . All Legal Beverages . . . Hostesses . . . Try Your Luck . . . Eat . . . Cocktail Lounge . . .*

A haze had come in from the river with the night heat, making molten halos around the signs that flickered.

There was no trace of expression on his hard brown face. They had taught him not to show expression. They had taught him that a trace of expression lands you in solitary, if you're a new one.

The fields had been long and flat and hot, the rows of vegetables stretching into infinity, wavering in the dance of heat waves. The callouses were as hard as leather on his palms.

"Yes, Mister Commissioner, the prison commissary is almost entirely self sustaining. Except for the staples like sugar, of course. It does them good to work out in the open air. Yes, you could call it a release."

Across James Forbes' temple was a fine white line. A prison screw, sun-touched, had yanked the hoe away from him and struck him down with it. He remembered and could taste again the blood and earth that caked his lips.

The people of the city sat on the high steps of the houses that stood, shoulder to shoulder, nuzzling the sidewalk. The doughy women fanned themselves and the men drank the cool beer, wiping their mouths with the backs of laborers' hands. The only notice they took of James Forbes was to wait until he passed before spitting out onto the sidewalk. Just a young guy walking. That's all. Just walking through the night heat. Probably been stood up by his girl. Got a nice suntan—you notice?

But there were a few smart ones who sat and drank the beer on the high steps. They saw the stuff of which the suit was made and knew where it came from. They saw the cut of the cheap white shirt and remembered the stench of the prison laundry. They saw the brown face with no trace of expression. Those smart ones drank deeply of their beer, remembered the

gray of concrete and uniform, the blind misery of the sun . . . and they were silent.

"Whadya stop talkin' for, Joe? Whassa matter, Honey?"

The measured snarl. "Shaddup, Woman!"

"Sure, Joe. Gee, I ain't done nothin'. Whassa matter?"

"Shaddup, I said!"

The contemptuous retreat, climbing up through the floors of ammonia salts and the stink of many people to lie sleepless and sweating on the gray sheets and remember the sound of a thousand feet in prison shoes stamping to a halt before the cell doors. The bitter-bright clang of the closing doors. The snug chunk of the lugs entering the door frames as the screw on the tier spun the big wheel.

Lie in the heat with the sweat running across your ribs and dig your fingers into your palms and curse them with lips that writhe. Remember the look of the young one that went by. Remember his 'just-out' look. Remember when they gave you your name back and every cop on every corner was a guy who ached to smash what was left of your teeth down your throat.

James Forbes walked the night streets, his feet scuffing through the candy wrappers, the chewed cigar butts, the cellophane off the cigarettes, the clotted spittle, and somehow he kept his eyes straight ahead and resisted the impulse to look behind him.

A woman with frizzed blonde hair and a body that sagged under her bright cheap dress stepped out of a doorway and said, "Wanna party, Chum?"

Barely moving his lips, he said one word.

As he walked slowly on, she screamed obscenities after him. Two boys leaning against a darkened store front laughed at her. She turned on them as Forbes walked on. Behind him, he heard her laugh.

He walked and he heard George's heavy voice. George, round and happy and doing a twenty for second degree. George was back there behind the walls and he'd be right there for ten more years. "I'll be forty then!" Forbes thought with a sense of shock and felt as though he should do something for George somehow to make it easier.

Then he could hear George's soft and heavy voice. "You're jus' heah for a little

time, Boy. Jus' a little time. But they somehow suck the guts out of you in a little time. Why, when I come in I was goin' a head back as soon as I got out an I was goin' a separate the head from the neck of my fine fren 'at turned me in. I surely was, Boy. Now I'm one scared boy. When I get out, I'm walkin' that chalk line. I surely am. I won't be no trouble to nooobody. Nossir! I'm leavin' my guts in heah. So'll you, Boy. So'll you."

Forbes remembered that he had said, "Not for me, George. I was framed into this place and I'm going to get even."

George had said, "Maybe you was framed, Boy. Maybe in kind of a funny kind a way everybody in heah was framed—whether they did what they say they did or not. But you won't have the guts to get even, Boy. I tell you now. You left your guts all over them fields out there in the sun with them screws a-standin' and a-watchin' while you spewed 'em out. You'll see, Boy."

He walked through the night streets and clenched his fists and felt the muscles of his arms and shoulders writhe under the skin. He smiled once, his lips flattening against his teeth. They put him up there behind those walls and he grew the muscles that would smash them. He tightened his fists harder, felt the callouses under his fingertips.

**A**HEAD was the street. The well-remembered street. He crossed diagonally and walked down the far side, walking a bit slower, alert for any sign of one who might be watching . . . and waiting. . . They would know that he was out. They would know.

He stopped on the corner, stood absolutely still and looked back over the way he had come. A couple passed, their arms around each other's waists, the girl giggling at something the boy said in a low, hoarse tone. A taxi rocketed by, the springs smacking against the frame as it hit the potholes in the asphalt.

Forbes crossed the street, walked back the way he had come. The house was just the same, a battered brownstone with a massive front door, always unlocked. Mrs. Lesnovack would be asleep in the room just off the entrance hall. The street was empty.

He hurried up to the door, pushed it open far enough to slip inside, and let it close softly.

The twenty-watt bulb left shadows in the corners of the front hall. He looked up the wide stairway. The house was asleep. He held his breath, heard the sing of blood in his ears, the steady, fast thud of his pulse.

Up the stairs. Quietly. Watch the third step—three years ago it creaked. Stay close to the railing. Good. No light on the second floor. Down the corridor smelling of age and dust and the disorderly lives of a thousand transients. The girl who drank the iodine lived in that room. The trumpet player lived in the next one.

It was the room beyond that that mattered.

She lived in that room.

He stood by the door, suddenly afraid that she would be out. His fear was a tangible, chilling thing.

*Tap, tap, tap.* Softly. Just loud enough to wake her. Not loud enough to wake anyone else. *Tap, tap, tap.* How will she look with sleep misting her eyes, with her golden hair falling to her shoulders? *Tap, tap, tap.* She should have heard that. She should be coming to the door. She wouldn't open it. You don't open doors at night if you are a girl and if you live in a place like Mrs. Lesnovack's.

The creak of the floorboard. Sleepy voice. Plaintive. "Who is it?"

Lips close against the stained wood of the door. "Open up. It's Jim."

Hands that fumble with the chain, the door swung wide. Arms high around his neck, the scent of hair against his cheek as he stumbled into the room, shutting the door behind him.

Her broken voice said, lips touching his face, "Oh, Jim! Jim! I didn't know you'd get here so soon."

She left him abruptly, saying, "I've got to look at you."

"No lights!" he whispered softly. "Someone may be watching your window."

She was a vague whiteness against the black. She walked to the window and raised the dark shade. On a building a half block away a sign blinked on and off, on and off. *Stanley Beer . . . Stanley Beer . . . Stanley Beer . . .*

With the shade up there was a second's

space of light in the room, constantly interrupted. In it's light, he saw her moving over to the bed. On and off. On and off. It gave her movement an odd quality, as in a very old motion picture—or a penny arcade.

He sat on the bed and held her hand tightly.

"Was it too awful, my darling?" she whispered.

"It's over now. It would have been—easier if you'd come to see me once in a while."

"I know. I know, Darling. I should have. But I couldn't bear the thought of seeing you in that horrible place. I'd remember it all my life. It was better that I didn't come. I wrote you all the time. Don't you think it was better?"

"I guess so," he admitted. "You wrote gay letters."

Hotly she said, "What would you have had me write? Tragic things, stained with my tears?"

"No. No. I only meant that I liked the letters. They helped me wait for now."

"I couldn't believe that such a thing had happened to us, Jim. To us! When I sat in that terrible courtroom, heard that horrible man say, 'Five years', I thought I'd die right there. I did. As it was, I didn't stop crying for three days."

"How is Besterson doing?"

"Why—all right, I suppose." Her hand tightened on his. "What are you going to do about it?"

The light, on and off, on and off, flickered across her pale face, upturned. Lips red. Shoulders smooth. Pale lace at her throat. Clean lines of throat, of brow.

He shrugged. "Do? What is there to

do? I was his accountant. He was hard up. He robbed himself, phoned the police, told them I had the combination to the safe. They came to my room and woke me up. They found bills with the right serial numbers in the side pocket of my jacket. Open and shut. Cut and dried. What is there to do?"

He felt her hand relax. "I'm glad you're not—going after him," she said softly.

"You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"Of course not, Darling. It would just mean more trouble. A lot more trouble." He moved closer to her, her head on his shoulder, the warm smell of her filling his nostrils, the sweet, aching smell of her after so long, after so many years.

She stroked the hand that was around her shoulder. Soft woman-fingers. Gentle. Sweet and gentle.

The light flicked across them, across the taut lines that cut down close to the corners of his mouth. No expression on the brown face. No life in the deep-set eyes.

He said softly, "Three years gives you a long time to think."

"You can forget it now." The soft answer. The warm invitation.

"It's hard to forget. How much do you make, Sally?"

"Fifty a week. It's not hard work. I get along."

He reached his left hand over, touched her gown, said, "The fabric is smooth and soft."

"You've been a long time away from such things." Moments of silence, a small tension coming from somewhere and building. Building. The soft fingers stroking his hand again.

**TOPS  
FOR  
QUALITY!**



"You always know expensive things, Sally. You sense them. On the tier underneath was Hans Reichert, craftsmen. Fine paper—engraving. He fingered the strip of paper I tore from one of your letters. Told me it was the best money could buy."

The stroking of her hand faltered for a moment. "It was a gift. Oh, an aunt or somebody. I've forgotten."

"I thought you broke with all of your relatives?"

"Not all of them. An aunt and I still exchange gifts."

"If there's only one, why can't you remember?"

"Why do we have to bicker about such a pointless thing, Jim? You're out now, and you're back with me."

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

More silence and the tension was there between them. It could be felt, tasted.

"**YOU KNOW** what they used to do with the papers we got? he asked. "They used to cut out all the crime news, robberies, murders. Give us the rest. Said it wouldn't hurt us to read the rest. You always wondered what had been in those empty spaces. Over a year ago I saw a racetrack picture. Showed the crowd at the races. Besterson was there—with a girl."

The stroking fingers stopped.

He said, "Her back was to the camera. Couldn't recognize her."

Her fingers moved again and he felt the deepness of the breath she took.

"A man's habits are funny. You notice that sort of thing in prison. You think about them a lot. Now some guys when they're home, they stand in front of the bureau and empty every last thing out of their pockets and hang up their suits all right and proper. Me, I just toss things around. I guess I told you that once. Warned you about what an awful guy I'd be to live with. That was before—before they caught me."

She stopped stroking his hand, put her hand down at her side. When the light flicked on again, he saw that her eyes were wide, that she looked up at the dark ceiling.

He continued. "I always had a good head for liquor. Never believed in mixing my drinks. I guess the only time I ever did

was the night I was out with you Sally. The night before they came and got me."

"Why are you talking like this, Jim?" she said loudly.

"Shh! You don't want to wake up the people. I'm talking because it's nice to talk to people when you haven't been alone with anybody for a long, long time. That's the worst of those places. The fact that you're never alone."

Her breathing was easier, but he saw in the next flick of the light that her lips were compressed.

"You know, Sally, that Besterson is a coward. Never fired people himself. Always had somebody else do it. Scared to death. Afraid of going broke. Afraid of getting sick. Always worrying. I figured he was going broke before a week or so before I—went to jail. You know, it was funny. For the month before I went to jail, he spent a lot of time out of the office. An awful lot of time. Let me see, it started about the time you lost your job, didn't it?"

She moved quickly away from him.

He caught her shoulders and pulled her back beside him. "What's the matter, Dearest?" he said.

"Get it over with!" she demanded, her voice hoarse.

"Sure, Dearest. I'll get it over with. You met Besterson when you used to wait for me outside the office. You always had your eye on the best chance. All that time Besterson was out of the office, he was with you. You got me tight. You knew my habits. You planted those big bills in my pocket, knowing that I didn't keep money or cigarettes or keys in that pocket. You made me a sitting duck, Darling. They still wonder where I hid the rest of the money that I didn't take.

"And then Besterson got scared. You were the link. He knows I'm smart. If you moved out of here and moved into the big time, I'd know the answer. So he bought you your pretties and told you to stay here. Expensive writing paper. Fancy night-gowns like the one you're wearing. Sure, the girl in the picture had her back turned to me, but I recognized the back.

"I know. Besterson is hiding and trembling someplace and waiting for the word from you. You're supposed to get in touch with him and tell him whether I've gotten wise to what you two did to me. Only you

could have planted that money on me. Only you, Darling."

She drew a deep and shuddering breath. The light flicked on and off, on and off. In a husky tone she said, "You're sick. You're talking rot."

"You're right. It was rotten." His hand slid past her face, and his hard fingers fondled her throat.

"No! No, Jim!" she gasped, as his fingers tightened. Then she could say no more. Her nails tore at his face, at his hand. She strained her body up in a hard arc like some strange bow and dropped back. Again and again. Her wide eyes bulged. There was no sound except the tiny tearing noises of her nails in his flesh.

He put his lips close to her ear. "Tell me where Besterson is."

He released the pressure gently. She sucked the air into her lungs and tried to scream. He tightened down again, careful of his anger, nourishing it, knowing that if he released the anger his fingers would crush her throat and she'd never breath or speak again. He turned his head away as she dug for his eyes.

"Where's Besterson?" he asked, lips close to her ear.

Slowly he released the pressure. Her breath rattled as she coughed, holding her throat. "Mountain Lodge. Near Star Lake," she gasped.

"This is it," he said softly. His fingers closed on her throat again. "Good-by, Sally. Good-by, Dearest. Good-by, you female Judas."

She found new strength in her infinity of terror. But his fingers were tight. Tighter. Tighter. . .

**H**E STOOD by the window and the light from the sign flashed across his face. Staccato. Pulse of a mechanical city. Pulse of a heat-sodden city, counterpoint for the littered sidewalks, the stains of sweat under the arms of the doughy women, the foam wiped from lips with the back of a hand.

He seemed to hear the voice of George, close to his ear, "But you won't have the guts to get even, Boy. You wait and see."

He turned toward the bed, full of a bleak weariness, as though a spring, wound one notch tighter during each day of imprisonment, had suddenly spun free of the ratch-

ets, lay sodden inside him, without tension.

She sat on the edge of the bed, still coughing and strangling and massaging her throat. When the light hit her face he saw the silver streaks of tears across the soft cheeks, the disordered froth of pale hair. With each inhalation, her breath made a rattling sound in her throat, like a parody of a snore. He picked up his coat, stood by the bed, the coat slung over one shoulder, looking down at her as the near-death noises slowly stopped.

She looked up at him and, in the light, her face was cold—the face on a silver coin, the face on a billboard in winter. "You're going after Besterson," she said. It wasn't a question. It was a statement and said in the way she would have said, "He is dead."

He considered her statement. He thought of his hard fists smashing Besterson's weak face, the blood gouting from the split flesh, the eyes puffing shut, the broken mouth working in a froth of red.

"No," he said softly.

She straightened her shoulders and there was contempt in her face. "You couldn't kill me," she said proudly. "You know why? Because you still love me."

He stared at the pale oval of her face, shocked by what she had said. "Love you?" he exclaimed. "You!"

It came then. It started as a small spot of delirium deep inside him, spiraling up through his chest, exploding into laughter at his lips. Loud, raucous, pealing laughter.

Somehow he found the doorknob, let himself out into the dark hall. The hoarse wonderful sound of his great laughter boomed along the corridor, blasted the silent air of the stairwell. He clutched his middle with one hand and caught at the railings with the other.

Slowly he managed the stairs, whooping and gasping in an odd glee that was almost too much to bear. The door slammed behind him and he was out in the night heat of the city, weak and panting.

James Forbes walked off through the night streets, a pain in his side, his lips still twisting, and in his heart he knew that he was at last free.

He could hate the two of them no longer.

Hate was a prison with walls that touch the gray sky.

He was at last free.

*Do-re-mi-mad Danny boy blew his horn off-key in a murder solo—and left his big brother to play out the . . .*

# HOMICIDAL HARMONY

By JOHANAS  
L. BOUMA



The girl grabbed Danny's gun-arm. . . .

**T**HEY called it justifiable homicide. Well, it was justifiable in more ways than one. The reporters are out there now. One of them is sure to dig back and find out about the old man. I wonder then if they'll guess the real reason Danny was killed. Would they still call it "justifiable homicide?"

Or would they call it murder?

It happened in Tijuana. Danny, my kid brother, and a Mexican youngster, Alfredo, and myself played a hot trio in Garcia's Del Rio Club in the Mexican border town. Danny blew trumpet, Alfredo strummed

guitar and I pounded the old piano keys.

It was late one afternoon and I was having a beer when Garcia came up. "Ed," he told me in broken English, "Danny, he tell me he quit."

That was news to me. "When did he tell you this?"

"Maybe ten, maybe fifteen minutes ago. He look for you."

"Forget it," I said. "Danny'll be on the stand tonight."

Garcia shrugged. "If not, you find new horn player."

I couldn't figure Danny telling him a thing like that. It worried me, because it looked like the kid was getting himself in another jam. What worried me most, though, was remembering the old man and

how Danny was cut on the same pattern.

Danny came through the front door. "Sit down, Kid," I told him. "What's this stuff you've been telling Garcia about quitting?"

He took the stool next to mine, his fingers nervous on a roll of Scotch tape. He kept looking at the front window.

"I'm sick of working in this Mex town," he said sullenly.

"Take off a few days," I said, "but don't talk about running out on me. Remember our plans? That big-time band of our own isn't just a dream, Danny."

"Two years, and look where we end up," he flared back. "A cheap club and playing for nickels. I'm getting out of here tonight."

"You want to end up like the old man?"

He shifted his eyes from mine. "Don't crowd me with the big-brother routine. I'm no baby."

"The old man wasn't no baby, either," I said softly, "and he spent twenty-three years behind bars because he never learned that a man has to work for his chips. He hated himself every minute of his life because of that. You understand? He died behind bars. You understand?"

"I understand you're thirty years old and no better off than you were at my age. If you think I'm—"

"At your age I was in uniform."

"Sure," he snorted. "Edward Malone, the guy who was planning to be a concert pianist, and you had to get your feet wet. What did it get you? Smashed hands that are only good for pounding out dance tunes."

"Shut up—dammit." I was looking at my hands and remembering. "I'm not gonna explain what it got me because you wouldn't understand. And keep your trap shut about the other. That was Mom's dream. She scrubbed floors so I could take those lessons."

I'd intended to plead with the kid, and here I was yelling at him. It made me feel ugly. I'd promised the old man to watch out for the kid. But hell, he was twenty-one. If he wanted to go, I couldn't stop him. And what can you do? You can't tell 'em anything. They have to straighten out with themselves, and if they don't—

"I'm taking the car," he said.

"Go ahead."

"Well, so long, Ed."

"Sure, Kid. You need money?"

"No." He was blinking back the tears when he walked outside.

"A shot," I told the barkeep. I was downing the whiskey when this couple came in and took seats at the bar. The guy ordered drinks while the woman played inside a multi-colored bag and came up with cigarettes. I didn't get it at first, I mean where I'd seen her before. Then when the drinks came, she stripped off green suede gloves and I got a look at her hands.

WHEN you've knocked around as a musician as long as I have, you notice hands. Like a dentist who instinctively looks to see if your teeth are shined. And her left hand, on the back, had a thin white scar running from the index finger to the base of the thumb. She'd changed clothes from what she'd worn that morning. Instead of the gray man-tailored suit, there was a yellow dress. There were green suede shoes to match the gloves. She hadn't changed the bag.

She was tall, graceful, and had a look about her as sultry as a blues ballad. But to me she was just someone I'd happened to see in San Diego that morning. She had a drag from the cigarette and then she looked at the bar mirror and saw me sitting there. My red hair was always a good identification mark. That and the checkered sport coat I was still wearing.

Three seats away, and I felt her go into a tight spin. She whispered something to her escort. Hell, I didn't know what was coming. I hadn't read the evening papers. The next thing I knew he was standing back of me. I didn't turn. I didn't have to. I could see him in the mirror.

"Me and Bee, we'd like to have a talk with you."

It was the way he said it I didn't like. It was a threat, not an invitation.

"Why?" I kept looking at the mirror.

His coat brushed my back. Something hard jabbed against my spine. Sure, I can feel the prod of an automatic as well as the next guy. I also knew he wasn't planning to use it—not in a bar on the main stem of Tijuana. Working that barrel into my spine was all fake. And I didn't like it.

I spun on the stool—fast. Maybe it baffled him. Anyhow, while I was still spinning, he hung one against my ear. It knocked me off balance and I slid to the floor, banging my head against the stool top on the way down. I sat there for a minute trying to figure it out. He was standing over me, rubbing his fist and glaring. I got hold of the stool and pulled myself up.

Then I gave it to him.

My foot caught him in the stomach, and he forgot about his fist hurting and doubled up. I scraped splinters with my right and smashed it up against his face. He spread-eagled six feet away. Then I rubbed my fist.

I went back and sat down. In the mirror I could see Bee helping him up. He was leaning on her heavily when they staggered outside. I thought: *What the hell*, and forgot about it.

That happened about six o'clock. We didn't start playing till nine, and meantime I went out to find a horn. I grabbed my briefcase from the piano, stuffed it with a dozen or so copies of sheet music, and started out. I didn't find what I wanted. State-side I could've had my pick—which was the reason I worked in Tijuana.

I still had a couple of hours, so I grabbed the evening paper and walked to the hotel. It's in a two-story building across from the Del Rio club. Downstairs they have a couple curio shops, and to get to the hotel part you have to go around back where they have outside stairs.

There are six rooms up there about as big as good-sized coffins, but Danny and I hadn't minded. Danny and I and a guy named Lewis, who had the next room, were the only regulars. Lewis had been there about a week, and on week ends the remaining rooms were usually rented to tourists.

Danny was around back, working on the car. He had it jacked up and the left rear wheel off. He cursed a blue streak when he saw me. "You have tire trouble when you took it to Dago this morning?"

"I should have told you, I guess. She had a slow leak so I just stopped and hand-pumped her up. If I had known you were taking off—"

"She's no slow leak now. She won't even hold air. This would happen."

"Roll her down to the service station

and get it fixed. It shouldn't take maybe ten minutes."

"Okay." He took a deep breath and looked around. "How about taking my stuff up to the room while I'm getting it fixed. I hate to leave it in the car."

There was his instrument case, a suitcase and a briefcase like mine where he carried his sheet music. I carried both briefcases under one arm, the other stuff in my hands and went up the stairs.

In the hall, I saw Lewis come out of his room. He was a dark-haired young fellow who claimed to be a writer. I'd spoken to him once or twice, and now I told him "Hello." He bounced past me and down the stairs like the FBI was on his tail. I didn't think he even saw me.

I TOSSED my briefcase on the table, put Danny's on the closet shelf and the bags on the closet floor. Then I stretched on the bed and had a look at the headlines. There was something about a teller being shot in a bank holdup in San Diego that morning. The crooks had skipped with about forty thousand dollars, mostly in large bills.

According to the cops, there were three guys in on it; two working the bank, one driving the getaway car. An hour after the robbery they found the car in an alley about a mile from the bank. It had been stolen earlier in the day from some respectable citizen. A hysterical woman who'd almost been run down when the car took a corner on two wheels, said the driver was a small, dark man wearing a slouch hat.

I didn't wonder any more about the girl, or about the guy taking a sock at me. I'd gone to San Diego myself that morning to see about an opening at one of the better clubs.

Where I saw her was on highway 101, leading out of town. It was past an intersection, and I'd pulled up to the curb because I could feel the drag of a low tire. I dug under the front seat for the hand pump. When I straightened, I noticed this woman walking away from her car where she'd parked it in the alley next to a low brick building. A man's hat rolled from the running board into the alley. She was fooling with a good-sized multi-colored bag and didn't notice.

I went over and grabbed the hat and took after her. I guess she heard me running. She turned, looking plenty scared.

"It must've rolled out of the car when you got out."

She opened her mouth like she was ready to deny the whole thing. Then she grabbed it with her left hand and shoved it in the bag. That's when I noticed the scar. She didn't say thanks or anything. I watched her walking away, liking the way that man-tailored suit clung to her. A National City bus had just pulled in and she boarded it.

With her hair piled on top and with the hat over it and wearing that suit, behind the wheel of a car she could have easily passed for a man. What cinched it for me, of course, was the cop's description of the car and where they'd found it. Then, she recognized me in Garcia's as the same guy who'd handed her the hat.

No wonder they wanted to talk to me. But why were they hanging around? Why weren't they making for points south? The only answer I could find to that was the third guy. They'd probably come across the border at different times and were still waiting for the third guy to make it. Well, a guy had been killed. I knew what I had to do.

For no reason at all I went to the window and peeked out. Tijuana wasn't ready to open up yet, but there were plenty of lights and already a few tourists. And then I saw the man and the girl. They were staring up at the hotel. I watched them starting to cross the street. I went across the room to go out, when the door made a noise. Danny came in.

"You get her fixed—"

I stopped then. Danny wasn't alone. Lewis came in after him. Lewis had an automatic bouncing in his hand.

"What the hell—"

"On the bed, both of you," he said. "And keep your mouth shut."

He stayed by the open door, and after a while I could hear feet moving down the hall. The man and the girl came inside. Lewis shut the door behind them.

We sat on the edge of the bed. I looked at Danny. His face was pale and had a stubborn, dogged look to it. I said, "Let's have it. What's this all about?"

The girl said, "Maybe he doesn't know, Milt. He looks dumb."

"You sure he's the one you saw this morning?"

"He's the one all right."

Milt breathed softly through his teeth. He looked at Danny. "We'll begin with you. Where's the dough?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think different." Lewis stepped over to the bed and waved the gun in Danny's face. "One of you heard us plan this job last week. I forgot about the walls in this joint being so thin you can hear a fly crawl in the next room."

"Either that, or you heard Bee and Milt up here and knew they were hiding the dough in my room; that we were to meet at seven and make for Ensenada. One of you slipped over and grabbed the dough while Bee and Milt were downstairs. We mean to get it back."

Danny looked at the floor without answering. I knew the way it was then. It made me sick to think about it. The old man, now Danny.

"Where's the stuff I saw you bring in?" Lewis asked me. "Don't tell me you guys weren't planning a run out."

"We weren't planning anything."

Milt said, "They're wasting our time, Lewis. They were ready to beat it, only they had tire trouble. That stuff's in the closet. Watch 'em. I'm taking a look."

"That briefcase on the table is part of the stuff he had," Lewis said. "There was an instrument case and a suitcase."

