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MAGAZINE

**DEATH RIDES
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A DRAMATIC
SUSPENSE STORY
by **DEAN OWEN**





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STATE FINANCE COMPANY was organized in 1897. During the past 54 years, we have helped over 1,000,000 men and women in all walks of life. Confidential loans are made all over America, in all 48 states. We are licensed by the Banking Department of the State of Nebraska to do business under the Small Loan Law. You'll enjoy borrowing this easy, confidential, convenient way from this old, responsible company in whom you can place the greatest confidence.

STATE FINANCE COMPANY
Dept. U-71
323 Securities Bldg. Omaha 2, Nebraska



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You'll agree with thousands of others that this is a wonderfully easy way to solve your money problem. No matter who you are or where you live—if you're over 25 years old and steadily employed—mail this coupon now. Loans are made to men and women in all walks of life and in all kinds of jobs—to factory and office workers, teachers, civil service employees, railroad men, and hundreds of others. Get the money you need and get it now. Rush the coupon.

MAIL COUPON Today!

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323 Securities Bldg., Omaha 2, Nebraska
Without obligation rush to me full details in plain envelope together with the FREE Loan Application and Loan Papers for my signature, if I decide to borrow.

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prepare yourself—right at home, in your most convenient spare time. From 391 different I.C.S. home-study courses you simply choose the one you need. One or more of our 203 expert instructors give you the individual, personal attention which helps you get ahead more quickly.

FREE—2 INTERESTING BOOKS

The coupon below, without cost or obligation, will bring you our Free Book about the subject you're interested in. You'll also receive, free, our book on "How to Succeed"—a 36-page gold-mine of valuable advice telling Why People Fail, How to Pick Your Goal, How to Develop Your Hidden Talents, etc. To take full advantage of today's wonderful new job opportunities, mail coupon NOW.



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25¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



Combined with
DETECTIVE FICTION MAGAZINE

Vol. 68

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Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person.
living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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and for every member of the family



Lee Overalls, made of tough Jelt Denim, give far longer wear.



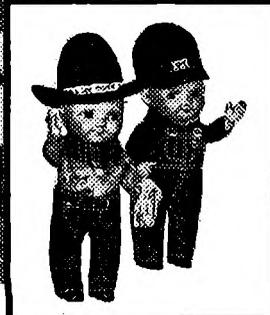
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READY for the RACKETS

A Department

Dear Detective Fans,

This column is yours. It is designed to warn you against all the petty swindles rampant today. Honest men must stick together and blot out crime—whatever it is.

Though you try to keep off sucker lists, swindle sheets and the like, there may come the time when you will fall for some phony scheme. Therefore, it is for your protection to study carefully the experiences of our correspondents. They, unfortunately, have learned the hard way—you still have a chance.

And friends, if you have the inside information on any shady racket, or have suffered at the hands of petty sharpsters and punks, why not send along a letter to this corner? We pay five dollars for every accepted letter—though the money and heartache you may save some prospective victim of the same racket may seem reward enough. Send all correspondence to The Rackets Editor, c/o DIME DETECTIVE, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, New York. If you wish your letter returned if we cannot use it, please include a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Now, for the rackets!

Know Your Agency!

Dear Sir:

Most employment agencies operate legitimately, but recently my cousin was fleeced of \$240 by a fake agency operated by two con men.

Replying to a listing which called for a \$500-per-month accountant, my cousin was set up for an interview with an executive who was supposedly the regional director for a large manu-

facturing company. The local office was small, but modern.

The director was apparently delighted with his new applicant and told him to report to work in two weeks. The agent had earned a \$300 fee, but offered a twenty per cent discount for cash. My cousin took advantage of the discount.

When he reported on the specified date, he found the offices deserted and for lease. Likewise the employment agency office. A check with the Better Business Bureau revealed that 14 other applicants had taken the same job and all but one had paid cash.

The two con men are quite probably working their little racket in another city right now.

Jack Eicholz
Cleveland, Ohio

Deduct and Dupe

Dear Sir:

It wasn't exactly me being swindled, but it was the best half of me, my husband. Bill is a one-hundred percent disabled buck private. He can't hold down just any job. His arms are crooked from arthritis, making even the smallest job almost impossible for him. He thought he had found that once-in-a-lifetime friend when Mr. X offered to attach a special lever on his caterpillar so Bill could handle it with his deformed limbs.

Bill took the job. All went wonderfully until payday. We thought the check seemed short but thought no more of it until the next check, and the next. Both were low. When the fourth was less than it should have been, Bill questioned Mr. X. "Why, son, I've been withholding your income tax. I thought you knew I'd have to do that. It's the law," he said.

Bill was puzzled. "That tax isn't supposed to be that much," he told me. "I'm going to the right authority and find out."

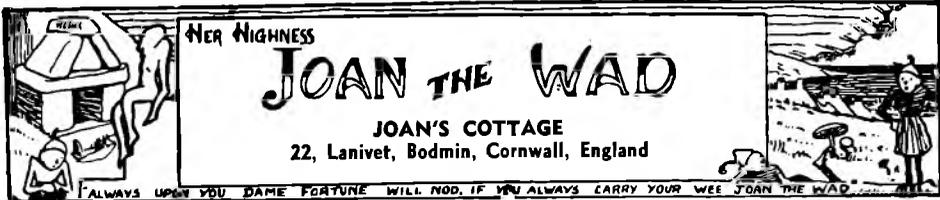
The lawyer, after checking the figures, told us that out of the four-hundred-ninety-five dollars Bill had earned, his tax should have been eighteen dollars. Mr. X had withheld ninety dollars in the space of three months! When confronted by the lawyer, he said it must have been a mistake on his part.

"Either make seventy-two of the ninety good to this boy or go to jail!" the lawyer told him.

Luckily for us, he did make it good. Next time we might not be so fortunate. Bill and I have learned all that glitters is not gold!

Mrs. Pairlee Pattillo
Bluff Dale, Texas

(Continued on page 8)



"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £232 10s. Please send two more." B.C., Tredegar, S. Wales.—*Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book, 1931."*

JOAN THE WAD

is the **LUCKY CORNISH PISKEY** who Sees All, Hears All, Does All.

That is why there is more health, less unemployment and more contented people in Cornwall than elsewhere, but all these benefits can be obtained if you live elsewhere by adopting **Joan the Wad**.

JOAN THE WAD is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that Joan the Wad has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness.



GUARANTEED DIPPED IN WATER FROM THE LUCKY SAINT'S WELL

DOCTOR GAVE UP HOPE—CURED—BETTER HEALTH

"Dear Joan the Wad. Since I received you a few months ago I have had lots of luck. First of all I had to come into hospital with an Osteomyelitis leg. The doctor gave up hopes of my recovery but after I was sent home I then sent to you, for a Joan the Wad and believe me I started to get well again and now I am back again in hospital as one leg had grown longer than the other. I then brought Joan in with me. I carried her to the operating theatre table and the bone was taken away from my thigh and my operation has proved a success. Next my knee has been straight for three years, now with exercise and massage it is starting to bend. I am sure that Joan the Wad has brought me lots of luck. If ever anyone says in here I'm always unlucky I always say send for a Joan the Wad. Wherever I go I will recommend her. I do hope you accept my story as I am a great believer in her. Yours sincerely, P. H., Sturges Ward, Wingfield Hospital, Oxford.

INCREASE IN WAGES

"... already after one fortnight we have had luck. I won ... sum of \$84 ... also have got \$2.80 per week increase in wages unexpected so Joan the Wad must be our lucky Star. So please send Jack O'Lantern to make the pair complete. (Mrs.) D. M., Kirkgate, Leeds.

JOAN THE WAD'S achievements are unique. Never before was such a record placed before the public. Ask yourself if you have ever heard before of anything so stupendous. You have not. Results are what count, and these few Extracts from actual letters are typical of the many hundreds that are received, and from which we shall publish the selections from time to time. We unreservedly **GUARANTEE** that these letters were absolutely spontaneous, and the originals are open to inspection at **JOAN'S COTTAGE**. Send at once for this **PROVED** Luck Bringer. You, too, may find benefit in Health, Wealth and Happiness to an amazing extent.

WON "NUGGETS" \$840

No. 257.—"My husband is a keen competitor in 'Bullets' and 'Nuggets.' He had not any luck until I gave him **JOAN THE WAD**, when the first week he secured a credit note in 'Nuggets' and last week **FIRST** prize in 'Nuggets' \$840."—Mrs. A. B., Salford.

\$84,000 WINNER

No. 222.—"Mrs. A. . . . of Lewisham, has just won \$84,000 and says she has a **JOAN THE WAD**, so please send one to me."—Mrs. V., Bromley.

Just send Two Dollar notes or an International Money Order and a large self-addressed envelope to:

JOAN'S COTTAGE, 22, LANIVET, BODMIN, CORNWALL, ENG.

and I will send you both History and Masčot.



(Continued from page 6)

All Sewed Up

Dear Sir:

On April 15, 1951, I purchased a certain brand of sewing machine for my mother, on contract from a salesman in the employ of a well known Seattle department store. While making the demonstration, the salesman told me the sewing machine head had been manufactured by a nationally famous sewing machine company, and due to the fact that its patents had run out, this company sold these heads to the smaller company. On the outside of the machine was an emblem plainly marked with the company name, Washington, D. C.

My mother did not use the machine until about a week later. Before she started sewing, I decided to scrutinize the machine closely. In doing so I discovered underneath in a very obscure place on the machine head: "Manufactured in Occupied Japan."

Lorne J. House
Seattle, Wash.

Postage Due

Dear Sir:

Some years ago I fell for an advertisement in a magazine by a Boston stamp dealer. It stated that he would purchase commemorative postage stamps on margin, deposit them with a local national bank (to be released only on client's signature) and sell them when desired. Some commemoratives rise rapidly in value, and this seemed to be a good deal.

I sunk some \$600 in it, but when I wanted to sell he balked. I had buyers in the East wiring me time and again to send them the stamps, but I could not get him to let go. Sometimes he would write me long letters, saying how hard he was trying to get me a buyer, and sometimes his secretary would reply to my inquiries that he was out of town for a while.

I wrote the bank and asked them whether they still had the stamps which were to be released only on my instructions. They answered that they had turned the letter over to him for reply. I wrote to the Commissioner of Banks of Massachusetts. He replied that he had nothing to do with national banks, which I should have known in the first place. I wrote to the Post Office Department and received a reply that they had made an investigation in Boston and had been unable to locate the gentleman! It was further stated that after they had interviewed him they would decide what to do. That was in 1942. Later, thinking over this governmental non-cooperation, I again wrote the Inspector-in-charge in 1949, asking why I had heard nothing further from my complaint of misuse of the mails in 1942, and whether they had ever interviewed the man. My letter went unanswered.

Apparently the public does not have much protection. Just another racket!

James R. Power
Los Angeles, Calif.

The Vanishing Video

Dear Sir:

I hesitated a long time about going in debt for a \$300 television set, which I wanted so badly, but finally decided to do it. It was quite a relief to me when the last payment was made, but I was glad I had bought it, for I enjoyed it very much.

One day something went wrong with my set and there was nothing to do but call a service man. I had a close friend in that business, so I called him and he told me he would send for my set in a couple of hours. I went back to my desk to continue my writing and in a few minutes my door bell rang. When I opened the door a young man was there and told me he had come for my television set, so I thought nothing of it and told him to go ahead and get it, and returned to my writing, not even looking up as he left.

Sometime later the door bell rang again and when I opened the door there stood another young man, and he too said he had come for my television set. I told him someone had already taken it. He looked surprised and said he was the only one working for my friend. I called and found this was true. My friend remembered there were several people in the shop that could have heard him talking to me when I called him to send someone, and had heard him repeat my address back to me, so the rest was easy for the man to do.

I, of course, notified the police. My television set has never been found.

S. Evans
Nashville, Tenn.

Bill-of-Sale Blues

Dear Sir:

A warning to your readers! Always keep the originals of sales receipts, bills, etc., and have photostats made for mailing purposes.

A year ago while living in Chicago I purchased a new battery for my car. With this purchase I received a year's guarantee. However, when I arrived in Florida two months later the battery developed a cell break-down. I had to buy a new one. In complete innocence I sent both bills of sale to the Chicago company, together with an explanatory letter so they would know I had bought the batteries. Hearing nothing from them I wrote them again. This time I received a reply telling me they had not received my first letter and that they could do nothing until I sent them the original bill of sale. Being unable to do this I was the loser, but it taught me a valuable lesson I won't soon forget.

Mrs. Ruth Konietzko
Pensacola, Fla.

Well, that just about winds up the information we have for you this issue. Although we hope no chisellers ever come your way, nevertheless, if they do, we know you'll be ready for them. Remember, a crime-free nation is a vigilant nation.

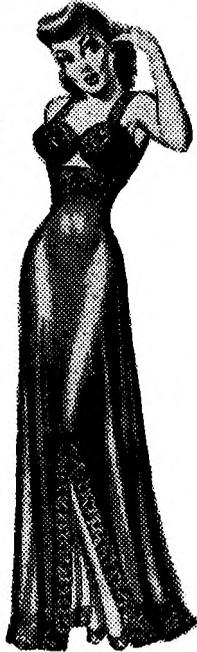


She'll be your "Dream Girl" You'll "Bewitch" her with it



Daring Bare-back She'll be entranced with it

Daring "BLACK MAGIC"



Heaven Sent Oriental Magic



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

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

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

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED or your money back

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED or your money back

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DREAM GIRL FASHIONS Dept. 130
318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey
Please send me DREAM GIRL gown at \$9.95. If not entirely satisfied, I'll return within 10 days for full cash refund.

I enclose \$9.95 cash, check or money order, send postage prepaid (I save up to 90c postage). (You may get it at our store too!)

I will pay postman \$9.95 plus postage. Check size wanted:

32 34 36 38 40 IN BLACK ONLY
(If you don't know the size send approximate height and weight)

Name

Address

City State

DREAM GIRL FASHIONS, Dept. 292
318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey
Please send "Heaven Sent" pajamas at \$9.95. If not entirely satisfied, I'll return within 10 days for full cash refund.

I enclose \$9.95 cash, check or money order, send postage prepaid (I save up to 90c postage). (You may get it at our store too!)

I will pay postman \$9.95 plus postage. Check size wanted:

32 34 36 38 40 IN BLACK ONLY
(If you don't know the size send approximate height and weight)

Name

Address

City State

DREAM GIRL FASHIONS, Dept. 446
318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey
Please send BLACK SORCERY gown at \$9.95. If not entirely satisfied, I'll return within 10 days for full cash refund.

I enclose \$9.95 cash, check or money order, send postage prepaid (I save up to 90c postage). (You may get it at our store too!)

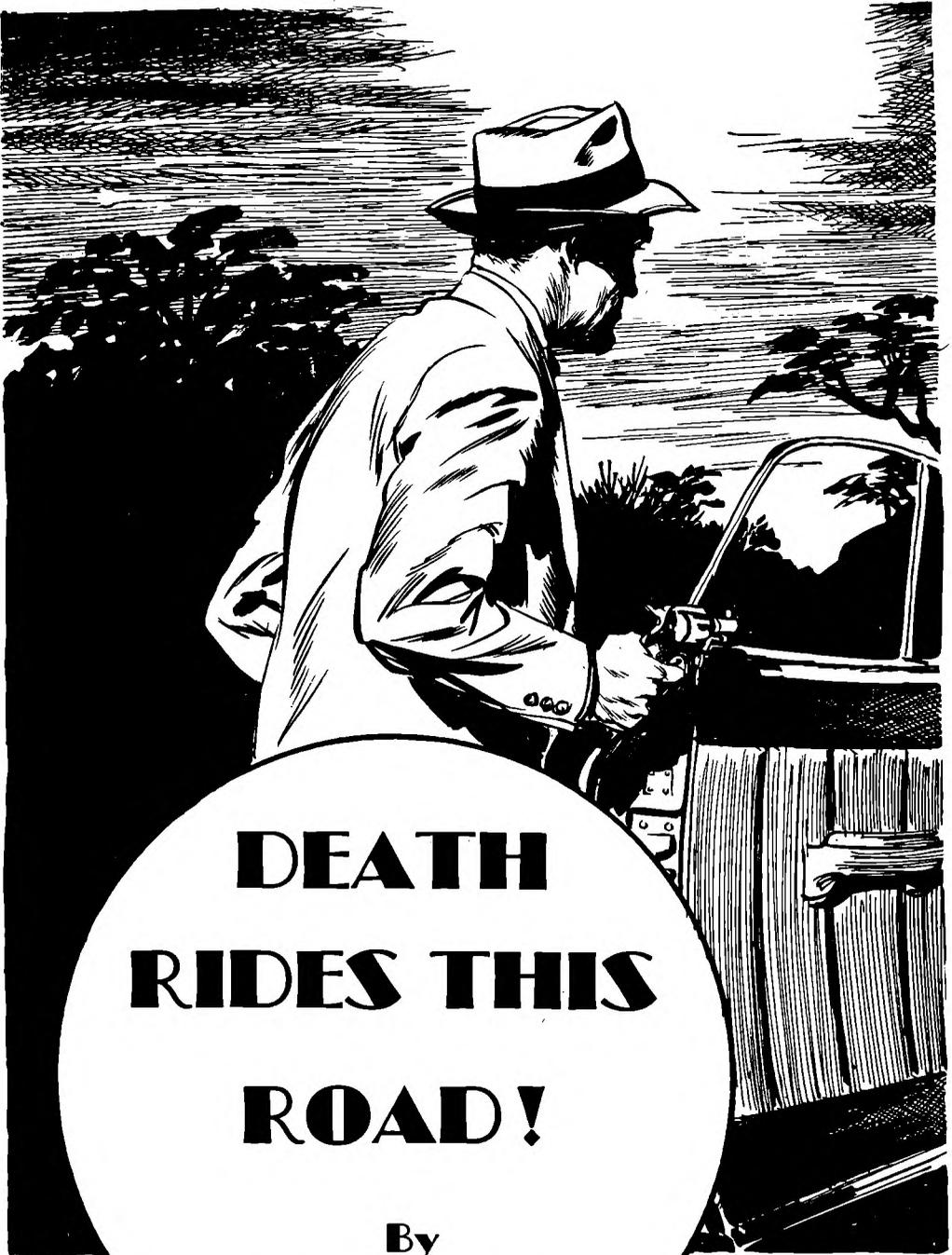
I will pay postman \$9.95 plus postage. Check size wanted:

32 34 36 38 40 IN BLACK ONLY
(If you don't know the size send approximate height and weight)

Name

Address

City State



**DEATH
RIDES THIS
ROAD!**

**By
DEAN OWEN**

"I told you to lay off,"
he said. "But you had to
dig..."

I would have given an Oscar to any guy who knocked off filmland's most jaded genius, Carter LeBlanc. But when the murderer tried to reward me with top billing in a gas chamber production, it was time to re-cast the show with some real good corpses!



BY THE time Pat was five miles along the Palm Springs cut off, the desert lay under the full moon like a silver platter. He hated the desert in a way; too many memories. But a job was a job. In

another five minutes he would see the lights of the village when he swung around the bend in the double highway. Not many lights, he reflected on second thought. It was after midnight, the tag end of the sea-

son, with summer's heat only a breath away.

Even though his memories were stronger than usual that night, Pat Riordan felt a welcome relief in the clean desert air and the silence. It was a contrast from the smog and clamor of Hollywood.

Slowing his old coupe, he flicked on its rusted spotlight and let the beam shoot up the sheer cliffs that rose from the road. Through the trees, high above, he could see faint streaks of white. Myra and he had always intended to prowl through the snow on Mount San Jacinto before the ski tram from Palm Springs was built. The ski tram was still a dream and so was playing in the snow with Myra. He hoped she had closed up the big house on Dolores road for the season. He couldn't stand facing Myra.

From the corner of his eye he caught sight of a figure sprinting across the sand. He shifted the spotlight. A tall girl wearing a green dress kept peering back at the beam, shielding her eyes. She had long legs and auburn hair and her face was terror-stricken. The girl was racing parallel to the road, away from a white, low-slung Italian coupe mired axle-deep in the loose sand a dozen yards off the highway.

Pat braked his coupe. "Hey, I'm not going to hurt you!" he yelled. "Did you have an accident?"

It was a foolish question. Obviously, there had been an accident. The whole left side of the sleek coupe had been scraped as if by a bulldozer.

He cut the spotlight and climbed out, stretching his long legs. Then he walked over to stare at the Italian car while the girl trailed along, brushing a lock of auburn hair from her eyes. Some of the terror had left her face. In the glow of the headlights, she watched him run a long forefinger over the *MD* in small gold letters on the racy job's crushed left hand door.

The girl said, "The car belongs to Myra

Denton. You know, the famous film star."

Pat nodded and clenched his fists. "Yeah," he said. "I know."

"I work for her. I'm Miss Denton's secretary." The girl gave him a weak smile and introduced herself. Her name was Joyce Kendall. She was pretty, if you weren't too particular about regularity of features. In Hollywood you get used to pretty faces. They had been Pat Riordan's stock in trade ever since he had left the *Blade*. But this face was fresh and vital. It didn't have that raised eyebrow look so many females who hang around the studios acquire.

JOYCE still looked a little scared. Her green eyes watched him. "I was just driving along when this car sideswiped me. He ran me right off the road."

"Some crazy drunk, probably," Pat said, stooping to inspect the tires sunk deep in the loose sand. His was a tall, slouching figure in a tweed suit that had lost its crease in the LA fog. Nearly thirty, Pat still had his black hair, but it was pushed up a little from his temples. A liquid dripping from the rear deck of the sideswiped coupe made a wet hole in the sand. As he watched the drops, he felt a chill between his shoulder blades.

His newspaper training returned in a flash. He tried to see if the liquid had a color. Red, perhaps.

He rose, dusting his knees. Behind him the mountains loomed dark and ominous. A diesel truck hammered along the highway on its way to the Imperial Valley.

He said, watching her pale face, "We'll have to send out a tow truck. I'll give you a lift to town." Pausing a moment, he added, "Anything in the luggage compartment you want to take?"

Pat watched her closely. It was possible that the car was stolen. It wouldn't be the first time a good-looking dame got a guy to stop, who when his back was turned,

had a tire iron bent over his head. Pat looked behind him. There was nothing but darkness and silence and the desert. In the distance, the headlight of a freight engine put a long yellow finger through the night.

Joyce said, "Oh, I almost forgot. The statue!"

She walked over and fumbled with the keys but finally got the rear deck open. Beside the spare tire was something wet, wrapped in burlap. When Pat picked up the object, he found it was cold as ice. He carried it to his coupe and deposited it on the rear seat. It was ice, all right, he saw, when he had taken his flashlight from the glove compartment. An ice statue, three feet high, of some guy wearing a beret. Or perhaps it wasn't a beret. Maybe the top of his head looked flat because so much of the ice had melted.

Joyce wailed, "Miss Denton will be furious."

Pat agreed. He introduced himself, wondering if the name would make any impression. It didn't.

When they were driving down the darkened highway, she said, "I haven't been her secretary for very long. The statue is for Mr. LeBlanc's birthday party. Miss Denton thought surely I could drive from Hollywood in three hours. I could have but I had motor trouble in Pomona. And then, this accident. I'll be fired; I just know it."

"Maybe it would be a lucky break for you," he murmured.

"Why do you say that?"

He made no reply but wheeled the ancient coupe toward the glowing lights of Palm Springs. Memory gripped him. Once he had been young and eager, fresh from a small town news desk. He had been assigned as personal publicity man for Myra Denton, film star.

Pat said, "You really can handle a car. It's a wonder you didn't turn over when that guy sideswiped you."

The girl's voice was frightened again.

"Miss Denton was supposed to drive down tonight. At the last minute she took a plane." Joyce shivered. "She doesn't handle a car very well. She probably would have just shut her eyes and taken her hands off the wheel." She turned and peered at Pat, who was bent over the wheel. "Do you think somebody thought it was Miss Denton in the car—"

She was a nice kid, concerned about her job. He didn't want to worry her needlessly. "Don't try to make a mystery out of it," he said, laughing. "It isn't the first time some screwball has run a car off the road."

"I still don't know how it happened; but all of a sudden this car just came out of nowhere. It crashed right into me."

Pat said, "What kind of a car was it?"

The girl shrugged. "I don't know. He didn't have his lights on." She moistened her lips. "That is, only a spotlight. He turned that on me after I was off the road. He parked down the road and just kept that light on me a minute. I was scared, believe me."

Pat nodded. "No wonder," he said.

Continuing, the girl said, "In a minute he turned the spotlight off and drove on. He was about a mile down the road before he put on his headlights." She turned in the seat to look at him. "When I saw you turn on your spotlight I thought he had come back. That's when I started to run."

HE KEPT thinking of the crumpled, custom-made fenders on the imported car back there in the desert. "Myra will blow a gasket over this," he said.

The girl shivered. "I'm afraid of her. She has such a vile temper."

"Yeah," Pat said. A sour, little, remembering smile played with the corners of his lips. "I know. . . ."

At one a.m., Palm Canyon Drive was deserted. Pat slowed the coupe, casting a

longing glance at Bert's Bar. It was dark. He had been afraid Myra still might be in Palm Springs and hadn't been too eager to come down when he got the note from Bert about a possible film job. Bert Bollard owned the best bar in the resort town. If there were any loose jobs, he'd know of them. The picture crowd liked his joint. When they got enough of Bert's liquor in them, they talked. Bert kept his ears open. He was always trying to do a favor for a friend. Pat was a friend. Bert had made a lot of money in real estate. Pat had known him when he was broke.

Joyce said, "Miss Denton lives on Dolores Road."

Pat nodded and turned right at the next corner. "You don't have to tell me where it is," he said bitterly.

Joyce straightened in the seat. "Oh," she said. "You're *that* Pat Riordan."

"I suppose Myra has mentioned me. In four letter words, probably."

"No, but she has your photograph in her bedroom."

He was aware of a catch in her voice and turned to look at her. In the glow of the dashlight, her face was red.

He gave a short laugh. "It's a relief to find a woman who can still blush," he told her.

To cover her embarrassment, Joyce said, "I hope LeBlanc's statue isn't ruined." Pat shrugged. According to the columnists, LeBlanc was Myra's current flame. Joyce said, "He directed *Crooked Alley*, you know. He just missed an Academy Award last year."

Even though he was odd, she said she owed him a lot. The year before she had come out from the midwest. She had been in the secretarial pool at Mammoth Studios. That was where Carter LeBlanc had seen her and suggested she become Myra's private secretary. It seemed like a good idea at the time, Joyce explained. But Myra's long contract with Mammoth had

run out. Joyce hadn't been paid in three weeks.

"But it's really an interesting job," she said, without too much enthusiasm."

"I'll bet." Pat swung the coupe along a gravel drive through a gate in a concrete wall and beyond an oleander hedge. The windows in the two-story, Spanish-type house were dark. Although it was late, any shindig Myra gave usually lasted the weekend. He felt ashamed that Myra might see his battered old coupe. In Hollywood, success was measured in horsepower. He'd been forced to sell his new car when caught in another studio layoff. He hadn't worked for six months. Press agents, it seemed, were sometimes cheap. Less than a dime a dozen on the current market.

He couldn't ask Joyce to carry the ice statue of LeBlanc, even melted down as it was. There was only one car parked in the drive, a two-seated English sports job. He carried the statue along a flagstone path to the floodlighted patio behind the house. Stretched out on a foam rubber pad beside the pool was Myra. She wore a low cut, one-piece, black swim suit. When she saw Pat and her secretary, Myra's gray eyes widened and her beautiful face went white.

Pat set down the ice statue on a table that held half a dozen empty highball glasses.

Myra said, "Throw that damn statue in the pool. And him with it!" She jerked a crimson thumbnail at Carter LeBlanc who was slumped in a chrome lounge chair.

He looked up, seeing Joyce. A faint smile stirred the upper lip that held his mustache. "Angel," he murmured and extended a feminine hand. But Joyce expertly maneuvered her hip out of his reach.

MYRA rose from the pad, fluffing out her blond hair. She was a holdover from the day when Hollywood demanded beautiful heads with nothing in them.

There were dark smudges under her eyes.

"Where have you been?" she demanded of Joyce. "Out with him?" She jerked her head at Pat.

Carter LeBlanc stood up. "What does it matter? Nothing matters." He began to pick at his fingernails. He wore a yellow sports shirt and trousers to match. He said, "Today is my birthday. Instead of a celebration, it is the day of my greatest defeat."

Pat, looking at Myra, saw that her eyes were ten degrees colder than LeBlanc's statue.

He tried to explain about the accident.

Myra blew her top. "One simple errand I send her on. Stop by Arturo's and pick up an ice statue I ordered. Then drive to Palm Springs. Not only is she two hours late, she wrecks my car—"

LeBlanc sank back to the chaise lounge. "Leave her alone," he said, and tried to catch Joyce's hand.

"Some drunk ran her off the road," Pat said. "It's a wonder she wasn't killed."

For the first time Myra seemed to lose her anger. She looked at Pat, the lines deepening at the corners of her mouth. "You think it was an accident?"

Pat shrugged.

Joyce was distraught. "I'll pay for the damage."

Pat shook his head. "The car's covered with insurance."

Myra's eyes were thin and angry again. "The hell you say."

At that moment Pat felt very sorry for Joyce. Too bad she'd listened to LeBlanc and ever left the secretarial pool at Mammoth Studios.

With a sweep of her hand, Myra knocked the statue across the table. "Just looking at it makes me ill."

LeBlanc's small figure was rigid with anger. "The statue was your idea," he accused.

"That was before I learned you were a damned thief!" Myra cried. She spread

her hands. "Form our own production unit, you said. So I raised two hundred grand for our picture. You direct and I'll star, you said—and now—"

It was an old story to Pat. A declining star, fired by her studio, was trying to make a comeback with an independent picture. And there stood Joyce Kendall, scared white of a has-been like Myra and a defanged wolf named Carter LeBlanc. Pat remembered him as a third-rate radio producer who had followed a debutante to Paris. Jilted and stranded, LeBlanc had talked a wealthy Frenchman into financing a weird opus entitled *Crooked Alley*.

LeBlanc's mustache quivered. He appealed to Pat. "Just because I spent a little money, she wants to throw my statue in the swimming pool. That's gratitude."

"Gratitude for spending twenty thousand on pre-production plans," Myra flung at him. "Now we don't even have enough money to start the picture."

Pat touched Joyce on the arm. "I'll drive you to a hotel."

Myra said, "She's staying here. I fired you once, Riordan, or have you forgotten!"

Pat gave her a tired smile. "No, I haven't forgotten. But the kid is shaken up. Maybe she should see a doctor."