Milt slid them out of the closet across the floor. "Here they are. Go through 'em, Bee."

**B**EE went through 'em. She scattered clothes and sheet music all over the floor. I looked at Danny, and it suddenly struck me where he'd hidden the money. I remembered the Scotch tape he'd had when he saw me in the bar, and I knew now that he hadn't used it to fix torn sheet music.

It was a good bet that he had the money in his own briefcase, pasted inside his sheet music. He had a funny look in his eyes, and it took me a while to remember that I'd seen that same look on the old man.

Lewis said, "Milt, you go down and take a look in their car."

Milt left the room. Lewis turned to Danny. "You like your brother?" Then,

"Because if you do, you won't like what's gonna happen to him."

Milt came in. "Nothing, Lewis."

"All right. You know what to do."

Milt grinned. "You kidding?"

I watched a guy take a pistol whipping one night. The guy who administered the beating was good. He made sure that the guy stayed one inch this side of consciousness. He had a neat way of using the sight to cut the guy's face to ribbons. I had an idea that Milt was just as good.

He came in and slapped me alongside of the head with the barrel. It was hard enough that it hurt like hell, but not enough to put me away. You think I was a hero? I knew where that money was. But that part of it didn't seem to matter.

What mattered was what Danny would do now he saw me taking the beating. Just how strong was this craze he had for easy money? Would he stand by and watch me take it and do nothing to stop it?

He was ripping me across the forehead. Another one and I went face-down on the bed. I pushed away from the bed. The spread was all bloody.

I heard Lewis say, "Ready to talk, Danny?"

He looked at me. My kid brother looked at me. He looked through me. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Work on his teeth," Lewis said.

I pushed away from the bed. Milt was grinning. He started for me. I couldn't take it any longer. I found myself sobbing. He had the gun by the barrel, and as he brought it down I threw my weight against him. I took everything I had left and bucked him across the room toward Lewis.

There was a shot. Milt jerked and suddenly went limp across my shoulders. The gun dropped out of his hand, and I saw Danny make a dive for it. I went to the floor, Milt on top of me. Two shots sounded in quick succession. I pushed Milt aside.

Lewis was jammed up against the door, and then Danny fired again and Lewis went down all the way. The girl grabbed Danny's gun-arm. He turned quick as a cat and punched her in the stomach. She went down.

I stood up. I said, "We did it, Danny."

He looked at me for a long time. Something was fighting in his face. I staggered over to him.

"Keep away from me, Ed." He turned and made a dive for the closet. He came out with the briefcase, unzipped it and looked inside. He started for the door.

"What are you doing, Danny?" I was screaming. "You'll never get away with it."

"Stay back, Ed. Stay back or I'll let you have it."

"You're crazy," I shouted. "You'll take it like the old man took it."

"I didn't steal it. It was like Lewis said. I heard them talking about hiding the money and I grabbed it as soon as they left the room. There's forty thousand, and I'm not letting it go."

"Don't, Danny. Don't do it."

"Forty thousand. I'll never see that much dough again."

Feet pounded down the hall. He went through the door. There was a shot. The sound of a body falling. I picked up Lewis's gun and ran out. Three Mexican cops were at the head of the stairs. Another was doubled up against the wall.

"Which way did he go?"

They didn't move. They weren't taking any chances. One of them pointed down the alley. I went down the stairs and saw him. He was half way to the street and running. The briefcase under his arm.

"Danny," I yelled. "Danny."

He went flat against the building. A flame winked in the alley and I heard the buzz of the bullet as it passed me. Things about the old man went through me. How he'd hated himself all his life. How he'd ruined not only his own life but a lot of other people's.

I knew what I had to do. I stepped into the alley.

"I'm coming for you, Danny."

He shot again.

I kept moving. "Danny, for Pete's sake. give yourself a chance."

Another shot broke the silence, but the light was behind him. A sharp click and I heard him curse. He was running. For the rest of my life I'll remember his silhouette when he reached the mouth of the alley.

I raised the gun and jerked the trigger. I jerked it again. He stood on tip toe, clawing at the sky. I rubbed tears from my eyes with the back of my hand. He wasn't over fifteen feet away. I raised the gun for the last time.

# Criminal's Cop

By JIMMY NICHOLS

IF anyone has been accurately described as a man's man or a ball player's ball player, then the best description of Oscar Krasner, of the Philadelphia police force, is that he was a criminal's cop.

Certainly he possessed few of the physical attributes of the effective law officer. Even wearing thick socks on his feet and a stiff haircut on his head, he barely reached the prescribed height, while his uniform was stretched so tight across his round belly that his fellow policemen could, and frequently did, play a tune upon it.

Nevertheless, Oscar's father had been a cop and his father before him and, as the only son, he fell heir both to the job and to the seasoned oaken billy with which his grandfather had brought down a trio of murderers and his father had cracked the head of a would-be presidential assassin. It was quite a heritage. Oscar failed in every way to live up to it.

Things might have been a little easier if it hadn't been for the handcuffs. These mechanical gadgets completely baffled him. At least once a week, Oscar was forced to make his way, blushing, to the precinct station house for help—he had locked himself into the handcuffs and, inevitably, lost the key. Once he dropped it down an open manhole and once, trying to turn the key with his teeth, he swallowed it.

In an emergency, Oscar was absolutely no good at all. "He don't just lose his head—he t'rows it away!" his chief complained. Seven times in his career he rushed to a box on a corner and shouted a message through it under the impression that he was talking to headquarters, and seven times the fire department responded. Then, because he was so scrupulously honest, Oscar arrested himself for turning in a false alarm. This made him the only cop on the force with a criminal record, and the newspapers pounced upon him editorially as an example of civic laxity and nepotism.

No one, however, could say he didn't try awfully hard. Once under orders, he would

follow them down to the smallest detail.

When the famed playboy-diplomat, Count Alfredo Sanchez de Oviedo, paid a visit to Philadelphia in 1910, the chief assigned Oscar to bodyguard duty. "If anything happens to the count—" he said, drawing a finger across his throat suggestively.

Oscar shuddered, and stuck to the dignitary like oatmeal to a burned pot. The first night of his stay, the count picked up a towel, drew a tub of hot water and prepared to indulge himself in the uniquely American luxury of a hot bath.

But a bluecoat barred his way. "Sorry," said Oscar. "Lots of people slip and fall in the bathtub." The count left Philadelphia a week later as much in need of a bath as he was on the day he departed from Spain.

Thus, it was no wonder that the police force of Philadelphia rocked with surprise when Oscar collected, in 1912, a gold medal for bravery in the course of duty and a reward of \$5000 for subduing James (The Digger) Walsh, a homicidal maniac who had killed three people, terrorized five counties and held up and robbed a jewelry store of \$20,000 worth of unset gems. Two hundred police were on special duty, scouring the area.

"And all of a sudden, we come upon Oscar Krasner, cool as a cucumber, holding this maniac by the arm and marching him along like a drunk," a detective recounted admiringly.

Oscar accepted his sudden fame graciously, posed for pictures, wore his medal and bought a chicken farm with his reward money. It was not until he had been safely retired for twelve years that he told the real story of his heroic grab.

"I saw Walsh standing on a corner. He was shivering in the wind and blue with cold. Naw, of course I didn't recognize him. I only figured he needed a square meal, so I offered to take him down the street to a restaurant. I took him by the arm, friendly-like. And that's how the other boys found us."

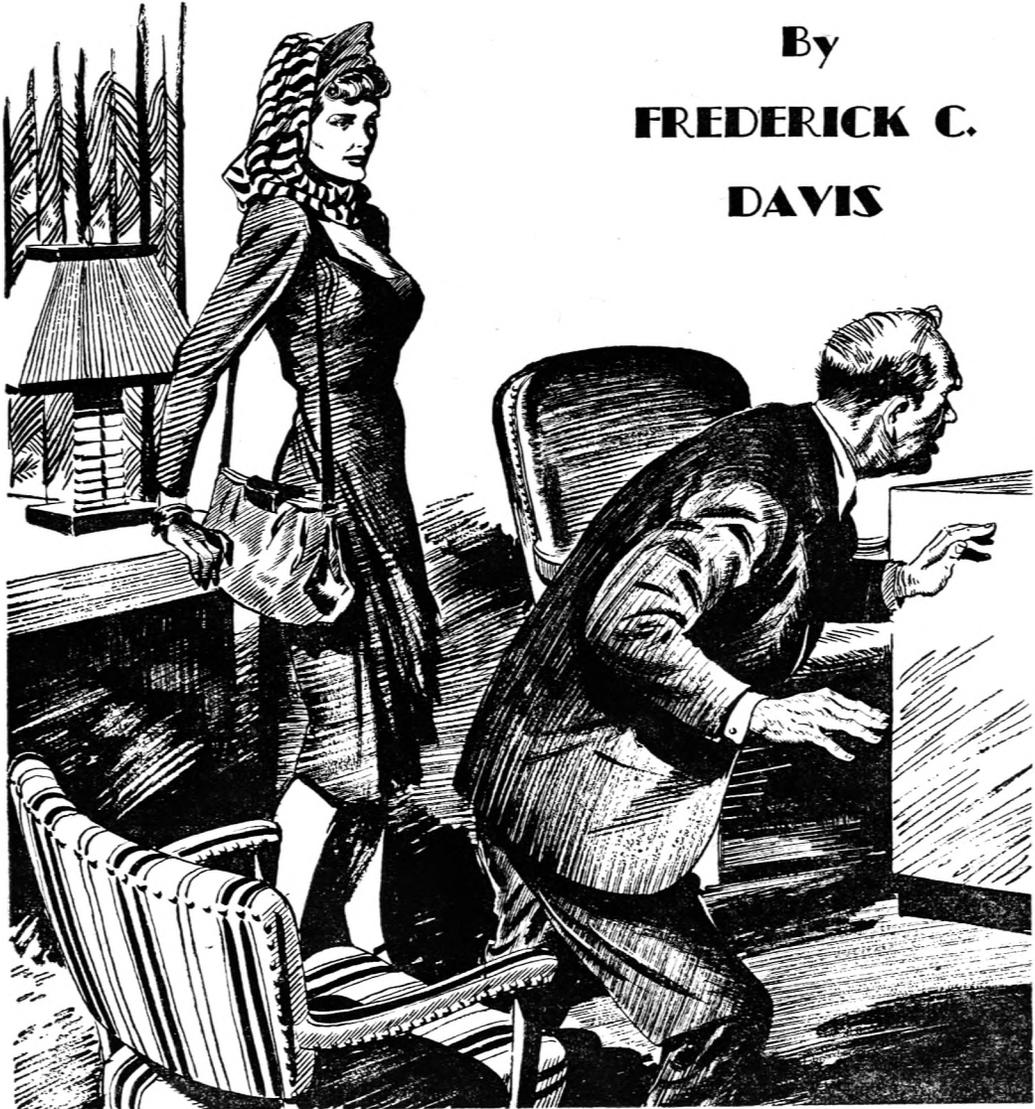
# TALL, DARK

★ *When the rum-soaked movie swoon-idol rocketed his baby-blue buggy into an unwary pedestrian, the golden keys to Hollywood were all mine. For I, a lowly, grubbing assistant director, was at last going to get what was coming to me. . .* ★

By

**FREDERICK C.**

**DAVIS**



# AND DEADLY

**Startling Novelette  
about a  
Four-Star Heel**

## CHAPTER ONE

Fast Trouble

**R**OLLEY was driving faster'n a bat. Rolland Martinez, the movie actor, the Latin lush from Jersey City. You've seen him in a dozen Apex epics, flashing a dazzling built-in set of porcelain in his kisser, all dewey-eyed with romance and non-stop hangover. A quick guy with a doll, Rolley. And entirely too hasty in a car.

I stared at the beautiful crystal-and-gold speedometer with its sparkling needle pointing toward the hereafter, and yelled, "Slow

They were all ganging up on  
me. . . .



down, you cretin, or you'll smash up your new toy wagon and kill the three of us!"

Rolley Martinez grinned his enchanting, dreamy, drunken grin and pressed the accelerator a little harder. That's the way you get to be after you've come to believe you're the most swooned-over of all movie stars; you're so full of sheer genius that the ordinary laws of God and man don't apply to wonderful you.

In Rolley Martinez's condition right now, he shouldn't have been allowed to touch the controls of a kiddie-car chained to a lamppost, but regardless of all common sense he reacted to my warning by stepping up his new sixteen-cylinder, topless, jet-propelled rocket-on-wheels to an even crazier speed.

Realizing it would actually be safer not to caution him again, I ducked lower under the chill, tearing wind and drew my arm more snugly around Jean.

Jean Terry, the little star rising. Luscious kid. Like the rest of 'em, not too bright—not too innocent, either—but still sweet.

She cuddled against me with her tawny blonde head resting on my shoulder, peacefully asleep. Really a honey. Nineteen and healthy, clean and fresh, alive with youth's eagerness, full of a feeling that everything's wonderful. Right now, nestling against me trustfully with the wind flickering her skirt above her knees, maybe she was dreaming of her plushy future as the studio's pet. For almost an hour now she'd been slumbering like that, her soft lips smiling faintly, unaware that the maniac at this car's wheel was hurling her through black space at such a reckless speed that she might better be reckoning her future in seconds.

Rolley kept whipping the car along with a vapid, half-blind look in his eyes—this super-duper baby-blue torpedo upholstered in genuine leopard skin. It sped with the smoothness of a cruising B-29, and I vowed that some day I'd own a chariot as fine as this. But I'd appreciate this one more with a soberer and older driver at the wheel—say an eight-year-old half-wit. Rolley Martinez, with less sense, never thought to slow down because the road was narrow and unfamiliar.

This road which we were slitting down the middle was Rolley's bright idea of a

short cut. Somehow he figured in his liquor-pickled brain-cell that this narrow black lane was shorter and quicker than the main highway. That was the big, glorious idea, see? To get back to Los Angeles before the rest of the premier party, who were using the train. Why race them? So Rolley could brag insufferably about his new buggy's dazzling speed, of course. We were looping wildly through the strange night for no sensible reason except to satisfy Rolley's infantile vanity.

Thank God this reeling nightmare couldn't last much longer. It would have to end pretty soon now, either in the ditch, or the morgue, or L. A., or all three at once.

Now we were whooshing into territory which possibly I'd seen before. This canyon might be recognizable if only it would hold still long enough. The hilly skyline was black against sprinkled stars; a few geometrically patterned orange groves were dimly visible in the silvery glow of a high moon, and a few civilized lights gleamed from ranch-houses even at this unearthly hour—four a. m.

As we raced on at the same crazy speed, more houses appeared closer to the road and more lights streaked past—but did Rolley take this as a signal to proceed more cautiously? Not our ineffable Rolley.

"Hey, you, crazy!" I blurted at him, unable to keep quiet any longer. "Take it slower in here, Rolley, before something happens!"

It happened even as I warned him.

**I**T WAS just a flicker in the gleam of the headlamps, a brief thump in the rush of the wind, something that was all over as fast as the click of a camera shutter.

"Stop, Rolley!" I poked at him. "Pull up!"

He blinked in bleary puzzlement, toeing the brakes, gliding us to a velvet stop. There were some lights ahead, and more lights behind us, but they were just a couple of houses some distance away. It was blissful to be safely motionless for a change. The night was perfectly silent now. Rolley's head floated in an alcoholic haze while I peered all around and found nothing wrong.

I eased Jean's head off my shoulder. Without opening her eyes she murmured,

"Mmm?" She hadn't noticed a thing, hadn't even seemed to realize we'd stopped.

I said, "It's okay, Kid, we'll be home in a couple more minutes." Trustingly she drifted right back into her lovely dream. With Rolley still blinking at me I got out to take a look at the front of the car.

"Your fender," I said quietly, so as not to arouse Jean. "Come and take a look at it."

Rolley pulled himself off the leopard-skin seat and tottered around to my side, holding on every stumbling step of the way.

"Yeah, yeah, Spence," he said in a tone of querulous complaint. "Looka what some dumb sonna-buck did to my fen'er."

The fender had a deep dent in it. It had been a powerful impact. By now I knew for sure Rolley was in serious trouble. Not me—just Rolley. I should have left him right there with it—this phony heart-throb to a million bobby-soxers, this offensively pretty no-good souse. He rated the wringer.

But in Hollywood you don't get places by being a high-minded agent of justice. Justice—what's that got to do with making a cushy place for yourself? That stuff's strictly for suckers, as I'd well learned. I'd taken a lot of kicking around in the process of getting smartened up. I'd been a long time looking for the million-buck break which my brains deserved—and maybe this was it.

"Get back in that car before you fall on your beautiful face, you glamorous hunk of imbecile," I snapped. "I'll see how bad it is."

Jean stayed in her lovely slumber in the car, still innocently unaware of anything, as I back-tracked along the road with a flash. Rolley had begun to get scared; plastered

as he was, he came staggering stupidly after me.

We searched fully ten minutes around the spot where something had thumped and flashed past the car; we were almost ready to give up when I found the guy Rolley had hit.

He lay in a huddled-together posture at the edge of a small lake. He wore a dark brown jersey shirt, brown checkered slacks and alpargatas. He'd evidently been walking along the edge of the road, and in these dark clothes Rolley hadn't even glimpsed him.

The clothes were all wet now, with blood. Probably his body was full of shattered bones. When I tried to turn him over, I felt his ghastly limpness. His lax face in the circle of my light was cross-hatched with wet red lines. The impact had hurled him a hundred feet and high, over a patch of scrub oak to the rim of this little lake which the scrub oak screened from the road.

Rolley sobbed. This bold, dashing cavalier of the technicolor hung onto my arm like a frightened brat and sobbed helplessly.

"Who—who is he?" Rolley blabbered.

"What the hell difference does that make? He hurts just as bad as if he were a famous movie star. He can die just as dead."

I stooped again, pressed his flaccid wrist, then straightened and used my handkerchief to wipe the stickiness off my fingers.

Rolley had begun to shake all over. "Dead, Spence? Dead?"

I snarled, "No, you didn't quite kill him. If only you'd killed him all the way, we might be better off—but no, you fluffed it, just like you fluff all your scenes. You had

## James E. Sorrels\*

has switched to Calvert because  
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\*of 1015 S. Rosemont, Dallas, Texas

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to leave a little life in him so he could get carted to a hospital, so he can get patched up and live to testify against you."

"Oh, jeez," Rolley whined. "They'll send me to jail, Spence, just on account of this dummy wasn't watching where he was going. Oh, jeez, it'll ruin me."

"Shut up and give me a chance to think!"

Rolley stood there with his shoulders bobbing as he sobbed, and I loathed him with all my sickened soul.

"This could turn out to be rough on you, Pretty Boy," I rasped at him. "Plenty rough—unless I can get in a quick fix for you—and that calls for some extra-fancy footwork. Stay here till I get back. Understand? Stay right here and watch this poor devil suffer."

I put the flashlight in Rolley's twitching hand. He sobbed to himself as I went back along the road. Jean Terry was still snoozing and dreaming of sugar-plums in the car. Her slender legs were curled under her, her knees shining apricot nylon. I tucked the leopard-skin robe around her and she stirred a little and said, "Mmmm, yummy."

Then I went on toward the lights I'd already seen on the road ahead, figuring they would lead me to a phone. Meanwhile my brain hummed. This was it—finally, at long last, I told myself, this was it. This was the million-buck break I'd always prayed for, and I meant to play it for every penny's worth.

**WE'D TROOPED** over to a godforsaken slag-pile in Arizona named Silverville for a trick premier of Apex's latest classic, *Ghost Town*. That was the dazzling inspiration of Hugo Dujon, lord god of Apex, see—to pick a real ghost town for the first showing of the cinematic masterpiece of the same name. A long-unused railway spur ran near Silverville, so for the past week a huge crew had been working in there at enormous expense, setting up Diesel generators and an outdoor screen, amplifiers, hundreds of chairs for the chosen and, of course—a prime necessity anywhere near Hollywood but especially in a desert setting as dry as this—several well-stocked bars.

This evening a special train chartered by Apex had trundled in carloads of hot-shot executives, first-string columnists, major

luminaries unmistakably of both sexes, and other favored darlings. Everyone had enjoyed the scotch-lubricated ease of the streamlined club cars with the single exception of cute Rolley Martinez, who had decided it would be more fun to loop over in his four-wheeled meteor.

The special train had pulled in to find Rolley waiting for it, wildly waving his hat, thoroughly pie-eyed.

A really brilliant occasion, this. The cream of the cream of Hollywood in the midst of a wreck of a town, which even the rats had abandoned decades ago, watching motion picture history made under the desert stars. *Apex Presents! A Hugo Dujon Production! Directed by Gar Douglass!* And so on, accompanied by plenty of decibels of fanfare.

The two-million-dollar opus stank, as I'd known all along it would. I thanked heaven the name of Spencer Race, lowly assistant director, wasn't anywhere on the screen-credit list. Dujon and Douglass would blame me for it anyway—but I secretly cheered this picture's bad smell, knowing my hour was coming.

Afterward everyone had been so perfectly charming and full of gracious praise for Dujon's and Douglass' new turkey, and there had been a copious flow of hard beverages. Possibly I'd miscalculated the heady effect of the desert air—otherwise I'd never have let myself be jockeyed into Rolley Martinez's new scooter for the return trip. With Jean cuddling beside me, though, happy little animal that she was, the take-off hadn't been too bad.

But it was too bad now. With a brutally battered man lying back there beside the pool, it might turn out to be very much too bad for that habitually drunken driver Rolley Martinez—unless I used my brains to wangle an out for him. . . .

The nearest lights shone through the venetian blinds of a small, salmon-colored stucco house.

I knocked and nobody answered. I knocked again and pushed the door open. I called, "Hello, is the party over?" and still nothing came to life. Easing in then, I crossed the living room, and stopped gazing through an open bedroom door.

The woman stood there beside the bed staring at me—just stood there with her eyes big and round and blank, swaying a

little. She wore a nightgown, low-cut, of black lace—the black of a faint shadow—and that's all. In one hand she held a high-ball glass half full of something dark enough to be the straight stuff, and it wasn't her first of the evening.

I recognized her. Sandra Alder.

I said: "May I use your phone? Emergency."

She said: "Sure, go's far's you like—with the phone, I mean." Then she took a wavering step forward and pushed the door shut in my face.

I heard the bed bounce; then everything was still. After a minute I eased the door open to look in. She'd toppled backward, first putting her glass on the bedside table. Her head had hit the pillow, fortunately for her, and her bare feet stuck over the edge diagonally. She was out—or at least pretending to be.

I closed the door, straight business on my mind, happy to have this shopworn doll out of earshot.

Four, five years ago Sandra Alder had been a beauty with a lacquered look, doing all right by herself in the studios. Thanks to her talent for telling several powerful producers and directors the ugly truth about themselves—lay it to bad judgment, or even to intelligence and courage—she had descended into total eclipse.

She could still act rings around the current crop of leggy babes, but never mind that—there's nothing like justice in Hollywood or anywhere else. Probably she'd never saved a dime when she was coining it, so there was nothing left for her but men. That guy who was huddled back there beside the little lake, full of broken bones—could be he'd spent most of the evening here and had been getting back to a nearby home before dawn's early light.

**I** found the telephone in the living room. Before making the call I had to dope out where I was. That little lake back there—sure, I recalled it now. Sometimes it was used for location shots because it was roughly rimmed with rocks, some grotesquely formed, making it suitable for horse operas of horror spasms. Paradise Pond it was called. Okay, so I could tell them just where to come.

I mopped my forehead and dialed a rare unpublished number, one known to only a

few of Hugo Dujon's closest henchmen. I'd just barely made that charmed circle. Ironically enough, Dujon, after planning that masterpiece of publicity, the ghost town premiere, had had to miss it. Doctor's orders, following a slight heart attack. He was probably waiting now for more of the customary bubbling reports he got from his yes-yes guys who had attended. What he was going to get right now was a report of a less pleasant sort.

I talked my way past a butler, a secretary and two personal aides before Hugo Dujon's peculiar, toneless voice finally came on the wire. Rapidly, and without dressing it up, I told him what had happened and what I figured we could do about it.

"These are just suggestions, of course, Mr. Dujon. I'm making them because I realize you want your men to think fast on their feet. How's this for the first step?—sent out the studio surgeon in the Apex ambulance. That'll keep it private and maybe we can handle him that way straight through. If not, why, then, we tell the hospital he's a technician who was working overtime on a set and happened to skid off a catwalk. When he comes to and finds out how long he's been on the payroll—and without even knowing it—he'll see it our way. So then we'll have Rolley going into a new picture instead of the clink."

"Excellent," Dujon said. "I'll take care of it from here. See me early."

Disconnecting, I grinned. Those three little words, "See me early," coming from Dujon, could be worth big coin at Apex—even a high-flying career.

He could count on it—I'd see him early.

Sandra Alder still lay still when I left her house. Hurrying back along the road I found Jean Terry still prettily asleep in the rocket ship. Next I wound my way back to the pool, guided by the gleam of the flashlight—a dim reddish gleam now.

Fifty feet away I could hear Rolley sobbing. He was squatting on a rock, pawing his face, alcoholic tears smearing his pasty cheeks. He sounded heavy on the ham, like Stella Dallas' worst moments, but he wasn't exaggerating it much—it was really shaken up, really terrified.

Suddenly, with a shock that jarred my whole spine, I realized! Rolley was now alone here. Absolutely alone!

"Rolley!" I blurted. "Where is he?"

Rolley squinted up, snivelling. "He died, Spence. He died, he died."

My hand still and chill, I picked up the flashlight. Its foggy pink shine was enough light to show me the waves on the surface of the pool, the black waves weaving in to the rocky bank, quickly and quietly, one after the other. Something had disturbed it only a few moments ago.

"I heard him die, Spence," Rolley muttered. "I heard it happen to him right in the middle of a moan. I saw him shaking—it was horrible how he'd begun shaking all over, and then all at once he stopped. All of a sudden he was a dead man, Spence."

I spat at him: "You blithering fool! You crazy, drunken cretin!"

Rolley blabbered on; "I musta been outta my head! I didn't know what I was doing—but I hadda do it, Spence. I couldn't let anybody know what happened, not anybody."

"You rum-soaked idiot!"

"First thing I knew Spence, I had these strips of cloth in my hands, brown cloth, his shirt all torn up. I kept telling myself I shouldn't be doing this, Spence, I better stop—but something made me go on tying those rocks onto him. Oh, jeez, Spence, he made a splash; jeez it was loud." Rolley got to his feet and stood there swaying, hanging onto both my shoulders. "But it's okay. Nobody'll ever find him now."

Suddenly I was cold, icy in every fiber. "Listen to me, Rolley. When you did that to him was he really dead? Do you hear me? Was he really dead when you pushed him under the water?"