Joyce gave an emphatic shake of her head. "I—I'll be all right. It's just that I was in another accident once and I—" Her eyes grew enormous and she put a hand over her mouth. Turning, she fled into the house.

CHAPTER TWO

An Old Flame and A New Corpse

WHEN Pat started to leave, Myra followed him along the walk. "Are you telling me the truth—about somebody side-swiping the car?"

He turned to face her. "Why should I lie?"

Her eyes searched his face. "You could figure it was a way to get back at me. Trying to make my secretary fall for you."

Pat shook his head. "Whatever was between you and me is over, done."

Myra's eyes softened. "Are you sure?" She put a hand on his arm.

"Maybe I've done a lot of thinking in seven years."

"If you've done any thinking," Pat told her, "It was only about Myra." He smiled. "It took me a long time to get over you."

"You tried to drink yourself to death for a while."

He rubbed a hand over his mouth. "Yeah. But then, all of a sudden, I sort of grew up."

Myra looked away. "Sometimes I wish—" She broke off and walked back to the patio.

As he was about to drive off, a huge figure suddenly emerged from the oleander hedge. There was enough glow from the floodlights in back of the house for Pat to see the face of Jack Harlan, who once had starred in a smash Western hit and had been living on his reputation ever since.

Harlan stuck his head in the window, blowing a sour whiskey breath in Pat's face. "You the guy bringin' the money?" he said thickly.

"Go back to the oleanders and sleep it off," Pat said.

"Funny man, huh?" He squinted his eyes as if trying to recognize the man behind the wheel. He was built like the guys on the covers of health magazines.

When he drew back his fist, Pat tried to roll up the window. He didn't quite make it. The fist drove through the window glass. Harlan grabbed Pat, roaring with anger and pain. His bleeding knuckles messed up the front of Pat's white shirt. Pat rolled down the broken window. He was no hero but he didn't like being pushed around by a boozy actor. Pat threw his

left out the window like a baseball. It caught Harlan in his soft midriff. Pat gunned the car, leaving the big man doubled up and gasping for breath.

He headed for Palm Canyon Drive, hoping Bert Bollard might still be in his bar. But when he tried the back door, he found it locked. He wanted to learn about this picture job Bert had written him about. Then he wanted to get out of Palm Springs, and quickly!

He drove to the Sleep Well Motel, where his old friend Sam Marcus had given him a pass key years ago. Sam disliked being awakened in the middle of the night just to rent a cottage to a friend. Pat could sign the register and pay up in the morning.

He found a cottage with no car in the adjoining garage. He keyed the door open and went in. He pulled off his torn and bloodied shirt and threw it in a corner. He'd bill Harlan for it. But Harlan probably wouldn't even remember the incident tomorrow. He was that kind of a guy. Pat didn't awaken until daylight.

He was jerked out of a sound sleep by the sound of a key turning in the lock. He sat up in bed. A big woman with dyed, red hair glared at him. She wore a green dressing gown with beer stains on it.

"I'm goin' to call the cops!" she belted in a grave, landlady voice.

When she turned for the door, Pat jumped out of bed and pulled on his pants. "Wait a minute!" he yelled. "I'm a friend of Sam's. He gave me a pass key—"

She wheeled around, giving him a cold stare. "Sam had a heart attack. He went back to Cleveland three months ago. I own this joint now. And I wish he had it back."

Pat moistened his lips. He laid a five dollar bill on the end table beside his pass key.

Her eyes lost their hardness as she looked him over. "How about a beer? I was just goin' to open a can."

"Never drink before noon," he lied. After Myra had blown up seven years ago he drank anything at any time. But then he was carrying a torch.

The redhead snarled, "You mean I'm too old. That's what you mean."

He knew she was hung over from the night before. He said, "You don't understand."

She shook a fist under his nose. "I ought to have you pinched." She picked up the five dollar bill and shoved it down into her bra. "Get out of here!"

He had been dressing while she talked. By the time he drove out of the yard, he was sweating. "My day," he muttered, "The luck of the Riordans."

A JANITOR was mopping out Bert's Bar. The place was deserted. Mingled with the odor of disinfectant from the mop water was the smell of fried eggs.

Bert Bollard's bald head glistened like the halo around the end of the rear booth. "Back here, Pat," he said.

Pat sat down. Bert put a thin arm across a platter of ham and eggs and shook Pat's hand. His small dark eyes seemed unusually melancholy this morning.

Pat told him about the run-in with the redhead.

Bert toyed with a piece of ham on the end of a fork. "We all hated to see Sam go back to Cleveland."

On Saturdays, the merchants of the resort town went Western. Bert wore a Western shirt and a kerchief around his neck, held by a silver clasp.

Pat lit a cigarette and eyed Bert through the smoke. "What's the pitch on that job you wrote about? Some picture factory need a bright, young press agent?"

Bert licked his lips. "I guess you ain't heard."

"Heard what?" Pat stiffened.

"The cops is lookin' for you."

Bert Bollard had come to Palm Springs

before the war, bringing his asthma out from Chicago. His past was dark and some whispered it pertained to the numbers racket. But Bert had reformed and gone into real estate. He'd made a killing during the boom. Now he kept the bar for sentimental reasons. He was a nice guy, Pat had decided long ago.

"Oh, look," Pat said, exasperated. "Sam Marcus gave me a pass key. I can explain to the police—"

"This ain't got anything to do with Sam Marcus." Bert gripped the edge of the table with his thin fingers. "It's Carter LeBlanc. They found him this morning with the back of his head beat in."

Suddenly, the odor of disinfectant in the barroom was overpowering. Pat wanted to retch.

He sat with the blood slowly draining from his face as Bert told how Myra had gone for a swim and found LeBlanc's body.

Bert said, "Myra says you come drivin' up with her secretary last night. Myra says this gal is sweet on LeBlanc."

Pat banged a fist on the table. "They can't pin this on Joyce!"

Perspiration glistened on Bert's bald dome. "I'm sorry I dragged you into this. If I hadn't written you about the job—"

Pat's lips thinned. "Forget it," he said.

Bert nodded. "The job was press agent on Myra's new indie film," he murmured.

Pat stared at him. "You ought to know better than that, Bert. If Myra never got her name in the papers she wouldn't hire me."

"I thought it was worth a try. I knew you was—"

"Broke," Pat said. "Thanks, anyway, Bert."

Bert mopped his pate. "I feel sorry for the Kendall kid," he said. "LeBlanc was goin' to give her a part in the picture." He shook his head. "Poor Myra. This is goin' to be tough on her. All this publicity!"

Pat pursed his lips, remembering when

Bert had first come to Palm Springs and written all those crazy fan letters to Myra Denton. He'd even arranged a meeting between the two, more for a gag than anything else. But even though it led to nothing, Bert was everlastingly grateful for the try. This Myra business with Bert was hero worship in reverse. He even had a huge portrait of Myra behind the bar.

Pat felt sick at his stomach. "Have the cops got Joyce?"

"No. The cops figure you know where she is."

In his dim past, Pat had learned that it paid to co-operate with the police. Reporters were already in Myra's patio when Pat arrived. He knew some of them and nodded.

Myra sat stiffly on the edge of a chaise lounge. She wore black and when she rose on seeing Pat, the reporters and two uniformed cops looked at her figure with appreciation. She was doing an "A" picture job of showing her grief. Her gray eyes were moist. The hot desert sun struck blue fire from her diamond ear clips.

A rugged, blond man named Sergeant Ericson was in charge of the investigation. He wore a gray suit and a wide-brimmed hat. He had the type of skin that would never tan. Ericson nodded at Pat. They had occasionally had a drink together at Bert's when Pat came down to get the winter sun.

"Hello, Riordan," Ericson said. His choice of the last name showed this was official business. The grim business of murder. Ericson didn't offer to shake hands. "Any idea where the Kendall girl is?"

Pat shook his head. "Haven't seen her since last night."

"Tell me about last night," Ericson urged, watching Pat out of his blue eyes.

QUICKLY, he recounted how he had found the Italian sports job mired down in the sand. Ericson nodded. The

car had been towed in early that morning.

Ericson led the way to a long, limp object in a rubber shroud. Two men from the coroner's office stepped aside and looked at Pat.

Ericson pulled down a long zipper on the rubber container. LeBlanc lay on his face. The back of his head looked like a melon that has been struck by a two-by-four. Ericson nodded at the coroner's men and they zippered up the body and carried it off, gripping the rubber handles of the shroud.

Pat looked at the dark stain at the edge of the pool. "What killed him?"

The sergeant's pale brows lifted. "Whatever she killed him with is gone and so is she."

Pat froze. "She?"

"Joyce Kendall," Ericson said indifferently.

Pat flicked his eyes at Myra, then looked at the sergeant. "That girl couldn't kill anybody."

Ericson shrugged shoulders that probably once had filled a football jersey. "She was set for a part in LeBlanc's new picture. She got mad when he turned her down. Then he turned his back on her and—whammo!"

Pat shook a cigarette from his pack. He lit it, trying to keep his hand from trembling. "Who gave you that dope? Myra?"

Ericson smiled. "Sorry, simple deduction."

Myra kept shifting her weight from one foot to the other. She bit her lower lip, her eyes on the tall, black-haired Riordan. Pat couldn't help but recall how those lips had tasted back in the days when he was a neophyte at this press agent dodge. He thought she was in love with him. That was the big laugh. Him and ten other guys.

LeBlanc had been killed around four a.m., Ericson said. Myra had left him at three and gone into the house and to bed. He seemed awfully willing to believe Myra.

Pat said, watching Myra, "There was a character sleeping off a drunk in the oleanders last night. His name is Jack Harlan."

Ericson gave Pat a fleeting smile. "Harlan checked in at the baths last night two hours before LeBlanc was killed. That should account for his alibi."

"So that means you've checked everything to Joyce Kendall." When Ericson only shrugged, Pat said, "What happened to the statue?"

The reporters and Ericson were all attention. "What statue?" Ericson said softly.

Before Pat could reply, Myra explained that the statue was only a gag. "Mr. LeBlanc is quite—or was," she corrected, "quite temperamental. He spoiled the party before it even got started. By the time Miss Kendall arrived with the statue there was no reason for the party."

"Why was LeBlanc temperamental last night?" Ericson wanted to know.

"He flew into a rage when I berated him for stealing twenty thousand dollars that didn't belong to him."

Ericson nodded. "It's common gossip around town."

Pat frowned. "Somebody could have used that statue to bash in LeBlanc's head."

"How much did it weigh?" Ericson said, not showing too much interest.

"Thirty pounds. Maybe more."

"Ice would be pretty slippery to handle for a blow like that."

Pat said, "There was a burlap sack around it. That could have been put around the statue so it wouldn't have been too slippery to hold."

Ericson looked skeptical. "I just can't figure a woman hitting a man over the head with a thirty pound chunk of ice."

The sergeant's calm manner of dismissing his theory, infuriated Pat. From the looks of it, Ericson was going to ignore Myra's obvious motive for braining LeBlanc. It was going to be pinned on a kid named Joyce Kendall.

Ericson said that was all for the present. But he suggested Pat stay around town. Something about the tone of his voice caused sweat to roll down Pat's ribs.

Pat went around to the front of the house. He waited in the oleanders until Ericson and the reporters had gone. He was walking toward the side of the house when Myra opened the door. "I want to talk to you," she said.

CHAPTER THREE

Murderer's Cue

DRAPES had not yet been pulled away from the living room windows. She stood in the shadows, her head tilted back. He looked beyond her at the big grand piano and the winding stairway beyond with its grilled iron banister. For a moment he thought nostalgia would grip him. But then, it seemed to him that this never happened. He had never before been in this shadowed house, nor loved this blonde woman who stood so tall and confident before him. It had happened to someone else, another Pat Riordan who had been entranced with a woman four years older than himself.

She said, "Don't let yourself get loused up over a girl you don't even know."

"You're talking about Joyce Kendall?"

"Who else?"

"Is that a warning?" he wanted to know. When she made no reply, he said, "I think you killed LeBlanc. You had the perfect motive."

"Motive, perhaps," she said coolly. "But I didn't kill him."

"You know who did."

"Joyce. She's a young girl. Impressionable. When LeBlanc built up her hopes and then rejected her, she couldn't stand it."

"Last night LeBlanc didn't act like he was about to reject her."

"You didn't know LeBlanc very well," Myra said, the thin plucked line of her

brows arched above the gray eyes. "He tired of his—women."

Pat felt his cheeks grow warm. "I don't believe the kid ever had anything to do with LeBlanc." He watched her carefully for a moment, then said, "I'm wondering where Jack Harlan fits into this."

"He's just a lush. Everybody knows that." She turned her back. "Unzipper me. I sent Martha downtown, and I want to get out of this dress."

Almost angrily he jerked down on the zipper. The black dress fell away. She turned, facing him, her eyes a little frightened. "I'm scared, Pat. This LeBlanc thing can ruin me—for good. You're a press agent. You're very good. You can put news in the papers. But more important you can also keep news out."

"You mean you want to hire me?" he mocked.

"I was a fool once, Pat. I should never have let you go." She stood with her gleaming bare arms away from her body. She kicked the black dress from around her ankles.

He said, "You've got a run in your stocking."

She glanced down. "So I have—"

He said, "You still look good. But I've learned a lot since I was a jerk around Hollywood pounding out copy for the great Myra Denton."

"I need you, Pat—in more ways than one."

He did something he had imagined himself doing a thousand times. But he always wondered if he would have the nerve.

He turned his back on her.

He was halfway down Palm Canyon Drive when he saw Jack Harlan speeding a chartreuse station wagon along a cross street. Harlan looked belligerent and hung over. He wore no hat and his rust-colored hair hung across his forehead. Before Pat could make a U-turn, Harlan was gone.

He parked and fed the parking meter and

started a tour of the bars. Harlan started his day's work early, Pat knew that. Ericson didn't seem interested in the big cowboy actor. Pat wondered why. He didn't want to see a nice kid like Joyce Kendall get all gummed up on account of a character like Harlan.

He was passing an alleyway when a frightened feminine voice said, "Mr. Rior-dan!"

He found her looking scared and ready to flee. She was leaning against a three-speed bicycle. She wore a white turtle neck sweater and denim shorts. Her thighs and legs were nicely tanned.

He got her into the back door of Bert's place. The small room Bert used as an office was empty. He sat her down in a chair and parked the bicycle against the wall.

"I—I've been trying to find you all morning," Joyce Kendall said.

Pat gave her a reassuring smile. He skirted a littered desk and went into the crowded barroom to find Bert. From the drift of conversation he knew the topic was LeBlanc's sudden demise.

Bert saw him and came around the end of the bar. The neon frame around Myra's picture on the wall was lit up. In the painting Myra seemed to be wearing an enigmatic smile as if knowing a secret she refused to divulge.

Bert wheezed, "If they try pinning this LeBlanc thing on Myra, I'll die."

THEY walked to his office and Bert was introduced to Joyce. She seemed frightened but Pat told her it was all right. He got her to tell what had happened that morning. She had learned about LeBlanc, she said, when she came back from her morning bike ride. She'd seen the police there and had heard her name mentioned from the side gate. Terrified, she had ridden off. Pat put his hand over hers. It was a nice hand with long fingers and red

nail polish that shone fresh and unchipped.

"Joyce couldn't have killed him," Pat told Bert. "The statue was too heavy."

Bert looked doubtful. "You sure he was killed with the ice?"

"What else?" Pat said. "There's no trace of a bloodstained rock or a paperweight or a gun or anything that would be used to beat a man over the head."

Bert kept shaking his head. "She shouldn't have run."

Joyce gripped her bare knees. "I know that," she agreed. "But I was scared."

Pat said, "How about getting her some breakfast, Bert. I'm going to hunt for Harlan." He laid a five dollar bill on the desk.

Bert pushed it back. "Save your money."

"And don't let anybody know where she is," Pat warned.

"You know me better than that," Bert said. Then he rubbed his jaw. "You figure Harlan's in this?"

Pat nodded, pocketing the five dollar bill.

Joyce bit her lower lip. "Are you so sure a woman couldn't have lifted that statue? It was completely melted by this morning. But whenever Mr. LeBlanc was killed, the statue might have been light enough for a woman to use—"

Bert shifted uncomfortably. "Myra never did it," he said, a trace of anger in his voice.

Pat looked at Bert. "Keep your shirt on. She's not accusing Myra."

Joyce crossed her long legs and began to swing her foot nervously. Pat couldn't help but think how things might have been if he'd met a kid like Joyce before he'd decided to hew his way through the Hollywood forest. A news job somewhere. Small town, maybe. A house and a wife and a couple of kids. None of this beating your brains out. Rich one year, broke the next.

Bert said, "What about that part LeBlanc was goin' to give you in his picture?"

Joyce blushed. "I—I just wouldn't accept it on his terms."

Pat touched her shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll get this mess straightened out."

As Pat started for the door, Bert shot him a worried glance. "You be careful. Harlan's a tough baby."

HARLAN was found in the Cactus Club drinking a stinger. He was staring moodily into his glass. The knuckles of his right hand were bandaged. He wore an expensive cowboy outfit. In high-heeled boots, he would be about seven feet tall.

"You've got a nice pair of shoulders," Pat said and sat down on the next stool. He ordered a beer.

Harlan swung a too-handsome face on Pat. He scowled. "I don't get you."

"It would take strength to swing a thirty pound weight over your head," Pat said.

Jack Harlan finished his stinger. Pat sipped his cool beer. Somebody had dropped a quarter in the juke box. A girl sang about the rocky road to love.

Harlan said, "You're trying to tie me in with this LeBlanc deal."

"Why not? They're trying to pin it on a nice kid. I don't want to see that happen."

"So you're going to take the pins out of your doll and stick them in me," Harlan said matter-of-factly.

Pat fingered his glass. "What about LeBlanc's ice statue?" he asked.

He watched Harlan start to order another stinger, then wave the bartender back. He knew he wasn't being very smart but if he could make Harlan mad enough he might let something slip. Harlan was hung over and rapidly building another fire with the stingers.

Harlan jerked his head. "Come on," he said. "I'll tell you all about it."

Pat followed him along a corridor to the men's room. Harlan bent over the wash basin, turning on the taps. He washed his face, then groped for the towel rack.

"Hand me a towel," he said.

When Pat turned his head, the flat of Harlan's big hand caught him on the back of the neck. The slick tile provided poor footing. Pat slipped and went down.

Harlan towered above him, holding a snub-nosed .38 he had taken from beneath his jacket. "Took me a long time to place you," he snapped. "You're the guy that busted my knuckles last night."

"My car window did that," Pat said, on his hands and knees watching the gun. "I wish it had been your head."

"LeBlanc had a head. It got cracked," Harlan said, glowering down at Pat. Then he said, "Don't go sticking your pins in me. I didn't kill LeBlanc."

When Harlan had gone, Pat got to his feet. His head ached from the blow on his neck. At the bar, he drank two straight shots when he found Harlan had left. There was something about Harlan's eyes he didn't like. It was like looking down a corridor that had no end.

Pat stepped into a phone booth at the far end of the bar. He called the police station and asked for Ericson. When he had the sergeant, he said, "Maybe I was wrong about that ice statue gag. Maybe it was the butt of a gun that did LeBlanc in."

Ericson's crisp voice came back over the wire. "Anybody with a gun butt you've got in mind?"

"Jack Harlan. You could pick him up for carrying a concealed weapon. Run a test on the gun. Bloodstains, hairs from LeBlanc's head—"

"Harlan has a permit for that gun," Ericson said. "Besides, you're too late. We've got the killer. She's about ready to crack."

Pat's voice dried up to a whisper. "She's about ready to crack?"

Ericson's voice was flat. "The Kendall girl. I just picked her up."

"Listen, Ericson," Pat shouted into the mouthpiece, "don't work that girl over. If you make her confess to something she

didn't do I'll take it out on you, copper."

Ericson said, "You're a good guy, Riordan. Ordinarily. But I don't like to be threatened. I think the girl will crack without anyone laying a hand on her."

Pat got down to the jail as fast as he could. Ericson met him in the entrance of the neat whitewashed building. When Pat said he wanted to see Joyce, Ericson led the way to a small, bare room. A matron brought Joyce in. She really looked frightened now.

When the matron and Ericson had departed, Pat put his arms around her. That Ericson was smart, Pat had to admit. He knew the sergeant had allowed this visit, hoping Joyce might talk. Pat knew from experience that somewhere a reel of paper tape was slowly turning, recording their conversation.

"I'll get you out of this, kid," Pat said. He saw Joyce was on the verge of hysteria. "Take it easy," he soothed. "You'll be all right."

She raised her tear-stained face. "I didn't do it, Pat."

CHAPTER FOUR

Bullet Boulevard

IT WAS the first time she'd called him Pat. He felt warm and contented. But the next moment he felt as if someone held a knife at his throat. Innocent as she might be, there was a chance she'd be convicted. It had happened before.

The matron took her back to her cell. Just before the door closed, she looked back and managed a weak smile.

Next door, at the telephone company, Pat put in a person to person call to his old boss Pete Fallon on the Riverside Blade. Pete's nasal voice barked, "Fallon!"

"Pat Riordan."

Fallon chuckled. Pat could see him at his desk surrounded by newsprint, a cracked, old, green visor slanted across his

wrinkled forehead. There'd be ink spots where his scalp showed through his thinning, gray hair from pushing ink-smearing fingers across his dome.

Pat said, "How much weight do you swing in Palm Springs?"

"Not a bit," Pete Fallon said. "Did you get my letter?"

"Yeah." Pat felt guilty. Fallon had written two weeks before. Pat hadn't answered.

"As I wrote you," Fallon went on, "I'm getting too much gray in my hair for this business. Why don't you come home and help me run this rag? Forget Hollywood before you get an ulcer."

Pat chuckled grimly. "I'm working on an ulcer now. A big one."

Pat recalled leaving Riverside to go to Hollywood and how he'd been a minor success. In the old days, producers asked him to be unit man on their pictures. Sometimes he'd worked six months at a stretch. Now he was flat. Busted except for his pride. Then he remembered Joyce.

"A friend of mine is up to her ears in this LeBlanc mess," he said. "You know about LeBlanc?"

"Sure. His dying is so important I have to give him half a column next to the county fair horse show results." Pete Fallon's voice crackled on, "What do you mean a friend is up to her ears? Not Myra Denton. Don't tell me she's a friend, not after she tied the can to you."

Pat frowned. "Who told you about this?"

Pete Fallon's voice was soft. "Hell, Pat," he said, "forget it. What do you want me to do?"

Pat talked fast. "Doug Halburt is your friend. He's the best lawyer I know. Will he take over? A personal favor, maybe?" Quickly he sketched in the details of how Joyce Kendall was being held for the murder.

Pete Fallon said, "Call me back in an

hour. "I'll see what I can do for you."

Pat felt relieved when he hung up the phone. Doug Halburt had a state-wide rep. He preferred a small town practice but he was sharp as any of the L.A. legal beavers.

He went to Bert's bar. Bert seemed unusually upset. He wheezed, "I couldn't help it, Pat. Somebody must have seen you bring the girl in here and tipped off Ericson."

Pat had a couple of drinks. Bert refused to take his money. "I get you down here for a job and then it peters out. The least I can do is buy a few drinks."

Pat looked at him and something began to buzz around inside his skull. "You knew Myra hated my guts. How come you figured she'd hire me as a press agent?" he asked.

"It was worth a try." Bert wiped his moist, bald head.

Pat ran on. "And how come you knew about Myra's indie film? I never saw anything about it in the Hollywood trade papers."

Bert shifted his feet. "Everybody comes in here. I just keep my ears open."

Pat finished his drink, his face suddenly hard. "You're holding something back. What made you think Myra would hire me? Have you got something on her?"

BERT turned his head to stare at the big neon framed portrait of Myra Denton. Then he looked down at his hands. "I put up the prelim dough for her new picture."

Pat felt his throat tighten. "And LeBlanc spent twenty thousand of the dough before the picture even started. Maybe—"

Bert lifted his hands, then let them fall. "I never killed him, if that's what you're gettin' at. Maybe I felt like it. He was a louse. But I knew anything like murder would just about ruin Myra. The publicity and all—"

Pat put a hand on his arm. "I guess one thing you wouldn't do is hurt Myra."

Bert wiped his head again. "What about Joyce? If there's anything I can do for the kid—?"

Pat shook his head. "I'm trying to get Doug Hurlburt for her."

"Then she's as good as out," Bert stated positively. He looked at Pat for a long moment. "I think Jack Harlan is your boy. But it's goin' to be a job to prove it."

Pat took another shot of bourbon. "If I could just figure where he fitted into it."

Bert said, "He was going to co-star with Myra in that new film."

Pat roared, "Him? Why, he's nothing but a ham!"

Bert's eyes were bright with anger. "That's what I tried to tell Myra. But you know her. She wouldn't listen. I think he was cutting in on LeBlanc. Myra was kind of gone on him."

Pat clenched his fists. "Harlan hasn't had a job in a year that I know of. When LeBlanc loused up the deal by spending that dough, Harlan popped him."

"That's about it," Bert said quietly. "I'd have put in more dough to get 'em started, but I ain't that rich."

Pat went outside, breathing the warm air. Girls with sun tanned legs walked by, guys in slacks and tourists with dark suits, their cameras slung around their necks and fists full of postcards. It seemed peaceful with everybody having a good time. But up the street Joyce was in a cell.

The throb of a powerful motor made Pat look around. Myra's expensive white coupe slanted in at the curb. She beckoned to him. He walked around on her side, seeing the crumpled fenders, the gash in the door.

She wore dark glasses and a linen jacket over a sun suit. "I've called every motel and hotel in town trying to find you," she said. Her lips were white. "Don't leave me now, Pat. I need you."

"Don't build yourself up so much," he said sarcastically and picked at the dented place in the door. He got a sliver of yel-

lowed paint caught under his fingernail.

Myra said, "Beat me, stomp me, curse me. I don't care. But please help me. You know most of the reporters. They're going to build this thing into a nasty mess if they're not stopped."

"How come you let Bert put up the money for your picture?"

JERKING off her sun glasses, Myra glared with fury in her eyes. "How do you like that? He made me promise not to tell anybody. And now he tells you."

"He'll probably have to tell Ericson. Ericson isn't any dummy. He'll be asking questions."

Myra caught him by the wrist. Her fingers were icy. "Listen, Pat. It's more than just keeping a story out of the papers, or making the boys soft pedal the details."

He watched her face. She was a good actress, but the fear in her was genuine. He felt it. "What is it, Myra?"

"We formed a picture company." She tapped the ends of her fingers. "LeBlanc, Bert, Jack Harlan and myself. All coming in for a percentage."

"Nothing wrong with that," Pat said. "It's the usual thing when you form an independent company."

"Don't you get it, Pat?" The fingers that gripped his wrist were moist and trembling. "I was supposed to drive down here last night in this car. At the last minute I took a plane and let Joyce drive. Somebody ran her off the road."

"It was an accident."

She shook her blonde head. "No, it was deliberate. I'm certain of it. Somebody thought I was driving the car. You know how I drive, with my foot to the floor and a prayer. If I'd have been sideswiped like that, I'd be dead today."

"Why would anybody want to kill you?" His mouth was dry. If this were true then Joyce had been lucky. So very lucky.

"The company, when it was formed,"

Myra said, "took out a hundred thousand dollar life insurance policy on me. Somebody wanted to collect that money." Ericson's tall figure angled across the street. "Oh, God, I don't want to see him. Not now. Phone me, Pat. Or come out to the house." She put on her dark glasses and shot the white coupe away from the curbing.

Ericson came down the walk, giving Myra's speeding car a brief glance.

Pat said, "Find out who sideswiped that buggy last night?"

Ericson shook his blond head. "We will. But first there's more important things. Murder."

Pat suddenly hated the big cop. "Did you ever consider that the two incidents might be tied together?"

Ericson said, "Maybe." He put a hand on Pat's arm. Pat shrugged it off. Ericson said, "Doug Hurlburt just phoned. He's taking the girl's case—"

"It's about time," Pat said.

Ericson looked at him out of his deep blue eyes. "You're kind of gone on her, aren't you?"

Pat looked away, feeling a lump as big as a walnut in his throat. "Gone is as good a word as any."

The cop scraped a thumbnail along his jaw. "I hate to tell you this, Pat. I checked R and I with the L.A. police. Joyce Kendall was in a jam once before."

Pat frowned. "I don't believe it," he muttered.

Ericson looked sad. "Manslaughter. They're going to wire me the details."

Pat stiffened. That meant Records and Identification was in on the deal, that nice orderly system of filing cabinets where a cop can find out anything about anything. That wasn't good.

"How long ago did this happen?" he asked.

Ericson was non-committal. "She was booked last year. . . ."

When Pat stumbled back into Bert's place, Bert looked across his crowded bar. "You sick or something?" he called.

Pat slid onto a vacant stool. Bert poured him a drink. Pat tossed it down. Those dreams he'd had about Joyce were now only a nasty blur.

Bert wheezed, "You better take it easy on the whiskey. You'll have a head big as a mountain."

Pat staggered along the corridor to Bert's office. He was about to go in when he saw Joyce's bicycle still leaning against the wall. Sight of it sickened him. He went out back into the alley, aware that Bert was calling his name. But he didn't turn back.

For an hour, he walked aimlessly. Then he saw his reflection in an advertising mirror in front of a drugstore. He looked ghastly. There were dark circles under his eyes and his beard showed. He hadn't shaved. Then he remembered. He'd gone off and left his shaving kit down at the Sleep Well Motel. Although he didn't like the idea, there was nothing to do but have another session with the frowsy redheaded landlady.

He drove down and had just stepped out of the coupe when he saw a black and white prowler car in the drive. Two uniformed cops stood with their backs to him, talking to the redhead in front of a door marked "Manager."

"When I heard about LeBlanc and the connection this Riordan had with Myra Denton," the redhead said, "I figured you boys ought to know about the shirt."

Pat felt his mouth go dry. One of the cops had his white shirt wadded up under a thick arm. From where he stood, Pat could see the bloodstains left by Harlan's bleeding knuckles.

"He sure acted funny," the redhead was saying. "He broke into one of my cottages so he could sleep."

"Probably wanted to stay out of sight,"

one of the cops said. "Ericson will want to know about this."

Pat ducked behind the grape stake fence that surrounded the place. The cops piled into their car and went roaring up Indian Avenue. Pat ditched his coupe.

Pat cut over to Palm Canyon Drive. What to do? Of all the screwy deals. He'd come down here because his old friend Bert Bollard said he had a job. Bert had financed a picture and was going to give his old friend a job whether Myra Denton liked it or not. And then Pat met a frightened girl in a wrecked car and—

HE FROZE. A chartreuse station wagon was pulled up at the curbing. When he had seen Harlan's station wagon before that day he had seen the left side. But now he was seeing the right side. The fenders and woodwork bore two deep indentations. Pat swallowed and something clicked in his mind. He looked down at his hands. While he had been talking to Myra he had picked a flake of yellow paint off the damaged door.

He started forward just as Jack Harlan emerged from a joint called Quincy's Place. He staggered, weaving, blind drunk. When he saw Pat he called:

"I got all I wan' of this damn town! I'm gettin' to hell out—"

Pat tried to grab him. It was like trying to block a bulldozer in high gear. The big man slammed Pat against the front of Quincy's Place and leaped into the wagon. He barreled the big car south on Palm Canyon Drive, along the road to Indio.

Across the street Pat saw a sleek, black Cad coupe just pulling in at the curb. Behind the wheel was Bert. The bald man was gesturing for Pat to cross the street.

Pat sprinted for the Cad. "Take out after him, Bert. It's Jack Harlan. He's trying to get away!" Pat had skirted the car and was about to slide into the seat when he saw Joyce. She gave him a weak smile.

"Bert has been trying to find you," she said.

Bert nodded. "Ericson turned her loose. Guess he was scared of Doug Hurlburt."

Pat slammed the door as he squeezed in beside Joyce. "Get Harlan, Bert!" His knee was uncomfortably warm from the pressure of Joyce's thigh.

Bert said, "But the girl's clear. Ericson knows he ain't got a case. Now that she's out of it don't mess in the thing no more."

"It's not the girl," Pat said, without looking at Joyce. "It's me." He told them about the cops and the blood-stained shirt.

Joyce said tremulously, "They can't arrest you, Pat."

She tried to press his hand. At last she caught it. She wouldn't let go. "Ericson told me what he said about—about me being in trouble before."

Suddenly Pat felt relaxed. The tension was gone. Ahead was that crazy Jack Harlan wheeling that gaudy station wagon. But Bert was catching him. When they ran him into a ditch the whole thing would be over.

Pat said, "You don't have to tell me. Whatever you did is all in the past—"

"I want you to know, Pat. Last year I was in an automobile accident. It was terrible. That's why I was so frightened last night. You never get over those things I guess." She took a deep breath as the Cad hurtled along the narrow, oiled road, pursuing that blob of chartreuse ahead. "At first the police thought I was driving the car. They held me for manslaughter." She shuddered.

Pat said, "Take it easy. It doesn't matter."

"But they found out my friend—the fellow I was going with—was driving the car. They turned me loose. But it was still on the record. Ericson got all the details awhile ago."

The station wagon turned right toward the mountains. It meant Harlan was going

to try and get back to L.A. over the mountain road.

Pat leaned forward, watching the erratic progress of the big station wagon along the twisting road. "He'll break his neck on those curves. He's boiled to the eyes and set to bust."

Bert said, "We'll catch him. That bus is only hitting on seven and his brakes are no good. Wouldn't you think he'd spend a little dough on that wagon? I like to broke my fool neck—"

Pat licked his lips. Joyce wasn't aware of anything yet. But Bert had caught the slip the moment he made it. Joyce saw the gun at the same moment. Pat did. Bert gripped it in his right hand, his left on the wheel. The muzzle was tight against Joyce's ribs and she softened as she felt it digging into her side.

"Don't be a hero, Pat," Bert said. "I don't like usin' a gun on a woman. But I will—"

PAT'S heart pounded. The Cad slowed on one of the steep grades. Bert coasted onto a flat fenced lookout point. A thousand feet below the desert was stretched out all purple and green and gray in the late afternoon.

Bert kept the motor running. He put on the handbrake and stepped out of the car. He jerked Joyce over under the wheel. Then he pressed the muzzle of the gun against her left ear. "I tried to get you to lay off," he told Pat. "But *you* had to dig. Damn it, Pat, I don't like this. We been friends. But I got to think of myself."

"I suppose it isn't the first time you've had to kill," Pat said, trying to make his voice scornful. "After all, you came from Chicago. Last night you thought it was Myra driving that coupe of hers. You were up at Myra's place arguing about the money LeBlanc had spent on the picture. That was before Myra came down on the plane. When you heard she was headed for the

"You don't need glasses...you need Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"

"Says he's got to save the Wildroot Cream-Oil because it's his hair's best friend!"

"If he's ashamed of having dandruff why doesn't he use Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"

YOUR HAIR'S BEST FRIEND

Wildroot Cream-Oil Hair Tonic

NON-ALCOHOLIC
WITH
LAVENDER

MOODS THE HAIR
RELIEVES DRYNESS
REMOVES
LOUSE DANDRUFF

LOW AS
29¢
PLUS TAX

BEAUMER KELLER

springs, you took Harlan's car, because lush that he is, he was probably already passed out. You figured he'd get the blame for the accident—"

Bert shook his head. "You're wrong. It wasn't the money. I'd give Myra everything I got. You ought to know that, Pat. Back when you and her was runnin' around together, I hated you. But when you busted up I figured you wasn't a bad guy. We needed a press agent for the picture and I knew you wouldn't fool around with her. 'Cause she claimed she hated you."

"She kept my photograph in her bedroom," Pat said.

"I never got that far," Bert said. "Like I say it wasn't the money. I told her to forget about LeBlanc spendin' the dough. I said we could get married anyhow." His eyes hardened. "But she laughed at me. She said she never had no intention of marrying me for putting up the dough for her picture. She was a damn thief. That's when I wrecked her car. I wanted her dead."

Pat could almost feel Joyce's heart banging away. She sat rigid, her face dead white.

Pat said, "But why kill LeBlanc?"

"I got drunk last night. I went to Myra's because I figured maybe she was just mad about not bein' able to do the picture. I wanted to tell her I didn't have no more cash. But I was willing to sell the bar. That would give us a start. I'd raise the rest for the picture. If she'd only marry me."

Pat's perspiring fingers gripped the door handle. "You're nuts, Bert. Nobody could love a dame like that and take all you took from her and not be off his rocker."

Bert said, "LeBlanc was sittin' by the pool. He laughed at me. He told me about him and Myra." Bert licked his lips. "He turned to go into the house. I guess I went sort of nuts. I picked up that ice statue and cracked him over the head. The statue busted all to hell—"

"You should have known how it was with Myra. It wasn't only LeBlanc. It was just any guy." Pat slipped the door catch. "What do you figure to do?"

Bert looked sick around the mouth. Like a bright yellow bug the station wagon weaved along the twisting highway above. It disappeared around a jagged cliff.

Bert said, "What else can I do?" He gripped the gun tighter. "I don't want to shoot your girl. It won't be pretty. The other way is best."

"What other way?"

"Just sit in the car. You'll go over the cliff together. With the car."

"You can't explain that away to Ericson."

"Yes I can. I'll say you tried to make a getaway. That you wanted my car and took me along. I jumped just before the car went over the cliff."

"How about skid marks? Ericson is going to wonder."

"I got to take that chance." Bert opened the door on the driver's side. Pressing the gun against Joyce's ribs, he released the handbrake. The heavy coupe started gliding in neutral gear for the fence.

IN THAT instant when he released the brake, Bert was off balance. Pat threw himself flat across the floor boards, seizing Bert by the wrist. "Jump!" he screamed at Joyce. The girl scrambled across the seat and through the door Pat had snapped open. The gun sent a bullet plunging through the rubber matting on the floorboards. Pat released Bert's wrist, sprang backward through the open door. His body was tensed even as he was falling, for he expected Bert to shoot him. But Bert was lying on his face on the floorboards, his eyes frantic. The momentum of the lurching car had pressed the heavy door tight against his body. As Pat cleared the car and landed heavily he saw Bert's body dragging beneath the car. The coupe crashed through

Pat said, "It's going to be odd coming to Palm Springs and not having a drink at Bert's Bar."

"It only proves one thing. Some guys go nuts over liquor or the horses. But with Bert, it was a dame."

Pat nodded. He looked at Joyce. She had a skinned knee from her plunge out of the car. The ambulance attendant had put a bandage on it, but otherwise she seemed to be unhurt.

Ericson braked the car in the police station parking lot. A highway patrol car had pulled in just ahead of them. An officer led a very drunk Jack Hartan into the police station. They had picked him up for drunk driving, the cop said.

Pat had enough of jails and violence. He took Joyce by the hand and led her to the telephone office where he called Pete Falton. He wanted to ask Pete about a job. A job on a small town paper.

He asked Joyce what she thought about it. Her eyes told him she thought it was a good idea.

Her lips confirmed it.

• • •

Bert had cleared the door, all except a corner of his coat. The speed of the car slammed the door shut on the fabric. Just before he disappeared with the car, he gave Pat one last frantic glance.

Pat climbed down the face of the steep cliff, finding Bert among the wreckage still clutching his gun. He was unconscious but still alive. Joyce had flagged down a car and finally Ericson and an ambulance arrived. Bert regained consciousness long enough to tell Ericson how it was with LeBlanc. But by the time they got him back to the road, Bert was dead.

"It's just as well," Ericson said gravely. "He was a cinch for the gas chamber. I suppose Myra Denton may have a few bad dreams, but I don't imagine they'll last very long."

Pat and Joyce rode back to the springs with Ericson. They were strangely silent, although they sat close together. Ericson said, "I'm sorry I gave your girl a rough time. But for a while I thought you had a hand in that LeBlanc deal. I thought holding the girl might make you open up faster."

HANGMAN'S LULLABY

BACK IN 1866, a strange procession wound down the spectator-filled main street of Statesville, North Carolina, led by a yellow-haired youth who fiddled and sang to the tune of Stephen Foster's *Oh, Susannah*:

Oh, how I'd pick my banjo now,
I'd pick it on my knee,
But by this time tomorrow night
"I'll be no use to me!
Poor Laura loved its tender strains,
She loved them long and well,
And now I go to pick again
And sing for her in Hell . . .

The singer was Tom Dula, convicted of killing Laura Foster, his sweetheart. He was riding his coffin—on his way to the gallows!

By
FLETCHER
FLORA

"Tell him to get out
with his hands raised
or I'll blast him out of
his shell!"



THE HEAT IS KILLING ME!

The two women in Danny Clive's life were sure-enough femme fatales. For packed into each of those gorgeous gals was femininity in plenty—and they were fatal as the business end of a gat!

THE room, dim and cool, was an air-conditioned retreat from the white heat outside. The furniture was rich walnut, gleaming like satin. It might have been the office of a bank president, and the man behind the desk might have been the president himself. But his name was Francis Kruger, and he was a hoodlum. Not

garden variety, of course. Mr. Big himself. "Danny Clive," he said to me. "Danny Clive, special investigator. How's the grand jury, Danny boy?"

"Like last week," I said. "Like the week before. Still looking for Eric Sands."

Rocking back in his swivel chair, Kruger brought his fingertips together and poutingly contemplated his paunch. His eyes were indifferent slits under lazy lids.

"Funny a guy like Sands disappears," he said.

I shrugged. "He isn't the first guy to disappear when a subpoena was looking for him."

"Do you," Kruger said, "figure Sands had help?"

"Yeah," I said. "Someone either bought him a plane ride to Shangri-La—or gave him a free ride."

Kruger's heavy lips pursed briefly, and his lids flickered momentarily. "A weak guy with too much on his mind," he said. "A guy who'd never get past a grand jury. Time comes when he gets to be a liability."

"You testifying or speculating?" I asked.

He laughed shortly. "That's what I love about you, Danny. Real sense of humor. Here's hoping you never run into someone who doesn't appreciate it. Just speculating, of course. I've already done my testifying for the jury. You know that."

"Sure. Just like any good citizen."

He rocked forward in the swivel and reached for a box of cigarettes on the desk. King-sized and gold-tipped. He lit a smoke with a silver lighter and drew deeply. The cigarette had a rich, exotic aroma. He didn't ask me to try one.

"Doing my duty, Danny. Nothing I admire like a man who does his duty. Take you for example. A lot of guys would have welshed on this Sands deal. Lot of guys wouldn't have the guts to play bloodhound with someone they'd called a friend. Not you, though. With you, it's friendship be damned, when you see your duty."

I TOOK time to find and light a cigarette of my own. Not that I needed the smoke. Just the time. Time for the hard, hurting tension of my anger to soften. Time to tell myself again that rage is impotent against a man like Francis Kruger.

"One guy goes one way, another goes another," I said. "Eric and I parted company a long time ago."

"Looks to me like you're trying to get together again. Looks to me like you're working overtime at it."

"I've got a job to do, that's all. The grand jury wants Eric Sands. I get paid to look for him."

He leaned forward over the wide gleaming surface of his desk and crushed the long butt of his cigarette in a heavy glass tray.

"Tough," he said. "You're a real tough guy, Danny. My kind of guy. You ever get tired of doing leg work for peanuts, come see me."

"I've come now."

"Yeah. I'm wondering why. Don't tell me you're looking for a job."

"Okay. I won't tell you that, but in case you've forgotten, I'm looking for Eric Sands. That's why I'm here. I thought maybe you might have remembered something you forgot to tell the grand jury."

"I haven't remembered anything. I don't know anything. Not about the murder of that special prosecutor. Not about anything the jury's interested in. Most of all, not about Eric Sands."

"He was one of your boys."

"So he was one of the boys. I pay them, but I don't nurse them."

"Eric was always a personable guy. The kind of guy who had a way of getting inside. Rumor has it that he knew too much. Too much to risk before a grand jury investigation."

Kruger's shrug was indifferent:

"Like you say, he was personable. Like I said, he was weak. Sometimes it's a dangerous combination."

"Sure." I said, rising. "I get it. Eric doesn't live here anymore."

His big pale face was smooth and bland. Beneath the thin white hair brushed sleekly over his big skull, the scalp glowed pinkly. He should have been in an album with a baby on his knee. *That's Grandpa with little Alfie. Grandpa loves kids.*

"No idea. None at all. Sorry, Danny."

"Okay," I said. "Thanks for nothing."

He lifted a big, soft-palmed hand. "Wait a minute. I'm a generous guy, Danny. I never like to send anyone away with nothing. So here's something—something to think about. Eric Sands has disappeared. It could be he just slipped away to be alone. Then again, it could be someone decided he knew enough to make him a menace. It could be someone influenced him. There ought to be a lesson in it somewhere. Especially for a special investigator playing bloodhound. You think about it, Danny."

I looked at him across the room, and I thought to myself that death is not a gaunt specter with hollow sockets. Death is a bland man with a pink scalp.

"Thanks again," I said. "Thanks again for nothing."

I walked out of the cool room into the blast of white heat and down to the curb where I'd left my crate. Steering a slow course over the city griddles, I parked again in front of a walk-up on lower Market. In the foyer, I punched a button over the word Sands, and in a few seconds, heard the lock on the lower door click off. I opened the door and went upstairs to Eric Sands' apartment, and when I got there, Gloria was standing at a window, looking down through the half-closed slats of the Venetian blind into a blistered court. From the bedroom came the low drone of a window exhaust fan. The air in the room stirred softly, caressing my skin.

Without turning, Gloria said, "Judas. Judas Clive. Tough guy Clive. Nothing hurts him."

"Listen," I said. "Someone else called me tough today. Francis Kruger. He was wrong, and you're wrong. I'm not tough. I'm just a medium-done guy with a job."

"You been to see Kruger?"

"Yes. I've been there. He had nothing to offer."

There had been a slight stiffening of her body against the slatted blind, an almost imperceptible sharpening of the overt signs of awareness. Now the brief tension eased, muscles and senses relaxing.

"You expecting donations from Kruger?" she asked.

"No," I said. "A guy just tries."

"Why, Danny?"

I didn't know. "I told you. It's a job," I said.

Gloria's voice came sharp. "How you going to feel?" she said. "How are you going to feel if you run Eric down? You know the grand jury'll crucify him. He won't stand a chance."

"Eric's small fry. The jury's after the one Eric can point to. Francis Kruger."

"I know that. So does Kruger. How long you think Eric'll live if you drag him out of cover?"

"He'll get protection," I said.

Her shoulders stiffened with bitterness. "Like the special prosecutor, I suppose."

"Maybe. That's the risk you take when you tie in with a man like Kruger."

SHE was silent, looking down into the glaring court where the heat rebounded from concrete in shimmering waves. Her pale blond hair was piled up on her neck and in the soft light, her face was strangely beautiful. She was dressed in a gayly colored bra and white shorts and her long legs were very tan. She would have looked beautiful on a beach.

I stood watching her, wishing I had a cold Collins with plenty of ice in my hand but no one was offering Danny Clive a drink these days. He wasn't very popular

anymore. Not popular, at all—anywhere.

As if reading my thoughts, she turned away from the window, saying, “Once it might have been different. Remember, Danny?”

“Sure,” I said. “I remember. I remember lots of things. I remember you and Eric and me growing up together on the streets of Northside. I remember every ache and pain and itch of seeing you change from pigtails and bones to what I see now. I remember as if it were yesterday. It doesn’t mean a damned thing, because it *was* yesterday.”

If there’d been a chance for a drink, it was gone now. Two scarlet spots indicating anger burned beneath the golden satin finish of her hollow cheeks. Her voice sank to a menacing gentleness.

“You’ve never got over it, have you, Danny? You’ve never got over my choosing Eric instead of you.”

“Don’t kid yourself, baby. Plenty of things have happened to me. Some good, some bad. The best that ever happened was running second to Eric in the race for you. I’ve been thanking the gods. All the time I’ve been seeing Eric turn from a weak charmer to a rotten one. All the time I’ve been seeing him reach for the things you’re hungry for at the jeopardy of his own soul, or whatever passes for his soul. Now he’s on a spot and you put him there because you’re a greedy little tramp who’d see a guy in hell for knick-knacks.”

The spots burned hotter in her cheeks. Her bright bra rose and hovered on the peak of a deep breath. Her voice was a whispered whip lash.

“Get the hell out of here, Danny boy. Get out fast.”

I thought I might as well. “Sure. I only came to ask a question. I’ll ask it and go. You heard from Eric?”

“Why should I hear from him?”

“You’re his wife. You’re the only person on earth he’d burn to hear from. The one

person he’d try to contact. You know that.”

“There hasn’t been any contact,” she said. “I haven’t heard from him and if I had, you’d never know. . . .”

Downstairs, the heat bounced up around me in a transparent cloud. It was cooking hot. I stood there steaming on the sidewalk and told myself that Gloria was lying. Sometime, somehow, Eric had contacted her.

I thought about driving the blistering thirty miles out to the county seat but wondered if my jalopy could make it without developing vapor lock. Mostly, because I wanted to, I decided it couldn’t. I didn’t have to be there until tomorrow, anyhow. The note said tomorrow. I’d make the drive after dark, when the mercury might drop as low as eighty. In the meanwhile, there’d be time to buy the tall gin that no one would give me.

I climbed into my valve-in-head oven and went after it.

RICHHILL, the county seat, lay prostrate around its square. On the east side, withdrawn behind its defenses of awnings and lowered blinds, the Journeyman Hotel passively bore the full force of the heat. Across the square on the west side, beyond a margin of brown lawn, the buff stone county jail was like an outcropping of the sear earth. In the middle, a country plutocrat with a square block of personal earth and elms, was the county courthouse.

I slowly paced across the courthouse lawn towards jail. Around me, under the trees, were slatted benches painted green. It seemed as if most of the older citizenry of the town were gasping out the afternoon on those benches. In the northwest corner of the yard, an iron flagpole rose from a huge circular concrete base. Around the circumference of the base, placed to stare toward the compass corners with an iron stoicism that was impervious to heat and cold and all suffering whatever, stood the sculptured figures of four Civil War

combatants. Above their heads, the flag hung motionless in the still air.

Crossing the glaring, naked strip of street, I went up the stone steps of the jail into the oppressive disinfected air of a white-washed hall. Ahead of me, the hall ended in a heavy steel grill. Through an open door to my left, I could see a green file cabinet and part of a flattop desk. On the desk beside a revolving electric fan I saw enormous shoes attached to legs that extended beyond the edge of vision. I stepped through the door and let my eyes continue their course up the legs, over a giant belly, and across a series of chins to a greasy expanse of folds and quivering pendants that did service as a face. Two little eyes twinkled at me with King Cole merriment. As a matter of fact, King Cole was sheriff in Richhill.

"Hello, son," he wheezed. "Come in and sit."

I did. King Cole closed his little eyes and blew a wet sigh through his thick lips. Then he swiped a sodden handkerchief under his chins, beginning with the top one and working down.

"Hot," he said. "Hot as hell."

"Yeah," I said. "Hotter for some than others."

Fanned air lifted the wispy hair on his head. His little eyes closed and opened, brightly bird-like.

"If you're referring to my weight, son, you couldn't be righter. It's hell to be fat in summer."

"I wasn't referring to your weight."

"No? I got an idea you were referring to *something*, but it's too hot to try to figure it."

"It's not hard to figure. I was thinking of a different kind of heat."

"You're still being fancy, son. It's too hot for fancy talk."

"My name's Clive," I said.

This time his eyes stayed closed while the air current crossed and recrossed his face.

He talked with the eyes closed.

"Clive. Special investigator. Now I get you. The Eric Sands business. Heat's on there, all right. Plenty of heat for that boy. If you catch him, that is. You got a lead?" Cole rubbed his nose reflectively.

"Could be," I said. "I figure he's close and been close all the time."

"Close is relative. Mexico instead of Brazil? The next county instead of the next state?" Cole was smiling now.

"Not even the next county," I said. "This county. This town, in fact. Or near it."

Small lids opened slowly over bright wariness. I had a sudden feeling that it made no difference whether the lids were raised or lowered. I had a feeling that those sharp little pupils could see right through my pounding guts.

King Cole waved a sweaty hand and laughed. "In my county? Don't be silly, son. You'd better look somewhere else."

With a tremendous gutty sigh, he swung his feet off the desk and let them drop with a crash. Putting a hand on each arm of his chair, he heaved upward mightily. Waddling toward me, he fished papers and tobacco out of his shirt pocket and slowly rolled a cigarette. When he'd plastered it with saliva and stuck it between his lips, he looked at me with one bright eye. The one he wasn't using was screwed so tightly shut in encroaching fat that only the eyebrow suggested there'd ever been an eye there at all.

"You'll have to explain that remark, son. Like I said, fancy talk in this heat just confuses me."

From a pocket, I took a folded sheet of rough paper and tossed it onto the desk.

"Read it," I said.

The perspiration seeping from the coarse pores of his skin glistened on his sagging face and plastered his thin shirt to his bulging torso. A drop ran unheeded down his nose and onto the paper in his hands. His lips pursed, fashioning a silent se-

quence of vowels and consonants. If I'd wanted to, I could have read every word off his lips. But it wasn't necessary. I knew the brief note by heart.

Dear Danny:

I've got to see you. Just once more, for old times' sake. I know I've got no right to ask, but the heat's on, and there's no one else to turn to. You know the square in Richhill? Be on the bench just across from the hotel next Wednesday afternoon at three o'clock. I'll contact you there.

IT WAS Eric's writing. His name was scrawled at the end. Fat King Cole stood looking down at the paper long after his lips had ceased their laborious pronunciation. He turned the note over and over in his blunt fingers, as if he were searching for esoteric markings. When he finally looked up at me, both eyes were unscrewed and bright with the same contempt I'd seen in the eyes of Francis Kruger and Gloria Sands.

"A mistake," King Cole said.

"Mistake?"

"Sending it to you, I mean. That part about old times' sake."

Anger was rising in me again, as it had risen so often these past few weeks.

"You can forget the sermon. I've told others, and I'll tell you. I've got a job. So have you, incidentally. Part of your job is taking fugitives into custody in this county. The only point is, what the hell do you intend to do about it?"

The little eyes went cold and flat with concentrated deadliness, and I thought to myself that the underestimating of fat men is a common error, and sometimes a fatal one.

"Don't get snotty, son. And don't tell me my job. This letter come from Richhill?"

"It was postmarked here."

"I wonder who mailed it?"

"I don't know. Probably the same person who'll make the contact on the bench."

"You want me to take the contact in?"



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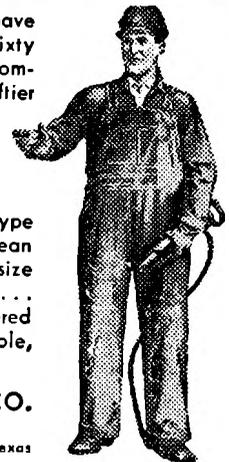
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"No. That way I'd never get to Sands."

King Cole nodded.

"Maybe I'm slow, son. Just what is it you've got on your mind? Just where do I come in?"

"Wherever I say. Maybe not at all. It depends on how things work out. I just thought you ought to know about this. If I need you, I'll get in touch."

Removing the battered cigarette from his lips, King carefully licked the seam again. The eye he used only part time had once more retired to its socket, and the other had resumed its bright merriment. No evidence of deadly intent remained.

"It's your job, son. You want me, I'll be right here. It's just too damn hot to circulate."

I said thanks and went out. From the door I looked back and saw that he was already under the fan again, his eyes closed, the wisps fluttering on his head, the dead cigarette glued with dry saliva to his lax lips.

It was two-thirty. The note had said three. I went back across the courthouse lawn, past the bench the note had designated, and over to the hotel. From the window of my room upstairs I could look down across the street onto the courthouse lawn. There was a green bench under the spreading branches of a giant elm about ten feet beyond the sidewalk. An old man wearing a wilted panama hat was sitting on the bench. He leaned forward with his hands folded on a gnarled stick and his white whiskers draped over his hands. He was staring into the glare of the street in front of him, and I wondered if he were reviewing the dead parades of past Memorial Days. At five of three, he hadn't moved, and I decided that maybe, after all, he was only asleep. I left the window and the room and the hotel, and went over to join him on the bench. When I sat down, he still didn't move.

Leaning back against the bench, I tipped

my Panama hat over my eyes and waited. About five minutes had passed when someone sat down on the bench between me and the old man. I waited a minute longer and opened my eyes, looking down at an angle under the tilted brim of my hat. The someone had smooth brown legs ending in blue socks and white, crepe-soled shoes. Her ankles were crossed, and her calves turned to perfection. I straightened, pushing my Panama way back, and turned for a full view. The legs, stretched straight, kept the promise of the ankles as far as a pair of faded blue denim shorts. The shorts took it capably to a sheer nylon shirt, and the shirt carried it on past valuable contributions to the fulfillment of a red mouth smiling and brown eyes reflecting the smile. Her hair was a shade lighter than the eyes, cut short for the season. A smooth job. The sleek, calculated country job that you buy in city salons for more money than most country girls have to spend. She was holding an unlighted cigarette to her lips. Then she smiled and said, "Light?"

I found a folder of gophers and struck one but its sodden head crumbled with a smear.

"Sorry," I said.

Soft shoulders lifted slightly under nylon. "They've got matches in the hotel tap room. Cold beer, too."

"Tap rooms usually do," I said.

"Sure. Probably a quiet corner as well. A corner where a couple of people could talk."

"With you, talking might seem like a waste of time."

"Maybe. It would depend on what I had to say."

I stood up. "Let's go see," I said.

DREAM girl rose with a fluid motion that seemed to have no break, and together we made the long trip across the blistered strip. There was no air-conditioning in the tap room, but several strategic

fans maintained the illusion of coolness that comes with air in motion. We found the corner that was quiet, except for the noise of the fans, and the beer that was cold without qualification. We sipped our suds for a while before she spoke: "You don't look like a special investigator," she said. "You look like a bright young guy with a future. Maybe a lawyer."

"I don't feel like an investigator, either. Nor a lawyer. Nor any kind of bright young guy whatever. I feel like I was going on two thousand years."

"It's your conscience," she said. "You should learn to ignore it."

"Sure," I said, "that's what they all say. Look, let's get down to business. What's a dame like you doing here?"

"You were expecting a man?"

"It seemed reasonable to expect."

"Why? Eric's quite a piece of boy. Lots of his friends are women."

"He always had the luck. There's no one nicer for a friend than a woman. If you can trust her, that is."

"You sound like a guy with a sad experience." She licked her lips.

"It's just the heat," I said. "It makes me say things."

"I know. What you need is a long rest in a cool spot like a lodge out on a river, up on a bluff, where a breeze always blows. Like mine, if you're interested. It's ten miles north on 27 State. Turn east on River Road Y. You can't miss it."

"Is this an invitation?"

"It's a suggestion."

I finished my beer and offered to buy her another one. She accepted, and I stood up to leave her with it. As I turned to go, she said, "It's a hot drive in the sun. Night's better."

I said, "Sure," and went out of the tap room into the torrid lobby and upstairs to my room. The room was like a sweat box. I turned on a fan that didn't do much to change the condition and stripped off my

shirt. Lying on the bed under the fan, I tried to make my mind blank, but all I managed was a confused retinal reaction of long legs in shorts that were apparently symbols of some significance. My brain was too seamy to solve the symbolism. The legs in white shorts were named Gloria, but the legs in blue shorts had never been introduced properly. Then Francis Kruger's face swelled upward into an enormous bulbous pink skull. The bulb kept swelling and swelling until finally it exploded and woke me up.

The white glare of the sun was gone from the window. I went over and looked down and across into the courthouse square where darkness was intensified by the spread of elms. A street lamp on the far corner across the square threw weak light against the buff stone of the county jail.

Turning away from the window, I put on my shirt and got my shoulder holster and .45 automatic from the closet shelf where I'd put them. I put on the holster and shoved the automatic into it. Then I covered them with the seersucker coat that matched my pants. That's the trouble with wearing a gun in hot weather. You have to wear a coat to hide it.

By my watch, it was three after nine. I turned off the fan and went out . . .

From where I stood, I could hear the soft undulations of invisible water far below. Ahead of me, the lodge lay sprawling on its bluff, one pale yellow light breaking through its dark mass. Walking quietly under wind-warped trees, I circled the lodge to its rear. Parked there in the gravel drive, near the rear entrance, were two cars. One was a standard sedan, the other a convertible. Neither in itself carried a mark of distinction, except that the convertible was by its character a car that might belong to a sleek-legged looker who cultivated an expensive rusticity. I went on around the lodge and up onto the veranda. The planking under my feet was sound. I

made no noise as I tiptoed up to the house.

I stood against the door and listened. At my left, the light fell in a narrow path across the veranda floor from the single window that showed any light at all. The curtains, I could see, were sucked inward away from the window by a draft, and I could hear the remote and familiar drone of an exhaust fan at the rear of the lodge. Other than that sound, there was none. None but the crashing of my own pulse and the small, shrill sighing of my breath in my nostrils. After a long time, I took the .45 out of its holster and put it in the right pocket of my coat. Then I pounded on the door.

WHEN the door opened, my sophisticated rustic stood looking out at me from a yellow frame. She had exchanged the faded blue shorts for faded blue jeans that hugged her hips and long flanks like tights, but otherwise, she was just as I'd seen her a few hours ago over beer suds. The eyes were still friendly and so were her lips.