Rolley gulped; "But I hadda do it, Spence! And it's aw right. Nobody'll ever know. I fixed it for us fine."

"You fixed it up fine, all right, you drooling imbecile!" With my open hand I slapped him across the face, hard, three times. "Fine, fine, fine!"

I dragged and pushed him back into the car. He spilled heavily into the rear seat. Jean opened her sweet blue eyes just once, saw nothing, then cuddled a little toward Rolley and floated back into her dream. Rolley's lids fluttered and stayed down also as I slid quickly under the steering wheel.

This wasn't just a drunken driving

charge any more. The way it looked to me, it was murder.

I didn't take time to run back to the phone and warn off the masterly Dujon. Explanations could damned well wait. First I had to get us out of here fast. This was murder—and if ever a car was built for a lightning getaway, Rolley's was it.

We glided away under its incredibly smooth power, picking up silken speed. While we whizzed toward the city a red blinker appeared on the road ahead, flicked past and vanished into the night behind us. That was Apex's private ambulance speeding to pick up the dying man who was no longer dying and no longer there.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Crimson Runaround

**I**N A palm-shaded side-street in Beverly Hills, not far off Wilshire, I braked in front of the bungalow where, to the intense frustration of a pack of wolves, Jean Terry lived with her mother. Looking back, I was startled to see her sitting up, wide awake, with Rolley's head resting in her lap.

"Wasn't it wonderful Spence thanks so much for bringing me home you've been really sweet," she said in one refreshed breath.

"Mighty glad to bring you anywhere any time, Honey." I eyed her, feeling twinges. "How long have you had those sparkling peepers open?"

"Oh, I've been awake for *minutes* Spence did anything go *wrong* tonight on the way *home* I mean?"

Keeping a pinching chill from showing in my face, I assured her, "Not a thing. It was smooth as you are all the way. Got a reason for asking, Baby?"

"It's just a feeling I mean I must've dreamed it if *you* say so, Spence."

Jean, trusting kid, had a lot of faith in me because I'd put in a fix for her at Apex. She'd taken plenty of snubs—and plenty of pawing—getting started, even if the bruises on her heart didn't show. The in I'd found for her had started her clicking in a small but promising way—and of course I hoped she'd never forget to be grateful. Even if *Ghost Town* was the fast flop it deserved to be, Jean had photo-

graphed like an angel; the picture wouldn't do her a bit of harm.

But murder would.

"That's all it was, a dream, Honey child," I said. "On your pretty way, now. Our little playmate there isn't my choice of something to put to bed, but it looks like the headache's all mine anyway."

I escorted Jean to her door. She kissed me lightly but deliciously on the lips and sighed, "G' ni-ight, 'Spence," and disappeared inside with a farewell twiddling of her fingers. Sweet kid.

In fact, a sweeter chick had never slept blithely through a raw job of homicide.

I went back to the car to scowl at Rolley Martinez. He lay on the rear seat in a sodden stupor. A fine example of a guilty conscience! He sickened me. The whole thing made my stomach squirm. A choice night full of unconscious people I was having. Jean slumbering, Sandra Alder passing out, now Rolley down flat—and that nameless man sleeping in the strange bed of Paradise Pond.

But I knew the score. It stood high in my favor and I'd be a sucker not to work to make it stay that way.

I drove Rolley's car slowly along Wilshire. Southern California would be getting its incomparable sun back again pretty soon now. The tropical dawn was a great pink pearl of light rolling up over the horizon. To everybody else it might look like the herald of just another damn day. To me it was the shine of a new life-making power.

"Listen, Rolley," I said over my shoulder. "I'm going to let my hair down to you, Kid."

He lay there insensible, hearing nothing, as I rolled him along in his costly juggernaut,

speeding to his costly hacienda.

"I've got a load of stuff to get off my chest, Brother—and not necessarily all of it in words. Some of it will show in actions instead, in the results I'll be getting from now on. But at the moment I might mention anyway, you muscle-bound phony, I hate every line in your beautiful, greasy mug.

"I'd like nothing better than to see you grabbed off the set and held in front of a rogue's gallery camera instead, where you'd look more natural. But that would be justice, a quality which doesn't exist. So I'm going to use you, Little Boy. And you're going to adore me for it. Because I'll never let you forget for a second that I'm the guy who can snatch away your diamond-studded contract, and the eight-bedroom hacienda with its swimming pool, and all your dough, and all the starry-eyed female minors who stand in line drooling for you. I'm the guy who can smack you all the way down with a murder rap any time I may choose. So you're going to be nice to me. Very, very nice. Aren't you, Glamour Boy?"

I cruised through the new-world glow of the dawn with five million dollars' worth of Apex property lumped on the back seat, inert and unhearing.

"But don't flatter yourself, my pretty one. I don't hate you alone. In fact, I reserve an even higher place on my stink-list for a worn-out, would-be genius named Gar Douglass. A great, outstanding director, everybody calls him. The director of a great many outstanding floperooos, they mean. A lousy has-been, that's all he is, living on past glory.

"For ten years now he's been taking the

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3 TUNE IN... 2 NETWORK SHOWS! "The Adventures of Sam Spade" Sun. evenings, CBS Network; "King Cole Trio Time" Sat. afternoons, NBC Network.



credit for my best ideas, soaking me with the blame for his dim-witted blunders and keeping a foot on my neck for fear I'd find a chance somehow to direct hit pictures on my own and crowd him out of the big time. Self-preservation, the first law of Hollywood, and Gar Douglass its most devoted practitioner.

"But not any more, Rolley, my precious. Thanks to you things are going to be plenty different for the great Gar Douglass from now on—and different for me also. Oh yes, wonderfully, marvellously different for me."

The acid in my voice should have been enough to sting Rolley back awake, except that waking him would be a major operation.

"And Hugo Dujon—I've detested him for so many years it's no use wasting any more loathing on him. Anyhow he's going to begin seeing things my way now; he's going to begin appreciating how truly invaluable I am to him, how much dough I'm worth. And as for Alicia Laurent—

"**W**ELL, Rolley, don't be silly. Hate her? How could I? Never for a moment! To me she's—mmm! I know you like her too, Rolley, and of course her husband, Gar Douglass, is partial to her—but neither of you matters any more. Not in Alicia's life, not the way I read her future.

"When I look at her and feel that ball of fire explode inside me, nothing in this world matters except the dream of having her all for myself. I've dreamed it, Boy, thousands of times, while Alicia was hardly noticing me as a fairly nice flunky of her famous husband's; but now she'll begin seeing me when she looks at me. I won't be glass to her eyes any more. She'll begin recognizing how really important I am to her. In the plan I have bubbling briskly in my mind Alicia is the chief ingredient—and a most delectable dish in herself."

I laughed out loud and broke off into song. *There's a Great Day Coming*—but it wouldn't be mañana. It was today, now, beginning this very minute.

I turned the car into the driveway of Rolley Martinez's hacienda. A tall, bushy hedge screened it from the passing riff-raff who helped to make his existence possible. Flowers suitable for putting into girls' hair grew everywhere in a bright riot. A tile pool was provided for girls wearing preferably

the least noticeable variety of swim-suit. An unmarried amatory athlete trying to live up to his screen personality—that was Rolley. Although he hadn't been going in for babes in such quantities lately. By this time his yen for Alicia and hers for him had become old-hat gossip. It might become news, though, when their marriage didn't follow the divorce which rumor said Alicia was soon to get.

No, the big news might take a different turn, thanks to a bit of slick work by the smart lad who by that time would be known as Apex's newest, most exciting, most promising young director, Spencer Race.

I stopped the car behind an open convertible of tasteful royal blue that sat beside Rolley's patio. My pulse began thudding—more hotly than it had at murder. It was Alicia's car. She was here, waiting for Rolley.

"Okay, my darling, I've brought him to you," I murmured to myself. "But will you really want him now?"

Since Alicia had been at the ghost-town premier with Gar Douglass, her car here meant that Apex's special train had returned to L.A.; and no doubt Hugo Dujon, closely following up my message, had alerted those most closely concerned.

My pulse gave a wild rattle as Alicia came from the patio, unbearably luscious with her olive skin, her great dark eyes, her red mouth moistly highlighted. She came hurrying on tiny sandals, her toes gleaming scarlet, all breathless concern. Not giving me a glance, not noticing the hunger in my eyes—an attitude I meant to correct soon—she paused beside the car to gaze open-lipped at her drunken Adonis.

Behind her a tall, droop-shouldered, half bald, waxy-faced man walked wearily. Gar Douglass—Alicia's husband.

Then another car came cruising up the drive; a massive, gleaming, chauffeur-driven yacht on wheels known all over Hollywood as Hugo Dujon's.

I could guess the play. The studio surgeon in the Apex ambulance had quickly reported nothing found. This had aroused new alarms in Dujon's mind—obviously complications had piled up. Taking personal charge, he had posted himself warily in his limousine, near Rolley's place, to wait for me to cart Apex's Greek god home. Now he had come in to get briefed and to

take command. I couldn't have hoped for a sweeter break—Alicia and Douglass both in on it, with Apex's high priest actually coming to me!

He alighted from his huge car with his chauffeur's hand steadying his arm—a small, gentle-mannered man with a sensitive face like a monk's. He walked haltingly, nodding to us, and turned his sad gaze at the drink-drugged Rolley.

"A bad boy, very bad," Hugo Dujon said in his strange, toneless voice. "Let's take him inside, please, and work over him. I'd prefer to hear your story along with his, Spencer. Of course this is a matter of the strictest confidence among us."

But of course; That was certainly the right way to play it, Hugo, old chum—with a delicate feeling toward the possible loss of a star as valuable as a big office building. That was exactly the way I liked it.

AT LAST we had Rolley sitting up. Scorching black coffee forced down his throat—smelling salts clamped under his beautiful nose until his beautiful, stupid eyes streamed—stinging cold showers drenching him while we held him up—we'd tried everything. Finally we had him wrapped in an enormous white terry-cloth robe, sitting round-backed on the edge of his satin-covered bed, answering our exasperation with a bovine blinking of his bleary eyes.

"Honest, I can't hardly 'member," Rolley mumbled.

We stood over him—Dujon, Douglass, Alicia and I. The chauffeur and Rolley's British manservant had helped us to bring him out of it, but now we'd cleared them out with a warning to stay clammed. I'd taken pains to keep a decisive hand on proceedings—doing a tough man's job for the gentle Dujon while the ineffectual Gar Douglass merely stood by. It was Alicia, frankly disgusted, who had given me the most help. My pulse kept quickening to her presence. We were working together on this. It was heady, and a beginning.

"Honest, I don't seem a 'member anything," Rolley mouthed again.

I grabbed both his hamlike shoulders and shook him. For the sake of impressing Dujon with the full ghastliness of it, I spared Rolley no reminders—the blood-

soaked clothes, the dying man's moaning and shaking, his clothing ripped off and used to tie the rocks on, then the black wavelets lapping, lapping.

"While I was gone, phoning Mr. Dujon, trying to cover up for you, you pushed him under—this poor helpless devil who wasn't even dead yet, who maybe needn't have died. You told me you knew you shouldn't have done it, but something made you."

"Yeah." Dim recollection flickered in Rolley. "Yeah, that was the way it was—I couldn't help myself."

I let go of him and he fell backward on his custom-built bed. "So that's the way it was, Mr. Dujon," I said acridly but with due respect. "This highly valuable star of Apex's is a confessed murderer. The L.A. dicks would be delighted to give him the works. Apex's influence wouldn't be enough to get him out of a dirty, stupid, drunken killing like this one."

Hugo Dujon said softly: "I am not the kind of man to cope with such ugly business, but I have no choice. What is it we must do now? Perhaps I should call in lawyers—"

"No, no!" Getting right in there before my esteemed chief, Douglass, could even start a word, I said; "First, if I may suggest it, Mr. Dujon, we'll just sit tight. Everybody stays strictly away from that pond and watches the papers for developments. The body won't be found for days. Then chances are it'll never tie up to us, thanks to the fact that I got Rolley out of there fast. Nobody here knows a thing about it. The only possible reason for suspecting Rolley would be the slight damage showing on his car—but I'll take care of that detail right away."

"Yes?" Much as the delicate Dujon deplored all this, I saw a glint in his eyes. Well, I'd been a long time working for a little admiration. "How will you take care of it?"

"Have your chauffeur drive me over to my garage. I'll get my buggy out. The attendants there can truthfully swear it was there all night, in case of any question, so it couldn't possibly have figured in any hit-run case. I'll come here and gently ram my car into Rolley's fender where the dent is. Green paint will be scraped off mine and left on Rolley's to show the damage was done by a minor collision, right here at

home, instead of by a human body out there in the canyon. A slick job of fixing, like that, ought to keep the dicks off Rolley for good."

Alicia made a choking noise and hurried from the room. Dujon gazed questioningly at Douglass and went into a buzzing huddle with him. I reached for my handkerchief to wipe my dripping hot face—and suddenly it wasn't hot any more.

My pocket was empty. My handkerchief was missing. I'd dropped it somewhere. For an instant I knew panic.

Then I realized it didn't really mean a thing. It was just an ordinary cotton handkerchief, no monogram, not even a laundry mark. I'd bought a dozen of them only this week and tonight was the first time I'd ever carried one. Even if the cops found it they'd never connect it with me, and just to be extra safe I could get rid of the others like it.

Dujon, turning, said softly: "Very well, Spencer, go ahead with your plan—but carefully. I am trusting you, after all, with a most important mission."

He was telling me? I gave them a confident smile, left them with Rolley and went out looking for—not Dujon's chauffeur, but Alicia. I found her in the living room, gazing out the open french doors at the sun climbing over the imported palms. I paused at her side, feeling the champagne tingle of her nearness.

She said huskily, not moving her eyes: "What a girlish little fool I was, ever to feel any attraction for that statuesque stack of beef."

"Rather surprising of you." I agreed, "considering there are other lads within reach who really have something on the ball."

She turned her dark eyes on me and was silent—but interested.

I followed up with a teaser. "I haven't heard so far whether your husband is going to work his magic on *Blonde Goddess* next."

She didn't miss the note of scorn in my voice. Such irreverence could be fatal to a movie career, but Alicia saw I had no fear of that. Trying to make me out, she said:

"It's generally understood Hugo's on the point of assigning *Blonde Goddess* to Gar."

Then came the one I knew would really

hook her: "With Alicia Laurent playing the lead?"

Sharp resentment flashed deep in her eyes—naturally, that star part being the juiciest plum dangling in Hollywood at this moment. "No." She tossed her head. "He doesn't think I'm the type for it."

"Another director, given that assignment, might see you with a fresher slant—and you've plenty of pull with Hugo," I said quietly. "If the picture were mine, I couldn't hope to find anyone else so perfect."

None too subtle—but I had to work fast, and it got her. She turned her full face to me, breathing more rapidly. The darkness of her eyes searched deep into mine, hunting, beginning to hope.

Hugo Dujon came from Rolley's bedroom at the propitious moment to say in his phantom's voice: "You won't forget to see me early at the studio, Spencer. Say ten o'clock. I think I may have a new program to discuss with you—something a little better than you've ever done before."

"Ten sharp, Mr. Dujon," I said, and I exited with a smile, feeling Alicia's eyes clinging.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Golden Boy

AT NINE fifty-five next morning, in my rat's nest of an office on the Apex lot, my nerves taut with anticipation, I was all set to let Hugo Dujon make me Hollywood's newest sensational white-haired boy—but before taking the next step into the golden future I paused to double-check.

Of course the morning papers hadn't mentioned a man missing from La Paz Canyon, where Rolley had done his little job of murder—it was much too early. Rolley himself was still at home, sleeping off the rest of it. Before leaving his place, hours ago this morning, I'd done that business with the crumpled fender, thereby covering him safely. Back at my apartment I'd even remembered the other eleven handkerchiefs like the one I'd lost somewhere, and had chucked them into the backyard incinerator.

Alicia, Douglass, Dujon and his hirelings, Rolley himself and his butler—if questioned none of them would have the

faintest idea what had happened. Of course not. Actually we still didn't know who the dead man was. In this respect it was the damndest thing—nobody on earth but me knew at first hand just how it had happened. The faultiness of Rolley's rum-corroded memory was no act—he really couldn't recall it. Jean was a lovely little cipher. Sandra Alder hadn't seemed to recognize me at the time, and even so she'd blanked out fast. Not a single thread was left to lead to us. Without me Apex would be suffering with one hellish costly case of migraine this morning, but as it was I'd whipped up a nice little miracle for them, one worth a mint.

It had been a sleepless, unforgettable night, exhausting yet a powerful shot in the arm, and profitable, Brother, profitable. After a pot of coffee, a needle shower, a fragrant shave and fresh shirt and slacks, I looked like something out of a haberdasher's window.

At 9:55 on this California morning it looked like the start of a perfect day, and I meant to keep it that way. I felt like a million except for a clogged-up nose, a minor annoyance to which I was susceptible and which was handy to have, considering the high stinkers produced at Apex. Fixing it up with a bit of nasal jelly, I strolled along the studio street toward the front office. Jean Terry rolled in through the gate in a cheap little convertible driven by Paul Brooks. Jean looked as clean and toothsome as a bon-bon. Paul Brooks, her favorite boy-friend and one of our very minor contract players, was also the clean-cut, corn-fed type, and this morning he looked glum. Jean hopped out with a bright "G' morning Spence!" for me, but then her spirits wilted a little because Paul's manly young puss was drawn down this long.

"Paul hasn't heard from Mr. Dujon yet about his option Spence," she explained in her unpunctuated way. "I keep telling him of course Mr. Dujon will take it up he's just a little slow because he's so busy that's all."

"Sure, that's it, Kiddies, so stop worrying," I said. "I'll put in a good word for you, Paul, boy. Hugo's expecting me in to talk a new contract right now. In fact, I'm a few minutes late."

"Say, gee, thanks, Mr. Race!" Brooks blurted.

Jean said: "Spence dear that's really wonderful of you I'm so grateful too." She added, more softly, "Paul getting a break really means more to me than just anything else, Spence."

Not noticing that certain tone in her voice, Brooks, the dope, did an awed double-take. "Late getting in to see Mr. Dujon?" It was like ignoring Gabriel's horn. Such a thing couldn't happen.

I strolled on toward Dujon's front office, not hurrying, forgetting Paul Brooks the moment I'd turned my back to him. I went through an ivory door. Secretaries used phones and nodded me on—one, two, three of them. I sauntered through another ivory door and into the throne room and there sat Hugo the Magnificent, waiting with a fond smile to do me enormous favors.

Why not? I'd earned them.

He took my tingling hand in his gentle one—a nice act, but a little overdone, the dilettante delicacy of this ex-pants-presser. He purred: "I am always so deeply appreciative of an associate's loyalty in a crisis, Spencer. Our interests are the same, whole-hearted devotion to Apex. As it happens, my boy, this comes at a moment when I had already decided you're ready for bigger, finer things. Allow me to express my sincere confidence in the brilliant future of Apex's newest young director, Spencer Race."

All it needed was a claque and a floral horseshoe. "Thank you, Mr. Dujon."

"I'm always happy to help such a highly talented young man as you are, Spencer. Your first production, under your full direction, my dear boy," Dujon beamed, "will be that great team of comedians, Bentley and Cellino, in *Anything for a Laugh*."

"I don't want it."

**D**UJON'S supersensitive face flinched. There was dozens of Dujon's worshippers around Hollywood who would be delighted to lick his boots for a chance like this; but I wasn't one of them. Not any more. I had entered a higher caste as of four o'clock this morning.

Before Dujon could recover tastefully from that jolt, I hit him with another. "I want full direction on *Blonde Goddess*."

Dujon stiffened, shock in his mild eyes. After a speechless moment he said with the patience he might show a half-witted child;

"My dear, dear boy, *Blonde Goddess* as a best-selling novel topped six hundred thousand copies. Apex paid a quarter of a million dollars plus a percentage of the gross for the picture rights. The production is one of the season's prizes, budgeted at two million, and it may go higher. Obviously I must have, my dear boy, a highly experienced director for—"

"That's me. I'm experienced as all get-out. I've spent ten years on this lot getting that way. You know the top-notch work I've done under other men's credit lines. You know I can cause that blonde goddess to shine in a way to make the customers fight to get at her. That's what you want, isn't it? That's what you'll get from me."

Dujon cleared his throat. I stayed there lounging in his morocco chair with his eyes smouldering at me. He didn't ring for the studio cops to leave me out. I was playing a wonderful hand and he knew I had him. But he couldn't help whining.

"But my boy, my boy. I've already assigned that great director Gar Douglass—"

"Then yank him off. After that smelly job he did on *Ghost Town*, you wouldn't dare risk your biggest production on him. He's through. That one finished him."

Dujon was actually pale. "Gar Douglass is not only one of my dearest and most faithful friends—he has a long, splendid record of hit picture behind him. Record-breakers, many of them—"

"That's dead history. He can't repeat now. He's done, burned out. I'm planning a future for us that'll leave him in limbo."

Slowly Dujon said: "Gar has given generously of himself to Apex. *Ghost Town* is a poor picture because he had worked himself into a state of exhaustion before starting on it. But since shooting its last scene he has had many months of well-earned rest. Although he hasn't yet fully recovered, I'm sure he can do a brilliant job on *Blonde Goddess*—and it is just what he needs to restore him to the peak of success where, with his genius, he belongs."

"Sure, sure—except that a new man has come along who's got something Douglass hasn't got. Need I mention what it is—Hugo?"

He sat very still, gazing at me for a long time, sadly—and I smiled back.

"What are you deciding, Hugo? Which

naughty gunmen to hire to shut me up?"

He shook his head a little. "I'm not the man to stoop to such ugly business. I am not so crude, Spencer, as to hire killers to handle my business troubles for me. I have better taste than that, I think. No, you needn't fear hired guns. Fear only yourself."

"Thanks, but I'm not worrying, Hugo. After all, this kind of deal is put through every day of the week in movie-land, where justice is never heard of—and it'll pay off big for you as well as for me."

"At any rate, you have forced your bargain on me." Dujon turned, pressed a button and said into his concealed interphone: "Ask Mr. Douglass to drop everything and come right in, please." Then to me, with soft bitterness, "Congratulations, Spencer, on your assignment to direct *Blonde Goddess*. You may go now."

"As to the details of salary and contract, Hugo—I'll let you know when I've made up my mind."

I went out with victory singing in my veins. Standing in the studio street, I saw Gar Douglass ambling toward Dujon's office. Minutes later he came out again looking stunned and soul-sick. Next he stumbled into Alicia's cabaña and, moving closer, I could hear his abject sobs. So what? What else could he have expected? He'd had his day, hadn't he? And this new one was mine, all mine.

This was no startling surprise to Alicia. When she stepped from her door in a gleaming blue satin swim-suit, ready for a beach scene, her dark olive face was raptly thoughtful, and when she paused, gazing at me, the black glimmer in her eyes told me she sensed I had suddenly become top man in her life.

That position carried certain privileges which I intended to enjoy to the full.

**A**FTER twilight I turned my new car into the driveway of Alicia's home. It had been quite a day, really quite a day.

With Hugo's okay I had moved into a plushy front office in the same wing as his own. I'd received congratulations from dozens of charming well-wishers, who envied me so much it hurt. I'd ordered the publicity department to dwell nationally on that most delicious of topics, Spencer Race as the director of *Blonde Goddess*. On my

way home I'd dropped into a show room to pick up this new car. A slick little job, not quite so glorious as Rolley's scooter; it would do while I waited for the delivery of something better. Yes, it had been a nice day—and now I was coming to the best part of it.

I stopped in Alicia's car port, intending to suggest she might like me to take her out so we could discuss the leading role in *God-dess*—among other things. But I sensed a strain. Cautious, I went in through the open glass doors of a moderne patio—and stopped, all the kilowatts of Alicia's presence hitting me.

She was there in the living room in a trailing black negligee, scarlet-tipped toes peeping beneath it, her midriff bare, her raven hair tantalizingly disarranged. She had a cigarette in a long holder, a brimming crystal cocktail glass. Smoke streamed from her nostrils as she gazed at me.

"Something wrong? No, there couldn't be, not about you," I said. "You're sheer perfection."

She said with smooth terseness: "You haven't heard about my husband?"

"No. Must I?"

"He tried to kill himself."

For a long moment we gazed at each other and finally I said: "You mean he made a flop of that, too?"

"Gar tried hard enough. I heard the shot bang out, then loud noises on the stairs. I saw him spill to a stop with a hole in his forehead dripping blood. Hugo's fixed it so the papers will say Gar accidentally slipped at the head of the stairs with the automatic in his hand. They told me at the hospital I'd better wait here. His condition's critical but they hope to save him."

I said: "Some guys just aren't big enough to stand a little disappointment."

Alicia downed her cocktail at a gulp, her dark eyes still widened at me.

"No use getting worked up about it," I added. "Let's talk about your next and biggest picture."

She came slowly toward me. "They found his body."

I went on feasting my eyes on her, saying nothing.

"Lane—Raymond Lane, that's his name, the dead man's. First he was reported missing by his brother. They lived together on a little ranch. The police knew he'd have to pass that pond so they tried grappling hooks and brought him up the first try. It's all in the papers."

"So what?" I searched her lovely face. "It's not getting them anywhere, is it?"

She ran a slender hand through the beautiful disarrangement of her hair. "Nobody knows. They aren't saying."

"Then let's forget it, Darling. I've got it all fixed, haven't I? Just leave the rest to me, then. You're willing to do that, aren't you?" She was close, her face lifted. "Quite willing, aren't you, Alicia, darling?"

Her lips were so red, so near. Mine had almost touched the glistening ecstasy of them when they moved—spoke tightly.

"But Sandra Alder's on the prowl."

I stiffened.

"Sandra Alder paid a visit to Apex, her old studio, today—her first in years. I watched her—how clever she was about it, playing it slow, taking her time working up. Something was giving her new hope—an ace in the hole of some kind. Really clever of her not to even hint she had something to talk over with Hugo—but it's com-



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ing up soon. She'll see him. What does she know?"

"Nothing."

"But she must! Otherwise why did she come smiling around so wisely today? I asked Rolley—tried my damndest to get him to remember something. He couldn't, but you— Is she dangerous?"

"Not half so dangerous as you, Darling."

My arms were almost around her, around all my thousands of dreams embodied in one, when the telephone spoiled it. Alicia rushed to answer. The hospital, no doubt. Alicia's worried monosyllables seemed to indicate her weak-spined husband was still in bad shape. I wasn't wasting time thinking about him; he was out of my life for good. I was wondering in the back of my mind what Sandra Alder thought she had.

A possibility suddenly hit me with nerve-chilling impact.