"We've been waiting for you," she said. "Come on in."

I went. I stepped with my right foot and reached across her shoulder with my right arm. Even a guy who never got more than three stripes and a rocker in the big tussle knows that surprise is an essential element in attack. Before she could fade away, I had a grip on her right wrist. With my free left hand, I took the .45 out of my pocket. Then I guided her right and rearward until her back was against the wall. Her voice was hoarse and ragged with fury.

"What the hell's the idea?" a

My laugh was no better than her voice. It cracked with tension.

"You know the idea, honey. You know it too damn well. And don't get the notion you can be a sultry hunk of bait for a death trap one minute and a lady the next. If I have to, I'll blow your pretty little spine to splinters."

Her eyes widened with fear; she stood perfectly still.

"That's right," I said. "And now you can listen. Listen real well, if you want to live to tell Francis Kruger how you fouled up this detail. Across the room there's a door. It's closed. It's the only closed door that opens into this room. Someone's behind it. Shall I tell you who? Eric Sands, or a venomous fat slob who's been Francis Kruger's bought man on Kruger's bought votes for more years than anyone wants to remember. Tell him to get out here. Tell him to get out with his hands raised, or I'll blast him out of his shell."

She spat an epithet and tried to break my grip. I twisted her arm hard, and she stopped. On the other side of the room, the closed door swung inward. Darkness beyond was splashed with flame and shattered by thunder. I felt two cushioned shocks, and the body in my arm seemed to leap upward and outward with a strange, wild violence. Then it sagged again, dead weight, and this time I let it go.

Hitting the floor in a dive, I rolled, scrambling for the wall across the room. Pressed against it, out of range, my shoulder blades maintaining contact with knotty paneling, I inched slowly toward the door. Feet short of it, I stopped. On the floor where she had fallen under King Cole's fire, the beautiful contact was a huddle of nylon and denim. On the nylon was a slowly spreading stain that was as red as the margin of her friendly smile. Around the frame of the door, in the dark room, I heard the faint sound of blubbery breathing, the suggestion of elephantine movement.

"King Cole," I said. "Fat King Cole. Look out and see your handiwork, King. She's on the floor over there. She's on the floor with two of your slugs in her. You know how it is to die with two slugs in you, King? You know how it is to die with blood in your throat? Come out and I'll show you. I've got a .45 for you,

King. The biggest gun I've got for the biggest hulk I know."

From the dark room, his windy wheeze was the oral expression of the deadly flat eyes I had seen briefly that afternoon.

"Come after me, son. Just come through the door."

I scraped shoulder blades a little farther along the paneling.

"I'll come. I'll come in my own time. You think I'd walk into this thing blind? You think I'd walk in like a sheep to slaughter? I've known the setup for days, King. I've had the idea for a long time. Ever since the note came. The note I showed you this afternoon, as if you'd never heard of it."

"You're a real brainy boy. Too bad you've got to die."

"Not really brainy. I didn't have to be. It was easy to see you'd run Sands down. It didn't take a genius to figure that he'd written the note under pressure. You've got him in there now, King. Under a gun, just like you had him when he wrote the note. You planned to shoot him to death after you took care of me. A real pretty picture. Very pat. Investigator and fugitive slaughtered by each other in a gun duel. Big headlines for the public. Phony as hell, but not hard to put over with someone like Francis Kruger behind it."

I laughed, and this time, maybe because I'd talked myself into it, there was, above and beyond the strain of tension, a ring of exultation that I really felt.

"There's a joke in it, King. A great big joke on you and Francis Kruger and all your slimy ilk. Shall I tell you why I smelled the trap? Shall I tell you how I knew the note was phony? *Because I hid Eric Sands myself.* That's right, King. I hid him myself in the Northside hole where you finally smoked him out, and in the beginning, I was the only one on earth besides himself who knew where he was. And if he'd had any guts to lie quietly, he'd be there yet. I told him not to contact anyone.

Above all, I told him not to contact Gloria. But he couldn't resist it. So behind my back he got in touch with her, and the first thing she did was to sell him out to Kruger for the promise of more gadgets and knick knacks than her yearning, rotten heart had ever dreamed of."

I stopped and waited, listening. Listening for the slight sounds of bulk in motion. But in the dark room there was now no sound at all.



WITH LOVE AND BULLETS!

A Smashing Murder Story

By LARRY HOLDEN

"Deliver these bonds to my ex-wife," Kuykendall instructed. "And watch out for the little she-wolf. If she acts friendly, put a bullet in her. But if she smiles at you—run for your life!"

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"At least, in the end," I said, "he used his brains. He shut his teeth on the fact that I was the one who'd caged him. He wrote the note, just as you wanted, and by doing it, *he let you tell me yourselves that you were setting a trap for Danny Clive*. Funny, isn't it, King? Everywhere I went, the scum who wanted Eric's blood looked at me down their snotty noses because I was a guy betraying a one-time pal. And all the time, I was the only person alive willing to lift a hand to save him. Sure. Very funny. I nearly died laughing. I really nearly died laughing."

THEN I heard a sound. The shifting of great weight on boards that gave a little. It seemed to come from back in the room, wide of the blade of light that splashed through the darkness from the open door. Abruptly, I jumped across to the other side of the opening, twisting from the hips and firing blindly back into the room. There was the tremendous clawing sound of a great body moving precipitately, and I wheeled, diving back through the door and out of the light. Now the King and I were in the same dark room fighting for our lives.

The sudden taxing of his fat-cramped lungs had brought the wind whistling through his teeth. I heard the sound and fired at it. There was an answering flash and a glimpse behind the flash. I never even felt the searing burn across my shoulder until the room had stopped rocking and my .45 was empty. Crouching in the darkness, listening for more sound, I realized at last that the most important sound of all, the crashing of his huge hulk, had been lost in the blasting of gun powder. My ears ached and pounded from the noise.

Moving slowly, feeling the shoulder now, I found a switch and made light. He was lying on his face by the opposite wall. His gun lay loose near the clawed fingers of an outstretched hand. Even as I watched,

the fingers jerking spasmodically relaxed a little, and the flabby mountain of his prone body seemed to settle softly down into the floor.

In one corner of the room was a studio couch. Lying on the couch, taped at wrists and ankles and across the mouth, was Eric Sands. His pale blue eyes rolled toward me in their sockets, and under the tape, the weak mouth I knew so well tried to fashion a grin.

I went over and jerked off the tape. Not gently. I did it with savage relish, bringing hair and blood and leaving across his face rising and angry welts. He came up on the couch slowly, swinging his feet to the floor. Now he managed a sickly completion of the grin.

"Good old Danny," he said.

My anger required no violence of expression.

"Sure," I said. "There's a dead woman in the next room and a dead man in this one, and all you've got to say is good old Danny. I pawned my good faith to save your worthless skin, and all you've got to say is good old Danny. Good old Danny's dead, brother, and you're dead, too. I hocked the little honor I had for a friend who never was, and now I'm getting it out of hock. You're going back. You're going back to the grand jury, and you're going to point a long finger at Francis Kruger. You'll do it, or I'll blow your brains out."

He stood up, trying his weight on numb legs, and his thin, handsome face settled in lines of tired acceptance.

"Sure, Danny, sure. It's past time I should have gone. Way past time."

I turned out the light on Fat King Cole, and we went out through the other room. On the way, I knelt beside the nylon and denim and put my hand near the spreading stain. She was dead, all right. A dead waste of things that should never have been wasted. I stood up and said, "We'll get the State Patrol on this," and we went on outside, into the river mists. ● ● ●

There was the corpse, and no shred of evidence to point the damning finger of guilt at him—unless it was the finger of Death itself!

He knew he was going to be murdered . . . nothing could save him.



MURDERER'S ENCORE

By MURRAY LEINSTER

DOREN'S dying was over too soon. Much too soon. When the tree branch crashed down on his shoulder, Doren jerked his fat face around in incredulous astonishment. He took the second blow slantingly on his head and then his face went terrified. At the third blow he went down, squealing feebly, and saw Thad Hunt for the first time. His expression took on a look of ultimate horror. He knew he was going to be murdered and that there

was nothing that could save him from it.

There were trees all about and the rustling of wind in the foliage overhead. Somewhere a little brook made small, tranquil, liquid sounds and somewhere the flute-like call of a bob-white quail floated over the hills. No other noises sounded but for impacts of the maniacal blows Thad Hunt dealt his enemy.

The frenzied satisfaction he felt almost paid him for his seven years of waiting for

that moment. It was the realization of dreams that had haunted him in the penitentiary and filled even his waking moments since. He battered his corpulent, twitching victim in an ecstasy of hatred, panting with the satisfaction of his lust to destroy. He wanted to smash the fat man until he was no longer human, until he was not even vaguely recognizable as that Charles Doren who had sent him to the penitentiary for a crime Doren himself had committed. As a lawyer, Doren had known of tricks Thad Hunt could not combat—and now had a document on file in the County Prosecutor's office naming him the man responsible if he should ever be found murdered.

He'd be found murdered now! Thad Hunt panted and struck and panted and struck, sobbing curses and revilings at the thing he battered, until no blow, however furious, made the battered object even twitch. It was a most complete, most satisfying vengeance.

Reluctantly, Thad Hunt stopped. He could find no zest in further outrage against his victim. Panting from his exertions he turned and stalked away.

All was peace about him. Branches rustled. Something small and gray and furtive scurried through fallen leaves, leaped to a tree trunk, and whisked out of sight. A squirrel. A cat-bird squawked raucously in the distance. Crows cawed. Thad Hunt tramped heavily through underbrush, careless of leaving a trail. Presently he stood at the edge of an abandoned and flooded quarry, unused these twenty years and more. He sat deliberately on its edge and removed the oversized boots he wore and replaced them with others neatly placed in readiness for this transfer. He put stones in the discarded boots and re-laced them. He heaved them out to where he knew the water in the quarry was deepest. They splashed and were gone forever.

Those boots were not his own. He'd

bought them in a second-hand store two hundred miles away and had them heavily wrapped by the salesman he'd bought them from; had not touched them until he put them on today with gloved hands and over a double pair of brand new socks. They'd have human scent on them, to be sure, but it wouldn't be Thad Hunt's. In the remote event that bloodhounds were brought to hunt down Doren's killer, those bloodhounds would trail the killer to the brink of the quarry . . . and halt. There'd be no trail beyond that. Even if a diver found the boots, it would be impossible to link them to Thad Hunt; and besides, nobody would suspect him!

Wearing his own boots he picked his way around the quarry's edge to the other side and followed a dim trail a quarter-mile to a tiny stream that ran down toward the valley. He waded into the stream and walked up it. Now he was utterly safe.

A GOOD two miles from the scene of the murder he left the stream and went over a rise to the home in which he had been left tenantless for seven years. He went to the penitentiary. The house had been left tenantless for seven years. Doors sagged open, shingles were missing, and the windows were lacklustre, though unbroken. No small boys came by here to break the windows of empty houses. Even when he'd lived here, he'd had no more than one visitor a month, outside of those in the business he'd done for Doren, and for which Doren had let him go to prison. Now that the place was known to be empty, nobody would come by at all.

He sat down on a rotting chopping log, his eyes like glowing coals. The house and few outbuildings were desolation. The inside of the house was only dust and cobwebs. Doren owned it now . . . had owned it. He'd bought it in at a tax sale while Thad Hunt was in the penitentiary, to take away his last excuse or reason for coming

back to his home country. But the loss of his house hadn't kept him away. He was here now. He'd come back, and Doren was a mass of pulp, corpulent flesh two miles away, which was exactly what Doren had feared most in all the world . . . what he'd tried to prevent by filing an accusation against Thad Hunt in advance should he ever be found murdered. And Thad, sitting on the chopping log, laughed softly to himself. It was a low-pitched, not-loud, satisfied laughter sound.

Presently he smoked, in flamboyant ease. He didn't have to run away. He'd arranged to be found here. And when he was discovered, he'd have an absolutely perfect alibi. Nobody in the world would ever suspect that he'd been the one to murder Doren. Doren's filed accusation would be absurd. His innocence would be so unquestionable that actually he'd be a hero, and public opinion would turn against the dead Doren and make him out the most villainous of scoundrels, whose murder was an act of justice no matter who'd done it or why.

Thad Hunt relaxed, reveling in his memory. He could eat now, if he chose. He looked at the food he'd brought wrapped up in butcher's paper; bread and cheese only. It was the sort of lunch a man might take with him when he had to count pennies and couldn't afford even the cheapest of public eating places while traveling. But he wouldn't eat now. His revenge had satisfied his every craving. He sat and smoked leisurely, filled with the triumph of this beautifully, perfectly contrived act of retribution.

Not the least of its perfection was that he had been able to destroy Doren in maniacal, insensate fury. It was no cunning destruction he'd had to content himself with. He'd killed Doren by brute strength and Doren knew who was doing it. He'd had leisure to exhaust himself in the fulfillment of every atom of his hate. It had been

just as he had pictured it a million times.

Time passed as he sat and remembered. He was waiting now to be found. It wasn't likely that anybody would come today, of course. He'd turned one of Doren's own tricks against him. A letter to the County Prosecutor, in the little town down the valley, had said that he'd heard from Doren, asking that he meet Doren up at this place, and he was afraid. If he didn't report to the County Prosecutor within two days, he should be looked for. Doren most probably would have murdered him. Doren believed he had evidence of a crime that Doren had done and had offered to make amends for past injuries if Thad Hunt would surrender it. The letter was very bitter indeed, coming from an ex-convict and accusing a prominent citizen of intent to murder him. No attention would be paid to it normally, but when Doren was missed. . . .

The long afternoon wore on as Thad Hunt lived and relived, with infinite relish, the murder of his enemy. There was sunshine upon the hills and in the valleys between them. There were birdcalls and chirping insects and the drowsy, somnolent humming of bees. All of nature was very quiet and very peaceful. Here Thad Hunt sat, with a queer twisted grin on his face, and remembered.

NIGHT fell. Fire-flies appeared and their lamps made little streaks of greenish light against the darkness. He sat grinning beneath the stars. Seven years of hate, and now this vast contentment. He did not even care to worry about his own safety.

That letter was in the town, saying he was to meet Doren here and was afraid that he would be murdered. The letter would have been delivered to the County Prosecutor today. He'd take no action at once, of course. He'd want to ask Doren about it, Doren being a prominent citizen. But Doren wouldn't be going back to an-

swer questions. The County Prosecutor might wait through tomorrow, or maybe not. Sooner or later, though, with Doren missing, he'd send someone up to this house to see what had happened. And they'd find Thad Hunt, and he'd tell a tale of threats and near-murder which would be infinitely convincing. He'd be practically a hero thereafter and the finding of Doren's battered body would make no difference whatever, because nobody could possibly suspect Thad Hunt of killing him.

When he grew drowsy as hours passed, he almost begrudged the need of sleep because it meant he would not be reveling in his monstrous pleasure. But he did doze, and in his dreams he killed Doren all over again in such an ecstasy of satisfaction that it woke him once. When he dozed off again, his mind absurdly framed a dream of doom, of arrest for the murder he'd planned so long.

When day broke, he woke with contentment. Undoubtedly someone would come up here to find him today. The County Prosecutor would have gotten his letter yesterday, expressing fear that he'd be murdered by Doren. There was another letter on file in the County Prosecutor's office, too, from Doren, accusing Thad Hunt in advance if he should be found dead. And two such letters from two men each fearing the other would surely produce action when Doren was missing overnight.

This morning brought no doubts and no regrets—except that Doren had not taken longer to die under his rain of blows. Thad Hunt had hardly stirred from his seat all night, absorbed in his obsessed reënactments of the killing. Now he looked out over the hills, fresh and clean in the dawn light, and laughed softly to himself. This was his home country. Five years in the penitentiary had kept him away from it, and during the two years since his release he hadn't come back because he knew the local attitude toward ex-convicts. From

now on though, as soon as he was found, that attitude would be changed for him. Doren would be blamed for everything. Thad Hunt would be almost a hero, and certainly he'd be a respected citizen immediately, ultimately because he'd murdered Doren! But they'd never dream of that!

He got up and moved about. If he'd been quite sure that he'd be found today he'd have left his sandwiches intact as a pathetic indication of his presence. But he wasn't absolutely certain, and he was a little bit hungry. He ate, carefully putting the fresh wrapping paper where it would catch the eye of anyone who came. And then he was thirsty; and as it was too early for any searchers, he went out to the spring a half mile or more away. There was a well by the house—a deep well—but he did not try to get water from it. He had another use for the well.

He came back and expansively surveyed the hills and sky and all the earth. Everything was perfect. Four days before he'd called Doren by long-distance telephone. In a disguised voice, he'd identified himself as a sportsman looking for a hunting camp in this neighborhood. He said he'd heard of this place and would buy it if the price were right. He'd made an appointment to meet Doren here.

He hadn't kept the appointment. From hiding, he'd watched Doren climb up to the house that once had been Thad Hunt's home. He'd waited downhill, hugging his anticipation to himself, while Doren waited for the mythical sportsman, until Doren gave him up; until Doren came down . . . to his death.

His plan was perfection! He'd done enough, but not one atom too much. He'd written one letter which he'd duly signed with his own name. He'd made one long-distance phone call which could never be traced to him. And he'd killed Doren going away from this house—not at it, or going to

it—and he'd be found here with the most perfect alibi any man ever had. There was nothing to go wrong! He hadn't even gone into the house. Since the murder, he'd stayed almost motionless leaving no sign of a long wait here. There wasn't anything to go wrong!

The morning passed. By nine o'clock, the County Prosecutor would be thinking about Thad Hunt's letter and asking for Doren, whom he hadn't been able to locate the day before. By ten, he'd know Doren hadn't come home all night. By eleven, he'd have sent someone up to see if anything had happened.

IT WAS a beautiful morning and Thad Hunt loafed, zestfully grinning to himself and enjoying every second of it. It was warm, almost, but not quite hot, and the smell of green things on the hillside and in the thicket was good. The sound of bobwhites' calling was soothing and homelike. An occasional butterfly, a homing bee or two, now and then a discordantly cawing crow; these things spoke of vast tranquility. Now that he had sated his craving for vengeance, Thad Hunt looked forward to years and years of happy remembering, while his neighbors were extra cordial to him because of the monstrous crime they would believe that Doren had perpetrated against him.

It was almost noon when he heard a car on the dirt road far away. He went to the yard in front of the house to watch. He was careful not to show himself. He watched from behind a thicket of tall weeds.

He saw four men. They were headed in his direction. They couldn't be headed anywhere else. They must have been sent by the County Prosecutor to hunt over this place for signs that Thad Hunt had been murdered here. They had two dogs with them.

He watched them until they were less than half a mile away, downhill. He didn't

recognize them, but an enormous satisfaction made him grin wildly and rather unpleasantly. He turned to go to the spot where he was to be found.

For the first time in seven years he faced the front door of the house that had been his home. There was a folded sheet of paper stuck to it with a pin. A scrawled, penciled name was written across the folded outer surface. It was fresh. It hadn't been there long. For an instant, he was shocked. Then he realized Doren had expected to meet a mythical sportsman here. Thad Hunt had murdered him as he descended after a vain wait. He'd. . . .

Yes. Thad plucked it away from the door, grinning. The writing on the outside was simply the name of that non-existent, would-be purchaser of this house and land. Doren, after fruitless waiting, had left a note for the man he'd failed to meet.

Chuckling, Thad Hunt went across the weed-grown yard, carrying a length of rope. He heaved up a rotten board from the cover of the deep, dark well. He threw it to one side. It would be very obviously a new happening. And since they'd be looking for a murdered man. . . .

He passed the rope around a four-inch tree some two yards from the hole. With the doubled rope in his hands, he went to the opening in the well cover. He let himself down carefully.

It was thirty feet to the bottom. There was a foot and a half of water there and under it, all manner of foulness and mud. He stood in the mud and pulled on one strand of the rope. The other end went up toward the rectangular patch of blue sky directly overhead. It vanished, and only one strand remained. He continued to pull. Suddenly, the rope tumbled down upon him. There was no possible way for him to climb out.

He trampled the rope underfoot, thrusting it into the mud beneath the water. It made a firmer foundation for him to stand

on. He stood looking up at the long narrow, rectangular patch of sky. The men the County Prosecutor had sent to hunt over the place for a murder victim, of course, would find the broken well-top. They'd look in the well, in any case, as a place for the disposal of a body. But, besides, he'd shout hoarsely as if he'd been calling despairingly for hours. Presently, astonished faces would stare down at him, cutting off part of the sky. He'd cry out. They'd have trouble getting him up. And by the time he was on top of the ground they'd have accepted as gospel his hysterical story that Doren had left him there. Doren had demanded that he surrender evidence of some one of Doren's crimes. When he protested that he couldn't, Doren had driven him down into the well at pistol point and said he'd come back to see if Thad Hunt changed his mind when he got hungry.

Everything fitted together perfectly, too. The County Prosecutor had sent to look for him because of the letter which was the perfect preparation for this tale. The tale was a perfect alibi for when Doren's body was found. Nobody would imagine that a man who had been fearful of murder would commit the insensately violent battering of Doren. Nobody could imagine that a man who'd murder Doren would put himself in the most hopelessly inescapable of traps. Nobody could doubt, from now on, Thad Hunt's story that he had gone to prison for Doren's crime. It was utterly, absolutely perfect, and he had the memory of having killed Doren to re-live and gloat over all the rest of his life.

The four men and the dogs would be arriving here soon. Thad Hunt sent a wailing call for help up the resonant shaft of the well. They wouldn't hear it yet, but he wanted them to hear faint cries as they neared the house. He'd better begin now.

The sound of his voice was ghostly. It rang and echoed hollowly against the

smooth, concret walls of the well. Thad Hunt chuckled. He stirred, and there was a rustling of paper—the note Doren had left for the mythical man he'd thought to meet here. It had to be gotten rid of, but trampling it into the mud would be enough. It would be amusing, though, to read Doren's trustful message to a figment of Thad Hunt's imagination.

HE UNFOLDED the sheet and read it. It was addressed to the man Doren had thought talked to him by long-distance. It said that Doren had been there, and waited, and nobody had turned up. And it said that if the would-be purchaser came to his office in town they could discuss the sale of the property. Doren added that he was the County Prosecutor and his office was just opposite the court house so it would be easy to find.

Thad Hunt started to trample the note underfoot. Then he checked. His breath stopped. Doren was the County Prosecutor. . . . Then the letter addressed to the County Prosecutor would have been delivered to his office after he left . . . to be murdered! Nobody'd been sent to look for Thad Hunt at his home place! His letter hadn't been opened! It wouldn't be opened until Doren was missed and his disappearance was accepted as final or his body found! Even after that it wouldn't be opened until somebody else was elected or appointed as his successor and leisurely got around to cleaning up the accumulated mail. The four men and two dogs weren't coming to this house. The men might be training the dogs for hunting, or trying them out with a view to purchase! They might. . . .

Thad Hunt couldn't get out. He knew that his only chance of living was to make those men hear him. He screamed. He shrieked. He raised a hellish clamor at the bottom of the hole into which he had low-

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It was the morning after March 15, and Danny Marcus, sometime tax accountant, had just braced himself for a long lay-off between meals when a little guy entered his office and calmly asked Danny to find his past!



Danny wasn't a detective, but from her photograph, this was one guy's past that looked pretty cute—so he took the job. That was his first mistake—and mistakes for an amateur detective can be plenty fatal!



For before Danny knew it, he was blundering his way into murder—his own. Why hadn't his half-pint client told him that his gal had been lost at gun-point? The Amazon who gave him a Mickey didn't tell either.



But Danny's troubles are only just beginning, as Dean Evans tells the story. Don't miss the action-packed novelette "Remember Rose for Murder" featured in the April issue of Dime Detective, on sale February 4th.



Mayhem in Tin Pan Alley!

DEADLY DOWNBEAT

By ALBERT

SIMMONS



"Stay out of this Mitch," he said. "This is just the two of us!"

Mitch was a hot musician, a guy with an ear for a good arrangement, a fast eye for a pretty girl, and a nose that smelled murder three octaves off!

YEARS ago, the politicians had promised that the Avenue of the Americas would soon be another Champs Elysées but today, with its cobblestones removed, its smooth black asphalt face looked forlorn. Without the clattering, noisy roar of the elevated trains it was just another New York street. Particularly around West 45th, it was just another street.

Reflectively, I rubbed my right hand against my coat. It hurt. Where the three fingers were missing, it hurt. They always

hurt and I couldn't get used to it. I didn't wait for the light to change but tucked the brown leather brief case under my arm and ducked across the street, racing through the streaming traffic. That I liked to do because it made me feel twentyish, and when you're in your thirties it's good to feel twentyish again.

As I ran across the street, the brief case became a spheroid hunk of pigskin and I dreamed I was breaking out into the open with nothing between me and the goal posts but one over-stuffed fullback. A yellow cab honked furiously at my sprinting feet and a red-faced taxi driver looked disappointed at having missed me. It was fun.

Just as I touched the curb on the other side, I collided heavily with something on the corner. This was no fullback. This was a cute Kelly green suit stuffed with something soft and feminine—beautifully stuffed to my way of thinking.

We both said "*Oh*" but with different inflections and I dropped the brief-case to the pavement. Instinctively I stuck out my hands to steady her and her shoulders felt like they were at home in my palms.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, "I thought you were a fullback."

She looked at me, and though firm chin still tilted in annoyance, her sparkling green eyes were amused, smiling.

"Me, a fullback? Say, I bet you tell that to all the girls!"

She stepped away and tugged briefly at a white linen blouse, and then her busy hands smoothed her suit over her trim hips.

"I'm sorry," I said again. "On closer observation I can see you're much too cute to be a football player."

She looked pleased as she brushed stray wisps of copper-colored hair out of her dancing eyes. The soft musical sound I heard ringing in my ears was only her tinkling laughter.

"It's all right," she smiled, "there's nothing broken!"

I looked her over appraisingly and thought it would be a pity if there were. I picked up the brief case with one hand and her arm with the other.

"Which way are you going?" I asked hopefully.

"Your way," was her positive answer, and when she noticed the expression that crossed my face she added with a sly grin, "I'm a singer, Mr. Irwin; I was just coming to see you, anyway."

"Oh," I grunted. A red-headed thrush was all I needed.

"Please?"

"Okay," I nodded, "come on."

The little two-by-four I used as a studio was on the top floor of a three-story shack that should have been condemned twenty years ago. It had a piano and a desk; all the space I needed to make up the dance arrangements I do for Steve Henko's ten-piece orchestra.

I dropped the brief case on the piano. "Look," I said, "why come to me? Steve's the boy for you to see. It's his band; he hires the help; besides, I can't do you any good."

She came over and put her hand on my arm, standing very close to me.

"You're Steve's friend," she murmured. "Everybody knows that Mitch Irwin is Steve Henko's best friend. Besides, he won't see me—for me—but he will for you."

HER fingers were doing things to my arm and I noticed then that her lipstick was on too thick and her blouse too tight. I shoved her away.

"Look kid, you don't have to do that." I ignored the red that came up in her cheeks. "I'm just Steve's arranger; go get your audition from him."

"All right," she muttered, "so I made a mistake! Mitch Irwin's a nice guy—but how many are there?"

That embarrassed me plenty. "For Pete's sake," I yelped, wanting to get rid of her,

"don't be a little sap. Go on back to Millville or Tanktown or wherever it is you come from."

"No," she said stubbornly, "I'm staying." She turned and walked away, the pink nape of her neck scolding me.

"Wait a minute," I said. She turned slowly and I could see that there was something glistening in her eyes. "Get down to the Club Century tonight," I told her. "Make it tonight, kid. . ."

"Call me Lee," she murmured, "Lee Fuller."

"Nice name," I said. "Well, you come over. We're leaving on tour tomorrow, so make it tonight, huh? I . . . might be able to fix it for you with Steve so's he'll listen to you. And, Lee, just sing, get me? Steve's a right guy, what I mean is—a real right guy."

She came over then and her warm lips brushed mine lightly with the soft kiss of a child.

"Thanks, Mitch," she said. "Thanks a lot."

After she was gone, I sat down at the piano and let my left hand roll over the keyboard the way my right hand longed to do—but couldn't. Those missing fingers were aching again, and to forget them, I kept thinking about the red-head and wondered why the hell I had sent her to see Steve. Even if she were great, she didn't have a chance. We had a gal vocalist already. After all, how many doll-faced singers can a band use?

But Steve would understand; my pal Steve always understood. Like the time I lost those fingers and my career at the same time. But there I was still with him. I knew he wouldn't let me down. "From now on you're my arranger, Mitch," he'd told me, and he'd meant it. Steve was like that, a great guy with his friends.

I inked manuscripts until dark. Then I went down to the corner drugstore, and polished off a liverwurst on rye and a large

coke. After a while, I started off for work.

The Club Century on West 4th Street in the Village was no first-class club any more than Steve's orchestra was a top-flight one, but it did the business and we got paid, so we didn't worry about its appearance. You had to go down eight steps to get into the place, which is two lower than some of our best bistros, but what a difference two steps can make.

The gilded tables, silver chairs, and heavy, brocaded draperies looked as worn and tired as some of the early customers sitting around the dark room. Two bartenders were polishing glass like they were on relief but I knew that come another hour, they'd wish they had three hands apiece.

Patti, our blonde singer, came out of the Powder Room and called to me in a thin, tight voice. She looked highly agitated and nervous. I waited for her and she hurried over, slipping her hand through my arm, and we walked toward the dressing room in the rear of the empty bandstand.

"What's wrong, Patti?" I asked.

She didn't speak at first but just hung there next to me, her warm body a little too close for comfort. Like I said, Patti was blonde—honey blonde—and cute, but as far as I was concerned, she couldn't sing for sour apples. However, she wore her evening gowns low enough to get by.

"I'm scared, Mitch," she muttered through set teeth and I felt her trembling.

"What's the matter?" I snapped. "What's got into you?"

Those big blue eyes of hers that were usually so provocative were dull and filmy with terror and if it weren't for the heavy rouge on her cheeks, she'd have looked as though she'd seen a ghost.

"He's gone, Mitch . . . Skins has disappeared!"

WHAT did she want from me? Sympathy? Skins Rio was our drummer and a damned good one, I might add,

though he wasn't the kind of guy men like. There was no exception. But women, now that was something different.

Skins was built like a movie star and had looks to match. He was the type that the entire female population squealed at in sheer delight. His dark wavy hair and broad shoulders were a real come-on. He knew exactly how to treat women and didn't hesitate to use his charm.

I glanced at Patti's white face. She was only one in Skins' Hit Parade of women, but she must have gone whole hog for the guy. She held on to my arm as though she thought I couldn't feel her nails digging into my flesh.

I pried her hand away and held on to her fingers in self-defense. "Take it easy, Patti." I jerked my thumb to the rear. "He's probably back there now."

"No! No!" she blurted out tensely. "He's dead, Mitch. I'm sure he's dead!" she cried. "Just like the other one, he's dead!"

I felt the shock go through me and it hurt. "Like the other one," she'd said. The blood must have drained out of my face because my lips suddenly turned very cold. "Like the other one." Now I was cold all over; I'd almost forgotten about *him*. Then Patti was making too much noise and people were looking at us so I pushed her through the door in the back and into the large dressing room.

The boys in the band looked up as we came in. Some were playing gin, others just sitting around talking, but they all looked up when we came in, all except Skins Rio . . . he wasn't there!

Patti sat down heavily in a straight-back chair, her nervous hands furiously twisting the white handkerchief in her lap. She didn't seem to notice that the boys wouldn't look at her but kept their eyes averted. Their faces were tight and drawn; they looked like a room full of guys waiting for something to happen.

"Just like the other one," Patti had said, and I could see by their expressions that they remembered, too. *You don't forget murder!*

Seven months before, when we'd gone on tour the last time, Dick Swift had been our drummer. However, the night before we'd left, he'd disappeared and we had to go on without him. It wasn't until three months later that they found him. In the river, they found him—his throat slashed from ear to ear—and they never found out why.

The big grandfather clock high on the wall of the bare room suddenly sounded like an old-fashioned time bomb. Patti jumped to her feet crying, "Where is he? Why doesn't he get here?"

Nick, the swarthy little piano-player who had taken my place at the eighty-eight, went over and touched the bare skin of her white shoulder with his long, hairy fingers.

"Take it easy, baby—he'll show, don't he always?"

And I kept thinking—*always*. Skins was *always* the first one at the Club . . . until tonight.

Nick slid his arm around Patti's waist, his mouth fumbling clumsily over the soft words of comfort he didn't know how to say, his eyes two bright beads that glinted like hard glass. The blonde pushed him away from her, her red lips twisting with disgust.

"Let me alone," she spat viciously, "let me alone!"

"Ah, Patti, baby," he soothed. His hand reached out for her arm, but suddenly, it shot up to his own cheek instead as her long nails clawed at his face, and left a bright red mark on his cheek.

His fingers came away from the crimson scratch and when he saw the blood, he went livid.

"You're a fool," he croaked hoarsely. "Pretty Boy Rio ain't worth it. Ain't you wise yet? He's had his fill of you, baby, he's tired of you." His voice was sharp

with jealousy. "You know what you are now, baby," he gritted. "You're just another one of his blonde tramps!"

I hit him with my left and it felt good when he went sprawling on the floor. I shouldn't have done it because he was much smaller than I am but he shouldn't have called Patti a tramp. He might have been right, but he shouldn't have said it.

Then I heard an ugly metallic click. I turned quickly. Nick was on his feet; he was breathing hard and he had a long-bladed knife in his right fist.

"You oughtn't have done that, Mitch," he snarled. "You had no right!"

A couple of the boys grabbed at him and I went over and said, "You're right, Nick, I shouldn't have done it."

THE hard line of his mouth softened. He bent the blade with his thumb and I saw it go into his coat pocket. "Okay, Mitch," he said softly and turned away and picked up some of my new arrangements.

That was the first time I knew that Nick carried a knife . . . I wasn't going to forget it! By morning I would wish by all that was holy that I *could* forget!

Red, the first trumpet, piped up, "A guy's forty minutes late and jitters we get, jitters yet!"

"Skins ain't never been late before," somebody chimed in.

"Aa, shut up, both of you," yelped the guitarist. He turned to me. "I don't like it, Mitch," he said. "It's too similar to last time. Remember on our last tour when . . ."

Patti sobbed just once and shoving her balled-up handkerchief against her mouth, ran out of the room.

"Dames," muttered Nick, eyeing the closed door.

"Leave her alone, Nick," I warned. "Don't make me tell you again."

They were all looking at me then as if Patti used to be *my* girl instead of Nick's. It was the piano-player's voice that grated

at me like jagged steel. "You got it too, pal?"

"Cut it, Nick, you know better than that."

"Yeah, yeah," he said. He knew better because he'd been doing fine with the blonde thrush until Skins came along.

The door opened and Steve Henko bounced in. "Hi, gang," he chirped. "Let's go. Music they want, music we'll give 'em."

There was an uneasy stirring all around and Steve's keen, gray eyes swept the room clean.

"Where's Rio?" he asked and he looked surprised. He mumbled something when I told him that Skins wasn't there. "Where the hell is he?" he snapped testily. He glanced at his wrist watch. "We're going on in a couple of minutes." Then he caught what was on everybody's mind and he seemed angry. "I know what you're thinking," he ripped out, "you're nuts. Skins is just late, you hear me, just late, that's all." And when the door opened unexpectedly, he yapped, "There he is!"

Only it wasn't Skins, it was some thin, pale guy I'd never seen before. He waved a slender hand at us by way of greeting.

"Hey, which one of you guys is Steve Henko?"

Steve identified himself and nodded at him. "What do *you* want?"

"Hi, Steve," he said airily. "I'm Jack Wilton . . . your new drummer!"

CHAPTER TWO m

Murder in *Razor Sharp*

ISAT there in the dressing room listening to the muffled sound of Steve Henko's orchestra. The drummer was too loud, and he read music lousy; he was murdering my arrangements. Why didn't Steve tell him?

Steve only used the guy because he had no alternative, he had to—Skins didn't show. I went over and picked up the tele-

phone, thinking Steve would do what I was going to do anyway. I dialed my number and waited. When they answered, I said: "Get me Joe Kosinski."

Joe was our contact at Local 802, the musicians union, and a right guy who went out of his way to help.

"Hello. Joe here." He had a voice like thunder in a tunnel and he knew it.

"Mitch Irwin, Joe."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, how are you doing, boy?"

"Fine," I yapped into the mouthpiece. "But how come the lousy drummer you sent us?"

"Lousy? You nuts? How come you've been satisfied for seven months and all of a sudden Skins is lousy?"

"Skins! I'm not talking about Rio, it's the other guy, the thin fellow you just sent over."

"You drunk or are you sniffing the white stuff? I didn't send anybody over to you."

I got off the phone as quickly as I could and went out front. The new drummer had said he'd gotten a fast call from 802. But how come Kosinski didn't know about it? Steve had made the guy with the sticks soft pedal a bit so it wasn't so bad for the dancers—for me, it was awful. This guy was no Skins Rio. I sat down at a table in the corner and ordered me a small beer.

Steve nodded at me meaningfully and he handed the baton to one of the boys. I waited for him to come over. When he did, he was angry. He kicked out a chair from under the table and sat down. He must have read my face because he said, "He hasn't showed!"

"Uh uh, and I got news for you." He said nothing, but his curious eyes questioned me. "Joe didn't send that guy over, Steve."

"What?"

"I called 802 and Joe knows nothing about it."

He beat me to the words, "Then who did?"

Questions like that I have no answers for. Absentmindedly, Steve picked up my glass and sipped slowly at my beer. "I don't like it, Mitch, if anything's happened. . . ." He broke off and looked thoughtful.

"The boys are getting jittery," I told him, "they remember. . . ."

He cut me off by banging the glass down on the table.

"Don't you think I know?" he said sharply. His bright gray eyes held a worried look. Then he reached over and squeezed my shoulder in his fingers. "Don't mind me, Mitch, huh?"

I grinned. "You're my boy, Steve, I understand you."

"Good."

"Besides," I went on looking at my mutilated right hand, "I don't forget what you've done for me, Steve." He mumbled a protest, but I kept talking; every once in a while I had to get my gratitude off my chest. "If it hadn't been for you, pal, I'd be out of the band business and you know what that would mean to me! I couldn't. . . ."

"Shut up, Mitch," he said softly. "You're a damned good arranger, I'm lucky to have you."

But I knew better. I'd have cut my throat for Steve and I wanted him to know it.

I looked up as Patti came over, an anxious expression on her taut features. She didn't have to ask if I'd heard from Skins.

"Let me off tonight, Steve . . . I . . . I've got to find him . . . please." She sounded desperate.

"No need for that, Patti," he said gently. "Mitch is going over and get him."

I glanced quickly at Steve. "Sure, kid, sure," I chirped up, "I'm leaving now, and stop stewing will you, huh? Skins is probably drunk somewhere."

She knew I was lying because Skins didn't drink, but she moved closer and put her cold palm against my cheek. "You're sweet, Mitch, you really are." And she turned and walked quickly away.

"Which reminds me, Steve. A girl's coming over tonight, Lee Fuller's her name."

"Lee Fuller? Who's she?"

"A gal," I said simply. "She sings. Listen to her, huh, a favor for me, huh, Steve boy, just listen."

He laughed. "Okay, pal, but I got a better idea—you listen to her."

"Uh uh."

"Okay, just as you say." He got up and strode across the room leaving me sitting there, the remains of our community beer in front of me.

SKINS RIO lived in a small six-story apartment house on the upper west side. At that time of night the street was quiet and dark, the occasional lighted panes of glass the only sign of life behind the windows. I stopped in front of No. 55. It was the last house on the street; it looked old and dirty. Small bits of torn paper, cigarette butts and other litter formed an unswept carpet for me to walk on as I stepped into the vestibule. If he weren't there, I had no idea where I'd look next unless it was the Missing Persons Bureau. The globe was so dingy in the hall that I had to light a match to read the banked panel of names over the worn door buttons.

I found the right button, pushed it and waited. Pretty soon there was the click-click as a button was pressed in Skins' apartment and the door moved inward under the pressure of my hand. There was a small, self-operating automatic elevator and I was glad; I didn't relish climbing six flights of stairs just to say hello to a drummer boy.

The sixth floor corridor was just as dark as the one downstairs, but Skins had his door partly open and I walked toward the sharp dart of bright light that stabbed out into the dismal blackness of the hallway.

I shoved the door open all the way and went inside but Skins wasn't there.

"Hey, Skins?" I called. "Skins, where are you?"

The only answer was a stifling kind of silence that I felt all around me like a heavy curtain of soaking wet blankets . . . that, and a faint tapping noise that reached my ears in a steady, familiar rhythm that I couldn't quite place. I called the drummer's name a couple of times more but all I could hear was my own voice . . . and that disquieting tap-tap-tapping. Suddenly I knew what it was, somewhere water was slowly dripping out of a leaky faucet. I followed the sound of it into a small bedroom off the living room and found the leak . . . only it wasn't water!

Skins Rio was sitting propped up at a small wooden table, his face a ghastly shade of white under the harsh light of a hundred watt Mazda. His eyes, coldly fixed, were staring at me as if he couldn't believe what he saw. But Skins saw nothing. . . .

The red gore had bubbled out of a murderous knife wound in his throat onto the table in front of him. What I had thought was a leaky faucet was Rio's life blood slowly dripping to the bare floor in a horrible, steady rhythm of death!

It was only because I bent forward for a closer look at the trace of white powder I could see on Skins' lapel that they didn't find me lying next to the dead drummer, my blood mingling with his.

It was just that close. You see, I know face powder when I see it, so I stooped to make sure and something sang a quiet song of violent death about six inches above my head. I heard it hit the doorjamb with a terrifying thud as the heavy blade bit into the soft wood. I saw the wicked bone haft of a long knife dancing with disappointment at having missed me and somewhere a door slammed with a loud noise. It was in the next room.

I tore out of the apartment without thinking what might be waiting for me in the darkness of the hallway—somebody had

tried to kill me. The elevator doors had just closed and the square cage of light was slowly beginning to move downward. I took those six flights of stairs like the halfback of old, I was twentyish again and the corpuscles were racing. By the time I got to the second floor landing, my knees were starting to sag and I hurtled the last flight on legs like stilts. I saw the doors to the automatic elevator slide open with a loud rattling noise . . . it was empty . . . there was no one inside!

Out on the street, I stood quietly before 111-46 Washington Street. I was completely alone, there wasn't a soul in sight. I stood there letting the cool breeze playfully finger my damp shirt and I was glad of the chance to rest. As I saw it then, the killer must have been in the apartment all the time. The thought made me break out anew in cold beads of sweat. But who had pushed the button that had let me in to Skins' apartment? If it was the murderer, why? For Pete's sake, why?

Off to my right the street ended abruptly and I could see the outlines of Fort Tryon Park. Towering trees gracefully reached full green arms upward toward the sky, but under the black canopy of a clouded night, the park was dark, forbidding, a perfect hiding place for a killer! I turned quickly and hurried away.

STEVE saw me come in alone and his good-looking features registered annoyance. He stopped making with his baton and gave it up to the second trumpet. I didn't wait for him to get off the stand but went right over to the little table in the corner and sat down. I felt tired, I was glad to sit down.

The boys in the band and Nick were looking at me, and—especially, the new drummer. His shoe-button eyes weren't as pleasant as the rest of his face and I wondered why I hadn't noticed that before.

"Beer, huh," said the waiter.

"Bourbon," I told him. He looked surprised and I grunted, "I need it."

He shuffled off and Steve slid down next to me trying not to look anxious; he didn't succeed very well.

"Did you find him, Mitch?"

I nodded. "Yeah, Steve, I found him!" The relieved grin on the orchestra leader's face dropped dead as I said, "He's been murdered, Steve—just like the other one, he's been murdered!"

The chair made a scraping noise on the floor as he got up holding on to the silver-colored piece of furniture with bloodless knuckles. His mouth tried several times to say something but his lips wouldn't work and all the juice had gone out of his tongue. He sounded like a mamma doll with stutters.

The waiter put a bourbon down in front of me and a glass for Steve. "I brought you beer, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, thanks." It was just a mumble and the waiter flat-footed away, a queer expression on his pale face.

Steve sat down heavily. There was dead-weight on his shoulders and strained tightness around his mouth. He began sipping at his beer without talking. Finally, he spoke:

"We're finished, Mitch, through. I'm ruined."

I didn't know what the hell he was talking about and I didn't hesitate to tell him so.

"It's the tour we were supposed to start tomorrow," he said.

"Supposed to?"

He glanced at me, quick impatience flicking its thin finger across his face. "You don't suppose the police will let us leave tomorrow, do you?" he barked. "There'll be questions, batteries of questions, it'll take days."

I shrugged. "So what? Sure, it's unpleasant but . . ."

By the way he drummed his fingers on the table top, I could tell that he was an

noyed at me. I repeated, "So what?"

"I should have told you, Mitch," he said softly, the furrows of worry digging deep into his forehead. "If . . . if this tour had been a success, they were going to book us into the New Pilgrim Hotel, and you know what that means."

I whistled. "Whew!"

"After all these years," he went on painfully, "the big time—and then this." He slapped the table top with the flat of his hand so hard that the glasses and I jumped together. "We've got to go on tour, Mitch, we've got to leave tomorrow. It's our musical lives! We won't get a shot at the New Pilgrim again."

"Yeah," I muttered. "I didn't know." And I dabbed damp rings on the table with the bottom of my glass. But I couldn't help thinking about Skins Rio . . . what about *his* life?

"We've got to go on tour, Mitch, we must! My whole future depends upon it." I looked up and he added, "And yours, too, Mitch—yours and mine."

"Yeah," I said again. "I see what you mean."

Nobody cared about Skins anyway, except . . . I looked over toward the bandstand, she was gone!

"Where's Patti?"

Steve shrugged. "She's in the back. I made her take a couple of phenos. She's probably sleeping her fool blonde head off dreaming of Skins."

"Not the way I last saw him, I hope." I tossed off my drink and got up: The new drummer was getting loud again, the whole band was too loud, but Steve didn't seem to notice.

"Where are you going, Mitch?" he inquired quietly.

"The police," I told him. "I should have gone there first."

He tugged at my sleeve. "No, no—wait!"

"Wait! For what?"

He was desperate, groping blindly in a

dark one-way street. "There must be some way—there has to be. I . . . I've got to leave tomorrow on tour, I've waited too long to lose this chance."

"You're crazy!" I yelled. "What you're asking is impossible. I must tell the cops. Don't you see, Steve? The guy was murdered—brutally. Maybe, if you'd seen . . ."

"If we just had time. Maybe if they didn't find out until after we left. . . ."

"That would be worse, Steve. They'd only make us turn around and come back."

He looked deflated. "You're right, Mitch, I don't know what I was thinking of."

I let my hand come to rest on his arm. "We don't leave until noon," I said. "Maybe the cops can clean up the whole thing . . ."

"Sure, sure," he mumbled and stood up. "Forget it, Mitch, forget it, huh?"

I watched the agonized droop to the splendid width of his shoulders and the pain I felt for my friend was a live thing that writhed within me. If I could only help him! I'd have done anything for Steve—for his career. I didn't care about myself any more; it was Steve who mattered—I owed that to him, didn't I?

The same flat-footed waiter with the sad face came over and nudged me. "There's a dame at the bar, Mitch; she wants to buy you a drink."

CHAPTER THREE

"Drink—For Tomorrow . . ."

LEE FULLER! I snapped my fingers in the air, I'd forgotten about the red-headed thrush. I looked over at the bar—but it wasn't Lee. This one was as blonde as peroxide could make her, and as full of curves as a left-handed pitcher under the arc lights at Ebhets Field. She was sitting cross-legged at the bar, her sheer nylons where I couldn't miss them. The glass held in her hand was openly inviting and her full red lips were likewise.

Now don't get the wrong idea. I'm no woman-hater and my blood is just as warm as the next guy's, but after what I'd seen on the top floor of 111-66 Washington Street, I had me an aorta that pumped nothing but ice water.

"Tell her I'm not thirsty."

"Huh?" He looked like he wished he were fifteen years younger and as he leaned closer his eyes rolled like a mammy singer at a song festival. "Did you see the build on her?"

I got up and walked toward the door leaving the waiter mumbling to himself, "What a waste—cripes, what a waste!"

The blonde babe got off the stool and crossed diagonally toward the exit so as to intercept me on my way out. I couldn't help noticing her because she had a body that moved like it was loaded with just the right cargo. She caught up with me as I went through the doorway and her arm crooked through mine.

"What's the matter, honey?" she drawled through pursed lips. "Not in the mood?"

"Beat it, baby, I can't do you any good."

She paid no attention and cuddled up to me as if she enjoyed it as we went down the steps. I tried to shove her away from me but she stuck like a bushel of rubber cement.

"Look, blondie," I said gruffly, "I got to see someone, so be a doll and fade, huh?"

She flashed a grin at me, and her lips had an even more darkly-painted look under the orange neon light that blinked over the Club Century.

"Someone wants to see you, too, honey," she mouthed and she surveyed the empty street in front of us as if she were an hour late for a date she wanted to keep.

I didn't like the way she was eyeing me. There was something electric in the atmosphere that needled at the back of my neck. We were half a block from the Club when my curiosity got the upper hand.

"Who wants to see me, blondie, huh?"

She didn't answer at first but laughed nervously and when she did speak I had the vivid impression that she was repeating lines rehearsed in a very bad play.

"The drummer boy wants to see you, honey," she whispered. "A drummer boy named Skins Rio!"

Did you ever swallow a big chunk of ice that got stuck in the middle of your throat? I didn't know what to do. I felt myself grab her shoulders, my fingers dug deep into her soft flesh.

"What do you mean?" I shook her viciously. "What the hell do you mean?"

She squirmed under my grasp, her hands prying at my fingers, her face like a mask of terror.

"Let me go," she squealed. "Let me go!"

"Yeah," croaked a hoarse voice from behind me, "let her go!"

I did and spun around to look into the face of a bull-like man whose flat, unhand-some features went along perfectly with the gruff low-pitched voice. He wasn't alone, either. A mousy individual, with hard eyes, black moustache and long side-burns to match, stood off to the side, one hand thrust deep in his coat pocket. I've read too much about those kind of parasites not to know what he had in his pocket.

"Beat it, toots," said the big one, "beat it."

"Ah gee, sweetie, you said. . . ."

"Never mind what I said," he rumbled, "you've done your bit." The flat of his hand shoved into her. "I'll call you some time, yeah?"

She muttered something in a thin muffled voice and wheeling walked away, her high-heeled shoes making staccato sounds on the concrete pavement.

"Okay, buddy, you're next."

I WENT in the direction the big guy nodded until they crowded me into an alley that was full of debris and darkness. From somewhere nearby, a small dirty

window threw a weak stream of light out into the night, right on me.

The bull-voiced one slammed me against a brick wall and pinned me there with a pair of hands that looked more like slab.

"Okay, guy, spill it!"

"Spill what?" I asked. "What's all this about?"

Someone laughed—a high-pitched sound—and I knew it was the mouse boy. "He's cute, ain't he?" he whispered. "Let me. . ."

"Hold it," the big fellow said. Then he came back to me. "What we're asking, feller, is what you were doing up at Rio's place?"

I saw the guy with the side-burns take his hand away from his pocket. It wasn't a gun after all, and I was glad. Even though the one dim ray of light in that dark alley flashed and sparkled on the long, shiny blade he held in his hand, I was glad . . . it wasn't a gun after all. I should have been scared, though, scared to death, because I could distinctly see that knife he held in his hand had a heavy haft . . . and it was made of bone!

This was the guy in Rio's apartment who had pressed the buzzer . . . this was the guy who had . . .

This time I didn't give him a chance to throw it. I ducked away from the big guy and lashed out with a left fist as hard as I could. The shock went up my arm like electricity and the crumb with the knife dropped in his tracks; his blade made sweet music as it hit the ground.

Something caught me behind the ear and flung me against the wall. I could have used those three missing fingers on my right hand then; after all what can a guy with only his left do against a big ape with two fists as big as Virginia hams?

He bounced me off that wall like I was made of rubber and he kept hammering away at me until I ached all over and was choking on my own blood. When he was only a vague shadow in front of me, he

suddenly stopped and crooked his hand into the front of my shirt.

"What's the set-up?" I heard him say. "Come on, spill it, where do you fit in?"

I don't know what my answer was because I couldn't hear the sound of my own voice. But he let go quite unexpectedly and without his helping hand I went forward flat on my face. I rolled over spitting out one part dirt to two parts blood and I could make out mouse boy getting to his feet, the knife in his hand.

There was a long, high-pitched whining sound and then they were running, both of them running. I got up and staggered toward the street, toward the high-pitched, whining sound. A girl was standing there, a horrified look on her white face—she'd been screaming. She almost screamed again when she saw my battered features, but instead, she put her arms around me and slowly, red-headed Lee Fuller walked me toward the Club Century, the washroom and the telephone . . . especially the telephone. Me and the Police Department had a big conversation coming up . . . a damn big conversation!

The Club Century at three a.m. was usually a dead thing, still and quiet as a ghost in the dark. The sounds of music, tinkling glasses and women's laughter long since gone, there remained only the hollow echo of a spent and fading night impatiently waiting the revivification of another day.

Now, there were lights everywhere—the boys in the orchestra were sprawled out in chairs, and Morrison from Homicide and two assistants were all over the place asking questions, never-ending questions.

I'd sent Lee home just before I'd called the police and I promised to phone her soon. My musical life I owed to Steve Henko and now to the red-head I owed everything else. If she hadn't screamed . . . besides I wanted to call her, I wanted to see her again.

The detective closed his notebook with a

loud slap. "Okay, boys, you can go now." He winked apologetically at Patti and added, "You, too, Miss—I'm through."

Nick, the piano player, got up stiffly, stretching himself with feigned boredom. "Ain't that nice? It's about time."

Lieutenant Morrison ignored him and went on, "Nobody is to leave town, understand? If anything comes up, clear with me first!"

NOTHING would come up, I thought. The tour was now dead; he'd just killed and buried it, and with it Steve Henko's future in music. Steve was explaining again about the tour, desperately explaining, but the lieutenant shook his head.

"Sorry, Henko. This is a homicide case, either you'll have to get a delay on your bookings, or . . ." he smiled abstractly, "we'll have to clear this thing up before noon-time, huh?" And he smiled again to soften his determined stand.

"You can't change bookings just like that!" Steve yelled. I told him to take it easy. "Easy!" He turned on me sneering, "Thanks, Mitch, thanks for *everything!*"

If he'd hit me, it couldn't have hurt more.

"Is there a chance?" asked Steve. He was talking to the detective again. "I mean, do you think we might be able to leave as scheduled?"

Lieutenant Morrison shrugged. "Who knows, you can never tell about cases like this."

A faint light flickered in Steve's tired eyes. "Maybe if . . . look, is it okay to load the instruments on the bus, just in case, I mean? It'll save time and . . ."

"Sure, why not?" came the answer. "You can always unpack!"

Steve didn't appear to hear. "Okay, gang, leave your stuff here," he said in a loud voice. "I'll take care of everything. And, gang, keep your fingers crossed, huh?"

Poor Steve, he was going to need more than that, much more!

Morrison put his hot hand on my shoulder and I didn't like the feel of it. "You come with me, Mac, I want you up there, and you," he thumbed at Nick, "you go on downtown with Jeffers." He spoke to one of his men, "Hold him until I get back, see?"

Nick's face was carved in granite, his hard eyes stabbing at the detective. "What do you want with me? I didn't kill the louse."

One of the detectives took Nick's knife out, balancing it in his hand. "You haven't answered half enough questions, yet, feller. C'mon, let's go."

Patti burst out laughing with the high shaking sound of hysteria.

"You'll pay for it," she screamed. "You'll pay for killing him! You'll pay, you'll pay . . ." Her voice trailed off in a sob, and I turned and walked out into the darkened, deserted street, Morrison close by me.

There was cold sweat on my forehead and icy beads rolling down my spine. My right hand hurt where those three fingers were missing, how my hand hurt!

They'd already removed the body by the time we got there and I was glad. I don't think I could have looked at it again. The apartment was in a hubbub of activity, there were men with police equipment everywhere.

"Okay," said the lieutenant. "Now, where's the knife? Where were you standing?"

I moved forward. "Here, and the knife is . . ." I was pointing right at where it should have been but it wasn't there . . . it was gone!

"Look you," growled the lieutenant, "if you . . ."

"He's right, Lieutenant," said a voice, "there was a knife here. Look!"

The detective went over and I heard him say, "Yeah, I see." He turned back to me. "It had a bone handle, huh?" I nodded.

"The same as the one in the alley, huh?"

"Yes," I said. I was beginning to feel weary and I wished he'd get through with his questions.

"Okay, Mac, that's it!" He turned his back on me and walked away.

SOMEBODY came in calling for the lieutenant. "Hey lieutenant, I've got something here for you. Rio was a hophead, a sniffer."

"Like hell he was!" I blurted out. "The guy didn't..."

The lieutenant turned and looked at me. "You still here? You can go now. But stick around town, huh? I'll want you to look at some pictures later. Do you think you can identify the two monkeys who slugged you?"

Was he kidding? "It'll be a pleasure, Lieutenant. I owe those guys something."

"Sure, sure," he replied quickly. "But leave us take care of that, huh?"

I couldn't find a taxi so I settled for a four-block walk to the nearest subway station. My legs were tired and my tail dragging, but the little wheels upstairs kept going around and around. Somewhere there was a brass ring, only I couldn't seem to grab it. I kept thinking about face powder, a woman's face powder, the kind I'd seen on Skins' lapel, and I wondered if the police had noticed it, too. There was something screwy about that. Skins Rio was a one-woman man, one at a time, that is, so how come? Was it Patti's powder on him, and if it was...?

Now look, don't get any cockeyed notions that I'm a guy who likes amateur detecting—it's just that I remembered the hopeless look on Steve Henko's face and if I could help it, he wasn't going to be bilked out of a shot at the big time by anybody!

Patti opened the door to her small apartment as if she wasn't surprised to see me. To tell the truth, the way she looked, I don't think she would have been surprised

at anything. She was way off the wagon.

"C'm in, Mitchie, come in."

She closed the door behind me and stood there weaving like she was a sheet in the wind. "I've been drinking, Mitchie," she announced as if I didn't know. "Mmmm, I have."

Her speech was as thick as Funk & Wagnall's unabridged, and the gown she wore was as thin as cobwebs. She flopped down in a big, fluffy gray chair.

"I'm drunk . . . why shouldn't I be?"

"Why?" was all I said.

"Well, I'll tell you, Mitchie, you're a sweet guy." She climbed unsteadily to her feet and I helped her. Her head found the hollow of my shoulder and for a moment she seemed content to leave it there. "He's gone, Mitch," she mumbled against me. "He's gone."

I held her at arms-length, the white face powder on the lapel of my coat goading me on. "When did you see him last, Patti? Do you hear me? When did you see Skins last?"

She moved away from me, muttering dully, "Last? See him last?" The window was open behind her, a slight breeze rippling the curtains between the fire escape and the sill. Patti walked toward it.

I suppose the blonde singer saw him first as he came in off the landing, because it was her terror-stricken gasp that announced his arrival. Nick's swarthy face was as dark as thunder, his eyes jagged lightning, but it was the .38 calibre automatic in his fist that gave me the creeps.

"I thought knives were more in your line, Nick," I said.

He laughed and it was an unpleasant sound. "Stay out of this, Mitch, it ain't any of yours. This is me and Patti, just the two of us."

She screamed something at him and he went over and hit her with the barrel of the gun. She moaned just once and fell down. I ran over and tried to help her up

and that's when the roof caved in . . . three times, I think.

Nick brought that gun down hard on my thick skull. A bubbling volcano inside my head erupted in one violent explosion that showered the entire room with fiery sparks and streams of lava that glowed white with heat. I keeled over face-down and obediently went to sleep!

WHEN I came to, things were hammering in my head and it took a little while for me to realize that it was really someone pounding furiously on the door. I got up off the floor and opened up. It was one of Morrison's fat detectives and that's when I remembered Patti.

She was lying sprawled across the gray chair, her pretty face cut and torn, a horrible mass of cruel bruises. Her klondike hair, hanging low over her closed eyes, was matted and red with her blood. She was breathing, but who knew for how long? It was a murderous beating.

I breathed heavily and I wanted to be sick. I started toward her but the Homicide man got some wrong ideas and grabbing me by the arm spun me clear across the room. His lips were drawn, and his eyes spat angry fire. Then he came at me, his fists ready for action.

I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't yelled Nick's name. When the sound of it sank in, it was like magic. He turned quickly and went over and picked up the telephone.

While he talked, I stood looking at Patti and I felt sorry for her.

"Don't touch her," the cop said as he cradled the receiver on the hook, "they're sending an ambulance over."

"Nick's crazy," I muttered bitterly, "he must be to do a thing like this." Then I remembered that he was supposed to be down at Headquarters and I didn't understand.

"He got away from Jeffers on the way

down," the detective told me. "As soon as the lieutenant found out, he sent me over here. I guess he figured something like this."

"Too bad you were late. Do you think she'll be all right?"

He shrugged and I got to feeling sick again, so I went inside and closed the door.