That handkerchief. The one I'd lost. I remembered now—I'd used it beside the pool to wipe the dead man's blood from my fingers. I'd used it again to mop my face while at Sandra Alder's phone.

**T**HAT, THEN, was where I'd dropped it—there in Sandra's house. She'd found it today, probably after the dicks had been there asking about that missing man, Lane. She'd come smelling around, trying to dope out who it belonged to, scheming to use it to buy herself a come-back—a standard Hollywood technique. But why had she headed straight for Apex with it? Because she'd recognized me after all?

The handkerchief might mean nothing at all by itself, but as evidence to back up the testimony Sandra could give— Suddenly I realized I hadn't a minute to lose getting it back from that boozy frill who was all too likely to blab too much.

Gazing at Alicia, still anxiously at the phone, I saw that this wasn't the night for us. Not tonight—but tomorrow night? Yes, tomorrow night, Alicia, sweet. . . . A promise.

In that proud new car of mine, I rolled into La Paz Canyon through another cool, clear California night. Slowing a little when I neared Sandra Alder's place, I passed it while giving it a quick once-over. Then the stretch of road along the oak-screened pool. As far as I could see, the cops, after dragging the dead man away,

hadn't thought it worth while to hang around. That was fine with me. So I backed around and tooled smoothly to a stop at Sandra Alder's as if for a casual visit on an old pal.

Like last night, lights shone behind the venetian blinds. I knocked, got no answer and, like last night again, eased in. The living room was deserted, although cig smoke hung in the air and Sandra's bedroom door was closed.

When I had crossed halfway to it a sound like a small cyclone rose out of the silence, whished from the rear of the house to the road, then away.

I ran back outside. No gleam shone on the road, but that little tornado still rushed off, fading.

"That must be Rolley's car!" I blurted. "Rolley driving like crazy again, with the light-switch off!"

I skirted around to the back of the house. A car parked there couldn't be seen from the highway. The kitchen door stood ajar. I used it and turned again to Sandra's bedroom. Just inside her door I froze.

Dressed in slacks and shirt this time, the shirt torn half off her in a struggle—she lay there dead. Eyes popping. Swollen tongue protruding. Neck bruised. Strangled. Ghastly dead.

I stepped back, closing the door, every impulse spurring me to get the hell out of here on the double-quick. But Sandra had my handkerchief. Nobody else knew about it, nobody else would have any reason for taking it from her, so it must be still here. Little as it meant, I couldn't let the police get at it—not with their scientific detecting machines, not here at the scene of a second murder. So I had to find it. Before I dared leave here I'd be smart to search, to get hold of that handkerchief. . . .

An hour and a quarter later—seventy-five ordeals later—I leaned against the door of a stripped closet, sweating, my back stiff with the effort I'd expended ransacking this place—every cranny of it—and I hadn't found that handkerchief.

All right. If I couldn't turn it up, then the dicks couldn't produce it either. I had no choice any longer, I had to get gone. I went around with a pair of Sandra's pink panties wadded up, wiping away fingerprints, then eased out to my car.

Then a new solution struck me—a bril-

liant crowning stroke that would settle the whole mess once and for all.

I still had a solid hunch that Rolley had done this to Sandra; and if ever the cops hooked onto that moron they'd knock the truth out of him in short order—so the play was to satisfy them by throwing them a fall guy first.

I'd thought of a fall guy who was a natural, easy to find and close at hand.

Quietly zigzagging into another branch of the canyon, I stopped near a little one-room cabin. It stood dark, no neighbors in sight. Paul Brooks lived here alone because it was cheap living and he liked to save his dough. Tonight he might be parked in his jalopy in a quiet starlit lane somewhere with Jean—a tough alibi to prove. Last night he hadn't joined the gala crowd at Silverville because he'd been ordered to stay home and learn his lines for a change, for the next day's shooting.

Sure, a natural, this all-American numbskull, living just far enough from Sandra to make it seem a short pleasure jaunt. Why, that car he drove even sported four fenders with multiple dents, a new one almost every week! A natural sucker if ever there was one.

The door was open. I eased in and within a minute I'd found something to serve my purpose nicely—a silver ball-point pen with Paul Brooks's name engraved on it, possibly a gift from Jean. So I drove quietly back to the house where Sandra lay dead and left Paul's pretty pen under her bed.

That would do it very neatly, I told myself as I breezed luxuriously back toward L. A. I wondered why I hadn't thought of it before, it was so beautifully simple. Now Rolley Martinez would be really safe and Apex would prosper while Spencer Race's career ascended to dazzling heights—Paul Brooks meanwhile conveniently taking the rap for both killings. It might hurt Jean a little, of course, but then, hell, she'd get over it.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Postscript to Glory

I STOOD behind my carved mahogany desk gazing with button-busting pride around my opulent office. The sun beamed in its warm approval of my rich

setting—the ankle-deep rug, the original French moderns on the wall, the built-in bar, the array of telephones in my favorite colors, the two secretaries guarding me.

Nobody on the lot except Hugo Dujon had achieved a more royally appointed suite. Already I could feel it becoming the focal point of Apex's bustling activity. The great and near-great of Apex could begin wearing a path to my desk now, all eager to consult me as to my priceless opinion, all currying my favor as a matter of self-preservation—and they'd damned well wait in my third anteroom until I felt like letting them in.

Like now. My intercome buzzed and one of my secretaries, the red-headed one named Helene, announced; "Miss Laurent to see you, Mr. Race."

With a real effort I answered; "The poor angel will have to wait a few minutes."

So now Alicia and all the rest of them would wait my bidding to enter. But this was a beginning only. *Blonde Goddess* would be a nice little screen credit for me, sure, and it would earn Apex a few million, but hell, it was only a picture. I had grander plans. Hugo Dujon didn't seem to realize it but he was beginning to slip. My plan was to make myself his first lieutenant in his old age while gently slipping the skids under him. Then, once I was established as the ruling monarch of Apex, I'd possess a power as supreme as any in Hollywood—all thanks to a small job of murder on another's guy's part but deftly milked for all it was worth by an expert.

As I laughed to myself over it, I found the door opening and Alicia quietly coming in. She had never looked more ravishing. Her eyes seemed darker and deeper, her warm olive skin even smoother, her mouth redder. Her smile was sweetly knowing, bold with secret meanings, as if to say we'd found the most intimate understanding of each other. She paused there at the closed door, gazing at me under lowered eyelids, leaning back, shutting out the world and making this moment ours alone.

Playing it to remind her that this was all my show, I said: "My secretary must have misunderstood. She was supposed to hold you off a little while. But since you're already in, why, come right over a little closer, Alicia, darling."

She came to my desk, her red lips shin-

ing. "You left me so suddenly last night, Darling. I felt sure you'd at least phone me later. I waited and waited for it."

"Don't worry, Alicia, I'll get around to everything. Right now I've got plenty on my mind—although a lot of it is you. You'll be starring in *Blonde Goddess*, you know—if we can get together on it."

She smiled a little more and said; "Darling, aren't you going to ask me how my husband is this morning?"

"I've no patience with a guy who can't stand up to it when it comes—but all right, how is he?"

"What would you say, Dar-ling, if I told you he's—dead?"

I peered at her, not knowing what she might be aiming at, not particularly liking her way of doing it—but she'd learn.

"Would you say, Dar-ling, 'Why, that's fine, that will save you the trouble of getting a divorce.' Are you thinking we'd hop right over to Yuma and be married, not even taking time to bury him first?"

"You're a little giddy this morning, aren't you?" I said, frowning. "Because of the marvellous break I'll probably be giving you, maybe? Well, remember, I'm still the guy who'll say yes or no, so be nice, Alicia. Better be—"

"But Gar isn't dead, of course," she broke in. "In fact, he's improving; he's going to get well. I'll bring him home soon and take the very best care of him myself. I'm sure we'll be so happy with each other again—don't you think so? That Rolley episode opened my eyes—it was so silly of me. Of course Gar will come back to Apex soon, to do the biggest and best pictures of his career. Oh, that reminds me, Dar-ling. I've heard that Hugo is postponing making *Goddess* because he feels the time isn't quite right for it."

"Idle talk, that's all, Alicia. I'm going to start *Goddess* rolling right away and—"

"But Dar-ling, Hugo himself just told me."

I glared. "That was stupid of him. He should know better than that. I'll see him about it some time this morning and set him straight. Meanwhile I'm going right ahead, and your part—"

"As for my part, Dar-ling," Alicia put in, "I wouldn't play in that picture for all the gold in Eldorado—not with you directing it, Dar-ling."

She said it with narrowed eyes. So she was turning out to be the snooty sort—a doll with delusions of decency or something? After figuring it a minute I began to laugh. Of course what she wanted was coaxing. That was such a pleasant part of the game. All right, I wouldn't mind taking that gambit with Alicia if that was the way she wanted me to do it. So I moved around the desk to her, smiling.

THE door opened again, surprising me to a stop. The girl who came in was Jean Terry. This morning she looked too sober—and not entirely welcome.

"I didn't hear you announced, Honey," I said.

She didn't answer, but just gazed at me with a glimmer of tears and reproach in her eyes.

And again the door was opening, this time on Hugo Dujon. He nodded gently as he entered and I began to wonder what the hell this was, people trooping into my private office. Especially I didn't like it when this other guy followed Hugo in—just an ordinary guy, none too bright-looking, one I'd never seen before and certainly didn't care about seeing now.

"Spencer," Hugo said in his spooky tones, "this is Mr. Cross, from the office of the district attorney."

Then I got it. This dumb dick smelling around was the reason everybody had turned jittery this morning. Well, then, this jerk was one to get rid of pronto. I figured Hugo had brought him to me for an expert brush-off, so I began the routine by buttering him up.

"Happy to meet you, Cross, really happy. From the D.A.'s office, eh? That's really interesting. Sit down, Cross—here, this chair's the best. Anybody around here, any bright stars or luscious babes you'd like to meet?"

"I've just done it, thanks. You. I mean." Cross squinted his sly eyes. "Thanks, but I'm not sticking around long enough to sit down. I'm leaving in a minute or so, and taking you with me."

"A busy man like me?" I didn't sound a bit worried. "Ha-ha, with a comedian, Hugo, maybe we should give him a contract. So tell me, Cross, why will I be going along with you, ha-ha?"

"For the murders of Raymond Lane and

Sandra Alder," Cross said smoothly.

I stared at him. "My Lord, you actually seem to mean it. You must have picked up a case of sunstroke in the head."

"Not according to the evidence. About Lane, for example: First, that fresh dent in Martinez's fender which you tried to conceal by ramming your car into it. Then your handkerchief—"

"Handkerchief?"

Cross produced it from his pocket—crumpled cotton with dark spots on it. I gestured in annoyance.

"That cheap item is not mine. I don't use that low-grade stuff. I never saw it before."

"The dark stains are Lane's blood," Cross went on steadily. "Lane was recovering from a rather unusual blood disease called nucleosis, and these specimens show the same corpuscle count. These other stains, faint yellow, are nasal jelly, which I understand you use habitually. You knew this handkerchief was evidence against you, Mr. Race. Otherwise you wouldn't have tried to destroy the other eleven like it. They weren't burned up, you see. Your janitor spotted them in the trash in the incinerator and salvaged them for himself—but we have them now."

He peered at me, adding; "Sandra Alder made a good guess as to how valuable this handkerchief was as evidence. She'd tucked it into her safe-deposit box. Heard enough, Mr. Race? Shall we go now?"

"No. Fast workers, you boys, aren't you?" I sneered at Cross. "Too bad you can't come somewhere near the right answer."

"We're near enough," Cross said smugly. "You can hear the rest of it now if you insist, including Miss Terry's testimony to

the effect that you were driving Martinez's car when Lane was hit."

"What!" I stared incredulously at Jean. "That's not true, Kid. Good grief, You can't make such a terrible mistake as that, not after everything I've done for you!"

"It's true," Jean said rapidly, looking scared but unshakably stubborn. "I felt the thump and opened my eyes and there you were driving—"

"You may have felt the thump, yes," I put in earnestly. "But when you saw me driving it was after that, *after* I'd taken the wheel from Rolley. Jean! Tell this gumfoot the straight of it!"

"She has given it to us straight enough, naming you as the driver, Mr. Race," Cross said in his insufferable self-assurance. "Martinez was sound asleep at the time, dead drunk, with his head resting in Miss Terry's lap—a circumstance she'd hardly be confused about. Sandra Alder could also testify to seeing you in action near the scene. That's why she kept your handkerchief and why you killed her trying to get it back."

"You're having a nightmare!" I barked at him. "Rolley killed Lane and Sandra both. Alicia had warned him that Sandra knew something dangerous, so he went to Sandra's place to find out what she had on him, and in trying to force it out of her the big-muscled ox got too rough—killed her."

"But it wasn't Rolley Martinez who thought he could get from under that killing by pinning it on an innocent lad," Cross said. "You're the cute one who tried to frame Paul Brooks."

Then Alicia said; "And don't trouble to deny that part of it, Dar-ling—it really was you who stole that silver pen. I know."

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SHE'D seen me? Alicia? No! Impossible! She couldn't actually have followed me out to La Paz Canyon last night and watched— No! She couldn't really—

They were ganging up on me. Dujon the delicate—Alicia, her eyes too bright and too hard now—even Jean, the kid who owed me so much—ganging up on me. I saw that now, and at the same instant I saw an out.

“Cross, I solemnly swear you're making a horrible mistake, tagging me for this. I'm innocent of everything—except possibly the minor charge of leaving the scene of somebody else's accident—and maybe a little too much ambition.”

They all speared me with their eyes.

“Rolley Martinez is too dumb to lie convincingly, too soft to hold out on you, Cross. Just squeeze the truth out of Rolley—the truth that he pulled both killings. You'll find out I'm, in the clear.”

Cross shook his hard head. “Rolley can't get you out of this, Race. We've kept it a little quiet so far, but just a few hours ago Rolley did the thing that everybody's been expecting him to do for quite a while now. He bent that new gocart of his around a telephone pole. What's left of him is now resting not so beautifully in the morgue—and not talking.”

Then Cross's hand reaching for my arm threw me into a frenzy. I must have tried to fight him off like a madman because next I felt myself pinioned by hands, by hundreds of hands, and being dragged out—dra—

*Postscript added by F. A. Hart, Warden, California State Prison at San Joachim.*

So ends the narrative written by Spencer Race.

He ended it actually in the middle of a word as I unlocked the door of his cell to lead him into the death chamber for the murders of Raymond Lane and Sandra Alder.

Early on the day when the death sentence was to be executed—and when it had become clear that the governor would not stay the execution—Race had asked for pencil and paper, and he had spent his last hours rapidly scribbling. No doubt he had intended his narrative to be his last statement, a factual record of what had actually hap-

pened. I found it on his bunk after his dead body had been removed for burial—at the State's expense. No one had appeared to claim his corpse.

I recalled how Spencer Race had insisted on his innocence; and how the decisive testimony at the trial had been that of Jean Terry and Alicia Laurent.

Strictly on my own, personally, not as an officer of the State, I visited the Hollywood section of Los Angeles not long after Race had been put to death. Seeking his friend, Jean Terry, I found that her mother had died since the trial and that she had moved to a new address which I could not readily obtain. Going next to Alicia Laurent Dougiass's home, I arrived at what turned out to be a remarkably revealing moment.

Walking unnoticed up the driveway, I heard a shrill voice in the patio. I paused curiously, remaining out of sight to listen. The young woman spoke again, obviously with a tongue loosened by liquor, and with strident bitterness.

“So now I'm gonna be a big, wonderful movie star. Sure, I finally found out how to make the grade. First you earn the big boss's gratitude by turning yourself into a stinking rat of a liar—”

Another woman—Alicia, no doubt—interrupted. “Do shut up, Jean!”

“Stinking lying—that's how I did it. Just by making an honest mistake and then being forced to stick to it. 'Bout where Spence was when I opened my eyes after feeling that thump in Rolley's car.”

“All right,” Alicia answered quietly. “I didn't actually see Spence stealing Paul's pen and planting it, either, but he really did it. We were all fighting for important things, weren't we, the best way we could? Weep no tears over Spence, Darling. He was a merciless heel and good riddance. After all, we get what's coming to us, don't we—or do we? Maybe the big difference between him and us is we haven't—yet.”

No one had seen me come and no one saw me leave. At this late date there was nothing in the world that could be done. The case was forever closed. Everything was settled—except that question Alicia had implied, the question of whether or not justice had been done.

I confess I don't know the answer. But perhaps Spencer Race does.

# MURCHISON GOT A GUN . . . .

By FENTON W. EARNSHAW



Carl Murchison said quietly: "This won't hurt you—much."

*Deadpan Murchison decided to throw a killer-diller burial party for his slave-driver boss.*

CARL Murchison stood uneasily before Slater's desk, his pose of humility hiding the hate which churned within his short, fat body. Slater's narrowed eyes were as cold as the diamonds which he bought and sold.

"I'm amazed," Slater said mockingly, "that you haven't asked questions about this deal. I imagined this was the kind of thing you were waiting for."

Murchison caught his breath. For a minute he thought Slater had somehow guessed. "I don't know what you mean. I—"

Slater laughed. "Don't dissemble. You do it badly." He touched the paper packets

on the desk beside the black leather wallet. "A hundred-thousand dollars, Murchison. More money than you'll earn in a lifetime. You knew when the package came they were illegal stones. And you know I've got a buyer. Why not blackmail? Why don't you demand a cut?"

Murchison felt the rush of relief. Slater didn't know. Slater didn't realize that death was sitting in on this conference. But, of course—he couldn't have guessed it.

The idea of killing Mr. Slater had occurred to Murchison many months before, on a hot summer Sunday when he'd found a gun beneath a clump of bushes in the Arroyo Seco near Pasadena. Murchison had lowered his fat perspiring body in the shade of a tree beside the dry river bed where he'd been walking and caught the glimmer of the barrel of the .45 caliber automatic.

At home that night, he'd taken the gun apart and cleaned it. And he began planning how he could use it to kill Slater.

Murchison rolled his eyes now at Slater. "It never entered my mind, Mr. Slater," he mumbled finally. "I wouldn't think of trying to—"

"Wouldn't think!" Slater mimicked, enjoying himself. "That's all you do think, Murchison! I'll bet you lay awake nights trying to figure out some way to chisel in. But you won't! You haven't got the heart for it."

Slater was on good ground. Once, defying a sickness that had welled up inside him, Murchison had hinted obliquely to Slater about the shady profits, the ones which didn't show on the books Murchison kept for him. From behind his desk in the darkened office on Olive Street, Slater had laughed coarsely.

"I wondered when greed would loosen that dry tongue of yours," Slater had said then. "It's been amusing watching you, Murchison. For six months I've let you learn more and more about my business. I'm quite safe. You won't talk and you won't pressure me. You see, I made it my business to find out about you. I know you served time in Illinois. I know they're looking for a little fat man with a different name in New York. They've got a chair waiting for him in New York."

He had felt faintness like the blast of strong wind as Slater had forged the last

link in the chain which had bound Murchison to this office since that day.

"You'll work for me at my terms. You'll take my orders and keep your mouth shut. As long as you do that—I'll keep your secret."

That was two years ago. Since then Slater's torment had grown into a monstrous thing. On the surface Murchison appeared properly humbled. But underneath deadly fires were being readied and the cowardice which had always dogged him turned into a consuming and calculating desire for revenge. The finding of the gun had been the spark. He had from that day begun to plan the murder.

It couldn't be a hurried affair. It had, moreover, to include ample reward for the risk he must inevitably run. It was a matter of waiting until fate provided a situation where there was both tangible profit and the luxury of freedom. And now, when the situation presented itself, Murchison recognized it immediately.

Slater scooped up the tissue paper packets of diamonds and carried them across the room to the safe. When he closed the door and twirled the tumblers and faced Murchison, the sarcasm was out of his voice. The game was over for this day.

"That's all, Murchison," Slater said. "Mr. Rodriguez's plane arrives tomorrow morning. Telephone his hotel. Leave word for him to meet me at my apartment at 3 o'clock."

"Yes, Mr. Slater."

As he stepped through the door into the outer office, Miss Peabody looked up from behind her typewriter. The woman's unyielding, prim expression seemed almost pleasant after the mockery of Mr. Slater.

"Oh, Murchison!"

Slater was in the doorway, holding out a small piece of cardboard.

"I know you're a sporting man," Slater said, the tantalizing smile on his lips again. "So, here's a ticket to the football game tomorrow. I'll be busy, but you go, Murchison. Have a good time. Take the day off. You too, Miss Peabody."

Miss Peabody's wry face cracked appreciatively. Murchison couldn't speak for the scheme was blossoming in his brain.

Slater frowned. "What's the matter, Murchison? Don't you like your bonus?" He turned on his heel, laughing.

Murchison crossed to his desk. He phoned the Biltmore Hotel and left word for Mr. Rodriguez to meet Slater. Then he took his hat from the coat rack. The cloak on the wall showed a few minutes after five. He bowed to Miss Peabody.

"Good night," he said, and he went out quietly.

AT HIS apartment that night he examined the gun again. Then he considered his plan. He laid the rough framework quickly. By the time he had finished dinner at a little restaurant on Pico Street he'd approved it. He got in his modest blue coupe and drove out toward Beverly Hills. There remained some elements, important ones, to be fitted in. He turned on his car radio, punched the buttons until he found a station that was broadcasting music.

The facts were simple. At 3 o'clock tomorrow afternoon Senor Rodriguez, a diamond buyer from South America, would go to Slater's apartment. He would give Slater cash for the illicit stones. That kind of a deal was always cash. Rodriguez would leave at, say 3:30, alone. Slater was careful not to be seen in public with a customer who bought "hot" jewelry.

Slater wouldn't expect Carl Murchison. Murchison would be at the Los Angeles Coliseum. Getting up to Slater's apartment was no problem. Murchison had already tried that. He knew about the Saturday afternoon crowds at the hotel. That part was simple.

There remained only the question of cementing an alibi. This was what had always worried him. He had worked out a dozen variations in weeks gone by and rejected them as imperfect. Now Slater himself had supplied the solution—football game!

Murchison's fat jowls creased in a smile of self satisfaction. Miss Peabody had heard Slater's invitation, too. Everything was perfect.

He noted the time by his watch as he swung past Slater's hotel. He drove out on Santa Monica Boulevard to the low hills near a movie studio. He stopped only for a minute in a dead-end lane where weeks before he had scouted out the tree. The drive had taken him nine minutes.

He wheeled back onto the boulevard and headed for the Coliseum. Exactly thirty-

two minutes later the tall, gray walls of the stadium came in view. Murchison turned off on a side street skirting the grounds of Exposition Park. As he cruised past the empty auto parks he reflected that tomorrow these deserted streets would be jammed with cars.

An announcer's voice cut in on the radio: "And don't forget tomorrow at 1 p.m. Frank Helm will bring you a play by play description of the Southern California-Stanford game from the Los Angeles Coliseum through the courtesy of White Test Gasoline, the high octane rated fuel of champions . . . 1 p.m. . . . Trojans versus the Indians. . . . It's a date, don't be late!"

Carl Murchison gripped the steering wheel tightly. The last element had served itself to him. Cement for the alibi! Now it would be perfect!

He drove slowly back to Beverly Hills. The return trip took thirty-six minutes. Excellent! He added the time necessary for an accident which was part of his plan. Finally he returned to his own little apartment and went to bed.

\* \* \*

Saturday morning Murchison arose early. He cooked his breakfast unhurriedly in the tiny kitchen. He wasn't very hungry. He was too nervous for that. The bright winter sun shone without heat. Outside, the air was crisp for California but not unpleasant. Murchison read the paper as he drank a second cup of coffee. Turning to the sport page he found the information he wanted.

#### TROJANS MEET STANFORD

Los Angeles, Dec. 22 (DP). Coach Bill Sumner's warriors from the University of Southern Calif. were confident of the outcome of the gridiron battle tomorrow when the Trojans meet the invading Indians from Stanford at the Los Angeles Coliseum.

Betting odds showed USC heavily favored to add the Indian scalp to its record belt of five victories in the Pacific Coast Conference which would make the Trojans certain of a spot in the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day. . . .

Murchison read it all, puzzled by the vernacular for he had never followed any kind of sport. But he had to know enough about the game to satisfy the police. They

would ask questions that he must answer.

At 11 o'clock he left his apartment. He spoke casually to a neighbor who called good morning to him. Normally on Saturday he would have been at the office and he felt an explanation was natural.

"Got a day off," he said. "My boss gave me a ticket to the football game."

He got in his car and drove slowly across town to the Coliseum. The streets for blocks around the stadium were filled with the cars of other early arrivals. Eventually he found a place to park on a side street.

Murchison entered Tunnel 9 shortly before 1 p.m. and moved along with the crowd, unaffected by its gaiety and color. There were girls with bright colored bandanas about their heads, carrying pennants and seat cushions, and young men with shining, fresh faces and slender pipes and lap robes. The smell of popcorn and perfume and occasionally gin gave a distinct flavor to the sharp westerly wind.

He paused at the top of the ramp, studying the vast green bowl opened before him. A program peddler, a young man wearing a Frosh cap, came toward him. Murchison reached into his pocket for some change, taking the program with the other hand. He handed the boy a dime.

"Twenty-five cents. Mister. Two bits!"

Murchison glowered at him. "Twenty-five cents for a program? That's outrageous! I can get the line-up from the newspaper."

The boy looked at him with open disgust. "Well, read the newspaper then. Gimme that program!"

Murchison jerked away. "Never mind," he replied angrily. "I'll pay you for it! But it's still an outrage!"

"Nuts," the boy declared. He took Murchison's quarter. "Don't buy any hot dogs inside, big shot. It'll bankrupt you!"

Murchison snorted. "If I ever see you outside—" He let it trail. The look the boy gave him was assurance to Murchison that he wouldn't be forgotten.

#### *Point Number One!*

He found his seat which was a good one almost in mid-field and about a third of the way up. People pressed in beside him. He was scanning the program idly when the game started. He watched the plays without interest, heard the shouts around him with detachment. At the quarter, the score

was Southern California 12, Stanford 0. During the second period he felt tension creep upon him. He couldn't help glancing at his watch.

THE half ended a few minutes before 3 o'clock. He got up and went out. Nobody paid any attention to him when he went down the ramp and outside. The sidewalks themselves were practically deserted. He walked swiftly. He found his car and drove away.

He parked a half block from the hotel. He took the .45 automatic from the glove compartment and dropped it in his coat pocket. He made his entrance with a group of people who disembarked from a taxi. He crossed the lobby with them to the elevators. The car was filled and he rode up to the top floor. Instead of entering the Starlight Room, the hotel's exclusive cocktail lounge, he went through the door beside the elevator bank and down the stairs. No one paid the slightest attention to him.