After they took Patti to the hospital, I grabbed me a cruising cab and went home. If ever a guy needed sleep I did, and I could hardly wait, but what I didn't know was that the cards weren't falling my way. My key went into the lock and his gun into my back at the same time.

"Open up and get inside," said Nick's voice. It was like a cold wind.

We went in and he closed the door behind us, then he switched on the light. "Too bad I had to slug you, Mitch." He sounded almost apologetic but his gun didn't look it. "How's Patti?" he asked in an off-hand way.

I guess I lost my temper then but I couldn't help it. After I told him what I thought of him, I got other ideas, but I guess he must have read my mind.

"Don't, Mitch, don't!" he warned grimly, and he waved his gun at me. "She had it coming," he snapped. "Besides, the way she told it, she made them think I killed Rio." I let him talk. "I could have, too," he went on, "I really could have."

"They just wanted you for questioning," I told him. "Running was screwy."

He just laughed at me. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I need dough, Mitch, lots of it. I'm getting out. You got any?"

I showed him my wallet. It wasn't very much, just a twenty-dollar bill, but he took it.

"You'd better go see the cops, Nick, you're a fool for running. What have you got to hide?"

"Uh uh, it's too late for that. A guy takes a step and it's too late, you hear, it's too late!"

CHAPTER FOUR

An Error in Timing

I WAITED forty-five minutes after he'd gone before I made up my mind—and it was only the memory of Patti's battered face that did it, you can believe that or not. Lieutenant Morrison was still on duty when I called and when I told him that Nick had just paid me a visit, he hopped up like a first day's recruit when a shavetail goes by.

"He'll probably try to get money from Henko," he snapped—which was my idea exactly and the reason I'd called him—"How long ago did he leave, Irwin?"

When I told him, he violated all the rules and regulations of the New York City Police Department by cussing me out like a Cavalry trooper.

It sounded lame when I said, "I had to think about it." But he had already hung up.

Sleep, now, was a far-away thing. By the time I got out to Steve's place, Morrison was there with a couple of his men; one of them I hadn't seen before and I guessed that Jeffers was on his way back to the Bronx for letting Nick get away.

The Lieutenant looked surprised when he saw me and my comment that I couldn't sleep seemed to have no effect on him whatsoever. Then I saw Steve. His face was pale and drawn but there were fever points of excitement in his gray eyes.

He smiled reassuringly at me. "I'm okay, buddy. Everything is going to be all right, Mitch, everything!" He flashed me another smile but I thought I detected a degree of nervousness that didn't belong.

Morrison was firing off words like a fifty calibre, loud and long.

"Cover all depots, bus, rail, air, etc. I want that guy picked up before he leaves town, understand? I want Nick Matillo and when you get him, book him for murder!"

Steve came over and asked for a cigarette. My hand was shaking as I held out the pack. He said, "He got me for a hundred bucks, Mitch . . . if it hadn't been for that gun . . ."

I blinked owlishly. "I don't get it. What happened?"

"He confessed, Mitch. Nick told me he killed Skins." He slipped his arm around my shoulders. "He was jealous. I guess the poor guy couldn't help it." Steve looked like a man about to cry and I, well I don't think even Freud could have figured out what was going on in my mind.

They were leaving then and the lieutenant called out "Hey, Irwin, want a lift?"

I went with him, leaving Steve standing at the door looking like a tired old man and, at the same time, happy thoughts of a New Pilgrim booking were doing things to the corners of his mouth.

I rode in silence on the way across town but the little old mechanism upstairs was at it again. If Morrison was just wrapping up the case around Nick, what about the two gorillas who had played badminton to my shuttlecock? Where did they figure in? I sat up suddenly. If the Lieutenant was dropping me off, he sure was going the long way round.

"Hey, where are you going? This isn't . . ."

"Take it easy, Irwin," he said, "I want to look in at Nick's place."

I sank back against the leather seat. Why didn't he say that in the first place?

I don't think that old Morrison expected to find Nick in his room, because when his skeleton key opened the door he went in with his gun in his holster. Only the detective *was* wrong, Nick was there. . . his body sprawled on the floor, an ever-widening pool of blood making a strange design on the threadbare carpet beneath his back!

The detective looked at the knife lying across the dead man's open right palm, the red-stained blade pointing like an accusing

finger at the razor-sharp wound in his throat.

"I didn't figure that," he muttered quietly to himself. "I just didn't figure on that."

He went over and took a wallet out of Nick's pocket. I saw my twenty in it before he put it back in the piano-player's pocket. Then he stood up.

"Well, at least he saved the taxpayers some money, huh?"

My mouth was a gaping hole of disbelief. "What?"

"Don't you know a suicide when you see one?"

WHILE Morrison had called off the dragnet from his car radio, he was grinning in a self-satisfied way that didn't become a police officer. It annoyed me.

"You can leave on tour as scheduled now, Irwin," he told me. "That's what you wanted, huh?" He notified Headquarters to phone Steve and then he must have caught the look on my face because he snapped, "Case closed. Any questions, bud?"

"Wait a minute," I protested, "if you've forgotten those two lugs who combed me over, I haven't."

"Oh, yes," he muttered without too much interest. "Get down to the lab before bus time and look over the pictures, huh? We'll pick 'em up."

The squad car had stopped in front of my apartment house and he opened the car door. "See you around some time, huh?" And as it moved away from the curb, I could hear Lieutenant Morrison call in Police Headquarters again.

I started toward the building until I saw the detective's car turn the corner and disappear then I stopped, reversed myself and walked quickly down the street toward the nearest all-night hack stand.

The first timid rays of dawn were probing for a soft spot in the black surface of the night when I hurried up the steps of

the City Hospital. The nurse at the desk thumbed her registry in response to my urgent question.

"Patti Sheldon?" I nodded. "Here it is," she said and she looked surprised. "She was discharged."

"That's impossible."

She fixed me with a reproving eye and her manner was as stiff as her starched white uniform. "Treated for cuts and bruises and discharged," she read. "And if there is anything else, mister. . . ."

But I didn't stop to hear. I ran for the nearest telephone booth and dialed Steve's number. After a while the operator came on the line.

"They do not answer, sir," her mechanical voice told me.

"Keep trying, keep trying!"

She did, but it was useless. Steve didn't answer his telephone—and that was when my throat got dry and panic stabbed into my belly like cold steel. The merry-go-round upstairs was whirling madly again and I could see the brass ring but no matter how many times I grabbed for it, it eluded my groping fingers.

The New Pilgrim Hotel . . . the cross country tour . . . a twenty-dollar bill, and a shiny blade dripping with blood! Keep going, Mitch, hurry, hurry, don't stop now—there's the brass ring. Grab it, Mitch, go on, try just once more!

My brain was racing furiously and frantically I refueled it. *Face powder on a lapel . . . his lapel . . . mine . . . a twenty-dollar bill and a shiny blade dripping with blood! I had it . . . the brass ring . . . it was in my fingers!*

When I finally found Steve he was at the Metropolitan Garage on West 110th Street. The top of the bus was packed solid with band instruments; he was just climbing down.

"It wasn't suicide, Steve," I blurted out like water overflowing. "Nick was murdered . . . like Skins, he was murdered!"

HE LOOKED startled and a little scared. "I don't understand. The lieutenant said . . ."

"He was wrong, Steve, he slipped up. He didn't see what I saw. The knife was pointing the wrong way! If Nick killed himself, the blade would have been pointing *away* from his body not toward it. A suicide would never grasp a knife in that position. He was murdered and the killer put the knife in his palm . . . the wrong way!"

"You're clever, Mitch," the orchestra leader muttered. "You really are."

"I saw his wallet, too, Steve. My twenty was in it, but I didn't see *your* hundred . . . the hundred you said he took from you when he confessed . . ."

Steve's hand came out of his pocket . . . the knife was just as big and ugly as all the others I'd seen.

"Don't make me kill you, too, Mitch—don't. You're my friend, Mitch, please don't make me do it!"

"Why? Steve, why?"

"You're my friend, Mitch, you'll understand! Remember how I helped you after your accident, remember?"

Remember! How could I ever forget! Just like I remembered how it had happened. Not that I'd ever blamed him for it, it wasn't really his fault. My fingers just happened to be in the bus door when he had slammed it shut. Remember?

"You'll understand, Mitch, won't you?" he said again.

I could figure a lot of things but this—this was different.

"Understand murder," I croaked. I was horrified and it rang in my voice.

"Listen to me. When this tour is over, I'm through. I'll be rich, do you hear? I'll go to South America, I'll . . . I'll never come back here again. You can have the band, Mitch, it's yours, I give it to you."

"What are you saying, Steve? *How* will you be rich?"

He went on as if he didn't hear me. "It

was small stuff before, but this is big. This is the clean-up, Mitch." His hand moved menacingly. "And not even you can stop me. Rio was greedy," he went on. "So was Dick . . ." His lips were white and compressed with determination.

"Dick!" I exclaimed. "You killed the other drummer, too?" My stomach was a weak thing and my legs were jelly.

"I had to, Mitch," he said almost apologetically and he answered my unspoken question. "Nick was a fool. He didn't know anything—he just was handy, that's all. Nick was my alibi, Mitch."

"And the new drummer?" I queried softly. "You phoned him after you killed Rio, didn't you?" He was grinning at me so I kept talking. "You had to have a drummer, didn't you, Steve? You were the one who called him and told him you were Local 802, didn't you?"

He didn't have to answer because suddenly I saw—I saw a lot of things. I saw the white face powder on Rio's lapel again, white face powder that wasn't face powder at all and I knew . . . at last I knew!

The orchestra leader moved toward me. "Are you my friend, Mitch? Don't make me kill you, I don't want to, Mitch." But he kept advancing toward me and that knife looked long and very sharp.

"Drop it, Henko!" said a hard voice—Morrison's voice.

I heard the knife hit the cement floor with a clattering sound and suddenly the garage was swarming with cops, cops with guns, cops with handcuffs. I waited until Steve was out of sight, then I climbed up on the roof of the bus and threw the bass drum to the floor.

It was heavy, heavier than it should have been and as it hit the ground it split open; it split way wide open and two of Morrison's men were busy then, picking up the dozens of little packets of snow-white powder that some men sell their souls for.

(Continued on page 111)

Crooked and greedy, Detective Herb Sloan had ruthlessly lined his pockets with bribes—in the desperate hope of redeeming his . . .

BADGE OF HONOR

There was a black .32 automatic in Al's hand.



By **HARRY
WHITTINGTON**

DETEKTIVE SERGEANT HERB SLOAN rapped on the manager's door in the rear of the Ace Jack Club. He had his right hand in his coat pocket and kept it there even after Al Cos-

tella opened the door and said, "Come in, Herb."

Al was a swarthy man in his middle forties. He looked very successful. He also looked sad. Herb said, "You wanted to see me, Al?"

Al nodded. "Yeah. Sure, kid. Sit down and have a cigar."

Herb sat down. He took a cigar with his left hand, shoved it into his breast pocket. He didn't move his right arm.

"What did you want to see me about, Al?"

"I hear you've been snooping into the death of my wife Sally."

"That's right."

"Got much to go on?"

"Not much. A button. That's all." Herb pulled his right hand from his coat pocket. He extended it flat, turned upward. His palm and fingers were sweated. His fingers had been clasped around a large button. It was brown. It looked as if it might have been pulled off a suit coat.

Al laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. It sounded uncomfortable.

"What's that other thing?" Al said.

Herb looked at his palm. He flushed. "Nothing—they're identification beads. Belonged to my baby. I carry 'em. Good luck."

Al coughed. "I never suspected you're sentimental. I thought you had a bank book for a heart." He went back around his desk and sat down. He was ill at ease. "Herb Sloan. Small town boy makes good as cop. Plain clothes and a plain racket. You been putting a lot of money in your pocket since you got out of a uniform. How much, Herb?"

Herb's mouth twisted. "Not enough," he said.

"When you came here from Circleville, you were a raw hick and broke. You've been a smart boy, Herb. I hope you're going on being smart."

"What does that mean?" Herb looked

at the beads then returned them and the brown button to his coat pocket.

"The department says my wife committed suicide. The coroner says that. Yet you won't let up."

"She was your wife. Looks like you'd want me to keep on until I find her killer. And I will—"

"That's it, Herb. Maybe she didn't commit suicide. And like you say she was my wife. I had the honor of being Sally's fourth and last husband and richest. She ran through a lot of men, Herb. A lot of money. She didn't care about anything but money. You know that."

Herb nodded. "She liked nice things, all right. Clothes. Diamonds. Perfumes."

"No chiseler in this town had a harder heart or a sweeter face than my wife Sally, Herb. It broke my heart when her maid found her dead in our apartment. But she is dead, Herb. She's dead and you're only going to stir up a lot of unhappiness by keeping at it."

"Since when did you care who was made unhappy?"

"Herb, believe me. If I thought anything could be helped by chasing down whoever killed Sally, I'd say go ahead. I'd beg you to. But she had lived hard, Herb. Hurt a lot of people. Made a lot of enemies. Why don't you drop it?"

"They told me to stay on the case. That's why I'm here."

Al shook his head. "That's not the way I hear it. I hear you asked to stay on the case. Working on it after hours. What's in it for you, Herb? Another shakedown? Is that it? You think maybe a guy with plenty of money throttled Sally? You're going to blackmail him, set yourself up in the big leagues on blackmail money?"

Herb smiled and shrugged. He got up and walked across the room, pulled open a closet door.

"Hey there!" Al snapped. "What do you want?"

THERE were four suits on hangars in the closet. Herb took the button out of his pocket. He touched it to the front of each coat. He was swagating. By the time he'd reached the fourth coat, Al was standing behind him.

There was a black, .32 automatic in Al's hand.

Herb turned slowly. He was still smiling around his mouth. Sweat glistened across his forehead. His green eyes were hard.

"A button's missing, Al," Herb said.

"That's the way it is, Herb."

"Your own wife."

Al backed away.

"You know why. She had her faults but she told me she loved me and never did. I could have stood all the rest. But it was that lie that drove me insane."

Herb nodded. He was silent.

"I'm a big name in this town, Herb. I got a reputation as a smart character. So now a country girl makes a sucker out of me, like I was a boob seeing the show for the first time. Everything she said to me was a lie. She makes me believe she loves me. Me. Big Al Costella."

Herb reached into his pocket. He didn't speak.

"And then she's been laughing at me. All the time spending my money. Running around. Well, she started drinking too much. Talking too much. I knew what was going to happen. She'd laugh and tell everybody the big joke. She'd tell them how she'd suckered Al Costella."

For a while, Costello said nothing, but then blurted:

"I made up my mind. She'd taken her last poor sucker. Driven guys to suicide, drink and dope. She had laughed at me for the last time. I—killed her. With her own pillow as she slept. The poison was just window dressing—to make it look like suicide. She must have pulled the button off my coat. I didn't notice. Even when I found it was gone, I didn't realize where."

Herb shrugged. "Looks like that button is going to fry you, Al," he said.

Al's face was white. "No. I asked you here for a reason— for two reasons. I didn't know you had the button when I asked you here. That ups the odds on your side. But only slightly. That button can make you a lot of money, Herb."

"Yeah?"

"Sell it back to me. What's the price, Herb?"

"You couldn't pay it."

"Maybe I could. Maybe I could even dicker with you on it. You see, Herb, you're in a kind of a spot, too. You're an ambitious guy. Came from the sticks to make his fortune. A crooked cop. A bribe taker. A shakedown artist. What if the department found out all that about you, Herb?"

"I'd be finished, all right."

"Sure you would. But I got proof you been taking bribes, Herb. Sorry, I had to get it. Self-protection. Now I'm thankful I got it. Because part of the price I pay for that button in your hand is going to be silence about your shakedown rackets. If you'd been an honest cop, you could have taken me for anything in the world. But as it is, you're going to have to name a reasonable figure."

Herb was looking at the baby beads dangling from his finger.

"Why don't you name it?"

"All right. In a moment. But first, there's the other reason I asked you here."

"Yeah?"

"We're going to pay a little visit, Herb. My wife's maid was in the apartment. I thought she was gone. I thought I was alone. She saw me kill Sally. She wants a hundred grand for her silence."

Herb's smile was cold. "Looks like you're in a bad spot."

"Oh, no. Because you're going to help me," Al said.

"Why?"

"Because I'm only going to pay one of you. You're crooked, but you're smart. You're my choice. But just so you don't get any ideas, hand me the gun out of your shoulder holster. Carefully."

Herb handed over the gun. Al took it.

"Let's go, copper," he said. "You're going to be my alibi."

AL PUT the gun in his pocket but he kept his hand on it. They went out through the club. People spoke to them. Al smiled and nodded. Herb kept his face straight ahead.

Al's black Caddy was parked at the curb. They got in. Herb could see Al smiling to himself. Satisfied. Smug. They drove across town in silence. The wind in from the lake was chilled. Even the street lights seemed coated with frost.

Alice's apartment was in the near north side. It was nothing to write home about. But Herb knew Alice had visions of everything luxurious when she got Al Costella's hundred grand.

Alice Gray let them in. She was a thin, gray-haired woman with sharp features and tight lips. She stared at them a moment. She began to rail at Al.

"I warned you to come alone!" she screamed. Her hands tugged the house coat tighter about her thin body. "Why did you bring him?"

They stepped inside. Al closed the door. His smile was cool. "I'm not going to pay you, Alice," he said. "You're going to die. You see, I found you'd been robbing my wife—"

"That's a lie! Like everything else you ever said, a lie!"

Al shrugged. "Sure. But so what, Alice? Who's going to say so? Not you. Where you're going there's no way to talk. I'll have to tell the police that I brought this officer along to arrest you. But you resisted, and in the struggle, I had to shoot you."

Alice's leathery face contorted. "That's what you think! I was ready for some kind of trick like that!"

From inside her lounging robe, she jerked a small, black automatic. Without speaking again, she fired.

She was wild. The gun popped in the room and missed Al's big body. Al laughed at her.

Deliberately, he drew out his gun and aimed low. He fired.

His gun exploded like a cannon. Alice let the little automatic slip from her numbed fingers. She toppled to the rug. Herb bent over her. She was dead.

Herb stood up.

Al was crowing. The whole thing was a success now. "It worked perfect! She even pulled a gun on me. Self-defense. It *was* self-defense. You saw it. Call the cops, Herb." Al laughed. "I mean the other cops."

Herb nodded. He went to the phone. He prowled quietly about the small apartment as the sirens screamed closer outside. Then the door opened and police began to spill into the room.

Inspector Maybery said, "How did it happen, Herb?"

Herb knelt beside the dead maid. The gun was at her side. He picked it up, shoved his coat back and pushed the gun into his empty shoulder holster.

He heard Al catch his breath.

"This man shot her," Herb said. "It was unprovoked. I came here with him. This woman saw Costella murder his wife. He killed her to keep from paying her blackmail."

"Why were you here with him, Sloan?"

"Oh, I'm not innocent. He threatened to expose me to the department if I didn't help him. I've been taking bribes—"

"You?"

"Sure." Herb's mouth twisted. His voice broke. "I came here to get money.

(Continued on page 113)

TELL HER THAT YOU SAW ME

By DANE

GREGORY



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Muff seemed to think she could handle the situation.

Bill was just another apple glaumer to his pretty boss, Buff Garnett. She didn't suspect that behind his shabby coat lay a roscoe—and behind his battered grin—murder!

IT WASN'T New York, he thought. The weathered old wooden depot wasn't much roomier than the open gondola he'd just piled out of, and on the other side of the depot the little huddle of false-

fronted store buildings looked like castaways from a Gene Autry movie. But he was glad, somehow, that the place wasn't big enough to shut off the view. You could look past the ramshackle stores and see miles and miles of vineyards and hop fields and mist-softened apple orchards rolling away to meet the saw-toothed hills that rimmed the valley.

It seemed funny, seeing so much fruit. It made him a little dizzy. He'd been in the Yakima valley several months now, but he still couldn't get used to the idea that apples actually grew on trees instead of pushcarts.

The guy standing across from him on the wooden station platform looked like something from a Gene Autry film, too. He was long and thin and grizzled, and he wore a dusty black Stetson tipped back from his head; his thumbs were hooked in the pockets of an old green vest with a bright tin star on it.

He said, "Lookin' for work, son?"

"I'm not looking for trouble."

The sheriff's lids dropped over eyes that were suddenly as frosty as the air. He studied the young man before him very carefully, his gaze travelling from the neck of his plaid lumberjack shirt down to the dirty cords that whipped around his shoe-tops. But he couldn't seem to find anything wrong. The young man was wearing an old serge coat that fitted him like a nightgown, and the loose folds hid the hard bulk of the roscoe against his ribs.

The law said, "If you really ain't lookin' for trouble, son, maybe it'd pay you to give civil answers to the same kind of questions."

The young man said, "Sorry. I didn't mean—"

Both of them turned. A pair of heels made a brisk clattering sound on the platform, and a girl suddenly breezed toward them, her red hair swinging around her shoulders and catching fire in the cold

morning sunlight. The young man eyed her.

She was twenty, maybe, and would have been something to gander at even on Hollywood Boulevard. She wore a smile, a bright silk neckerchief, and a soft flannel shirt that pouched becomingly in the right places. And she was one of the few girls who really looked all right in slacks. Most women develop unexpected bulges when they pour themselves into pants, but this one was as sleek and trim as a racehorse.

She said, "Don't throw him in irons, Sheriff! Maybe I can use him."

"You need another picker, Miss Garnett?" said the law.

"I do." The girl smiled at the young man. He could smell the clean, soapy fragrance of her, and that seemed to make her even nicer. Her grey-green eyes frisked him lightly from head to foot; suddenly, he felt self-conscious about the cannon under his left arm. He needed the cannon, because one of these days he was going to put the blotter on a guy, but sometimes he got a little tired of packing spare weight around.

"I'm Buff Garnett," said the girl.

"Please to meet you," he mumbled. "Just call me Bill."

The constable gave him a hard, searching look, but the girl seemed to think that was enough of a name. "You do harvest work?"

"Sure. Just finished a job in the upper valley. I pick up spuds, gather hops, glauam apples—"

"All right," said Buff Garnett. "This is an apple-glauming job. Jonathans. But I can't pay much. Times are a little tough right now."

"That's all right. You don't need much to live on around here," he said. "Lead me to your apples, lady, and watch me massacre 'em."

She had a nice way of walking—a trick of tipping her bright head back and bouncing along like there was music in her heels. She led him across the narrow, oiled street to a little old pickup that could have been

the one Henry Ford threw together in his basement before he got the idea of mass-production.

"You'll need some lunch," said Buff. "How are you fixed for money? I can advance you—"

"Thanks. I got enough," Bill said, shaking his head.

He sidled into the corner emporium and came out with a loaf of bread, a quarter's worth of pressed ham, and a sack of potato chips. Buff sat behind the wheel, and the pickup was jumping around like one of the broncs at the Pendleton roundup.

Bill threw open the door and slid in beside her. "Hey," he said. "I'd have cranked the thing for you."

She shook her head. "It doesn't know you. It always kicks at strangers." Her foot pressed down hard on the starter. Surprisingly, they were off.

THEY WENT rocketing out of the business section and swung into a twisting dirt road flanked by miles of solid orchard land. The road was as full of thank-you-ma'ams as a polite bindlestiff getting a handout, and Bill's teeth rattled around in his head like a cupful of poker dice. But the girl didn't seem to mind the bumps. She sat there with her slim fingers steady on the wheel, her hair whipped to a red froth by the crisp air that slammed in through the open sides of the car.

Bill looked away from her and saw a little pearl-handled roscoe sticking its shiney out of the side pocket to his right. He picked it up very casually and gave it the once-over lightly. It was puny enough so that his own heater could have swallowed it at one gulp and been hungry for more, but it was loaded and ready for business.

Buff had been watching him from the tail of her eye, and she laughed a little soft laugh as he shoved the roscoe back into its nest. "Don't let it scare you, Bill. There

was a riot in the Congdon orchards near Yakima one season, and ever since then Slim has made me pack that thing around with me. But I don't often shoot people with it."

"Oh." Slim, Bill thought, would be her husband, of course. You couldn't expect a girl like that not to have at least one husband. But no, Slim, she explained, was the hired man.

Bill said, "How come I was lucky enough to snag this job? The pool halls are usually full of floaters looking for work, and I'd have thought—"

"That's the trouble," Buff said. "I hate to go into a pool hall and pick just one man out of a crowd. They're all hungry for work, and I always feel sorry for the men I can't hire. You see, I only needed one more picker to fill out my crew."

"I see." A couple miles later, "How big a ranch you got, Miss Garnett?"

"Sixty acres. It's not all apples, though—some peaches, some pears. It takes a lot of running. . . ."

"Hey! You don't manage a place that size all by yourself?"

"Oh, no. No. There's Slim—and there's dad. But dad isn't quite—"

She broke off.

"Things are pretty sad for the growers right now, aren't they?" he said.

"Sad? Well, sort of, right now. But maybe this apple deal will pick up later in the season. I—I hope so. It means a lot . . . this particular year."

Bill waited. The girl gave him a quick sidelong glance and said, "I don't know why I should bother you with my troubles. You're probably no international banker yourself—they don't usually travel in box-cars."

"I'm a good listener, though."

"All right. It's one of those old home-stead yarns that are supposed to put a lump in your throat. There's a nice big mortgage on our farm, and we're due to

lose it next spring unless we clean up on the apples."

"Hey!" Bill said. "That's tough."

"Not for me, maybe," Buff said, "I'm young. But it's worse than tough for dad. He—he's attached to the place. He cleared it out of sagebrush a good many years ago, and right now it's about all he has to live for. He can't walk, you see."

"Can't walk?"

"No. He fell off a picking ladder last year and fractured his spine. The doctor says he'll never walk again." What had been a tremble in the girl's lips was suddenly a faint smile. "You see? A crippled father, a mortgaged farm—it's just like one of those sad movie melodramas, isn't it? Only they're always a little sadder in real life, because you aren't so sure of the happy ending."

Bill said, "Yeah," and thought of a girl named Leah, and a man named Yeager, and the gun that was pressing flat and hard against his ribs. There they were—Buff Garnett with her troubles and him with his—and he found himself wishing he was a movie scenarist or something so he could arrange a happy ending for the pair of them. But he didn't expect to. He'd knocked around enough to realize he was no damned good at arranging things.

"So maybe," said Buff, "I'll ask you to reserve a nice box-car for dad and me."

SHE swung the pickup across a wooden cattleguard and braked it in a narrow dirt lane filled with the smell of ripe Jonathans and the noise of magpies quarreling in a nearby treetop. You could look straight up the lane and see the farmhouse—a comfortable old wooden house taking life easy under a bunch of maple trees turned red as the girl's hair. There was a nice sweep of lawn around the building, and it looked like it would be a good place to read the funny papers on Sunday afternoon.

Buff said, "Three rows to a picker, Bill.

You can have the first three rows next to the fence. You'll find a ladder and a picking bag there, and I think there's plenty of shook. All right?"

"Sure." Bill gathered up his groceries, got out of the car. He made his way through jimson weeds and bunch grass to the first tree near the road. The Ford jumped away toward the house. Bill found a canvas picking sack on a pile of box-shook and slung it around his hips. Most pickers wear them over the shoulders, but it hurt Bill fierce to have a full sack of apples grinding gun-steel into his skin.

He wiped spray off a Jonathan and munched it thoughtfully while he was sizing up the orchard. The trees were big and the apples looked plenty good—nice, red, solid ones that would maybe yield about one worm to the carload . . . There were other pickers in the orchard. You could hear the sound of ladders squeaking and apples rolling into the boxes, but you couldn't see anybody at all. The loaded branches hung down to the ground and shut you away in a world of your own.

Maybe he's here, Bill thought. He's got to be somewhere in the valley, and this could be the place. Maybe I'll stop his clock before sundown . . .

Then he quit thinking about anything and began to glaum apples with both hands. It was nice work for a guy like him. He didn't care much about brain work, anyway. This way, all he had to do was swarm up and down a ladder and let his fingers do his thinking for him.

He got so interested in seeing how many boxes he could fill that he didn't even know it was noon until somebody who'd inherited a leather-lunged voice bawled out, "Hey, you guys! It's straight up! It's that time now!"

The orchard had spilled about twenty men into the lane by the time Bill got there.

Just ahead of him was a tall, thin number who turned around and dusted him lightly

with colorless eyes. There was a friendly grin on one side of his ugly raw-boned face, and on the other end was a mess of hair that looked more like pine-shavings.

He said, "Hi. You're the new guy Buff hired today, huh? What's the name?"

"Just call me Bill."

"Okay. I'm Slim Guthrie. O'chard fo'man here."

The guy just ahead of him turned around to say in a flat voice, "You can call me Mac, cowboy," and Bill stood there with the blood hitting hard in his ears and the roscoe getting ready to jump into his fingers.

There they were. A couple of no-goods who'd have been more at home in the shadow of elevated trestles . . . meeting the hell-and-gone out there in the shadow of an apple-orchard. Bill and the guy he was going to turn into a worm-banquet.

He had sleek dark hair and one of those long, slim, olive faces that always seem to break the dolls up in small pieces, but his eyes belonged in a fish market instead of a face. A little scar-pucker ran down from the corner of the left one. He faced Bill in a kind of half-crouch, right hand hanging near the bulge under his windbreaker, but that must have been the way he always greeted strangers. Bill didn't have the kind of map that gets into newspapers, and he could see fish-eyes didn't know who he was.

"Well, Bill thought. *Well, this is as good a time as any to smoke him over.* He wondered what he was waiting for.

Then he thought, *The hell with it. Let the son of a biscuit pick a few more apples for Buff.* There was always quitting time.

Bill said, "Hello, Mac. Glad to meet you," and that was no damned lie.

THE pickers flopped down on the lawn and began to go through their groceries. The guy who called himself Mac was the only one who seemed to take any interest

in Bill. He sat there with the makings of a Thanksgiving dinner spread out in front of him and watched him from one eye-corner. Bill watched him the same way.

Bill had finished his meal and was starting to roll a quirley before either of them spoke. "Have a tailor-made," Mac said, fishing a deck of butts out of his wind-breaker.

"No, thanks," Bill said, and continued rolling his smoke. "Kinda got used to these."

Slim came over. He looked down at Mac and said, "Wish you'd get the lead out of yo're parts this afternoon, Mac. You didn't glauum enough fruit this mo'ning to make one good sized gulp of cider."

Mac's lips pulled flat against his teeth. "I'm earning my money, what little it is, I guess."

"You're getting goin' wage," said Slim. "You won't get no more'n that at any the other ranchés. Anytime you want to check, we always can find another guy for yo're ladder."

"Hell! Did I say it *wasn't* going wage? Fruit-growers are the worst chiselers in the world. They're always beating their gums about hard times, but I notice they still go on harvesting their apples."