On the ninth floor he came out into the hotel corridor. He stopped in front of Room 904. It was a corner suite, five luxurious rooms that commanded a view of all Beverly Hills and, on smogless days, of Los Angeles and Hollywood. It was cool outside the door and yet Murchison felt a wave of heat rising around him.

For a moment his courage seemed to ebb. His legs felt rubbery and the sweat was soaking his shirt along his spine. He pressed the pearl button beside the door of Room 904.

This was the most critical moment. In every plan, the ones he had rejected and in this one, this was the single instant when some unavoidable accident could destroy the entire scheme. Of course, he was prepared to cover up if Slater had a visitor.

But Mr. Slater was alone.

"What the hell do you want?" Slater said.

Murchison forced out his prepared speech. "I've got to see you. I've got to, Mr. Slater. Are you alone?"

Slater's eyes flickered. "Yes," he said finally. "I'm alone. This had better be good, Murchison!"

Murchison went ahead of Slater and when they were in the living room he stopped and turned about slowly.

"Well?" Slater demanded.

Suddenly Murchison felt amazingly calm. He let his hand fall into his side pocket. There was comfort in the feel of the gun.

"Did you complete your deal all right? With Mr. Rodriguez?" Murchison licked his lips ever so lightly.

Slater stared hard. "So that's it. So the little worm decided to rise up on his tail!" Slater laughed shortly. "You poor stupid fool!"

Murchison gripped the automatic tightly. He gazed across the room at a small writing desk. A package lay on top. He looked back at Slater.

"Damn you, Murchison!" Slater cried "The nerve of you coming here to try and pressure me for money. You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to beat your fat little body to a pulp. Then I'll have you thrown out!"

Murchison felt the blood drain from his burning face. His voice seemed unnatural as he spoke.

"No. You aren't going to touch me, Mr. Slater."

Slater's eyes widened. "No?" he said. "You think somebody might hear us? You're wrong, Murchison. This place is soundproof. Makes it wonderful for parties." He took a step forward. "Nobody is going to hear us—"

Murchison said quietly, as he drew the automatic: "This won't hurt you—much."

The explosion was terrifyingly loud. Slater fell as though he'd been struck in the stomach with a heavy timber. Murchison stepped across the carpet. He looked just once into Slater's eyes, eyes filled with terror and pain. Then he fired a second shot into the man's head. Slater rolled over.

Murchison took the package from the desk. He pulled away enough of the wrapping to see the green of the money inside. Then he stuffed the package into his pocket. He dropped the gun in his other pocket, and checked the time by his watch. It was 4 o'clock!

Using his handkerchief, Murchison pulled the blotter off the desk. Then he tipped over the inkwell and pushed a framed photograph onto the floor beside the body. Finally with a sweep of his hand he knocked the telephone onto the floor. The receiver crackled as the operator's voice sounded.

### *Point Number Two!*

Murchison crossed swiftly to the door and went out. He climbed the stairs to the top floor again. Almost immediately he caught an elevator down. He found his car and started driving.

By 4:15 he had parked at the dead-end street and walked to the splintered stump of the eucalyptus tree. He hid the package of money and the .45 automatic in the rotted limb. He went back to the car and headed for the Coliseum.

**I**T WAS a few minutes before 5 o'clock when he turned down the side street. The sun was low and flung a blood red sheen upon the oval walls of the stadium. A few people were already moving out from the tunnel exits.

Murchison leaned over and snapped on the car radio, punched a tuning button. In a second, crowd noises swelled behind the sound of a band. An announcer's voice cut in:

"... and here it is, ladies and gentlemen, the last half minute of this old ball game. It's been a hard fought contest but the score doesn't show it. California hasn't been a very charitable host to the brave visitors from the North. 35 to 0, Folks, that's the way she stands! Most of the playing field is in shadows. There's just time for one more play—and here it is! Curtz is fading back for a pass. They're rushing him—he can't get it away! He's trying to run! And there's the gun! Curtz goes down under a swarm of tacklers. That's the ball game—"

Murchison snapped off the radio.

### *Point Number Three!*

He saw the ant-like files of people spewing from the tunnels. He didn't have to circle the block to wait for the traffic to build up. There was enough when he reached the main avenue.

At the first cross intersection Murchison spotted a large gray sedan. It came slowly from the right to join the flow of traffic. Murchison slowed purposely so that the sedan could swing in front of him. Then he accelerated. A second before the crash he slammed on his brakes.

Cars piled up behind as Murchison climbed from behind the wheel and went forward to meet the driver of the sedan.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said immediate-

ly. "It was my fault. No question about it. Here's my card."

The man's face eased under Murchison's geniality. "I'll handle everything. My insurance covers it," Murchison added. He climbed back into his own car.

*Point Number Four!*

It was quarter to six when he reached Slater's hotel. He parked around the corner and went inside to the desk. The clerk looked at him curiously when he asked for Mr. Slater's room.

In a minute the clerk said, "Go right up, sir. Room 904."

He'd seen the strain in the clerk's face. He was sure the police would be there. This was the boldest step of all, and the smartest. By going directly back to the scene, he was insuring a minimum of suspicion. Fable to the contrary, he knew that facts prove a murderer does not return to the scene of his crime.

When he touched the button outside Room 904 he had to force himself to act surprised. A large man with a coat over his arm opened the door.

"Come in," he said.

Murchison hesitated. "Mr. Slater is expecting me. I—I didn't know he had visitors."

"That's all right. Come in."

Murchison stopped inside the door. Half-a-dozen men stood in the living room. He let his glance carry to the sheet-covered body near the desk.

An older man with a tired but kindly face stepped toward him.

"What happened?" Murchison blurted. "What—"

"There's been an accident. Are you a friend of Mr. Slater's?"

Murchison swallowed. "I—I work for him. I'm Carl Murchison. I'm a clerk in Mr. Slater's office. Is he . . . is he hurt?"

The man took Murchison's arm and led him to a chair. From this position he didn't have to look at the body.

"I'm Captain Lurner of the Beverly Hills Police Department. Homicide. Mr. Slater is dead. I'll have to ask you a few questions."

Murchison passed a hand over his fat moist face. Inside he steeled himself. He wasn't worried about his physical reaction for it fitted the occasion.

"You came here by appointment?"

"Yes. Mr. Slater phoned me this morning, asked me to come to the hotel right after the game."

"Game?"

"The football game. At the Coliseum. Mr. Slater was good enough to give me a ticket."

Lurner nodded. "You've been there all day then."

"Why, yes, Captain. Since noon."

Lurner nodded again. "You could prove that?"

Murchison frowned. "I don't understand. What's happened? Why should I have to prove where I was this afternoon?"

CAPTAIN LURNER lit a cigarette. "Mr. Slater was murdered," he said soberly. "He died about four o'clock. That's why I want to know where you were, Mr. Murchison. At four o'clock."

Murchison fumed. "I just told you, Captain. I was at the USC-Stanford football game. Surely—" he paused, trying hard for a proper appearance of shocked anger—"surely you're not accusing me?"

Lurner shook his head. "Of course not," he said. "We just have to ask questions."

Murchison made a gesture. "Sure, Captain. Sorry. I misunderstood. Certainly I can prove I was at the Coliseum." He pulled the torn ticket stub from his pocket. "Here's my ticket."

The Captain looked at it casually. "You were alone?"

"Yes. I sat alone."

"Did you speak to anyone at the game? Anyone?"

"No, I was alone. I—wait a minute. There was a little argument with a program seller. If it was a question of identification he might remember me. But surely you don't—"

"Anyone else?"

Murchison shook his head. "No, sir." He hesitated, feigning thought. "Not until I started home at least."

Another man in plain clothes moved in beside Lurner, listening.

"I had an accident just a block from the stadium. Hit another car. Not serious. I gave the fellow my card."

"What time was that?" Lurner asked.

"About five, I suppose."

Lurner and the second man exchanged glances and then the police captain whis-

pered something Murchison couldn't hear. "It'd take a good half hour each way," the second man said.

The Captain nodded. Then he looked at Murchison and sighed.

"Sorry to have bothered you. Just let me have your address. We may want to talk to you again."

Murchison recited his address mechanically. It was all he could do to control the excitement he felt. Victory was in his hands. He started for the door.

"Oh, Mr. Murchison!"

The captain walked after him. "You said that Mr. Slater asked you to meet him here after the game. Wasn't that a little unusual? On Saturday, I mean?"

Murchison hesitated. "Mr. Slater had a business appointment with someone earlier. I thought he might want to give me some notes on that meeting."

Lurner pursed his lips agreeably. "Or money? Mr. Slater was in the diamond business, wasn't he? Isn't it possible he sold some diamonds this afternoon?"

Murchison forced himself to be steady.

"Yes, Captain, that's possible. I just don't know."

Lurner looked speculatively at him a minute. "By the way, Mr. Murchison, how was the game? I had a bet on Stanford."

"Then you lost, Captain. Southern Cal won. Thirty-five to nothing. A terrific game!"

The faint smile Murchison had affected faded as he saw the look that came upon the face of the man who stood near Turner. The man spoke quickly in Turner's ear. The Captain swung about then and something in the way he moved sent a chill of premonition into Murchison's bones.

"You say you were at the game and that the Trojans won by thirty-five to nothing, Mr. Murchison?"

Murchison's heart pounded. He bobbed his head. A mist of dizziness sprang up in front of him as he saw the incredulity in the Captain's eyes. For an interminable minute the officer did not speak. He just stared.

"Tell me," Lurner said finally. "Do you have a radio in your car?"

The heat was suddenly unbearable, and Murchison thought he heard the faint tinkling of a thousand bells. He looked at the Captain from Homicide.

"Yes, sir," he said faintly. "I have a radio. But I don't understand—"

The Captain's face was suddenly round and smiling.

"Oh, yes you do. We'll find your program peddler and the man whose car you hit. The ends of your alibi will hold. But the middle! You'll crack when you realize you can't win. You'll tell us where the money is and when you left the game to kill Slater and just everything about it."

Murchison screamed. "No! I don't know anything about it!"

"Sure you know, Murchison. Because you weren't at that game at four o'clock. Somewhere along the line you turned on the radio in the car to get the final score. But you hit the wrong tuning button! Up at San Francisco the California Bears beat Washington State 35 to 0. But down here at the Coliseum, Stanford beat Southern California 13 to 12." As the room spun before Murchison, the Captain added, "You got the wrong station, Murchison. But don't let it worry you. I've got the right station. Let's you and me go over and pay it a visit!"

# HEADACHE

UPSET  
STOMACH

JUMPY  
NERVES



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# BLACK SPOTS OF DOOM

By L. S.  
GOLDSMITH

"I wasn't going to kill  
her. . . ."



*The dirty-faced urchin, the cops, the grief-stricken doctor—all were hunting for Mary's killer . . . not knowing he had already drawn the Ace of Spades.*

**T**HE cop, Flaherty, was a specialist in screams. In a split second he could tell if they meant rage, pain or death. He thought this one sounded like death. He was right. When he reached there, she was practically dead.

She was on the floor of the Eye Clinic. The thin knife lay close by and it shone brightly with wet blood. He knelt beside her. He could feel the warm, sticky stuff

through his heavy trouser leg at the knee.

The girl with the mop of gold hair was trying to talk through pale, stretched lips—a strange jumble of words. Then he thought he caught a name, O’Cassidy. It sounded something like O’Cassidy—he wasn’t sure. He never would be now. She was gone.

He looked at her still, white face. He knew her all right. She’d smiled that warm young smile of hers a hundred times as she passed him on her way home. He always circled the hospital block at this hour. He’d seen the tall redheaded guy walking arm-in-arm with her. Richards, that was it—Doctor John Richards. The one who knew the D. A.

Flaherty heard a movement behind him. Richards stood in the doorway. The kid with him had frightened eyes and a very dirty face. It looked as though it hadn’t been washed in several years. They both were staring at the girl on the floor. The kid’s eyes were fixed and shining.

“It’s Miss Dutton,” he said. And then without stopping for breath, “I’ll bet the little guy killed her.”

The cop held Richards back. “It’s no use, Doctor, she’s past all help. I’ll phone headquarters if you don’t mind.”

Richards pushed the cop aside and dropped to his knee. He put his head close to her heart and listened. His look was despairing, then hopeless. He didn’t speak.

Neither one of them paid any attention to the kid. He was talking shrilly—a torrent of tumbling words. “Didn’t I keep telling you, Doc? The moment she yelled, I knew something was wrong. I seen him running out. A little guy—hardly bigger than me. I kept telling you and you wouldn’t believe me.”

Richards nodded, but the kid’s words hadn’t reached him. Then he broke his stony silence. He turned to the cop. His tone was flat.

“Okay, Flaherty, call headquarters and when they contact Jerry Sheridan, the D. A., tell them to say it’s Mary.” His laugh shocked Flaherty. “Funny, isn’t it? The D. A. was going to be my best man.”

The kid trailed after Flaherty. Richards stayed where he was, his mind in torment.

Johnny Richards was in his late twenties. In repose, his face was grave with that quiet listening quality that helped young doctors get ahead. When he laughed, the

light and life of youth took over and he seemed just a boy. There was no laughter in his soul just now, only despair.

An hour before he had been kidding this girl. He remembered her smile when he said she’d have to buy the ring. That smile of hers was like a legacy from heaven, so warm-hearted, so honest. Her generous lips had been ready to offer smiles to all who wanted them. Mary, with her sunlit hair and skin like new cream. Mary, with eyes that saw all things as good. There was no one else in the world for Richards. Mary was his world. The suddenness of it completely shocked his senses, left him bewildered.

But one thing he knew: whoever had done this thing would be made to pay. He’d collect that unwished for debt if it took him a lifetime. . . .

Jerry Sheridan, the D. A., surveyed the little group. For an hour he had been questioning Richards and the boy. Beside him was Sam Burke of the Homicide Bureau. Flaherty, the cop, stood by the door of the clinic.

The D. A. was prematurely gray. He wore glasses without rims. Behind them were a pair of eyes that saw the world pretty much as it was, and liked it. The D. A. was human. What’s more, he didn’t try to hide it. A kindly face, more the face of a judge than a hard fighting attorney. Almost everyone in this thriving little city liked Jerry Sheridan. Even the town drunks called him Jerry.

Sheridan had known Johnny Richards all his life and his father before him. Johnny was a dead ringer for his old man. Red hair, blue eyes and all. He even had his father’s long, ambling gait. Old Richards had tended and befriended the Sheridan family when Jerry was working his way through law school and times were hard. Jerry had worshipped the old man, and when he died, no one had taken it more to heart—except, of course, young Johnny.

The D. A. looked spent. He knew this was torture for his friend. He said:

“Now let’s go over this once more and pick up the loose ends. You say you left her at a quarter to five?”

Richards spoke unevenly. “That’s right. I had to get the new bulb for my ophthalmoscope, and I told her that I—”

“How far is the shop from here?”

**R**ICHARDS was trying to pull himself together, but his voice kept surprising him. It didn't seem to belong to him and it wouldn't act right. "It's Jones', over at Pine and Main. It's only about five blocks. But it took me a while because I—"

"How long would you say you were gone?"

"Maybe thirty-five or forty minutes."

"Wasn't it unusual to leave the ward alone—with just Mary?"

"No. It's happened many times before. As you know, Mary has been helping me for the past year. She got her medical degree about eighteen months ago. Besides," he added, "it was after hours. We seldom get patients at—"

"Yes, I know. But what makes you think the murderer was a patient?"

"I don't say he was. All I know is that the lights were on over the examining chair and over the test charts in the back."

"And you think that while or after she was examining his eyes, he attacked her?"

Richards nodded and stared into space. "That's what I think, Jerry."

The D. A. turned to the kid. "All right, Tommy. Let's have it again. Where were you when you heard that scream?"

Tommy thought he was in school. He took off his hat and stood up straight. His eyes took in the silent Burke and the deadpan Flaherty who hadn't moved from the door.

"I was up by Meyers' grocery on the corner. I'd just delivered Meyers' papers and then Mr. Meyers said—"

The D. A. broke in: "Yes, let's skip that. But when you heard Miss Dutton—?"

Tommy's voice was a shrill squeak. "I told you I didn't know it was her. I wasn't even sure where the yell came from. I thought maybe—"

"All right, Tommy. So you asked Mr. Meyers, and he said he ain't heard no yell, and then while you are standing there you see a little guy running out the door?"

Tommy had liked this game at first but he was getting fed up.

"I didn't say I seen him coming out. I said I seen him running toward me and then he sees us standing there and he turns and runs the other way."

"Did you get a good look at him?"

"Not so good. But I think I'd know him if I saw him. If I ever get a crack at—"

"Okay, Boys. Take Tommy along."

Tommy made a dive for the door but Flaherty stopped him in his tracks. Tommy shrugged. "Listen, you big lug—you can't arrest me!"

The D. A. smiled. His tone was reassuring. "You're not pinched, Tommy. You're going to join the force. For the next twenty-four hours you are Tommy Ryan of the Homicide Bureau, and the Ryans always get their man. . . ."

Burke, of the Homicide Bureau, was footsore and sad. In fact, he even thought it might be nice to be dead. They had saddled him with this kid, Tommy, because Tommy was the bright hope. He had seen someone near the scene of the crime. He had seen him running away. It could have been that ghost, O'Cassidy, that Flaherty mentioned.

Burke wasn't fond of kids. They got in his hair. This one acted like a cross between a half-baked movie-star and Dead-Eye Dick. Just now he was working on a kind of chant:

"We'll put Cassidy in the can. The Ryans always get their man."

He kept on repeating it over and over again. He kept step to it, too. It got Burke sore. It's no good slapping kids, he thought, especially if they're not yours.

Burke had checked his list of neighborhood O'Cassidys. He wished he could check Tommy Ryan, and throw the claim ticket away. Before they started out, he got the kid to wash his face. But when it was all clean and shining, Burke found he still didn't care for him.

All day he had cautioned Tommy about talking out of turn, but it had done no good. They would trace an O'Cassidy to his lair, were it home, bowling alley or saloon. They'd no sooner approach their man when Tommy would sing out, "That's not him," and another O'Cassidy would bite the dust of confusion.

The O'Cassidys didn't like it. Burke didn't like it. And as for the cop, Flaherty, he'd left them flat long since. Burke decided to stop at a drug store down the block and phone headquarters.

In the drug store, a spidery little man sat at the soda fountain, his legs curled around the tall stool. His strange, high-topped shoes concealed his ankles—and also a gun. He wore a crumpled, double-

breasted brown suit with wide white stripes. He gulped the white foamy stuff with relish, wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

The soda-clerk didn't fancy him—neither his manner nor his face. The face was chiefly nose, low and spreading with astonishingly wide nostrils. He wore a battered hat pushed back on a narrow shelf of forehead. His eyes were small. The whites were shot with dirty pink.

Tommy shouted from the doorway, "That's him!" and Burke made the pinch.

Burke left Tommy having a soda on the house.

**B**URKE gave his customary knock and heard the customary "Come in." The D. A. sat at his old, flat-top desk, and Johnny Richards sat beside him. Flaherty stood over by the window.

The D. A. looked up. "It's okay, Burke, don't mind the doctor. He has a stake in this. Mary Dutton was his girl—and besides," he added, "a doctor may come in very handy."

Burke pulled up a chair. "Well, as I told you on the phone, we picked up this little guy, Pedrello, at the drug store. We haven't a thing on him, and we've done some tall checking."

"That name Pedrello may be phoney."

"Sure, but take a look at him. No Irishman would own a mug like that. If his name's O'Cassidy, I'm King Solomon."

"No luck on O'Cassidy?"

"Chief, we've fine-combed the neighborhood. Every O'Cassidy has a halo or an alibi, and that goes for the O'Caseys as well."

"Well, let's have Pedrello in and get it over with."

But it wasn't easy to get it over with. They worked on Pedrello for hours, to no avail. The little man sat back on the hard wood chair, his thin legs spread, his feet just touching the floor. He seemed interested in the D. A.'s glasses. Every time the D. A. took them off to polish them, Pedrello leered as though this showed proof of the older man's confusion.

Now and then Pedrello closed his eyes to shut out the glare of the lights above his head, but for the most part, he seemed to be enjoying himself. Four-eyes didn't have a thing on him.

The D. A. spoke sharply. "We're wasting time. Stop stalling. We know you killed the girl, Pedrello. Just tell us why you did it."

Pedrello yawned. His wide nostrils were black caverns. "I told you ten times. I never went near the place."

The D. A. continued to polish his glasses. He wondered which of them was putting on the better act.

"Look, Man, why not come clean? We've got a witness outside who spotted you the moment he saw you in that drug store. He swears he could pick you out of any line-up as the guy he saw running away. We've got the knife you killed her with, and the boys are working right now on fingerprints. You dropped your trademark somewhere. They'll find it. They seldom miss."

His voice rose, "Pedrello, every man in this room knows you're guilty as hell. All we want to know is why you killed her."

Pedrello said nothing. The stretched nostrils and small, cruel mouth made his face a jeering mask. But silently he cursed those lights.

"You say you went on duty at eight last night? How long you been on that job?"

"I told you, about seven months."

"Kind of tough on your eyes, I guess, with that furnace blazing at you."

Pedrello blinked. "They give us protectors. It ain't too tough." But his little eyes weren't steady. They seemed to be listening for something in the white wall.

And a strange thing was happening to Richards. He couldn't quite figure it. He got the crazy idea that there was a little door in his brain. Someone was hammering at the door, someone wanted to yet in. He looked at Pedrello's red-rimmed eyes, all shot with dirty pink. He watched the shifting glances—always to the right—to the wall. He thought of Mary and her last confused words.

And then, quite suddenly, the little door in his brain was flung open. O'Cassidy! It was all clear now. Richards knew all about O'Cassidy. He also knew that he was looking at Mary Dutton's murderer.

Richards leaned across the desk and whispered hurried words in Sheridan's ear. Sheridan nodded.

"Pedrello," he said, "the doctor wants to look at your eyes."

Pedrello bridled. "No one ain't going

to look at my eyes." He half rose from his seat.

Richards took over. His voice was soft and coaxing. "There's something wrong with your eyes, Pedrello. Maybe that light hurts them." He was all sympathy. "Let me move your chair closer to the wall. Let me adjust that light a little." Pedrello looked at him in surprise.

Flaherty laughed. "There's a footstool in the other office, Doctor."

But Richards continued to act like a dotting mother. He moved the lamp. Its rays now fell directly on the white wall.

"What's wrong with your eyes, Pedrello? You are seeing things, aren't you? They're funny spots on the wall, Pedrello, black spots. That night work at the plant wasn't too good, was it? That hot fire from the furnace was burning bright. Too bright, Pedrello. You are seeing that glare right now, and those black spots are sort of swimming on the wall. Don't blink, Pedrello. That won't help. Those spots will still be there."

Under the lamp's steady glare, the little man sat stiff, rigid—and silent. The sweat poured down his face. Richards went on relentlessly.

"Don't you know the truth, Pedrello? Those spots aren't really on the wall. They're in your eyes, and they'll always be there—even when you hang. Didn't you know what ailed you, Pedrello? Didn't Miss Dutton tell you?"

Pedrello lost control. "I don't know what in hell you're getting at. I don't see anything. I never went near that damn hospital. I don't know any Dutton dame. I—"

Richards walked up to him and grabbed his shoulder. "You fool. Didn't you see

her making notes on that prescription blank?"

Pedrello pushed his hand away in panic. His face was gray. "Notes; there was no notes. She didn't make no notes." And then too late he saw the trap. He kicked over his chair and backed to the door. The gun in his hand swung in a wide arc. His high-pitched voice was screaming wildly now.

"I'm getting out of here! You stay where you are, all of you. I wasn't going to kill her. She didn't have to smile like that if she didn't mean to be nice. I only wanted her to be nice—"

Burke cursed as he threw the telephone book. It caught Pedrello right between the eyes. The gun exploded in midair.

\* \* \*

The D. A. regarded Richards with the eyes of a somewhat puzzled but proud father. "That's all clear. I see that business of the black spots all right. But a guy can have shifty eyes without seeing bugs on the wall. How did you pin the killing on Pedrello?"

Richards was tired now. The reaction had set in. All this didn't seem to matter much. He pulled himself up. "You see, old man, it was 'O'Cassidy' that nailed him."

"O'Cassidy? Take it easy, Boy. You've been swell up till now."

Richards smiled. His eyes were very far away.

"Mary was trying to give us a clue. She was trying to help us. She remembered her medical books. What she said was 'Opacity—vitreous opacity.' *Black spots to you, old man.*"

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946, of Dime Detective Magazine combined with Flynn's Detective Fiction, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1947. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Dime Detective Magazine combined with Flynn's Detective Fiction, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Managing Editor, none; Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of October, 1947. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 40, Register's No. 363-W-8. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Rev. 7-46.

# READY FOR THE RACKETS

A department conducted this month by Bill Slater, moderator of the "Racket Smashers" program, Mutual Broadcasting System.

*Racketeers and scoundrels of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a fore-knowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chiselers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your name, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Rackets Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 206 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17, N. Y.*

## Dollars But No Scents

Dear Sir:

Office workers are quite often the swindle victims of building-to-building "salesmen." Several months ago one of such salesmen displayed to the girls in our office an ornately packaged bottle of perfume.

The cap of the bottle was sealed and showed no indication of ever having been broken. The perfume was a popular brand, and the label was clearly marked \$3.50; however, the man told us that he was going out of business and was selling all of his products at great reductions. He then offered us the perfume at \$1.00 per bottle, and each of us in the office bought one.

By the time one of the girls had opened her bottle and had discovered its contents were nothing but colored water with absolutely no scent at all, our swindler had disappeared completely from the building, taking along with him our five one-dollar bills.

Mrs. Stanley Latchford  
Cleveland, Ohio

## Clever—and Cruel

Dear Sir:

A new twist has been added here in the Midwest to swindle Gold Star widows and families.

The nice-appearing agent congratulates you on being related to the brave soldier who gave his life that we might live.

"Our government wants to honor this hero by hanging a permanent life-size portrait of him in the beautiful new Memorial Building at Lincoln," he continues. "Could you lend us a good picture to make the portrait from?"

You ask questions, and you like the idea fine, so you let him take the best picture you have. "The service fee is only \$10," he says, smiling, "and we send you a colored enlargement free."

You hesitate, but not for long. It would be inhuman to deny your loved one that special honor. You pay the nice man, and he promises to send your picture within ten days.

A month passes. No picture. Then you travel to Lincoln to view the fine portraits—and the police tell you that there is no such Memorial Building or portraits. You're another sad victim of a clever swindle.

The American Legion is publicizing this racket over a three-state area. If you're approached by these men, call your local Legion Post at once.

And remember this: U. S. military honors paid deceased heroic veterans don't cost the relatives one cent!

Respectfully yours,  
James D. Callahan  
Lincoln, Nebraska

## Surprise!

Dear Sir:

When calling on a client last week, I heard of a racket that reminded me again of the old legal phrase, "Let the buyer beware."

Mr. A. had recently bought a second-hand car. After driving it for a couple of months, he noticed some mechanical defect. Since he was on his vacation and was somewhat of an amateur mechanic, he decided to replace the worn part with a new one.

He had purchased the car as a 1937 D-car. That's what his papers and receipt called for. After he had removed the defective part he went to the D-car parts store and asked for a part like it to fit a '37 D-car. When he tried to put it in he found it wouldn't fit. So he returned to the store and told the clerk that he had made a mistake. After checking the parts, the man suggested that he bring the old part down and when Mr. A. did, they found that it was from a 1934 P-car.

Examining the car closely when he got home, Mr. A. discovered that he did, indeed, have a 1934 P-car motor in a 1937 D-car chassis and body. Too, it looked as if the motor number had been tampered with.

The motor vehicle people said they could do nothing, but when he went to the Better Business Bureau, where one should go with complaints like this, he was promised a full investigation.

Yours truly,  
D. D. Axtell  
San Francisco, Calif.

## Expensive Favor

Dear Sir:

I own a cafe and am considered pretty smart, as the customers have tried to pull all kinds of tricks. But here is one they did pull, and how!

A young man came in and said: "Buddy, I want to send some money through the mail to my

*(Please continue on page 97)*

# MURDER ON MY MITTS

**Dramatic  
Crime-Adventure  
Novelette**

**By  
ROBERT TURNER**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Dame In a Dungeon

IT'S crazy, the way some things hit you, will send you running back down Memory Lane. A snatch of an old familiar tune, a long forgotten snapshot, the smell of autumn leaves burning, or sometimes just the scream of a train whistle in the night. You know what I mean?

Only tonight, with me, it was none of those more-or-less usual things. What gave me that old nostalgic feeling was going back to Dix Hill, the swank and snobbish residential section of Mill City, the first time in twenty years. I'd sworn I never would go back unless it was to live there. And I never had. It was taking a murder to make me break that vow.

Halfway up the long, winding road that climbs the hill, I scrounged around in the seat of the cab and looked out the back window. We were on a curve, with sheer cliffs dropping off the side of the road for several hundred feet. You got an unobstructed view of the whole of Mill City in the valley below. It was a beautiful spot. Only it wasn't so beautiful to me. It dredged up too many memories and it made me feel very old, very tired.

Mill City looked pretty from way up

She whimpered: "Please, Mike, get me out of this.  
... I'll go away with you. Please, Honey!"



\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$

*My mystery novels brought me a lot of cash and some high fun—till my favorite girl (married to a drunken slob) was crucified on my dollar sign.*

\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$



here, but it wasn't really pretty. Up here, you couldn't see the dirty, ramshackle company houses. You couldn't see "Rotgut Row." But I could. I'd been born and raised in Company Town. And later, as a police reporter I'd had to crawl along every seam and fold of the town like a louse in a hobo's overcoat.

From the heights of swanky Dix Hill, I looked back down across the town and I remembered a lot of things. I remembered how proud my old man was when I was a twelve-year-old kid and my first job was delivering papers to the big homes on Dix Hill. He was a great guy, my old man. He was a foreman at the foundry and he could outdrink any three men in Company Town. I wondered what he'd think of me, now, going back up on the hill to snoop around at a murder that was really none of my damned business.

I used to brag to June Manners, who lived next door, about the house I would someday own on Dix Hill. That was a funny thing because it was June, not I, who finally got to live up there. She had become June Warburton. I wondered if she had ever looked out from her palatial home up there and remembered those kid nights when we used to talk and dream. I wondered what she thought about now that she was back down off the hill again. I felt a little sorry for her, sitting down there in the city she hated, in one of those little hencoop cells at headquarters, facing the big rap—the murder rap. I wondered if she had really killed her rich and drunken no-good husband.

And then the cab swung around that curve and I settled back in the seat and lit a cigarette.

The hackie said: "You want the Warburton Place, huh? You know them people?"

"A little. I knew *her*."

"Yeah?" he said eagerly. "What do you think? I mean you think she really—"

"I don't know," I stopped him.

He went back to his driving. A few minutes later the hack turned down a maple-lined street, where the smallest home's a cute little hovel in the forty-thousand-dollar class.

Even though it was still early, the darkened streets looked deserted. There was a sort of breathless hush over the whole of

Dix Hill, as though the section had been shocked silly by the sordid act of murder being committed in its midst.

The hack turned into a driveway that cut through an acre of broad lawn and pulled to a stop under the porte cochere of the Warburton mansion. A porch light was on, and a tall, rawboned cop, with a horse face and a worried look around his sad brown eyes, was sprawled in a wicker chair, reading a comic magazine. He guiltily cupped a cigarette in his hand until he saw that the cab wasn't a squad car and I wasn't the precinct sergeant. He stared at me in mild surprise.

"Hello, Coogan," I said.

He unhinged his lanky figure from the chair, rolled up the comic book and flipped the butt of his cigarette out onto the lawn. "Will Dennison." He looked puzzled. "What you doin' here, Will? You back coverin' crime for the *Herald*, again? I heard you got off the paper a long time ago. I heard you was writin' books or something? Mystery books?"

I thought "got off the paper" was a polite way of putting it. I'd been fired. I stood there on the front porch of the Warburton mansion, where I used to toss folded copies of the *Herald* every night. Across the street I could see lights in the home of Arthur Macy, the *Herald's* publisher. I wished the Macy place was closer, so that I could spit over onto Arthur's nice velvety lawn.

"Coogan, you dolt," I said. "I see you don't go in for fine literature. Didn't you ever read *Here's to Murder*, or *Affair Of The Lonely Loon*, *Tonight You Die!* or *Death in Texas*, et cetera? All by Will Dennison?"

His sad eyes widened. "You write all them books?"

"Don't hold it against me." I told him. "A guy's got to make a buck here, a buck there. . . . Who's got this case, Coogan?"

He sat back down in the chair. "March," he said. "You remember him? Lieutenant March?"

"SURE. Johnny March. *Licutenant*, S eh? He was always an ambitious boy, that Johnny."

Coogan said: "He cracked a couple nice cases the last few years. He's moved up fast. He's a dirty, no-good heel, too. . . ."

What *are* you doing here on Dix Hill, Will?"

"It's a long story. Who's inside?"

"That lunkhead, Bruno—*Sergeant* Bruno," Coogan said in a lowered voice.

"Good old Mike Bruno. He's come along, too, eh? How is good old Mike?"

"He's sore as hell at March for takin' this case off of him. But Bruno don't have to take his peeve out on me, the—" Coogan went back to his comic book. "Go ahead in, Will. You'll probably find that cabbage head down in the wine cellar—if there is one."

I opened the front door and went in and the mounted head of a wild boar leered at me from one side of the entrance hall, and a polar bear from the other. Sam Warburton had been a big game hunter and explorer. He'd made several fortunes lecturing on his travels and from the motion pictures he brought back from his trips and the specimen of rare animals he captured and sold to zoos.

At the end of the hall, a full-figure portrait in oils of Sam Warburton was hung, right where you couldn't miss it, where it banged you in the eye as you came in. That picture told you every thing about Warburton there was to know. The artist hadn't missed a trick. He'd shown Warburton, in full hunting costume, with a high powered big-game rifle crooked in one arm, in an arrogant stance, with one foot on the head of a slain tiger.

Sam Warburton had been a big man, heavy chested, with strapping shoulders. He had a leonine mane of tawny hair over a high, bulging forehead. He had a jowly, bulldog face with a muscle-ridged, under-shot jaw; a broad, rugged nose and surly looking amber eyes set deep under craggy brows. There was a great strength in his face and yet a touch of weakness, too. There was viciousness and vindictiveness and a frightening sense of lust for power and riches. There was a sort of bestial resentment and restlessness and a love of the hunt and the kill.

Despite his ugliness, women were supposed to have swarmed after him. His tremendous brute strength and reputation as a hunter was supposed to appeal to the primitive in them. I wondered what sensitive June Manners had seen in a monster like that. It wasn't so good to dwell on

that, so I thumbed my nose at the picture on the wall and turned into a big sitting room off the hall.

A lot of money had been thrown into the furniture and fixtures, but every piece had a heavy, gross look to it. But that was all right; so did the man who was using it, now.

Detective Sergeant Michael Bruno was curled up in a barrel-back chair and he didn't have the build for it. He hung way out over the edge, his blue serge trousers shiny enough to shave by. He was talking into a telephone. On a heavy teakwood table next to the chair was a fifth of good brandy, a soda-siphon, a silver bucket of ice, with tongs, and a glass with the remains of a drink in it. Detective-Sergeant Mike Bruno was living the good life for the moment.

HE HAD his back to me and was so busy with this phone conversation, he didn't hear me come in. Mike was a guy who always had his hair cropped too close in the back so that the sight of so much of that beefy red neck, with its creases and blackheads, was downright repulsive. The hand that held the phone was big-knuckled and red and matted with black hair. A ring with a diamond the size of a pea, winked from one of his sausage-like fingers and I wondered what kind of a grift Mike had pulled to rate that.

He was saying into the mouthpiece: "—so I won't keep you any longer, Baby. Go on and get back into your shower . . . You what? . . . Now, cut that out, Honey. You know I gotta put in another three hours in this lousy dump."

Mike Bruno began to laugh. "Okay, Keed. Sure. . . . What? No, not a dam' thing new. . . . Of course *she* did it. Who else? And they'll break her down, get a confession. And that oyster-face, Johnny March, will get all the credit for breaking the case . . . . What? Jeeze, I can't help it, Honey, I don't get no breaks. You just wait, Baby. I'll get there. I swear it. And you'll get them mink coats and diamonds like I always said. . . . Yeah, I know you been waitin' a long time. You just keep your—you just take it easy. . . . Okay, Honey. G'bye, Honey."

He hung up and released the phone in its cradle on the table. He swung his legs

down out of their curled-up position and twisted around front ways in the chair, reaching for the half finished drink. He saw me and pulled his hand away from that drink as though it was hot. He came up out of the chair like a jack-in-the-box.

Mike Bruno had once had a build like a Greek wrestler but most of it had gone to beef and now he was just a big hunk of plainclothes cop, whose suits were getting to be a tight squeeze. He had a low, corrugated forehead, ledge-like black brows and small, squinty blue eyes beneath them. Mike had a broken nose and an outthrust lower lip. You wouldn't call him a pretty boy. His meaty face was always too red and faintly shiny with perspiration. Little nests of broken veins were starting to show on his ruddy cheeks and around his nose. Right now, he had an ugly rum-blossom on the corner of his chin.

"That was Honey you were just talking to?" I asked innocently.

"Who the hell let you in here? Listening in on my private phone calls. That Coogan, I'll break his droopy jaw. You print a word of this in that crumby rag of yours, Dennison and I—I'll—"

His words faltered. His fists unclenched and his eyes widened. The heightened color flowed from his face and he grinned sheepishly. "Hi, Will," he said. He shuffled his big feet. "I—uh—I forgot. You kinda startled me and I forgot you don't work for the *Herald* no more."

His eyes went over me quickly, expertly, gauging the cost of my tweed sport coat and slacks and pebble-grained shoes. "You look good, Will," he said. "You look almost like a gent. You must make pretty good at that book-writin' racket, huh?"

"I get my coffee and beans, regularly," I admitted. I gestured to the phone. "You've got a new queen, Mike, you rogue." When you wanted to soap Mike up, you worked that angle. They called Mike, Casanova—behind his back. It was a joke. But not to Mike. He beamed.

"Will," he said, "you ought to see this one. This one's for me." He moistened his lips and threw up his eyes. "Just a kid, Will. And blonde. And with legs and—"

"I know," I said. "I'll bet she goes for you, too. What the hell, a big guy like you—a detective sergeant!"

He looked at me suspiciously for a mo-

ment, then he said: "This dame's got class. A dancer down at the Blue Angel. She's got ambition. She thinks a dick sergeant is nothin'. She thinks a guy my age should be the commissioner, already. Or an inspector, at least. She drives me crazy. All the time needlin' me, Will. Why don't I do somethin', she says, become somebody? Crack a big case, become famous. . . . Any other dame and I'd make her swallow some teeth. But not Barbie. She's got me with my brains hangin' out, Will."

I didn't ask him what brains. I said: "Barbie. That's a nice name, Mike."

"Yeah," he said, looking off past me . . . somewhere. "Barbie Valentine. What a dame, Will. I'd do anything for her."

I winced and looked at Mike Bruno closely. Five years ago Mike hadn't been a guy to get moon in his eye over a girl. He was very practical about that sort of thing. I didn't think he knew what the word love meant. But here was Mike Bruno in love.

"Well, you've got a nice deal, here, Mike," I said, gesturing around the room. "You loll around and lap up brandy and take life easy. And you get paid for it."

He flopped back down into the chair, and reached for his brandy and soda. His ugly red face was screwed up speculatively. "Look, just what are you doin' here, Will? You ain't no newspaperman no more. You don't even live in Mill City now. What's your angle in this?"

## CHAPTER TWO

### A Mind for Murder

I FIGURED it was time to spread the cards. "Well, you know, Mike, a little publicity doesn't hurt *anybody*. Authors—and book sales—thrive on it."

"Yeah? What is this? Everybody wants to get in the act. What do you mean, publicity, Will?"

I hunched my shoulders. "Don't get yourself excited. I'm not going to play detective to steal any glory from you and March." This had to be handled gently. "I've just got an angle that'll get my name mentioned—and one of my books. It will maybe sell a few thousand more copies of the book and possibly get me a Hollywood bid. That's all I'm interested in."

"What kind of an angle?"

"Well, I read about this case in the papers and when I saw the method of murder that was used, I told myself, 'Willie, boy, here's where you grab yourself some press notice.'"

Mike Bruno sipped at his brandy. "Murder method?" he said. "You mean the way this dame bumped her husband? It was cute, wasn't it? Only it didn't work."

"I mean the way Warburton was murdered," I corrected him, a little edge getting into my voice. And that was silly. June was nothing to me, anymore. She probably wouldn't even know me, if she saw me. But I finished it up: "She hasn't been convicted, yet, Mike. Anyhow, that idea wasn't original with her. It was *my* idea, Mike. That was *my* murder method."

He almost spilled what was left of the drink. He leaned forward, stiffly in the chair. "What are you talking about? Who'd you kill?" he demanded. "What are you trying to pull on me, Will? You always were a tricky guy, double-talkin', phenaglin' around."

"This is simple." I held out my hands, palms up. "Sam Warburton was killed, while he was in an alcoholic stupor. A wet cloth was placed over his face while he was dead-drunk asleep, and the alcoholic fumes of his own breath smothered him to death. All right. A tricky idea for a murder. I thought it up—at least, I thought I did. In my last book, "You Slay Me!" just out, the killer murdered his wife, that very same way. I've got a hunch that the person who knocked off Sam Warburton got the idea right out of my book. They cribbed it and put it to practical use."

He sat there, stunned, his big head cocked to one side, like a large, not-too-bright hound dog puzzling out a command he doesn't understand. He set his empty glass back very carefully onto the teakwood table.

"You mean that, Will?" he said. "That's where she got the idea?"

"Don't keep saying that *she* did it. Do you have conclusive evidence that June—I mean Mrs. Warburton—killed her husband?"

He looked hurt and a little defiant. He poked out his pugnacious lower lip. "Well she did," he asserted. "Who else?"

"There're probably at least a hundred people who would have loved to do the job,"

I told him. "Sam Warburton was a guy easy to hate. But that's beside the point. Do you see my angle? Do you see how that'll put my new book in the spotlight? The first edition will probably sell out right off the bat."

It took a little time to get Mike Bruno off of one subject and onto another. He said: "Look, chum, it had to be his wife. She had plenty of motive. She told us that the guy was getting so that he stayed drunk all the time, lately. And he beat hell out of her. She just couldn't take it any more and she knocked him off. If you want more motive, think of the dough she'll inherit. Warburton was still worth plenty chips. And she has no abili."

"No alibi?" I said. "I'd say that was in her favor. Anybody using that method of murder would do so to enable them to *have* an alibi. That's the idea of the thing. They put the wet cloth over the drunk's face and take off somewhere to establish an alibi. The guy smothers to death, the cloth dries and there's no evidence of murder."

"Yeah, yeah," Bruno waved his arms around. "Only she got stuck. Someone crossed her up. Someone came here unexpected and found Warburton dead and blew the whistle on the wife. They—"

"Someone?" I stopped him. "Who, Mike? What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "How the hell do I know. Some one of their friends. She called headquarters and said we'd better send some one up to the Warburton place, that Sam Warburton had just been murdered. March figured it was probably a crank call and sent me up to see about it. But when he saw it was the real thing, that no-good son—"

"You mean, you guys don't know who phoned in the tip-off?" I cut him off again. "You haven't bothered to find out?"

Bruno waved his hand airily. "Somebody's workin' on it. What difference does it make? March figures it was some neighbor, or maybe some friend of the family, dropped in unexpected, found Warburton and called us. But she got panicky and hung up without giving her name. Or maybe she didn't want to be dragged into the case. You know how these hotsy-totsy Dix Hill dames are."

I thought, yeah, and I know how the Mid City cops are, too. "Well, Mike," I

said, "I'm going downtown and see Johnny March and feed him this angle on the method of murder being taken from my latest book. I think Johnny—and the reporters—will go for that. Be good, Mike. Don't take any plastic pennies." I started to turn away to go out of the room.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Mike called. "What was the name of that book again, Will?"

I told him, and, looking back at him, I saw that Mike Bruno had the damndest look on his face. He looked like a cartoonist's version of the guy who has just gotten a bright idea. You could practically see the electric bulb flashing in his head. He looked amazed, almost shocked at the enormity of this thought that had struck him.

"What's the matter, Mike?" I said. "Did you finally figure out Einstein's theory?"

"What?" he said, jerking his head at me, as though he was seeing me for the first time. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing's the matter, Will." He suddenly grinned and his face still had that electrified look, though a little toned down, now. "Listen, Will, any time I can do anything for you, lemme know."

I thought about that. "Sure," I said. "I sure will. Right now you can do me something. How about showing me around. I'd like to look at this hundred-grand joint."

**H**E LET that run all around through his brain system for a few moments, trying to pin the idea down and see if it was all right. Then, reluctantly, he said: "Sure, Will. I guess I can do that. Only don't you tell anybody about it." He took a last swig of brandy.

I followed him out of the room. We took a quick tour of the house. I was objective enough about the tour until we stepped into June's bedroom. Then I didn't feel so good. The first thing I saw was an enlargement of a snapshot on a chest of drawers. It showed June and Sam Warburton on a tennis court. They were both holding tennis rackets and this big, ugly thug of a husband of hers, had his arm around her waist and she was sort of leaning against him.

She was wearing a very brief pair of white sport shorts and a silk bandana-type halter. Her dark, pretty little face looked a little more mature. Her legs were just as long

and slender and lovely as ever. She used to drive me crazy, just to look at her. She still did.

Mike Bruno had come up behind me. "Not a bad little pigeon, eh, kid? Most of these society babes got a look on their fizz like they smell something bad. But this little tomato looks like she could—"

"Mike," I stopped him, "someday, somebody's going to take that large, poisonous mouth of yours and stuff it full of fist."

He looked at me, a little surprised and color crawled up from his bull neck and painted his puffy cheeks an angry purple. His thick lower lip pushed out and curled under. He said: "Maybe you'd like to try to do it?" His eyes hooded down. "What's the matter, you tryin' to play Sir Galahad to a husband-chilling fluff?"

"Look, Mike," I said quietly, "in this country, a person is innocent—until they're proven guilty. I'll lay you a hundred, even money, nobody ever proves June guilty. So put up or shut up."

His eyes were narrowed and he was cocking his head, studying me with a cold, appraising look as he said: "So it's June, eh? Not the Warburton tomato, not Mrs. Warburton. Just June. And that's the second time you've jumped to her defense on this murder rap. What's it to you, Will? You know this baby?"

"I used to know her," I admitted. "Long ago, before she got married. And she was a swell kid. That's all, Mike."

He got a funny smile on his tough, fleshy face. "I'll take that hundred bet. I'll bet that this babe croaked her husband."

"Start saving your pay," I said, not looking at him. I was walking around the room, glancing at things when I noticed something funny. There was a big book case, against one wall of June's bedroom. The shelves were stacked with books, a lot of classics and a lot of book-club selections. But a big part of one shelf was empty. There was a gap in the middle and it just didn't look right.

"Where are the books that belong on that shelf, Mike?" I asked him.

"We got 'em," he said. "They were impounded. The captain has 'em in his safe. Evidence."

"What?" I said. "What the hell were they, a series of books on How to Kill Your Husband In Ten Easy Lessons? What

kind' of evidence is a bunch of books?"

Mike Bruno said: "Murder stories. They were all these here now murder-mystery books. Lieutenant March thought they'd make good evidence. He figured they would show a jury that the gal was murder-minded. What did he call it—an ob-ob—an obsession with crime, or something."

I clapped my hand to my forehead. "Oh, cripes!" Then I asked: "Were any of those mystery books *mine*, Mike? Who were their authors?"

"How the hell would I know? I didn't notice. Whoever looks at the authors name?" He grinned at me. "So you think maybe she was a fan of yours. Maybe you think she's still carryin' a torch for you or somethin'?"

I had thought that but now I realized the idea was as silly as Mike Bruno made it sound. "Mike," I said. "You're boring hell out of me. I'd better get out of here."

He walked back downstairs with me and just before we reached the front door, he took hold of my arm. "I've got an idea," he said. I didn't ask him how and he went on: "You know the kind of a guy this Johnny March is. If his grandmother was hangin' onto the edge of a cliff, he'd think it was very funny to step on her fingers. You go bullin' in to him with that idea about the murder method being borrowed from one of your books and just because you want a big play in the papers, March will see to it that your name isn't even mentioned. And maybe not even the title of the books. Johnny March would think that was a cute trick. Remember, him and you never got along too good. You weren't ever spittin' pals."

I thought about that and he had something there. Johnny March and I had tiffed a few times in the past.

Mike put his arm around my shoulder. "Give *me* a break, Will, and help yourself at the same time. Let *me* tell the captain about that book-murder-method angle. I'll see you get all the publicity you can stand."

He had a point. I shrugged off his big, heavy arm. I said: "All right, Mike. But if you louse me up, I'll pin back your ears. You know I can do it. An ex-police reporter will always have his hook into a lot of people in a town like Mill City. I can get favors done. And dick sergeants

have been known to suddenly find themselves out in the tall shrubbery precincts, putting one big flat foot down in front of the other." I looked him right stiffo in the eye when I said that and I wasn't kidding and he knew it.

He put on an injured expression. "Will," he said, "what kind of a guy do you think I am?"

I didn't tell him. I just waved and left the Warburton mansion. Going across the porch I looked at Coogan and he was peering at me across the top of his comic book. I told him not to tire his mind with that heavy reading and hit the long-driveway out toward the street.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Guild-Edged Assignment

**T**HE NIGHT was crisp and clear and cabs don't cruise Dix Hill, so I decided to walk back down into town. I was just outside the gate of the Warburton place, when a car came up the street and caught me full in its headlights. I stared into the glare, squinting my eyes and saw that the car was about to turn into the estate across the street. The car slowed, but it didn't turn into the opposite driveway. It swerved across onto the wrong side of the street and pulled to the curb in front of me.

It was a huge, sleek black limousine, with white wall tires, and long as a hearse. It would cost the royalties from a dozen of my books to drive that wagon around the block. I started to walk past it and a voice called out:

"Will, Will Dennison. Come here."

I walked over to the car, and, facing this way, the driver was on my side. He leaned his head out of the window. In the wash of light from a street lamp, I saw that it was the silver-templed head of a fiftyish man, well preserved, flat-cheeked and square-chinned, with only a slight puffiness under the eyes and crows feet at their corners. Sharp penetrating black eyes peered at me from beneath gray-specked, thick brows. A thin, determined mouth made the closest approach to a smile I'd ever seen it attempt. Arthur Macy, publisher of the *Mill City Herald*, was not a smiling man.

He stuck out his hand and I shook it.

"How are you, Will?" he said in his clipped, businesslike way. "I read some of your books. They're swell. I hear you're doing fine and I'm glad to know that."

He was lying from beginning to end. If he'd heard I was doing fine, his stomach would have been upset for a week. Art Macy hated me almost as much as I did him. When he'd fired me one time too many, I'd told him off. I'd told him what I thought of him and his cheap, politics-playing yellow paper.

"Hello, Arthur," I said. It was the first time I'd ever called him that. When I worked for him, it had always been Mr. Macy or "Chief." He was the kind of man who liked to be called Chief. When I'd quit the *Herald*, I'd called him just plain Macy . . . along with some other things.

He didn't even wince at my calling him by his first name. He shook my hand heartily and kept that phony smile plastered on his good looking middle-aged face. "You just come from the Warburton place, Will?"

"Yeah."

"That's a dirty rotten shame," he said vehemently. "That poor kid. If she did kill Sam Warburton—which I doubt—she ought to get a medal for it."

I didn't say anything to that. When I didn't pick up his statement one way or another, he took the lead, as I'd forced him to.

"You know, I think I'm going to put the *Herald* behind that girl," Macy said. "In a very cagey way, of course. A paper has got to be very careful, taking sides in a case like this."

I tried to figure this. It sounded like Macy was going to use his sheet for a crusade for June, against the police and the D. A. The only times I had known Macy's paper to crusade, there was always something in it for him. I couldn't see anything for him in this. I still let him carry the ball. He went on:

"The case they've made against her is so damned flimsy. Almost a hundred percent circumstantial evidence."

I dropped a pearl of wisdom: "People have sat down in that big black ugly chair on the same kind of flimsy evidence."

"I know." He nodded gravely. "You—ah—you interested in this case?"

"In a way." Macy would have made a

bad reporter. He was finding out nothing, fast. But then he started to improve. "You handling this story for anybody?"

"No," I told him. "I've never gone back into the game again. I don't ever expect to. I had a bellyful, one time."

**H**E DIDN'T have anything to say to that. Then he almost bowled me over with: "You made a name for yourself, handling crime stuff for the *Herald* in the old days, Will. Folks will remember your name. Especially since you've written all those popular mystery books. How would you like to do a special job for me, a front-page, bylined feature story, every night, on this case?"