Slim explained mildly that it cost money to buy spray and to prune trees and to keep smudge-pots burning all winter. "That's goin' wage, Mac. You want to keep on workin' here, why you remember what I said." He strolled away.

Mac slid closer to Bill. He put a paper drinking cup on the grass, and pulled a pint of three-dollar rye out of his pocket and poured a drink. "The hell with him, I'm going to get a cockeyed drunk this afternoon. Want a slug?"

"No, thanks."

Bill wanted a drink, and a tailormade, but it would have cost him cookies to accept any favors from Mac.

Mac lowered his voice. "You're hot,

aren't you? You look like a guy with law on his tail, and I'm the guy who can tell."

Ignoring the silence, Mac tossed off his drink and poured out another one. "Why be that way? I know there's an oscar under your coat. You damned near went for it when we met. And you're jumpy too. Well, maybe I know how that is, get me?"

Bill said, "Am I supposed to tell about the wen on my grandfather's side?"

Mac laughed. "Tough guy, huh?" He studied Bill carefully again. "There's something kind of familiar about you, but no matter . . . You keep playing it the smart way. I always said that when a guy's hot with the law he should head for the Yakima or Wenatchee Valley. There's so many floaters that the cops don't have time to look 'em over . . . If you can really make that oscar bark, dearie, I might cut you in on something that'll buy more than peanuts for both of us."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah . . . A gold mine that's not up in the sky."

Bill rubbed his hand. "Give."

Mac's voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Fruit is perishable, you know. And most of these farmers would jump clear out of their sideburns if they thought something might keep 'em from getting their produce to market in good shape. How about organizing a grower's protective league?"

Bill whistled. "The protective racket . . . out here?"

"Why not? We could maybe get us a smooth front to make it look respectable. We could round up a few more gunsels over on the coast, and you and me could just stay under cover and keep things running. . . . Finger each of the growers for a couple of hundred a year and it'd add up to something like a million. Think it over, dearie—that ain't hay."

"I'll think it over, dearie," Bill said.

He was watching Buff. She had stepped

out of the ranch house and was floating toward the old jalopy parked in the lane. She turned toward the men and let her fingers flutter in a friendly way. Then she got in the car and went bouncing down the lane.

Mac said, "That's a sweet enough tart to go with anybody's tea. But make your hands behave, dearie, because I seen her first. Why else would I stick around here and let that skinny foreman jaw me?"

Bill looked at Mac, and suddenly knew why he hadn't already killed him. He'd never been much good at thinking, but all the time there must have been an idea beating itself into shape somewhere in the back of his mind. Because now it was there in the front of his mind. He hadn't planned it—the thing was just there.

Bill said, "Nuts. You may be Robert Taylor for all I know, but you won't make time with that one. Tell you what—you try it this afternoon. If you even get close enough to lift a kiss, I'll throw in with you on your protection racket."

Mac said, "That's a deal. We're as good as millionaires, dearie."

MAC was doing all right by mid-afternoon—by that pint of blended nose-polish. He had the three rows next to Bill, who could hear him whistling and singing and shying apples at magpies. He didn't seem to be picking many, but Bill conceded maybe a guy has a right to take life easy when he hadn't much of it left.

Every once in a while Mac would bawl out the words of a song that always seemed to slay the drinkers in West Coast beer flats:

*"Papa does the work,
Mama gets the pay—
And the man comes around,
When papa goes away."*

It reminded Bill of stratified cigarette smoke, high-heeled women, and all the things he'd have been glad to put behind

him. He hated to hear it, somehow, out there in the clean air of that Jonathan orchard.

Buff came back. The jalopy bucked and jiggled along the farm-to-market road and went vaulting across the wooden cattleguard into the lane. There were sacks of feed in the rear end, so evidently the Garnett family raised hen fruit as well as apples.

Bill drifted close enough to the lane so that Buff caught the wave and the friendly grin he sent her. She toed the brake, piled out, and came toward him—which was exactly what he'd been hoping.

Bill said, "Hi. Wouldn't have a few matches in your heap, would you?"

"I think there's a package of gophers in the side-pocket," Buff said, "I'll go get—"

"Never mind," he said. "I'll get 'em. You stay here and peel the spurs off a few Jonathans."

He didn't want any matches. What he wanted was her little pearl-handled pal, and it was in his right coat-pocket when he came back to the tree.

Buff smiled at him like somebody passing out medals. "Why don't you take five minutes now and then, Bill? You're picking too many apples for your money. It makes me feel sort of cheap."

Bill's gaze sank deep into those grey-green eyes. They sent tag-ends of old songs dancing through his head, but not the kind of songs Mac knew. "You wouldn't believe in taking something you hadn't earned. You'd refuse to take it unless it was forced on you. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

She stared. "I—don't quite understand. But yes . . . yes, that's right. I . . . you're a funny boy, Bill, but I think I sort of like you."

He went on with it. "I'm a crook, Buff," he said in a hurry. "A heat-number, get it? The kind of guy you've read about but never expected to meet."

Her eyes ate up her face. But she didn't back away from him. She said in a stunted voice, "What did you—"

"Never mind what I did. That don't matter. The point is, I'm dodging law-heat. And if I should happen to get in a jam out here—just any kind of jam that'd give the local bulls a chance to look me up—I'll go back east and do a twenty-stretch. Get it?"

She whitened a little around the lips. "Why did you tell me, Bill? I . . . I'd rather not have known."

"Because I didn't want to work for you under false pretenses." Bill nearly gagged on that one. "I want to play a straight game with you." And on that one, too.

"All right, Bill. Your—your secret's safe with me, of course. I won't tell—"

It was then that Mac's coarse song came sailing through the treetops.

Bill laughed. "You'll be lucky if that guy picks enough apples to give the doc a half-day off. He's drunk."

She had a temper to go with the red hair. Her little jaw hardened, and so did her eyes. "Drunk . . . on the job? I won't have that! I'll go tell him—"

She spun on her heel, ducked under a branch, and went striding away.

Bill waited maybe a minute and a half before he loped after her.

IT WAS just about the sort of scene he'd expected. Mac was laughing drunkenly, his smooth face flushed to the hue of raw liver, and he had one arm around the girl. He was trying to kiss her.

Buff wasn't screaming for mother. She seemed to think she could handle the situation. She was flailing at his chest with one clenched hand and struggling to hang one on his lug with the other.

Bill said softly, "Yeager." But Yeager didn't hear.

Bill said, "Let her go, Yeager."

He heard. He let Buff go and swung

toward Bill, color gone from his cheeks.

Bill said, "Just tell Leah that you saw me, will you? Just tell her hello for me, Yeager."

He was drunk, and he was scared, but he could still move fast. Not fast enough, though. The butt of his gun was just sliding out of his windbreaker when Bill began to aim. He didn't give him a chance. He never intended to.

Bill shot him four times through the pocket of his coat. The pearl-handled rod made a quick *splat-splat* sound against the shocked air, ugly as the noise of leather on bare flesh. Yeager twitched and jumped like a cardboard skeleton. He sagged a little at the knee-joints and then made a slow, easy dive into a pile of windfall apples. He was done.

Very white, Buff stood there with one hand against her mouth. Not speaking, not screaming . . . just looking down at the back of Yeager's neck.

Bill whipped the gat out of his pocket and gave it a quick polish with his bandanna. "I did it for you, Buff. You wouldn't put me in a hole, would you? Remember that twenty-stretch back east. . ."

Before she had time to glance at the

score-card, he'd shoved the pearly into her fingers and was turning to face the crowd of pickers that had already swooped down on them from the upper orchard.

He said, "She had a right to do it. I saw the whole thing, and it was self-defense. This ape was trying to maul her, see, and so she shot him."

Buff pulled in a little sharp gasp of surprise. Slim Guthrie stared at Bill with his colorless eyes.

"You're a dang liar, Bill. Buff didn't shoot him. I could of swore I saw you put that gun in her hand . . . Tell us about it, Buff."

Silence.

Bill said, "It's a clear enough case of self-defense. There won't be any trouble, Slim. Why you aiming to pin it on me?"

Slim said, "Who killed him, Buff? Don't let this gun-slicker scare you."

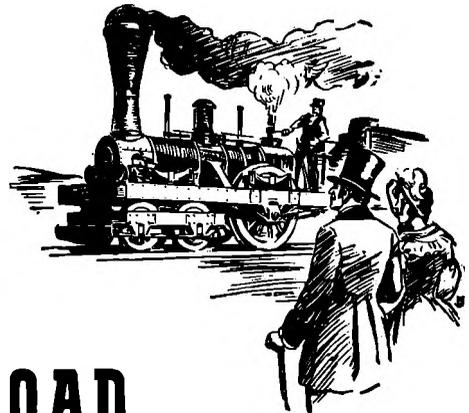
They waited.

Buff was in the corner pocket. She knew that Bill had jobbed her, that he'd had the whole thing worked out like a blueprint, because there was the little gun that ought to have been in the Ford. She knew that she could tell the truth and everybody there would take her word against his. Sure.

THE FRISCO

IF ANYONE is qualified to write the history of the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway, it is William R. Draper of Joplin, Missouri. As a Frisco publicity writer many years ago he helped sell the Southwest to editors and prospective settlers, and before that he watched the railroad expand when he was a tyke sitting on the cracker barrel in his father's general store in the Indian Territory at Claremore.

In *The Frisco*, Draper takes you back to the eventful Fourth of July in 1851 when some 300 rich merchants in top hats, frock coats and wigs gathered on the banks of Chouteau's pond to witness the laying of the line's first rail out of St. Louis. The road failed to reach Frisco by some 1000 miles, but it weathered the manipulations of Benjamin Franklin Yoakum, Collis P. Huntington and Jay Gould to emerge in the 20th Century as one of America's great carriers. You'll see and agree when you read Draper's detailed history in *January Railroad*, on sale December 3, or send 35c to



RAILROAD

MAGAZINE

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But she knew also that if she told the truth Bill would either get a hemp necklace out of the deal or go back east to wear out twenty calendars.

She said, "I killed him, Slim. It was self-defense. He started to—to attack me."

Slim face sagged. His eyes snapped from Bill to the girl. "Now looky here, Buff, you didn't do no such a thing—"

She said, "I killed him, Slim. I killed him, I tell you. I killed him."

"What she means," Bill translated, "is that she killed him. All you guys heard her admit it, and that's evidence in any court of law." He hauled the forty-five out of his under-arm holster and let them look at it. "Would I have used a pea-shooter on the guy when I've got something here that'd blast a tunnel through Coulee Dam? Hell, this is one knock-off I'd gladly take the credit for if I deserved it."

Nobody said anything.

"The guy's name was Silks Yeager," Bill said, "and he was bad. He was one of the worst jobs nature ever turned out. He murdered a bank cashier in Omaha—shot him down in a stickup that didn't net cigarette money. He rubbed out a copper, 'oo."

No one spoke.

"He had a girl-friend named Leah," Bill said. "One night he beat her face out of shape and then left her stranded in a Portland flophouse. She wrote me a letter before she killed herself. She said Yeager was planning to cool off down around here."

He put the gun away. "My name's Bill Costello. I got me an assignment from the bankers' association and I've been hunting this guy ever since—picking fruit, riding boxcars, haunting pool halls. So I find him here, and I was going to take him in tonight. It was just my luck to have a girl muscle in and cop the five thousand dollar reward that's offered for him . . . dead or alive."

Silence.

Buff said huskily, "I can't—I won't—"

Slim was grinning again. I said, "For God's sake, Slim, get the guy out of here! Go telephone that Zane Grey law-dog and surprise him with the kill that comes once in a lifetime. Me, I'm going back and glauam apples."

BILL was sitting on the bottom rung of his ladder wiping the spray off a big Jonathan when Buff moved in on him half an hour later. She said softly, "That was nice of you, Bill. It was sweet. But I—can't take the reward, of course. It's not allowed."

He bit into the Jonathan. "You'll take it and adore it. Five grand isn't much of a reward—not for a girl big enough to play pasty for a poor homeless devil she thought was dodging cops. I'm sorry I had to lie, Buff. I played it that way because I knew how you'd play it."

Buff said stubbornly, "It's your money. I didn't earn it."

"Look," Bill told her. "I'm not a reward chaser, see? I'm not even a full-time dick. . . . That girl Leah—she was a good kid once. Not a tramp, see? But she got a singing job in a night spot, and she met Yeager, and—well, that's how it was . . . Leah was my kid-sister."

Buff said, "Oh."

"So I wouldn't feel right, somehow, about taking cash money for cooling the guy off. . . . Well, that's over now. And I'm not a dick any longer—I'm just an apple-glaumer."

"Then you'll maybe . . . stay until the harvest is over?"

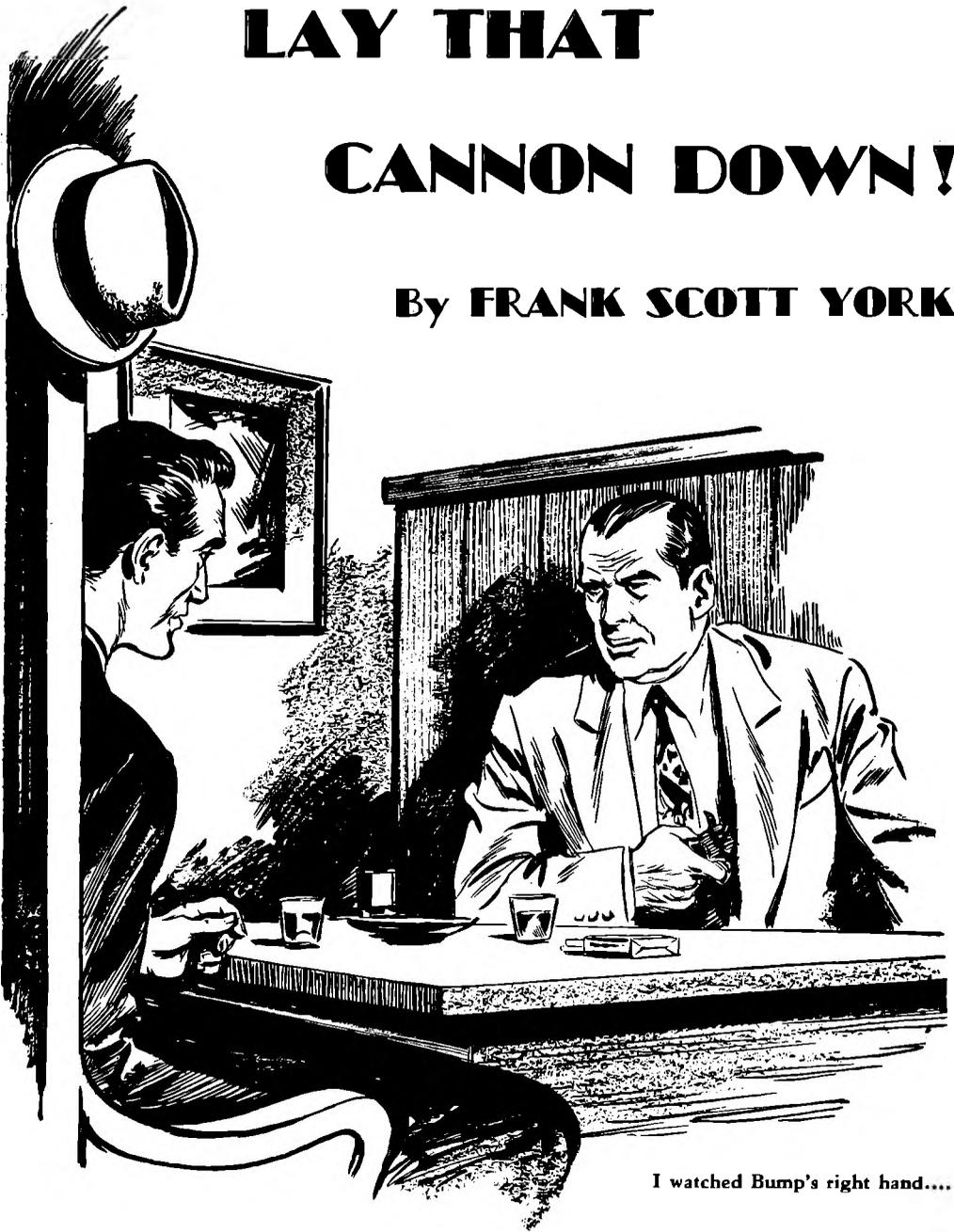
Bill threw away the core. "Sure. Hand me that picking sack, will you?"

Buff gathered up the picking sack and moved toward him. Then she suddenly gave it a good-sized heave and came into Bill's arms as lightly and naturally as if she belonged there. And he guessed she did, at that. ● ● ●

LAY THAT

CANNON DOWN!

By **FRANK SCOTT YORK**



I watched Bump's right hand....

Could even Frenchy's expert spiel charm his old prison pal out of the idea that there was one too many pitchmen in the rubberneck racket?

CALLAHAN looked all right. Except for the fact that he was my parole officer, I might even have liked him. I put on my best choir boy look before I told him how I was behaving.

"I'm doing fine," I said. "Why I'm such

a reformed character my wife doesn't even know me. In fact," I added, "I don't even know myself anymore.

He laughed at that. "You just keep that up," he said, "and we'll get along fine. You know, I'd hate to see you back where you came from."

I nodded vigorously. "Now there's a real coincidence," I said. "Let me tell you, I've those exact same sentiments. In fact, I told the Warden how I felt. Not that I had anything against his hospitality but after six years, I sorta felt like his welcome was wearing out." I leaned over Callahan's desk and looked him straight in the eye. "Don't you worry about me," I added, "From now on, you're the boss."

"I hope you're levelling with me," Callahan said. "Incidentally, has any of the old bunch bothered you, yet?"

"Naw," I snorted, and that was no easy trick for a guy whose beak has been busted four times, "I haven't seen anyone. Anyway, I'm so busy lecturing on that sight-seeing bus, I really don't get much of a chance to see anyone but tourists. But after six years time, I expect most of the boys have either been disqualified or retired by our hard-working law enforcement agencies, or have expired by natural or otherwise causes."

Callahan made some notes in his book, rose and gave me a nice, friendly smile. "Well, that's all, Frenchy," he said. "We'll be watching you. As long as you turn in a good report card, you won't have anything to worry about. But I suggest you get in touch with me right away if any of the boys do contact you. Otherwise you'll be spotted. You know the company you keep means a lot."

I shook his hand. "Now don't you worry," I said. He seemed like a nice boy. "Daytime I'm on the bus. Evenings I'm home with Lil and believe me, it takes a determined man to listen to her seven nights a week.

He laughed. . . .

After telling him this, I leave. The best intentions are in my mind. When I get into the elevator, I am singing. But when I get out into the lobby, the song dies in my throat. In front of me, stands Bump Mancuso. At that moment, I remember I'm thirty-eight years old. The next moment, I doubt I'll see thirty-nine. It is obvious to me by the way Bump is ignoring all the pretty dames that pass him that he is here on business. I have a strong feeling that I am the business.

The last time I had dealings with Bump, we were not on the best of terms. That was seven years back, just before society gave me my lumps for selling stock in an undiscovered but fabulous South African uranium mine. Bump Mancuso was more or less president and head muscle of the organization while I, being better looking and generally more intelligent, was the road man, the guy who spread good will—and peddled the stock. It was a very prosperous arrangement too, until the night in Chicago when I'd approached a wealthy looking party in a nightclub, who had responded beautifully to my pitch. By midnight he'd forked over two thousand in cash, and I'd presented him with an engraved certificate representing five percent in stock. Right then, my left eye started to flicker, a sure sign of trouble. But I ignored it, much to my sorrow. You see, later, after getting me tanked, this guy loosed half the Chicago police force on me. I would pick on an assistant district attorney for a touch.

Bump had to leave the country then. He figured he'd stay away till things cooled down. They didn't cool down much though, for I spilled the whole deal to the cops, and had some time knocked off. I never did much care for Bump and couldn't see peeling State potatoes for ten years while he lay around in the Mexican sunshine and stuffed himself with tamales.

As a matter of fact, since he was still

wanted, I had great hopes he would be eating tamales for the rest of his life, until the moment I spotted him there in the lobby of the Bar Building. He was leaning against a wall and working over his choppers with a toothpick, while scanning the crowds.

Pulling my hat down low over my eyes, I started coughing into my handkerchief and cantered by him. It was no great surprise though, when I felt my arm gripped firmly just above the elbow.

"Well, well," a familiar voice said in my ear. "If it isn't my old and dear pal, Henry French!"

I TURNED with a haughty look of surprise, and tried to bluff my way out. "I beg your pardon, sir," I said. "Evidently you have made a mistake. My name is Peck. Roger Peck. Never seen you before so must dash off now. Meeting an old friend who attended Yale with me."

I tried to pull away, but Bump is a big fellow and he steered me to one side like I was a yo-yo on a short string. "Why, Henry," he purred. "I'm surprised you don't recognize me! I, too, went to Yale with you. Don't you recognize my old frat pin, Buster?"

"O.K., Bump," I said, "leave go of me, now. I can't talk here. It's as safe as a courtroom for both of us."

Bump grinned. "A drink, my old buddy? What a charmin' idea. I know just the joint, around the corner. We can sing all the old school songs and talk over old times."

I was so afraid of being spotted with Bump I didn't put up any argument. It wouldn't have done any good, anyway. His steely fingers stuck to my arm as he half carried me out of the building. We went around the corner and down three steps into one of those joints that smells of stale beer and disinfectant. Bump eased me into a booth and plunked himself down opposite me, after ordering two whiskeys.

"A long, long time, Frenchy," he said, fingering the tablecloth. "I missed you."

"Yeah," I croaked. "But you must have been out of your head leaving Mexico!"

The mean smile got three degrees meaner. "And how did you know where I was?" he asked.

"Hell, Bump, where I was, such information was common knowledge." I smiled as if I loved him. "Besides, I always was one to be interested in my old friends. You remember from the old days what great buddies and chums we was. Why, I wasn't a bit jealous that you was down there enjoying life with the señoritas and stuffing yourself with chile, while I scrubbed mess hall floors and ate slop for six years."

Bump snarled. He could snarl very convincingly. I dabbed at the leakage on my forehead. "Shut up," he said.

It was evident we were no longer old college pals. "I am back for several reasons," he said.

He ticked the reasons off on fat fingers no longer hidden by an assortment of four karate gee-gaws.

"First," he snapped, "after the second year down there, my stomach went on the fritz from all them hot peppers. I've been living on baby food ever since. Second, the sun gave me migraine and I picked up six varieties of jungle rot. Third, one of them señoritas you mentioned conned me out of half my roll, and last, a doctor told me that if I stuck around in that climate for another six months, it was likely my ticker would give out."

I clucked sympathetically. "That's real tough," I said.

Bump ignored me. "Furthermore," he said softly, "I remembered you—how you were due to get out of hock, and how it was your fault that I had to go South in the first place—if you follow me."

"Now wait a minute," I protested. "Figure it this way. You woulda gone to jail if you stayed up here."

"Yeah," he said. "And I'd be a healthy man today." He shrugged. "You see, Frenchy, thanks to you I don't have much to live for so I decided that I would take my chances on coming back. I'll give you a choice—be assassinated by me personal, or team with me again."

I smiled weakly. "Don't think I don't appreciate that offer, Bump," I said. "But I can't make it. The fact is, I'm kinda tied up at present with other commitments. Also, I am no longer interested in unethical rackets. You see Bump—and since you're a gentleman I know you will appreciate this—I have gone straight. I am a new Henry French."

As I spoke, I watched Bump's right hand. At first I thought it was just scratching his chest, but as Bump lifted it toward his tie, and smoothed his collar, I saw the butt-plate of a .45 rod peeking at me from inside his jacket. Then he smiled. "That's too bad, Frenchy," he said. "I mean about the new Henry French. When I blast the old Henry French, it's gonna be kind of inconvenient for him. Get me?"

"I believe I do," I glumly replied.

"Good," he said. "I'm very relieved." He removed his hand from his collar and picked up his drink. "I ain't supposed to touch this stuff," he whispered confidentially, "but this is an occasion. Here's to the payroll of that sightseeing outfit you work for."

My drink went down the wrong way and Bump watched happily as I came within inches of strangling to death. When I looked at him finally, the tears were real. "You're nuts!" I said, "I'm not gonna get mixed up in anything like that! Bumps, pal, I'm on parole. All I gotta do is sneeze at a cop and I'm back scrubbing that mess hall floor! Besides, I keep telling you, I'm trying to go straight."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"That's interesting," Bump muttered.

HE ROSE slowly, looking a little green. I could see the drink hadn't agreed with him and for a moment, I thought maybe his ticker would give out. Hopefully, I threw in two cents more to egg it into quitting. "I can't do it," I said. "And look Bumps, all I gotta do is holler copper and you'll be in retirement."

"The hell you would," he spat. "Just you try and I'll fix you good. I'll give them such a story, you'll think the stretch you just did was a week-end in the country." He reached over and grabbed a handful of my jacket, shirt and skin. "I'll see you tomorrow and you better have some information for me. I want to know when money is there—all the details."

He pushed me back on the seat and I could see the bartender making nervous passes with his bar rag, taking it all in. I could barely hear Bump's final threat.

I watched Bump leave and then held my face in my hands. My shoulders shook like the hips of a belly dancer. When the bartender called over, "Mac, you want I should call the cops?" I got up wearily, and tossed a buck on the table. I said, "Threatenin' me? What you talking about, Jojo? It happens the gentleman is my father and he's a little annoyed I should blow my allowance on a chorus girl."

I know when I'm licked. . . .

Take a bus load of rubbernecks on their first trip through New York and you got a great audience. The theater must be in my blood, cause everytime we start rolling down Broadway, toward lower Manhattan, I feel like John Barrymore on opening night. I got a real cute spiel, and at the end of the tour, it isn't unusual for me to get a nice little round of applause and sometimes, a couple bucks in tips. A lotta people think I've a racket, but what the hell, a tourist wouldn't feel like a tourist unless everybody had a hand in his pocket. It makes them and me feel good.

But the day after running into Bump, I

wasn't feeling so good. When I stepped into the bus, I didn't even bother warming up the audience with patter. I just sank down on my chair and glared sourly at the hayseeds. Because she'd been walking the floor all night, Lil accused me of being in love with another woman—she could never forget how the dolls used to chase me—and that, and the effects of a half quart of rye, had left me in great shape. I kept hearing Callahan's voice and at the same time, saw Bump's paw wrapped around the butt of his forty-five. All in all it didn't make for one of my better nights.

The dispatcher started to wave us off, but then signalled us to hold up a moment. Ziggy, the driver, cursed and opened the door for the late arrival. Some of the customers clucked at the language, but I just ignored it. Ziggy, a bus driver for thirty-five years, has a right to hate people. There's nothing you can do with a guy like that but ignore him. Then a tall, young guy with a grin almost as wide as his shoulders jumps up and pats me on the shoulder. My left eye started twitching like it was wired and I could feel the old prison pallor draining to a bed-sheet white. It was Callahan.

"Well hello, Frenchy," he said. He dropped into the front seat. "I was in the neighborhood on business, and it's such a nice day I thought I'd take you up on that offer to see the town. Lived here all my life but never been to Chinatown."

"Hello, Mr. Callahan," I said. "I hope everything will be alright. But you can't tell this New York weather; it might cloud up and rain and the roof of this heap is fulla holes. Now, maybe you oughta make it some other day. I don't want you to get all sopping wet. You might catch pneumonia."

"Nonsense, Frenchy. Not a cloud in the sky." He looked at me shrewdly. "What the hell's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing, sir. The new Henry French is just considerate, that's all." I

flicked on the hand-mike and started my pitch but for all the sense it made to me, I could have been reading the stuff on a box of soap.

The tour is advertised for two hours but traffic conditions generally stretch it out to three. Bump had said he would see me that day and with my luck, I had a pretty good idea he'd be around before I could get rid of Callahan. The thought was so disturbing that I realized too late I had pointed to the Paramount Theater and called it the New York Times Building. Callahan gave me a funny look, and twisted around in his seat to get a look at the other passengers.

We were into Herald Square before I spotted Bump. I had just explained how Horace Greeley told all the young men to go West while he stayed East and got rich. Bump was standing right under Greeley's statue, watching for the bus. He saw me as we went past and he gestured downtown. I wanted to stick my head out the window and scream no, but I figured Callahan would consider such behaviour kind of unusual and stick through the whole tour; I hoped I'd be able to lose him in Chinatown which shouldn't be too difficult as without even trying I lose an average of six tourists a day down there.

WHEN WE hit Chinatown, I escorted the group to a temple where they could bang gongs for good luck, buy incense sticks and generally carry on like tourists. While they were enjoying themselves, I went up to the tea shop for a saucer of brisk. Maw Lin, its owner, pinched me on the check.

"Frenchy got trouble," she said.

I slurped my tea moodily. "Maw, Frenchy got heap plenty trouble."

Her chunky features expressed concern. "Maw Lin thought so. Man here ten minute ago. Ask when bus come. Ask about you."

I put the cup down shakily. "Big guy? Kind of sick looking?"

She nodded.

"Well, I kind of expected him but thanks."

Maw frowned. "Why you can't stay out of trouble. Polieman?"

"Not yet, but they'll be next."

The old girl made a noise that probably means *ich, ich* in Chinese. I felt a hand on my shoulder and closed my eyes. "O.K., Bump," I said, "Go right ahead and shoot, cause I'm telling you right now you can whistle up a tree before I do any business with you."

"I thought so," Callahan said.

I whirled. "That's a dirty trick! Sneaking up on a guy and pretending to be somebody else!"

Callahan shrugged. "Frenchy, you're a chump. Why didn't you tell me Bump is around?"

"Look, Mr. Callahan, the new Henry French is just as much a coward at heart as the old one. Bump is a desperate character and holds me responsible for everything from his athlete's feet to his bum ticker. If he has any idea that I am talking to the law concerning his whereabouts, it is likely he will shoot first and not even bother to ask questions later. Aside from which, it is my opinion the law is not likely to believe I am as innocent as a bareback baby and will revoke my parole for consorting with a public enemy."

"Ess," Maw Lin agreed, profoundly glaring at Callahan.

"You should have a little more faith in us, Frenchy," he said severely. "But we'll overlook that right now. I know you're clean from what you said when I put my hand on your shoulder and since Maw here witnessed it, you have nothing to worry about, at least from us."

"Which means," I said pointedly, "I got exactly a fifty-fifty chance of coming out of this business. Years ago, I seen Bump

knock out a gnat's eye at fifty feet with his cannon." I hadn't really but I'm never one to underplay a situation.

Callahan rubbed his hands together briskly. "That I'd sure like to see," he said. "Is he supposed to be in touch with you today?"

"Yeah," I said, relating the whole story while Maw Lin's eyes got round as saucers. I knew the whole village would know the story by nightfall. She is the voice of Chinatown.