While I stood there with my mouth open, he pressed his point. "I'll pay you a flat thousand dollars, Will. It shouldn't run more than two weeks, before we get her out of it. All you do is concentrate on the case, looking for angles and write a short, feature piece every day."

I got back my voice. "What kind of angles, Arthur?"

"Why, to prove this poor kid is innocent, of course?"

"Why, Arthur? And suppose she isn't?"

He looked as though he were about to haul off on me with one of those mean, poison-tongued dressing-downs, as though it were still the old days and I was one of his wage slaves. Then he seemed to remember that I wasn't.

He leaned toward me, confidentially. "Look, Will. These people are neighbors of mine. I know her. I knew *him*. If there was ever a guy begging to have somebody kill him, it was Sam Warburton. A dozen people would have motive to do it, if you could dig them up. I would have gladly done it myself, if I'd had the chance—and the nerve."

"That's an interesting angle. Why would *you* want him dead?"

He hesitated and for a moment I thought he was going to clam up but then he decided to level. "He beat hell out of me one time, Will. Right on this street. Or almost did. My dog drove him off, before he could make a real good job of it. The big damned fool was jealous as hell of his wife. He had the silly idea, because she came over to see me and my wife a lot, that I was—well—interested in her. Truth *was*

we were sorry for the poor kid, being tied down to a lousy—”

“Why would he be jealous of *her*?” I asked, but even while I was talking, I was thinking: *June, June, what's happened to you? The guys you get mixed up with—Warburton, Macy, and how many more?* Then I said: “I thought Sam Warburton was too busy playing the field himself to get worried about his wife.”

“That’s the kind of man he was,” Macy said. “He judged her by himself. And an egotistical, possessive brute like that can never see justice in someone else doing the same things he did.”

It wasn’t doing me any good, talking about June and her marriage, to Arthur Macy. I decided to back off of the subject. “I take it you want me to dig up angles to make the case against June Warburton look silly. And if she’s innocent—if possible—find the real killer. And write a feature piece on my findings, every night.” I made my decision. If I did anything like that, it wouldn’t be for Arthur Macy. It would be for myself—or for June. I finished up: “All for a thousand dollars. I don’t think so, Arthur. What you want is a private detective. Why don’t you find yourself one?”

I expected him to explode on that. People didn’t turn down Arthur Macy. But all he said, was:

“A private investigator couldn’t do as good a job as you could, Will. And the way you write, you could sell the people a bill of good on June’s innocence.”

“I still don’t think so,” I told him. “If I change my mind, I’ll give you a ring.”

He sighed and pulled his head back into the car. “All right, Will,” he said. “I can’t force you. I wish I could up the price but you know how it is. Well, I hope you change your mind.”

The car motor purred and he pulled away from the curb, swung in a U-turn around toward the driveway of his own estate. I stared after the red glow of the tail light and then turned and headed back for town.

**M**ILL CITY’S Police Headquarters was housed, along with the city jail, in a huge, ugly red brick building in the First Precinct, on a side street just off of Main Avenue. As I went up the old familiar, gun-wadded steps, between the green lights

and through the door, it was almost like I was coming home. It seemed that I had just been away for a weekend, and was coming back, like always.

I went up the rickety, dirty wooden steps to the offices on the second floor. I passed the press room and looked in. Marx, of the *Herald*, who had got my job, was curled up on a desk, snoring. Wickman, of the *Ledger*, the rival paper, was on the phone with some babe, purring into the mouthpiece and caressing the instrument, with that sly, wolfish look on his face that a guy sometimes gets when he’s shooting the oil to a dame. It looked like a quiet night.

Lieutenant of Detectives, Johnny March, had a two-by-four cubicle a few doors down from the captain’s office. I knocked on the frosted glass of March’s door and walked in. He was sitting at his desk, working on a container of coffee and a ham-on-rye. He was a small-built, dapper, saturnine looking man. He had clean-cut features and would have been good looking, if it wasn’t for the slight slant to his green eyes and the sharply inverted V of his brows. He had wavy, wheat-colored hair.

March stopped a hunk of sandwich half-way to his mouth and looked over the top of it at me. He said: “Hot dam’, if it isn’t the goon. I thought we combed you out of our hair a long time ago.” He was very fond of me, this Johnny March.

“Hello, Johnny,” I said. “I hear you’re cracking yourself another big case. First thing I know you’ll be running this town. You ought to write a book yourself: *How To Climb The Ladder To Success*, by Johnny March.”

He liked that, even though it came from me. He said: “If you mean the Warburton thing, I’m not cracking that case, I’ve cracked it.”

“Oh?” I said. “She—she confessed?”

He waved the remaining chunk of sandwich. “Not yet,” he admitted. “But she will, boy, she will. We just let her salt away for a few days, down in the basement. We’ve got enough evidence to run her through the mill four or five times.”

“That’s not the way I heard it.”

He dropped the crusts of the sandwich into a waste basket, swigged down the last of the coffee from the container and stared at me, hostilely, pulling his winged brows

together over his nose. "Who you been talking to, wise guy?" he demanded.

"Arthur Macy," I said.

He grinned and his eyes slitted and his teeth were long and sharp and wolfish. "Oh," he said. He lit a cigarette, slowly, deliberately, blew out a cloud of smoke and talked through it. "You're not so smart any more, are you? When a guy gets sweet on a doll, his viewpoint gets a little lopsided.

It was my turn to say "Oh." It came out a little sour. After talking to Arthur Macy about the case, I'd had an idea it might be something like that, but I'd been trying to talk myself out of it. I said: "So you've got plenty of evidence, Johnny. You mean like the fact that June Warburton likes mystery novels?"

He laughed. "Oh, that," he said. "That just gives the case a little color, fancies it up a little. I figure the jury will go for that. Here's a doll who steeps herself in crime fiction. She has an obsession. She—Say, guess who's trash she reads?"

I tried not to blush. I said: "Slip it to me easy, will you?"

"Will," he said, "you must have something in your writing that dame goes for. She had every one of your novels except one in her bookcase." He eyed me narrowly. "Look, she wouldn't happen to know you, would she? Maybe I can ring you into this case, too. That would be fun. Maybe I can work it so that it comes out that you and she, together, bumped the husband, so you could be free of him. Cute?"

I let it go by. "All except one book? Which one?"

"The last one you did. What the hell was the title of it? You Slay Me!—or something like that."

It struck me a little funny that should be the one missing. That was the book from which the murder method had been borrowed. I wondered what that meant—if anything. I said: "Do you mind if I take a look at those books, Johnny?"

"Help yourself," he told me. "It's no skin off my elbow. The captain's got them in his safe. If you can talk him into it. What are you doin'. Will, back working for Macy again? What's the matter, those books not selling so well?"

I stopped at the door, turned back to

him. "I'm not working for Macy," I said. "I'm not working for anybody. Is that all right with you?"

He squinted one eye at me as though he was sighting along a rifle. "You've got some interest in this case. Don't try and kid little Johnny. Maybe you'd better break down and tell me all about it. You might save yourself some grief."

"Johnny," I answered. "You're a smart guy. You're a tough guy. I wouldn't want to cross swords with you. And by the way, how's that convertible of yours running? You know, the one you bought right after the mayor's son was acquitted for lack of evidence on a drunken driving, hit-run charge?"

He sucked in breath so hard his cheeks hollowed. He got a little green around the mouth. "You punk! You'd just better keep your nose clean. And don't try to gaff up this Warburton case on me. It means everything to me. Remember that."

"This case means a lot to Mike Bruno, too," I reminded him. "I saw him, by the way. He asked for you. He said to give you his love."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A Jerk's Honor

WHILE he was still saying some things about Mike Bruno that weren't very nice, I went out of his office and shut the door behind me. I went down the hall to Captain Rossman's office. I poked my head in his door and said: "I'm workin' my way through Police School, Cap. Can I sell you some magazines? With every subscription to—"

"Dennison, you whelp of Satan!" he roared. "Come in here and lemme look at you."

Captain Rossman was a big bluff, hearty old-school cop, who had worked his way to the top. He was a tough man and he used tough methods. You were his friend as long as you didn't pull any fast ones on him. He was supposed to be honest, and, as far as I knew, he was. And that was plenty far.

He was a lot of man, over six feet and close to three hundred. He had a ruddy moon face, with loose dewlaps of flesh like turkey wattles hanging down each side of his jaw. The only hair he had was in little

white tufts over his ears. His small, deeply sunken eyes were as bright and alert as those of a man twenty years younger.

I stepped inside, and it was good to know that here was a man I'd done some favors for. And he seemed to remember that, be genuinely glad to see me. We kicked around the usual amenities and then I said: "How come you're not handling this Warburton case yourself, Cap?"

He grinned. "You know I'm just a figurehead around here, Dennison. I let the younger boys scrap over the bones. I just thought it would be a good break for March, if I let him see what he could do with this case."

I said, "Uh-huh." Rossman was a good man, only he'd outgrown any ambition. He'd climbed as far as he wanted to go. From here in, he didn't care whether school kept or not. I mean he kept a weather-eye cocked toward everything that went on, but he didn't bestir himself unless it was necessary. A few more years and he was ready for retirement. He wasn't going to knock himself out in the interim.

I told him I'd like to take a look at the books he had in his safe. I was about to tell him about the murder-method angle and ask would he make sure I got plenty of mention when he handed the yarn out to the press, but at the last second I remembered my promise to Mike Bruno, to let him do that—and I kept my mouth shut.

Rossman said, sure, to help myself and I bent down in front of his huge old-fashioned safe. There they were, in a neat stack, eight of the nine books I had written. The best part of five years of hard work. It didn't look like so much, that little pile of novels. I checked the titles on the backs of the bindings and March was right. *You Slay Me!*—the last one—was missing.

It suddenly hit me how bad an angle that was. When March found out that book held the odd murder method by which Sam Warburton had been killed—and that the book was missing, he'd make plenty out of it. He'd claim that June had hidden that particular book.

On the basis of the reports of the murder and arrest I'd read in the *Herald*, not knowing at the time, that they were colored by Arthur Macy's personal interest in the case, I hadn't seriously considered that June would get stuck with the rap. I thought she

had every chance of getting out. So my bringing up the angle of the murder method being borrowed from my latest novel, to get a little publicity for myself and the book didn't hit me as possibly hurting her case. But now I didn't know.

The way Johnny March was pushing this case, the way he was twisting things around against June, that angle could boomerang and hurt her case bad. But it was too late for me to stop the ball from rolling, now. Mike Bruno knew about it.

I thumbed quickly through a couple of the books and they had been read, read a lot. The bindings were well broken in and the pages were dogeared, with some of the corners still turned down, to mark the place. That was a bad habit a lot of people had, when they stopped reading at a certain page in a book.

I suddenly realized that I wasn't getting anywhere, this way and I put the books back in their neat pile and straightened up.

Captain Rossman had been studying me, curiously. Now, he said: "What are you mixing in this case for, Dennison?"

I'd been asked that question several times, tonight. For the first time I let it sink in and really considered it, not giving a wise-acre, snap answer. And I realized I hadn't even known the answer, myself. Or rather, had known it, but had been unwilling to admit it even to myself. I knew suddenly that the publicity angle had been strictly phoney. It was there and it had been straight as far as it went. But that wasn't the real reason I'd come back to Mill City and gone up to Dix Hill again and was poking my nose into the thing here and there. The real reason was the girl who had been June Manners. I decided to level with Rossman, to a certain extent.

"Cap," I said, "This may sound silly to you. I used to know that girl you've got down in a basement cell. We grew up together as kids. I—we—" I didn't go any farther on that line. Quickly, I finished: "For old times sake, or something, I thought maybe there might be some way I could help. And now we're right down to it, Cap, how about letting me see her for a few moments?"

HE LOOKED at me narrowly with those wise old blue eyes of his. Then he looked away, swiveled around on his

chair and stared out the window into the blackness of the alley. I thought for a second he was going to refuse. But he didn't say anything at all. He just heaved around again, picked up a phone, asked for Beemis, the city jailer.

"Beemis," he said. "There's a young fellow named Dennison—you remember him; used to be on the *Herald*—coming down to see you. He wants to visit Mrs. Warburton. Give them about fifteen or twenty minutes."

He was sticking his neck way out and I knew it. I grinned at him, on the way out. I said: "Thanks a hell of a lot, Cap." There didn't seem to be anything else to say.

"You had a favor coming," he told me and waved me on out.

They had a small, ancient block of cells in the basement of the First Precinct. It was damp and chilly down there and it didn't smell so sweet. They had a hatchet-faced matron sitting on a chair at one end. Beemis introduced me to her and started to lead me along the cell block. She got up to tag along. I grabbed Beemis' arm. "Look," I asked, "couldn't we have a little privacy? It'll mean a lot. Call Rossman, if you have to."

Beemis, a mousey looking little man, made a grimace and finally turned to the matron: "I guess it'll be all right, Miz Gates. I'll take the responsibility. You sit back down."

She looked at me, disapprovingly and I could read her mind and it wasn't such nice reading. I wanted to tell her off, but there wasn't much point in it. I let Beemis lead me along the short row of cells. I noticed that they had dumped out all their other prisoners, or transferred them someplace; the drunks and vags that usually clutter up a city jail. I didn't know whether it was out of respect to June Warburton, or to the size of the case she figured in. Probably it was the latter.

Beemis stopped in front of the last cell and unlocked it. I stepped inside and heard the door clang shut behind me. He wasn't taking too many chances, at that.

I looked at the woman who sat here in this cell. She was perched stiffly on the edge of the iron cot, her hands clasped on her knees. I saw that the picture of her and Sam Warburton on the tennis court,

had lied a little. She had changed. That one must have been taken shortly after their marriage.

She was still slender and very dark, but she wasn't pretty any more. She was beautiful, now. At least that's the way she hit me. Her rich brown hair hung in a long, simple bob about her shoulders, a lovely frame for the pale, almost tragic beauty of her face. She had high cheekbones and there were little dusky hollows beneath them. Her eyes were very widely set and they looked enormous now, soft and hurt-looking and sad in a way that cut right into you.

A look of surprise pulled at her face when she saw who I was. She stood up.

I waited for Beemis' footsteps to fade down the cell corridor before I spoke. I had planned to say a lot of things, that first moment. Those little pat phrases scurried around in my head like frightened mice. But none of them seemed right. Now I didn't know what to say. How do you start in when you're seeing the first girl you ever loved—one you maybe still love—for the first time in over ten years? And she's in a crumby little city jail cell? When she's facing a charge of murdering her well-known, wealthy husband? I didn't know. So I just said:

"June! . . . Hello, June." I didn't ask her how she was. I could see how she was.

"Will Dennison!" she whispered the name and the way she said it got into my blood and made high octane out of it. It had always been that way, when June said my name. It still was.

I walked over and took her hands and held them tight, feeling how cold and small they were. We stood there for a moment looking into each other's eyes and then she ducked her head quickly. Her shoulders started to shake. I couldn't hear her sobbing. It was not that kind of crying. It was the silent kind, where you just break because everything is suddenly too much.

I eased her back down onto the cot and stood over her, watching her, letting her cry it out. When she was finished, I gave her my handkerchief. I sat down beside her, said simply: "June, if I can, I'd like to help you. If you'll let me. I don't know what I can do, but I want to do something."

When she looked at me, her eyes were

still moist and shining. She said, huskily: "All right, Will. Only I think you're wasting your time. They're so sure I did it. They're so crazy sure, that sometimes they even get me to believing it. That Lieutenant March, he—"

I stopped her with: "Suppose you give me the whole thing, right from the beginning. Start anywhere you want. Tell it any way you want. Just get it all out and don't skip anything. Any little thing might be important."

So she did that. She started back there the first year I had gone away to college. That part wasn't much. It was the old story of a nice kid, who's never had anything, suddenly being exposed to all the glitter that comes with big money, through her job. It wasn't very pretty. When she came to the part where she met Sam Warburton and married him, she said:

"Will, I didn't marry him for his money, alone." She kept looking right into my eyes while she said it. "Believe me, Will. Maybe the money was a little part of it. But I was a dumb young kid and his name, his reputation and the big, expensive rush he gave me, overwhelmed me. I *thought* for a short while, that I was in love with him. It wasn't till after we were married that I realized it wasn't love, it was just a sort of hero-worship fixation. I found out, then, too, that he wasn't such a hero."

SHE didn't go sob-sister on me with that part. She told it straight and with restraint. Warburton used to go away for months at a time, and several times for over a year. He had a possessive, savage, jealous streak in him. In his letters while he was away, and when he came back, Sam Warburton would accuse and try to force her into admitting unfaithfulness. June said:

"Will, he was wrong. I never stepped out on him. I went out of my way to avoid any incident that might lead him to think that way. I don't know what was the matter with him, Sam. Sometimes I think he was out-and-out insane."

Something about the way she said that, the way she looked at me when she said it, made me believe her. I asked: "Why didn't you leave him, June? Why did you put up with all that for so many years?"

She took a deep breath. "This may sound silly to you," she said. "But I was afraid to. He, Sam, he swore he'd kill me, if I tried to leave him. He said he'd hunt me down wherever I went. He wouldn't give a damn what kind of protection I had, he'd get to me. You didn't know Sam. He'd have done that, Will."

I could see how that could be. There was one thing more I had to get off my mind. I said: "June, how about your neighbor, Arthur Macy?"

"I was coming to that, Will," she told me. "The last year or so, Sam stopped going away on such long trips. He stuck more to short lecture tours in this country. He was home and around more. And he got worse. He drank nearly all the time and his jealous rages became worse. He got to the point where he started to hit me. Several times he knocked me senseless and when I came to, I'd find him sprawled on the bed in a drunken stupor."

She paused for a moment, trying to get her thoughts together. Her hands twisted nervously in her lap. I saw that she had taken her wedding ring off. I guess she figured she was free of him, even though he still was making her life miserable.

"One very bad night, I got away from him, Will. Chasing me, he stumbled and fell. I ran over to the Macy's place. They were swell to me, Will. After that, I went over there a lot. Jess, Arthur's wife, was wonderful. But then Sam found out where I was going and he had trouble with Arthur about it. He accused us of having an affair."

I said nothing.

June went on. "After the night Sam tried to beat Arthur up, Mrs. Macy must have gotten suspicious, too. She was a little cool after that. I didn't go over there any more, after that—until the night Sam was killed."

"You were there—at the Macy's—that night?" I questioned. "There was nothing in the papers about that."

She pulled her upper lip between her teeth for a moment. "I know," she said. "Nobody knows about that. I couldn't tell anybody, Will. You're the only one who knows and you can't tell anybody, either. I'm trusting you, Will."

I said, gently: "Go on. Tell me."

JUNE looked up toward the narrow ventilator at the top of the cell, the gentle line of her throat arched gracefully. She went into this part of it, with a funny sort of voice, as though her throat was tight and she had to force the words out.

"That night," she said. "Sam was worse than I'd ever seen him before. I—I couldn't take some of the things he said to me, Sam. I slapped him. He went altogether crazy, then. I really think—he meant to kill me. In desperation, I ran over to the Macy's place. Jess wasn't home. Only Art Macy. I told him what had happened and begged him to protect me from Sam. He wanted to call the police, but I wouldn't let him. The way Sam was that night, he would have killed one of them and there would have been even worse trouble. Anyhow, I hid there. Sam came there looking for me. But Arthur Macy had the door locked, and didn't answer. I guess Sam figured there was nobody home and that I couldn't have gone there."

I was beginning to see why Arthur Macy was willing to help June get out of this murder rap. June went on.

"I guess I stayed over there for three or four hours. I had a couple of drinks, and Art and I talked a lot. He had more to drink than I did and he began to get a little difficult to handle. And then a flash bulletin came over the radio, announcing Sam's death. We both sat there stunned. Arthur got scared. He begged me not to tell the police that I'd been over here with him, alone, all that time. It would ruin him, he said. Nobody would believe that there wasn't anything between us. He swore he'd get me out of this jam, without using that alibi. So I—so I said all right. I just told the police that I'd gone for a long walk and to a movie."

When she'd finished telling me that, I sat there for a long time, digesting the whole thing. But it wouldn't settle. It was making me ill. Finally, I said:

"That scurvy, selfish skunk. *His honor!* The hell with him, June. Don't you realize that you're a cinch to get the death penalty? Come on, kid. I'll get you up to Captain Rossman and you can tell him right now."

She put her hand on my arm. "Take it easy, Will," she pleaded. "I've thought about that a lot. It wouldn't really do much

good. They'd say Art and I were lovers and he was just trying to protect me. They wouldn't take his word and we have no other proof. It would only drag him into it, too, and in the end it wouldn't do my case any real good."

There was something to that. "Look," I said. "The police say some anonymous woman phoned in to report Sam's murder. The cops are not working too hard on that angle. They figure they've got you wrapped up."

Without looking at me, she said: "There were lots of women, Will. Most of them were just entertainment to Sam. But the last few weeks, there was a special one. I know that she was special because—they were very careful."

"What do you mean?"

"For a long time I didn't tumble. And then little things started to happen. I took a phone call by mistake. She was a blonde—that's all I know about her. I found blonde hair on his clothes. And she used a heavy, musk-like perfume. I used to be able to smell it on him, when he came in, nights. I thought that maybe this was going to give me an out. If I could catch them—I could get a divorce. And if he thought anything of this blonde girl—he might be willing to get rid of me."

"What happened?"

"One night, when I was pretty sure he was going to her, I followed him." She gave me a wan little smile. "I wasn't a very good detective, Will. I followed him to the River Park apartment house. I even found out which flat he went to. It was Three A. But there was no name on the door, nor on the bell. I rang the bell. But they didn't answer. They were too smart for me. I waited outside, across the street, for them to come out. I waited a long time.

"But Sam outfoxed me. He must have left by some rear exit, because when I finally gave it up and went home, he was already there. I didn't say anything, figuring to give him plenty of rope. . . . I never found out any more. It was a few nights later that he was murdered."

"Did you tell any of this to March?" I asked. "He should be able to run that woman down."

"Yes," she said, "I told the whole thing to Lieutenant March. He didn't seem to believe me, but he said he'd check up on the

story. Later, when I asked him about it, he said that I'd been trying to throw them off, that I'd been lying. The people in that apartment had never even heard of Sam Warburton. Nobody at that address had ever seen a man answering his description, he said."

I couldn't make that out. Johnny March was a cocky, big-talking heel, but he wasn't any dope. If June's story was straight, Johnny should have been able to prove it. In which case, either Johnny or June was lying.

Down the hall I could hear Beemis fidgeting his feet and coughing loudly to remind me that my time was almost up. So I told her to hold tight. I felt like a fool, too. It's always so easy to say those things, when you're on the other side of the fence, yourself. I hated to leave her. I could imagine what it was like, down here, alone, for her.

As I started out, she called: "Will!" There was a note of desperation in her voice.

I turned around and looked at her. Her arms slowly raised toward me. I stared at her—then I walked slowly toward her and into those outstretched arms.

I guess we could have been standing there, holding onto each other yet, only I heard Beemis and the matron coming along the corridor toward the cell. I let her go quickly. When they opened the door I walked out of there, without looking back.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Glory-Grabbing Coppers

IT WAS almost midnight, when I went back upstairs. I wanted to see Johnny March and try to pump him on just how deep he'd looked into that story of June's about the blonde woman she thought her husband was mixed up with. But I didn't get a chance right then. Johnny March wasn't in his office. He was in Captain Rossman's office. And Sergeant Mike Bruno was there, too.

When I went in there, Cap. Rossman and Bruno were laughing like hell about something. Johnny March was slumped into an arm-chair, his hands jammed into his pocket and a murderous look on his Satanic face. Mike Bruno was sitting cas-

ually on the edge of Captain Rossman's desk. From Sergeants down, I knew that Rossman didn't stand for too much familiarity. *Something* had happened.

They cut out the laughing when they saw me. Mike Bruno got up off the desk, quickly and walked over to the window, stood there and lit a cigarette and looked out, his back to the room.

Rossman said: "Dennison, you're just in time. I know you'll get a bang out of this." He picked up a book that was lying on his desk. I recognized the jacket, immediately. It was a book I had written, the last one, *You Slay Me!* Rossman said: "Look what Bruno found. This is a corker. Johnny swipes a juicy case away from Mike—and what does Mike do? He turns around and yanks the case right out from under smart Johnny March, again."

I took the book and held it in my hand, looking down at the lurid jacket painting, the big letters of the title and the little letters underneath: *by Will Dennison*. "What's this book got to do with it?" I asked.

"You and you're damned trashy books!" Johnny March growled at me. "You and you're screwy murder methods."

"Excuse me while I act dumb," I said to Rossman. "Draw me a picture. Maybe I'll get it."

"Sure," the captain said. "This is a honey, Dennison. Bruno, on duty at the house where the murder was committed, just found this book stashed away behind some dirty linen in June Warburton's room. She had apparently hidden it there. Out of curiosity Mike started to glance through the book. What do you think he found?"

"I know," I said. "He found that the villain of that book used the same murder method. So now you figure that's where June got the idea. You figure that practically puts her in the hot chair."

Rossman nodded, looked smug. "It goes a long way, Dennison. It ain't goin' to help her case any. I mean, after all, why should she pull this particular book off the shelf, hide it? I mean—"

"I know what you mean," I stopped him. I looked toward Mike Bruno and the fat, naked back of his red neck, seemed to leer at me.

I hadn't figured on Mike Bruno pulling

a cutie like this. Now I knew why he'd got that shell-shocked, bright-idea look, earlier tonight, at the Warburton place, when I'd told him about the Warburton killing following the pattern of the fictional one in my latest book. I felt anger begin to ball up inside of me and I said to myself, *The hell with him, he's not going to get away with this.*

I opened the book and thumbed through the pages. Right off, I noticed that the binding was a little stiff. And then I remembered something: all the other books of mine, that June had had on her shelf, that had been impounded as evidence, had showed signs of being will read. I remembered that a lot of page corners had been turned down to mark places. I looked for that in this book I held in my hand. Not a single page corner had been turned down. I said:

"Cap, if you'll get those other books out of the safe, I'll show you something."

He did that, and he frowned when I showed him the difference between those books and this one.

Mike Bruno had come over from the window, now and was watching this closely. He said, finally: "What are you tryin' to pull, Will? You tryin' to make a liar out of me?"

"**N**OT trying, Mike," I told him. "I'm doing it. You didn't find this book in the Warburton house. You bought it somewhere after you heard about it from me, earlier this evening. You cooked up that cute little yarn, to get yourself back into this case the way you want to be in it. To put one over on Johnny March. To make yourself the fair-haired-boy with Rossman. You—"

Mike started toward me with a roar.

Captain Rossman's one icy word, "Sergeant" brought Mike Bruno to a dead stop.

I said: "Let him go, Cap. I'm not afraid of the big mutt." That was stupid. Mike Bruno could break me in half. But all this ganging upon June was boiling inside and I was anxious to work a little of it off.

Rossman turned to me. "I think you might have something there, Dennison. Me and Mike will settle this between us. But I think you'd better go. You don't belong here. I don't want any more trouble."

"Okay, Cap," I said. "I'm sorry. But something doesn't smell right about this case. All these promotion-hungry dicks of yours are too damned anxious to pin the posie on June Warburton. They aren't able to see the woods for the trees. Maybe you'd better check up on the way they've been handling this case."

Johnny March had an amused smirk on his face. He enjoyed seeing people get into trouble, whether it was me, Mike Bruno, or anyone—except himself. I had to dig him. I said: "Isn't that right, Johnny? Maybe you'd better ask Cap to let somebody double-check on your investigation of the blonde dame who was mixed up with Sam Warburton. I don't think you did a very brilliant job of it."

I walked out of the office, out of the police station and onto the street. I turned west toward Main Avenue and "Rotgut Row." I needed a little drinkee and some hot jazz, a nice noisy dive where I could peacefully work this whole murder case over in my mind.

It was about four boiler-makers later in Dopey John's that I got a bright idea. The place was a little shoebox with the lights as dim as a movie theatre. The thick fog of smoke further helped to obscure the things that went on in the booths that lined the wall. A three-piece band, all kited-up, were making the walls shiver with a brand of jazz that was completely wasted on the people there.

Maybe it was the place; maybe it was the music. I don't know. The drinks could have helped, too. But all of a sudden this whole thing with June Warburton got itself boiled down and became very clear. It centered on one angle. Her story of the unknown blonde that she claimed her husband had been carrying on with. I had to find out the truth of that, myself. It meant everything.

It had come to me, jammed in there at the crowded bar, putting alternate layers of beer and whiskey into my stomach, that I might just possibly be going for a nice big sleigh ride. With June at the reins. It had happened before, to smarter guys than I was.

A moment later I left Dopey John's. The cab dropped me off in front of the River Park apartment house. I looked at my watch and it was about twelve thirty. The

building I entered, was a four-story brick job, with simple design, but well kept and quietly dignified.

In the vestibule, I saw that so far, June Warburton was right. The tab under the doorbell of Three A, had no name in it. The downstairs door was open and I went in and climbed to the third floor. Three A was in the back. I stood in front of the door for a moment had listened. A radio was playing softly and there was the muted sound of a man's voice.

Then I heard the soft laughter of a woman. I knocked on the door. The radio went off and for a moment, there was no sound from within the flat. I pounded on the door some more, hard, confidently, a knock that told them I damn well knew somebody was home and to stop the baloney and open up.

It worked. A woman's high heels clicked across bare floor between rugs and the door opened. June Warburton's story was getting verified some more. This was a blonde, all right. This was a hell of a lot of woman.

She wasn't very tall, but the willowy slimness of her build gave the impression of being taller. Her hair was a white-gold color. It was very thick and soft and fluffing lightly to her shoulders.

And the rest of her stacked right up with the hair. She had an oval face, with intelligent, but sleepy-looking green eyes. Her eyebrows were shaped in a thin, high arch. She had flaring nostrils and curling orange lips that in any other face would have been too full and sensual, but here were just right.

She was wearing shimmering, black jersey, with just the two top buttons undone. I thought I had seen everything in that line, but nothing ever like this. I never went for the flashy blonde, show-girl type. But the first look at this creature and I felt as if my eyes were hanging out onto my cheeks.

**T**HOSE sleepy green eyes gave me a quick once over and I felt as though she immediately knew everything about me. This was a cookie as smart as she was beautiful. She cocked her head just a trifle and batted me lightly with those green eyes. Her over-ripe mouth twisted a trifle at one corner in a half-smile that would

mean nothing or would mean *everything*

All this and she was just sparring around. I was just an unknown guy who had knocked on the door. I could imagine what it would be like if she ever went to work on a guy for keeps. He wouldn't have a chance. Not *any* man. This was a woman who had all the weapons; knew every trick and could use them all at once and bowl you over for the count, any time she wanted to.

I swallowed, and used the dodge I had planned. I said: "I'm from the insurance company, Ma'am."

"Insurance?" she said. She had one of these throbbly, husky voices. "I don't think I need any insurance right now."

"I don't think you understand," I corrected her. "I'm not selling it. I'm from the claim office. You see, Samuel Warburton, one of our clients, died recently. We have your name as a beneficiary on a policy he held for twenty-five thousand." I paused and watched for the effect. I got it.

For a moment, the barest fraction of a second, she cracked and the green of her eyes got very wide and shined like a cat's at night. The color went out of her oval face and left just the bare red chips of rouge there. Just as suddenly, she recovered. She said, evenly: "Are you sure you have the right apartment?"

Before I could answer that, a voice from inside the flat called out: "Hey, Barbie, tell them to come back some other time!"

For a moment it didn't register—and then it whacked me. *Barbie!* This girl's name was *Barbie*. And she was a beautiful blonde who *could* drive a guy crazy.

I said, in a tight voice, dredged up from somewhere in the back of my throat: "You—you work in the Blue Angel. You're a dancer?"

"That's right," she said. "But why would Mr. Warburton make me a beneficiary of—"

I didn't hear the rest of it. *Barbie Valentine*, I was thinking. Mike Bruno's honey, the one who was giving him all the ambition, who was giving him a hot brain. I could just imagine what this one would do to a guy like Mike Bruno. And then, piling one thing on top of another, it rammed home to me that I also recognized that man's voice, from inside the apartment. It

was one I'd heard too many times, to make any mistake about it. It was one I'd heard only tonight.

"Excuse me, Blondie," I said, and put the flat of my hand against the door, slammed it all the way open and squeezed past her. She whirled, put her hand on my shoulder, but I shook it off and kept going.

She said: "Hey, where the hell do you think you're going?"

I let her guess, and went on down a short hall and into a small, tastefully furnished living room. I stopped just inside the door and looked at him. He was sitting on a fat-cushioned love-seat. He was in his shirt sleeves, with his collar opened and his tie pulled askew. He looked very handsome, sitting there, this Lieutenant of Detectives Johnny March.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Overtime Sleuth

WHEN he saw me, his sharp thin face tightened and drew longer. His eyes seemed to pull outward and the V of his brows deepened. His lean lips pulled back from his teeth. It was an animal-like baring of the fangs.

I said: "You ought to thank June Warburton for fixing you up with this." I jerked my head toward the blonde who had come in behind me and was standing to my right, now. "Or did you know this little queen before that?"

He still didn't say anything but just showed me his teeth and held a cigarette halfway to his lips, where his hand had frozen when he saw who I was.

"Who is this guy?" the blonde demanded of Johnny.

He stood up then. He dropped the cigarette into a large ash tray on the cocktail table in front of the love seat. "A punk," he said. "A nosy, too-smart punk. That's who he is. But I don't know who he *thinks* he is. Who do you *think* you are, Billie The Boy Detective? Maybe you believe these books you write."

I ignored him. My eyes were roaming around the room now. They found the bookcase. It was a small one and it was filled with cheap novels of the circulating library type, mostly. A lot of them were

mysteries but only two of them were mine. One was an oldie and the other was my latest, *You Slay Me!* The title of it and the shiny new jacket seemed to leap out and hit me right in the eye.

"Johnny," I said. "I suppose you're working overtime tonight. You went off at twelve, but I know a policeman is always on duty. I suppose you call this, grilling another suspect in the Warburton case. She must be a suspect, according to your deductions, because she is apparently a mystery novel fan—like Warburton's wife." I waved a hand at the bookcase. "She even has the book that contains the murder method."

Barbie Valentine asked: "Johnny, what's this guy talking about?"

"I'm not sure," March said. "I hope it isn't what I think it is. Or maybe you crazy dames who read his books are going to have to find yourself another boy."

I turned to the blonde. "Where's Mike Bruno tonight, Honey? He almost made himself a promotion this evening but I sort of put the kibosh on it. That was too bad, wasn't it?"

"I don't know any Mike Bruno!" She almost snarled it at me. Her eyes licked at me now like the little poisonous fangs of an asp.

"Don't you?" I said. "Johnny, ring Mike Bruno and ask him what he knows about Barbie Valentine. He'll tell you. He'll go into raptures about it."

Johnny March's cold eyes swung slowly from me to the girl, to a telephone on an end table and then back to her again. Very low and deadly, while spots of temper flamed in his lean cheeks, he said: "What about that, Baby? Should I make that call? Do you know Mike Bruno?"

"Johnny, I—" she started. "It's a long story. You see, I felt a little sorry for Mike. I—he—there was never anything between us, Johnny. I swear. He's just a friend. He—"

"Mike Bruno!" March cut her off. The way he said the name was like an oath, a piece of gutter language. He turned away from her toward me. He was very pale, now and there was a film of fine sweat all over the high bony structure of his forehead. His slightly slanting eyes had a cold glitter in them. He spoke through his teeth.

"Dennison, I know you're a smart boy. I won't try to con you because I know it's no use. So it's *this* way. I want you to understand; it's *this* way—and you'll never be able to prove otherwise. You'd better not even try."

"What way, Johnny?" I wanted to know.

He took a deep breath. "She did it, of course. Barbie killed Sam Warburton. I got the tip from Mrs. Warburton. When I came up here to investigate, Barbie made a play for me. I strung along, figuring to get conclusive evidence against her. That's all there is to it, Dennison. I was just about to arrest Barbie and take her downtown—when you busted in."

It was quick thinking and it was clever. I had to give him credit. I had to let him know it didn't cut any ice with me, either. I said: "Captain Rossman's going to think it's a little unorthodox, you working that way, Johnny. He's liable to size it up the same way I do. That you knew Barbie, here, killed Warburton—but she suckered you into keeping quiet about it. The set-up with Barbie was all right with you, too, because you thought you could make the murder stick with June Warburton. And a suspect like rich June Warburton would give you a lot more publicity than a floosie dancer in a Mill City night club."

Suddenly, Barbie flung her lithe body across the room at Johnny March. She clung to him until she couldn't get any closer. Her head was flung back and her silver-blond hair was beautiful in the lamplight. Her white, bare arms were coiled about his neck and she was crying: "Johnny, don't talk like that. You don't know what you're saying. Johnny, Johnny, darling, you can't do this to me. Cut it out, Johnny, will you. I—"

He reached up and took her arms from around his neck, stepped back and flung her roughly away from him. She spun and fell onto the love seat. A long tendril of hair hung over one of her eyes and she tossed it and sprawled there, staring up at him, her breathing coming hard, her eyes glassy and wild looking.

"Keep away from me!" March told her, without looking at her. To me, he said: "All right, Dennison. I'll give you the publicity break you wanted in this deal. I'll even cut you in on the credit."

I laughed at him and he stopped. "Don't be stupid," I said. "Johnny, you were going to railroad an innocent woman. You were going to do that to save the hide of this beautiful tramp—and to boost up your stock. The hell with you, Johnny."

**H**IS fists balled at his sides and, for a moment, I thought he was going to try to take me. But something happened then. There was the sound of the apartment door slamming open. Heavy footsteps sounded along the hall. A man's voice boomed: "I got here early, tonight, Honey. Don't get sore at me; I just couldn't wait until the time you said. It's all right, ain't it, Barbie?"

It did seem to be all right with Barbie. For a moment, she sat there, staring dumbly toward the hall doorway and the sound of that voice. Then a look of desperate cunning covered her face. And as Mike Bruno came into the room, she flung herself up off the sofa, ran toward him. She went right into his arms, sobbing:

"Mike, Mike, Sweetheart, I'm so glad you came. I'm in—I'm in awful trouble, Mikie!"

Mike Bruno stood there, looking over her blonde head at Johnny March and me. Mike's red, sweat-shiny, ugly face worked with the effort of trying to figure this deal all out. Then he suddenly exploded:

"What are these no-good heels doin' here, Barbie?"

She swung around to his side, her arm still around his thick waist, her head leaning against his massive, meaty shoulder. They made a picture, all right. Beauty and the Beast. She said: "I don't know how to tell you all this, Mike, but these two came up here to arrest me. Mike, they're trying to frame me for the murder of Sam Warburton. They'll do it, too. They've got it all worked out. Get me out of here, Mike. Help me!"

"What?" he roared. "Warburton?" He looked at me and at Johnny March. "You guys crazy?"

I felt my scalp tingling. I didn't like the way Barbie was playing this.

I said, quickly: "Sure, we're crazy, Mike. Like foxes. She's lying. We don't have to frame her. *She* killed Warburton. Why would we pick on her. Look, Mike, did you know that she was a friend of Warburton?"

"No," he admitted. He shook his big head like a punch-drunk fighter. He blinked his small eyes. His great red hands were clenching and unclenching at his sides, his diamond ring winking in the light. Suddenly his eyes narrowed. He pointed a thick finger at Johnny March. "What's that punk doin' up here in his shirt sleeves, Barbie?" His eyes found the cocktail table and a couple of glasses on it. "What is going on here, anyway?"

"That's what I mean," I said in a hurry, trying to keep this thing in hand. "You see what you've got a hold of, Mike. This little gal is slippery as quicksilver. She was playing all ends against the middle. She was playing Warburton; she was playing you—and when it became necessary, Johnny March. Lieutenant Johnny March is a good detective, when he wants to be. He's got Barbie cold on the Warburton kill—but he didn't turn her in. Why, Mike, as dumb as you are, you can figure the answer to that."

Barbie Valentine changed tactics swiftly. Mike Bruno's slow brain and his adoration for her, were her only chance, now. She clung to his arm and she put on an act. She turned on all the stuff. Her eyes were starry with tears and the expression on her face would have wrung the heart of a stone man.

"I'll tell you the truth, Mike," she cried. "They're right in a way. I—I did kill Sam Warburton. But I had to, Mike. Don't let it make any difference with us. I love you—I'm crazy about you, Mike. I'll marry you—I'll do anything you want, if you'll help me. Mike, I couldn't stand going to jail. Mike—*help me get away.*"

Mike Bruno didn't know what to do, what to say. "I don't—understand, Barbie. Why? How did that all happen? What was Warburton to you?"

She really had it. She didn't even hesitate. "He was a rich and influential man, Mike. I met him down at the club. He was going to help me with my career. I—well, I thought he just wanted to be friends. I went out with him a couple of times and there was never anything wrong, Mike. Honest. And then—then, that night, he talked me into coming up to see him at his house. Over the phone, it was. He said he had some important people there who wanted to meet me. So I went."

Mike Bruno was looking down at her as she talked. I could see his huge Adam's apple moving in his throat. He was swallowing it hook, line and pole. He said: "The stinkin' rat! Barbie, you poor kid, you! What happened up there?"

THAT stopped her for a moment, but she got around it. "Mike—I don't remember too well. He fixed me a drink and it must have had something in it. He was awful drunk when I got there. Every thing was in a haze after that. I'm not sure what happened, but I guess he must've passed out or something. I guess he asked me to put a wet rag on his forehead. Honest, Mike, this is the way it happened. Then I—"

Johnny March stopped her. "That's not the way you told it to me, Baby," he said coldly, his face a grinning mask. "You told me you tried to blackmail the old goat and he got sore and slammed you one on the button. He said he'd have you locked up. When you came to, you found him drunk, passed out cold. You went a little haywire. No guy had ever hit you before. And you were scared he'd press the blackmail charge. You saw that he had that wet rag over his forehead and you remembered something you'd read in a book, recently. So you pulled the cloth down over his nose and mouth—and stood there and watched him, while he smothered. And then you got the bright idea to try and frame it on his—"

"Shut him up, Mike!" she screamed. "He's lying!" She grabbed Mike's arm with both hands and shook him. It was like a little terrier trying to worry a mastiff. Mike just stood there, dazed, looking down at her. Then she said, purring, the hot stuff in her voice:

"Mike, we can go away together. Just you and I, Mike. It's what you've always wanted, isn't it? We—we're both smart, Mike. We'll get along. I've got a little money, too. We'll make out . . . Mike, let's get out of here."

Johnny March never used a gunbelt or holster. He claimed it spoiled the hang of his tailor-made suits. Instead, he had a leather-lined back pocket tailored into his trousers. He reached back there, now and pulled out his Police Positive. He held it loosely, and said:

"You heard enough, Mike. Get away

from her. I'm going to take her downtown."

Then Barbie went at Mike again. "Don't let him, Mike," she whimpered. "Please Mike, get me out of this . . . I'll go away with you. Please, Honey!"

Mike Bruno made a sighing noise and said gently: "All right, Baby." He untangled his arm from hers and started across the room toward Johnny March, slowly, deliberately. He said to Johnny:

"You pretty-boy, two-bit chiseler, I've taken too damn much off of you for too damn long. All the time you louse me up. But you're not going to do it, this time . . . Put that rod away."

Johnny March took a backward step. "Mike, don't be an ass. Stand back." He brought up the muzzle of the gun. The knuckles of the hand that held it, began to stick out whitely. "Go back, Mike. I'm telling you—"

Mike Bruno made his jump, then. He got Johnny's gun-arm and twisted it to one side. He got his other big hand around Johnny's throat. In reflex action, Johnny's fingers squeezed the trigger. And it couldn't have done a better job if he'd have aimed it. At that same moment, Barbie Valentine made a mad break for the door. She ran right into the line of fire of that bullet. She stopped still in the middle of the room and her hand came up and clawed at her breast. Then she went down.

Meanwhile, Johnny March and Mike Bruno were fighting with everything they had. While I dove toward them, Johnny got his gun hand free for an instant and the thunder-clap of it echoed in the room once more. I saw Mike Bruno stiffen as though someone had kicked him in the stomach, but he didn't take his hand away from Johnny's throat. Johnny's eyes were beginning to bulge and his face was purpling. The gun roared again, just before I reached them. I knew that Mike Bruno had taken both of those shots right in his big, beefy middle. Yet, still he stood there, holding Johnny March by the throat. He kept calling Johnny sewer names.

I got to them and knocked the gun flying out of Johnny's hand, as if that were going to do any good now. I got hold of Mike Bruno's arm and I had a hell of a time trying to break the grip he had on Johnny's throat, but I finally made it. Then I

stepped back. Johnny March fell into a chair, clutching at his bruised throat, sucking in air.

Mike Bruno stood there, swaying; his knees going a little and looked at me, as though he were seeing me for the first time. There was a glazed look over his eyes and the sweat was running off of his red, ugly face in little rivers. A crazy little twitching grin tugged at his big mouth.

"Hell, Will," he whispered. "You know, I think I'm hurt, Will." He put a hand to his stomach and pulled it away wet and red and looked down at it, stupefied. "Yeah, I think I'm hurt bad . . . It's too bad it had to happen like this, ain't it, Will?"

I felt sorry for the big lug, right then. I couldn't help it. "It's too *damned* bad, Mike."

"Will," he said, squinting his eyes as though he was having trouble seeing me, "At least I helped Barbie, huh? At least I helped her get away. Did she get away?"

From the corner of my eye I could see her lying twisted on the floor. "Yes, Mike, she—got away."

"That's good," he said. His eyes were closed altogether, now. "Say, Will, I guess I was wrong about that Warburton dame, huh? I guess I owe you that hundred bucks . . ."

He stopped and a fit of ugly coughing caught him. He turned away from me and took one step and fell forward onto his face. He coughed a few more times, weakly and then lay still. I looked at Johnny March, who was still sitting there, rubbing at his throat and looking at Mike, on the floor. Then I walked toward the phone to call Captain Rossman . . .

I couldn't work it so that June could get out that night. The best they thought they could do, would be the next day. There were a lot of technicalities to be straightened out. But they let me see her alone for a few minutes in Rossman's office.

We didn't do much talking, though. I guess we figured there'd be plenty of time for talking, later. Plenty of time. So for a little while there, it was just like it used to be, back when we were kids. The only difference was, that when you're kids, you don't know how to make the best of those things. We knew, now, though. We really knew.

(Continued from page 28)

came a game of hide-and-seek with groups of armed men. How, after wading down that creek half a mile, we found the cows grabbing a noontday drink and rode out on their backs. How I finally pooped out and didn't awaken until twelve hours later to find myself in this cabin and hear how the Big Guy had lugged me up the mountain.

What I want to tell you—hold it, Pete!

It's coming up trouble. The Sailor says the hounds finally picked up our trail. It's still two hours until night. But that's not long enough. They must be using planes, must have spotted us from a plane. One of them is coming down to land on the level spot behind this cabin. So, so long. . .

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

*The surprising thing about this document was that it was postmarked Salt Lake City, Utah. That was a month ago.*

*I followed the Clawson Case in the West Coast papers and learned that Glenn Yates had not died and that his confession implicated Bud Thrasher as the murderer of Thomas Clawson and Zello. But there has been absolutely no mention of the capture of either Wale, Duffy or Thrasher.*

*The fate of that ill-assorted trio remained a mystery until a few days ago when I received the following communication from Portland, Oregon:*

Dear Pete,

Can you imagine? The guy in that plane was Bud Thrasher! That was his cabin. He was pausing long enough to fuel up for a flight to his ranch in Nevada.

He didn't want to take us, but in the face of all our artillery, what could he do?

If you show this to Homicide Inspector Quinn, he can notify the Nevada Law to pick up Thrasher on his ranch, a few miles east of Carson City.

The fat boy tried to keep us from borrowing his station wagon. He tried with the same forty-five he used to blast Glenn Yates. They'll find it still in his fist and they'll find him on the floor of his garage.

He wanted to have a finger in everything, that guy. His biggest mistake was to put it alongside the trigger of a revolver pointing at your old friend,

Cash Wale

THE END

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## Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 73)

mother who is ill. I have here twenty dollars in one-dollar bills. Would you please give me a twenty-dollar bill for it?"

When I handed him the twenty, he gave me the ones and put the twenty in an envelope, sealed it and put it in his pocket. Upon counting the one-dollar bills, I found only nineteen and called the fellow back.

He counted it and said: "You're right." He took the envelope out of his pocket and handed it to me. "Here, hold your money until I take these bills out to my friend and show him I am one short and borrow one from him."

After waiting about fifteen minutes for him to return, I opened the envelope and found folded newspaper. That favor cost me twenty dollars.

Your truly,  
M. S. Pozanek  
Baltimore, Md.

### Good Clean Fun

Dear Sir:

One evening about dark two boys, about twelve or fourteen years old, knocked at our door and said we could help them in a treasure hunt. They requested a raw egg with my name written in ink on the egg.

Of course, I was glad to help them in their fun.

They must have found lots more people as well as myself to do the same, for the next day we saw those same boys selling eggs house to house in another neighborhood.

The eggs being sold had no signatures, however!

Sincerely,  
Dorothy McClurg  
Dallas, Texas

### Lonely—But So Well Dressed!

Dear Sir:

Much to my regret, when I was a working girl in Chicago, I met another working girl who was living in a rooming house and was quite lonely. Since I had a two-room apartment, I offered to let the girl share it with me, paying half the rent.

We got along very well, but about two weeks later I came home from work to find every piece of clothing I owned gone. There I was with only the clothes on my back and the rent to pay!

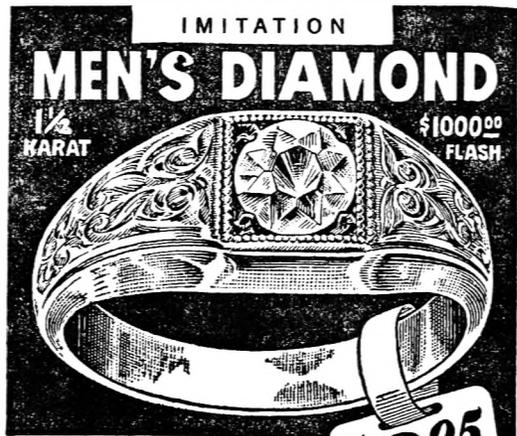
It took me three months to get some sort of a wardrobe together, and believe me, I never let another girl live with me, lonesome or not!

Betty Botelho  
Oakland, Calif.

### Sure Kill

Dear Sir:

With roaches swarming over my basement floor like an infantry attacking a helpless enemy, I decided that I had better see about some kind of insecticide. So off to the hardware store I pranced and purchased all kinds of highly ad-



Cut, polished and hand set as if it were a genuine diamond! The stone in this ring is the nearest approach to a diamond known to science. So real you or your friends can hardly tell the difference even on close inspection. One of America's Greatest Ring Values. Gold Filled or Sterling Silver. Write for yours NOW.

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DENT'S TOOTH GUM

TOOTH DROPS

## Ready for the Rackets

vertised roach killers, none of which did any good at all.

Suddenly, when all hope was lost, I spotted a large colorful ad in a magazine; reading something like this:

"Get rid of roaches! A sure kill or your money back! Complete kit and full instructions, only \$1.00, etc."

"Oh boy!" I thought to myself, "just what I've been looking for—and guaranteed, too. What have I got to lose?"

Off went my hard-earned buck. About two weeks passed and finally the postman brought my package. I quickly fumbled through the straw and shredded newspaper, and before my eyes lay two boxes, marked *kit 1* and *kit 2*. In these boxes were two blocks of wood and an instruction sheet reading:

"Place roach on block contained in kit 1, and then pound vigorously upon said roach with block 2."

This killed them all right and, as advertised was certainly a *sure* kill.

James Dodson,  
Norwood, Ohio.

## The Case of the Wiggly Kids

Dear Sir:

Having no one to leave them with when I went grocery shopping, I was in the habit of taking my two small children with me. Usually I shopped in super markets, in which I thought I could buy foods most economically.

Hunting for grocery items in a large store with two wiggly, energetic, youngsters in tow always had me pretty well confused. By the time I had arrived at the checking counter, with a load of groceries and two children to watch, it was practically impossible to keep my eyes on the cash register.

Time after time, after reaching home, I checked my groceries with the cashier's price lists. I found that each time I had had the children with me, the stores' lists were inaccurate, always overcharging me, sometimes as much as 75¢. I did not trust my memory completely, so, as I took each food item from its shelf, I wrote down its price. Again the cashier added 5¢ to a price here, 3¢ here, 15¢ there.

I tried leaving the children in the car when I shopped. Such errors did not occur. For the purpose of experiment, I tried taking the children with me into the stores again. Errors were again made in price lists, overcharging the customer. I also found that when I had carried bundles with me into the stores, cashiers seemed to think I was too busy with packages to watch. Errors—overcharges—were made every time.

One day, in a confidential conversation with a neighbor whose husband worked in the super market, I mentioned my observations. She confessed that the manager had actually encouraged the employees to cheat, saying the cashiers could keep the extras.

Mrs. S.  
Oswego, N. Y.

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