When I'd finished, Callahan stroked his chin for a moment, while Maw Lin clacked her false teeth appreciatively. I stared gloomily out the window and watched the rubbernecks climb back into the bus. I clutched at Callahan's sleeve, disregarding my necktie's flicking into the teacup. "Look," I groaned. "Right in the first row in the bus."

Bump Mancuso sat there, hat pulled low over his eyes, face turned toward the window. Callahan's voice was tense. "Go out and stall around for a minute," he said. "While I make a phone call."

"Maybe it would be better if I hopped on the subway and went for the police or something," I suggested. "Really, sir, maybe it would be better that way."

"Is this the new Henry French?" Callahan asked.

"I told you," I complained, "the new one is just as big a coward as the old one."

"Ess," Maw Lin said scornfully.

I jammed my hat down angrily. "Ok, Ok. So I'll be a lousy hero. Only remember, the Guides Union isn't going to like the idea of losing a good man, not to mention the loss of any tourists. Business is tough enough without killing off the customers."

"You brave man," Maw Lin smiled proudly.

"Ess," I sighed. . . .

Callahan laughed.

Hopelessly, I watched him go.

AS I entered the bus, Bump gave me a cold grin. "You sure look silly in that hat," he said.

At seeing him, I registered pleased surprise. "Why, Bump, buddy, I been looking all over Mott Street for you!"

He looked at me with a suspicious frown. "How come you're so glad to see me?" His eyes traveled up and down the sidewalk as though Dick Tracy might be hiding behind a lamp post. "You haven't, by chance, been making a phone call, have you, now Frenchy?"

"Of course not!" I bluffed.

He appeared mollified and I was relieved to see him stop scratching his chest. "Just remember what I told you yesterday, Frenchy. Either you play ball with me or your playing days are over." He glared meaningfully. "Never antagonize a guy with ulcers. Especially when he packs a .45."

"I'll remember that," I promised. There was no sign of Callahan yet. I looked at my watch. "Well, another few minutes and away we go. We gotta maintain a schedule, you know."

Bump clenched his fist. "The hell with the schedule, let's get rolling." He leaned forward. "You see, Frenchy, I saved you some work. I found out today is your payday and there's eight G's sittin' back there in the dispatchers office. In about an hour, the men'll start dropping in for their salary but until that time the money sits in an open drawer in the cashier's cage. In fifty minutes, you'll walk in for your envelope and I'll be right behind you. We'll make with the nice friendly chit-chat, so nobody'll get suspicious about my being in the office. Then, when the paymaster brings out the little box, I'll introduce him to my rod. Remember Whitey Dill? I ran into him the other day and being unemployed, he was more than happy to accept my offer to drive the car. He'll be in back of the wheel. Nice, eh?" Bump leaned back against the

cushion, smirking. "It's a great set-up."

Some of the tourists behind Bump were staring at me curiously and I guess I must have been a sight if I looked anything like I felt. The old eye was twitching again and a big hunk of sweat rolled down my nose and dropped down on my shoe. It was a moment for tact and clear thinking but all I could say was, "You're nuts!"

It was a bad few seconds that followed, but for once, Ziggy the driver blew his top at the right time. He slapped his hands down on the wheel and howled, "Whyinhell we sittin' roun' here, eh? We waitin' for the President, maybe?"

Still no Callahan. I groaned and turned to Ziggy. "The schedule, Ziggy, the schedule. You know how the boss raises hell we get ahead of schedule."

Ziggy stared at me like I had lost my marbles. "Schedules! What in hell schedules? Who ever heard of schedule wid this outfit. Schedule he sez! In this pile of junk we're lucky to get back the same week we left."

At that moment, I was afraid to glance at Bump, so I looked up through the glass roof as if I'd just seen a flock of pigeons overhead. Actually, I was waiting to feel the slug go through my belt buckle. If Callahan had taken another few seconds, it probably would have been too late. I let out a long, weak sigh when he hopped up, popped me on the shoulder and bellowed, "Sorry to hold you all up. I just had to get some postcards to send to the folks back home." He eased himself in the seat next to Bump, winked at me and gave Bump a friendly smile. "Hello, friend, I don't remember you from before. Say you look awful sore. I sure hope I'm not the reason 'cause you look like just the type of fellow I like to stay friendly with."

I didn't dare look see if Bump would stop scratching himself, but waved to Ziggy and the old crate sputtered alive and wheezed out into traffic. I started talking

a mile a minute about the Bowery, keeping my eye glued on the streets. As soon as I heard sirens—and knowing coppers, I wouldn't doubt they'd use 'em—I planned on hitting the floor boards and crawling under Ziggy's legs.

Then I noticed the peculiar expression on Ziggy's face like he was sucking on a lemon or something. Further, he was dripping sweat even faster than I was and he wasn't cussing out the hackies like he always does. And I suddenly knew why. A crumb like Ziggy would sell his momma for a sawbuck. Where else would Bump have gotten the information about the payroll! It fitted; because Ziggy was alone in the bus when Bump climbed aboard in Chinatown. I had to fight the urge to whang him over the head with my hand-mike. I glanced at Callahan and he mouthed "Bowery" at me. Bump looked very nervous. I knew he didn't like the smell of things.

I started talking. "Folks," I spied, "we are pulling into the world-famous Bowery where, if anyone is interested, you can get a bed for thirty-five cents, and a bottle of Vino for a quarter. The street of lost souls, the boneyard of old dreams, the garment center of the hobo." We pulled up at a red light. "If you'll notice the sidewalks on both sides of us, you see the human flotsam and jetsam that populates this district. Notice the beat-up clothes, the disheveled appearance of these poor, lost bums."

MAYBE I should have looked first. A woman's voice in the rear piped, "They're the healthiest bums I ever saw." I had a horrible premonition. Sure enough, there was a cluster of plainclothes bulls on both corners and, even as I watched, they ambled off the curbs in pairs, heading for the bus.

I gave Callahan a hurt look. The one corner in New York where a crease in the trousers stands out like a mink coat in Gim-

bels basement. Bump caught on fast. He jumped into the aisle, pulling out the rod. "Driver," he snapped, "roll this crate fast, or I'll shoot your ear off."

Ziggy groaned, banged the gear into second, hunched over the wheel and we leaped across the intersection, narrowly missing an ice truck. A woman shrieked, but the others just stared with their mouths open, probably figuring this was just a little routine we'd worked out to liven up the tour. The bus headed South.

Bump stood facing the rear of the bus, his cannon waving about indelicately. "If anyone makes trouble," he announced, "I will also shoot his ears off." He looked at me, and I could see the glaze of very strong feeling in his eyes. "As for you," he snarled, "I'm gonna let you have it right now."

"Let me know," Ziggy quavered from over the wheel, "when you wanta get out."

Bump glared hard. "Shut up! I'll tell you when. Just keep going and don't stop for anything, even if the engine falls out of this thing."

"Look, Bump," Callahan said easily, "don't you know when you're through? Why don't you put the gun away and sit down. There's a lot of innocent people on this bus."

"So," Bump sneered. "You were the finger, eh? Well, you and Frenchy better hold hands cause you'll be going together."

"Mr. Callahan," I said bitterly, "I hope you're a better parole officer than you are a law enforcement officer. Seems to me you have loused us up good."

"Guess you're right, Frenchy," he answered sadly. "So there's only one alternative." He stood up slowly eyes on Bump. "I'm going to take that popgun away from you, Buster."

Bump backed against the window. "Just keep coming, Copper," he whispered.

Callahan was in the aisle, walking slowly toward him. I watched, frozen stiff. Zig-

gy howled at Bump. "Get offa the wheel will you. I'll run this heap right into the harbor." The bus screeched around a corner as we neared the Battery. I was only a few feet from Bump and I watched his finger whiten around the trigger. "Callahan," I yelled, "don't be a chump. This guy'll kill you." But he kept coming a step at a time, like nothing in this world would stop him.

I don't remember getting the notion, but the thought flashed through my mind that if my parole officer got knocked off, the odds were extremely favorable I would be in sixty kinds of trouble, each worth a year of my time.

PLAYING out about a foot of the mike-wire, and closing my eyes, I arced the mike like a yo-yo, praying it would make connection with some portion of Bump's noggin. I guess I played out a little too much wire for suddenly I heard Ziggy moan. When I opened my eyes, he was laying across the wheel. The bus was careening toward a tavern like a Saturday night drunk and Bump was giving a good imitation of an adagio dancer with the hotfoot. Callahan had taken up new residence on some old doll's lap.

Meanwhile, we banged into the curb and decapitated a fire-plug, the bus crashed its way through the plate glass window of the tavern. I held on to the arm rest of the front seat but Bump went through the windshield, backward. The curb had slowed us down plenty, so, aside from a lot of screaming, no one got any more than a shaking up, except for a dame

in the rear who made it known right off that she wanted her teeth back.

Callahan panted up beside me and we peered cautiously through the shattered windshield, to see whether Bump was still around. It was a reassuring sight. He was sprawled over the hood, looking like some king-size radiator cap. I could even see the bartender down at the end of the bar, staring at us like we was something out of one of his bottles.

Outside, the sirens were howling. Ziggy, still out cold, was draped over his wheel. For once, he looked peaceful. Beside me, Callahan let out a long, uneven breath. "Frenchy," he crowed, "don't ever say again that the new Henry French isn't a brave man."

I collapsed into a seat and looked up at him, fanning myself with the cap. "I guess I'm like that guy Patrick Henry—" "give me liberty or I'd rather be a dead pigeon." I put the mike to my mouth, pushed the switch and was surprised to hear it still worked. "Ladies and Gentlemen," I announced. "Due to mechanical difficulties beyond which I have no control, this here tour is now over and I suggest you grab a subway. We sincerely hope you have enjoyed your visit with us, and remember, if you want to take the *uptown* tour, we offer a special reduced rate. See Fifth Avenue, Millionaires row, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Harlem, Central Park and so on. So those that would like to continue on, let me know as you leave the bus and I'll see that you get choice seats."

You know, I must be losing my touch. I didn't have one taker. ● ● ●

HUH?

Testifying in court, Southend, England, doctor declared: "He had bilateral peribital hematoma and left subjunctival hemorrhage." Pleaded the lawyer: "Won't you please translate that for us ordinary mortals." Replied the doctor: "Two black eyes."



When the cops barged in, I was standing with a smoking gun in my fist.

THE freight slowed in the yard. As I jumped, the switch engine buckled the line of cars. It threw me off balance and I went to one knee in the cinders. The gun in my pocket banged my ribs.

Look, pal, I told myself. That rod's so hot it sizzles. Better get rid of it.

Instead, I headed up a steep gravel bank toward town. A sign informed me I was in Carlinville.

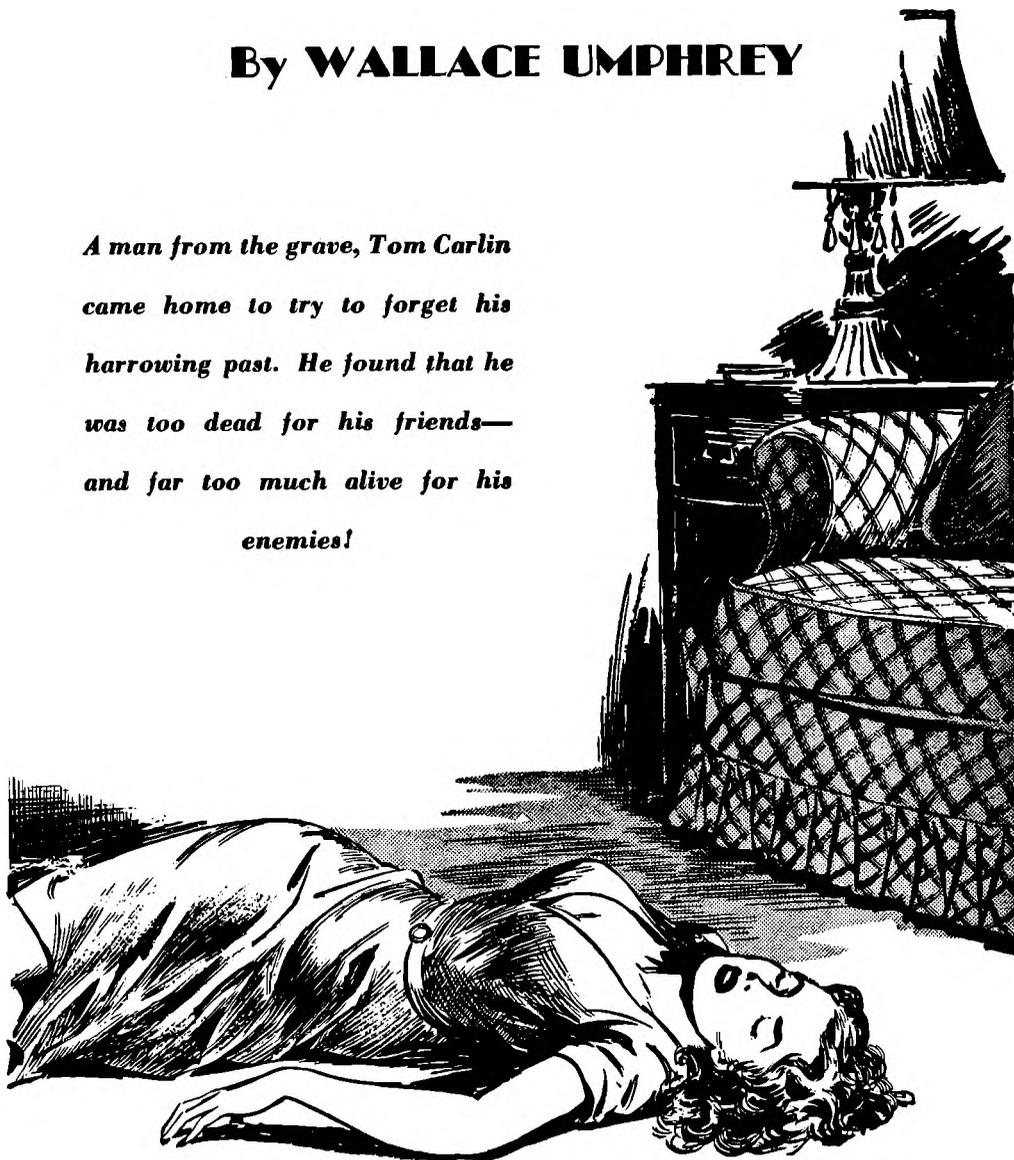
From the top of the bluff, I could see the big Carlin Lumber Company mill. Freshly cut lumber was neatly stacked.

KILLER, COME

HOME!

By **WALLACE UMPHREY**

*A man from the grave, Tom Carlin
came home to try to forget his
harrowing past. He found that he
was too dead for his friends—
and far too much alive for his
enemies!*



Steam and noise came from the mill. Beyond was Hanford's Slough, with giant fir logs floating in it. And above, was the old First Street bridge where I'd gone diving as a kid.

At the first filling station, I went into the rest room. I washed and then dried on a roller towel. Then I stared at myself in the mirror.

A thin, pale, deeply-lined face. Sunken blue eyes. Mousy blond hair—what was left of it. The face of a man of forty.

Leaving the filling station, I hiked toward the center of town. Since I'd seen it last, it had grown and spread out. In my pocket was eighty-six dollars. My suit was old and clean. I didn't want to get vaggged for being a bum. Not here in Carlinville.

Mill Street was wide and clean. A poster in a window bore the picture of a darkly handsome man. Underneath the smiling face were the words: *Vote For John Clement For Mayor.*

Walking along the street, I felt like a watch that had been wound too tightly. I didn't expect to be recognized—but you never could tell.

I stopped in front of the Carlin Building. It looked about the same, just a little older with the passing years. A clock across the street informed me that the time was just noon.

Office help came streaming out. Girls in thin dresses brushed past me, and I felt the tug of memory. I stood there letting the past and the present curve through and around me. It wasn't pleasant—the dredging up of the past.

Then I saw Pete Martin standing in the doorway, looking at a watch on his wrist. He hadn't changed much. He was big and blond, with the amiable features of a St. Bernard. He had football shoulders, a tapered waist, and he still wore his hair in a crisp crew cut. He was thirty, but he didn't look it.

I was twenty-nine.

He looked up suddenly. His gaze went through me and then away. That was that. I wouldn't be recognized.

Farther along the street, was a sign on a window: *Pastime Tavern.* And below it, in smaller letters: *Pool & Billiards.* The window was painted green up to about eye level. Above the paint the glass was greasy and fly-specked.

Only two men were inside. One of them, a paunchy, graying man, was sitting loosely in a chair with his hat tipped over his face to shade his eyes. A big blue fly buzzed around his head.

The other man was playing a solitary game of snooker. He wore a green eyeshade and the sleeves of his silk shirt were rolled up above his elbows. He made a shot and then walked around the table. He walked with a jerky motion, like a man with an artificial leg.

I SAT down at the bar. A soggy copy of the *Carlinville Free Press* lay in front of me. I stared down at the front page and a sort of empty feeling twisted in my stomach and I got the shakes.

Amos Carlin, owner of the mill and son of the founding father of the town, had donated a park to Carlinville in honor of his dead son.

"Beer," I bawled out.

The man wearing the green eyeshade was the barman. He racked his cue and rolled around the end of the bar. His walk reminded me of something. He drew a beer and slid the glass toward me.

I downed half the contents in a gulp. Some of my shakes went away.

"This Carlin guy," I said. "A big shot."

The barman picked up a rag. "About six million big."

"What happened to the son?"

"Died in the wreckage of a B-17 over Germany."

I finished my beer. "No living relatives?"

"Wife died at childbirth. Only a nephew. Young guy named Pete Martin. He's been working up in the business."

"This Pete Martin," I said. "He'll do all right."

The barman nodded. "Old man's got a bum ticker. He's been sick in bed for quite a spell. Pete Martin will do about six million all right."

"A stinker?"

"Hell, no! Pete's a nice guy. No fancy ideas."

"You know something?" I felt as if I were walking over a case of eggs. "I'll bet the son isn't really dead."

The barman stared at me, all friendliness gone. With an angry gesture, he slapped down the bar rag. He moved away, his artificial leg hitting the floor hard. Then he turned back.

"Pal," he said. "I wouldn't push that idea no further."

The front legs of a chair hit the floor. The paunchy man let out a yawn. Above his head the blue fly buzzed. Then he walked toward me. His tread was light and easy for a fat man.

"What's your business in town?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "Just passing through."

He had muddy brown eyes, with blood-shot whites. His voice was very weary. "You should've just kept on passing through. Kind of." He pulled a badge from his pocket. "Cop. They call me Dutch Henning. I didn't catch your name the first time around."

"Tom Jones."

"Identification?"

"No."

"That's kind of too bad." He put away his badge. "Well, hell, we don't want trouble, do we? Let's you and me kind of mosey down to the station."

The police station was a low brick building. There was a long counter with a swinging gate, behind it some desks. Off

to the side, were a couple of small offices. In the main office a man was sitting behind a PBX board.

We went into one of the small offices. A tall black-haired man wearing glasses looked up from a desk.

"Picked up this guy down at Larry's," Dutch Henning said. "Hell, Chief! He's got the idea Carlin's son ain't dead."

The Chief looked impressed. "Search him."

Henning looked, and found my billfold, eighty-six dollars, and a gun.

The chief frowned. "Name?" he asked.

"Tom Jones," I said.

"There's no identification," Dutch said, "and with this much dough, we can't vag him."

He dropped my gun on the desk top and the chief gingerly put it away in a drawer. They exchanged glances. After the Chief removed his glasses, the three of us went through a door at the back.

In my bones, I knew I'd talked too much. I was in a jam. That gun could fry me.

A short corridor ran between rows of cells. The cells were empty except for a couple of snoring drunks. There was another door at the far end of the corridor. It looked thick and sound-proof.

DUTCH HENNING switched on an overhead light. The room was small and dusty and empty. Dutch picked up a doeskin glove and began to worry his right hand into it. The glove was skin-tight.

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

The chief's myopic eyes were startled. "He says we can't get away with it."

"I guess we can't," Dutch said.

"No," the Chief said.

Dutch said, "I'll be damned."

The Chief grasped my arms and pulled them behind my back. He pushed them high enough behind me so that my shoulders hurt. I was held rigid. Dutch planted himself in front of me. The sweat shone

on his forehead. "What was your name?" he asked.

"Tom Jones."

Dutch Henning hit me. His gloved fist landed just below the ribs, a little toward the back, over the kidney. Pain came like a red curtain.

"What was the name?" the chief asked.

I told him again. Tom Jones.

"Why in hell," Dutch said to me, "did you make that crack? How come you think Carlin's son ain't dead?"

"Just talk," I said.

"You talk too much," the chief said.

Dutch Henning hit me again and the red haze went away and I began sliding down a long dark tunnel. I slid swiftly and smoothly and there was no end.

I dragged myself into the first hotel I came to. It was all I could do to scribble my name in the register. The clerk gave me a hand to my room.

The chief had handed me back my bill-fold and money but not the gun. They hadn't worked me over again. I'd only been out a couple of minutes.

"We can't hold you," Dutch Henning had said, helping me out of the rear-door of the police station. "Better leave town. And no hard feelings."

I fell into bed. . . .

The dream wasn't pretty. It was about a young guy who left Carlinville eleven years before. This guy didn't get along with his old man. The old man's name was Amos Carlin.

This young guy could have used a psychiatrist. He didn't get along with anybody.

I was Tom Carlin.

I'd always got into one scrape after another. Finally my old man blew his top and handed me an ultimatum to get out of town and stay out until I learned how to behave. I got a monthly allowance to stay away.

The arrangement was fine with me. I lived high wide and handsome. I met a lot of

people. Deacon Clarke. Nice people—mobsters and cut-throats. And I met Francie.

She was a smooth red-head with a thin veneer of culture and the ethics of an alley cat. One night we got married; I never knew how it happened, and it didn't work out. We were always fighting. I was jealous. Half the time, I didn't know what was going on.

"Francie's stepping out on you," Deacon Clarke had told me.

I'd shrugged. "Lend me your gun, Deacon," I said.

He'd nodded. "Sure. Sure, Tom. Scare hell out of her," he'd said.

The dream was worse. The young guy was standing in a room, a smoking gun in his fist. Staring down at a red-head named Francie.

Cops barged in. They laughed—ha, ha. It was funny how this guy had shot his wife. Everything was crazy. She'd taunted him and he'd let her have it.

The cops stopped laughing when Deacon Clarke came up behind swinging a sap. He helped get this guy to another city. He was the only one who knew where this guy was hiding out. He'd pick up this guy's mail and get him to sign his monthly allowance check and leave him a little money.

One day he showed this guy a newspaper clipping. Francie had died. The cops were still looking.

This guy was me.

Days went past and I stayed hidden. Then I got sick. When I awoke, I was in a hospital. I never saw Deacon Clarke again.

They didn't know my real name. My landlady had called a doctor, and they were using the name my landlady gave them. Tom Jones. I was moved to a T. B. sanatorium. For five years, I was flat on my back.

Then I began to mend. One lung was gone, the other patched up. They let me

out of bed and gave me the job running the X-ray in the sanatorium.

T. B. had aged my face. X-ray made me partially bald.

Four years later I was released. Twenty-nine years old and looking forty. The world had gone to war, sought peace, gone to war again. I was Tom Jones. Tom Carlin had disappeared.

And I wanted to go home. In nine years you can do a lot of thinking. Everything was worked out in my mind. And more than anything else I wanted to see my old man. Just to talk to him. Just to tell him I was sorry. Just to tell him now my mind was clear.

I'd seen a story in the *Free Press* that got me. It said that I hadn't just disappeared. I'd died a hero in the flaming wreckage of a bomber. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Fatal Memories

WHEN I awoke, it was dark outside my window. I'd slept about four hours and I didn't feel rested. My stomach hurt and it felt empty. I'd been warned to leave town but I was going to see my old man first. Nobody would recognize me. It would take the cops a while to check the gun. I'd see my old man and then blow town tonight. I ate dinner and then walked up the hill back of town.

The Carlin mansion was on the crest with a fine view of the whole valley. It was the place where I'd been born and my old old man before me. I took a deep breath. Nostalgia? Maybe

A high wall and an iron gate, standing open, and a winding driveway up to a *porte-cochere* where white pillars marched along the front. Through the oval glass of the front door I could see a light somewhere at the back.

I rang the bell, hoping one of the ancient servants would answer and would believe

me. Hoping he'd take me to the old man without yelling for the cops.

I knew my old man would never bring down the law on me. He was a rugged individualist. I'd tell him I was sorry. I'd tell him I'd finally learned what life was about. He'd understand. And he'd be glad to know I saw things his way now.

Someone come down the broad curving stairway. A girl, her face in the shadows, opened the door. She was somebody new.

"Where's everybody?" I asked.

"There's just me," she said. "I'm Anne Gregory. A nurse."

"Where's Pete Martin?" I asked.

"Out," she said.

I took a chance. "I'm Tom Carlin," I said.

She gasped. "No. You can't be."

"I'd like to see my father," I said.

"He's very sick," she said.

"Tell him Tom's come home. He'll see me," I said.

She didn't believe me but she mounted the stairs. I stepped into the hall to wait. Everything was suddenly familiar. Shadows of the past were all around me; I didn't like it.

The nurse called me from the upstairs hall. In the dim light, I couldn't see her very well. I followed her along the hall. A bedroom door was ajar and I went through and then shut the door behind me.

The old man was lying in a big old-fashioned four poster bed. He looked lost and alone in it. Only his eyes moved.

"It's Tom," I told him. "I've learned how to behave."

He lifted his head. "Tom? By heaven! It's you. . . . Come over here and let me have a look. Here, help me sit up."

His voice was weak. I put a pillow behind his back and helped him slide up. He was weak all over. His face was pinched and gray and only his eyes looked alive.

"Thought you'd come home someday," he said. "And then I gave up hope. Put

a private detective on your trail once. Somebody else was getting your mail. Gave my detective the slip. Looked like your endorsement on the checks, but I didn't know. Quit sending the monthly allowance, hoping you'd write. You never did. Decided you were dead. . . . You look terrible, Tom."

"Tom Carlin died in a bomber crash," I said.

The old man made a face. "Pride. I gave the story to the paper. Didn't want the town laughing behind my back." He laughed weakly. "I showed 'em. Tell me about yourself."

I told him. Everything. He listened quietly, eyes closed.

"Tom, Tom," he said afterwards. "You learned the hard way. We'll make up for it, eh? You lie low for a while. I'll take care of you. We'll buy the law off."

"It was too late. Sometimes the pieces get so mixed up you can't put them together again. "Sure," I said.

"Don't be bitter, Tom. . . . This Francie, you sure she died?"

"I saw the clipping," I said.

He added. "Why'd you hang onto the gun?"

I told him. A symbol, to remind me how stupid a man could get. The gun was my hair shirt. The cross I had to bear.

"It wasn't smart, Tom. Keeping the gun. But I understand." A little color had come into his face. "You're cured now?"

I nodded. "How's Pete?"

"Fine. Fine boy. Capable. Knows the business backward and forward."

"You love him."

"I lost my own son," the old man said quietly.

"I understand," I told him. "How's everything going?"

He flushed. "They're trying to take the town away from me, Tom. It's happening under my nose. Pete's putting up a fight

but maybe it won't be enough. When I get well, I'll run John Clement out of town." He was fighting for breath.

"Take it easy," I said. "You'd better rest."

"Don't tell me to take it easy," he roared.

It sounded like the old man used to talk. I started to grin. And then I saw the scarlet ebb from his face and he toppled over. I knew he was dead even before I took his wrist to make sure.

THERE was nothing I could do. If I'd had tears left in me I'd have used them then but there was some consolation. I'd got to talk to him before he died.

The door in the next room was open. I heard the nurse stirring in side. I didn't look at her. "He's asleep now," I called out. "I'll let myself out."

I went down the curved stairway and out of the front door. Nothing would be gained by my staying. I'd get out of town. That's the way my old man would have wanted it.

A headlight beam swept up the driveway. I dove into the bushes and the car went past, stopping beside the porte-cochere. A man got out. I knew it was Pete Martin.

I headed down the hill toward town. About half way down a car passed me and the red light winked out of sight.

When I got back to the hotel I was all in. I'd misjudged my strength, or maybe it was just the reaction. I'd have to take a chance and wait until morning to clear out of Carlinville.

I ran a tub of hot water and fell in. It felt wonderful. After awhile I examined my mid-section. There were only a couple of faint pink bruises over the kidneys. Dutch Henning knew his business.

It was hard keeping my eyes open. I pulled myself out of the tub, towelled and fell into bed. I didn't even bother running the water out of the tub. . . .

Sun was shining in the window when I

awoke. My stomach was so stiff, it began to scream. But I felt hungry and rested. That was a good sign.

I let my eyes drift open. A man was sitting on a chair close to the bed watching me.

My sleep must've been that of the dead. I hadn't heard him come in. He was sitting with his knees together, a gray felt hat balanced on them. He was dressed in a dark blue double-breasted pin-stripe business suit. He had dark hair, a tanned face, a dark trimmed mustache.

"Awake?" he said.

His voice was soft, and deep and dangerous.

"Who are you?" I asked him.

"That's not the point. Who are you?"

I remembered where I'd seen him before. On a poster in a shop window. "Vote for John Clement for Mayor," I said.

He nodded. "And you're Tom Carlin."

"No." I closed my eyes. Nobody knew my identity except nurse Anne Gregory. When I opened my eyes again he was still sitting there. "No. I'm Tom Jones."

He shrugged. "The police told me."

"The cops don't know."

Again he shrugged. My pants were lying in a heap on the floor where I'd left them. I reached down and worried a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket. My belt was gone.

"I'm a candidate for mayor," John Clement said. "A Carlin has always pulled the political strings in this town. Pete Martin isn't a Carlin—but he's got Carlin blood. He wants to run the town the way your old man always did. He's opposing me. I want you to change his mind for him."

"The old man," I said carefully. "He's against you too."

"The old man died last night." John Clement smiled. "You were there."

I began to sweat a little. "What you mean is this. You want me to let Pete know I'm alive and kicking. I could stand

in the way of his inheritance. He'll do whatever I suggest if I agree to remain under cover."

"Exactly."

"What's to prevent me from taking over?"

He was still smiling. "Only one thing. You don't dare to let the police know who you are."

So he knew that too. He knew everything.

"No," I said. "I'm getting out of town today."

"I don't think so. By the way, there's some talk that your father died of some slow poison."

SWEAT was cold on my face. John Clement stood up and put his hat at a jaunty angle on his head. He turned at the door. He said amiably, "Think it over and let me know later."

I lay there in the bed a while longer. Everything had fallen apart. I'd been so secure in the knowledge that I wouldn't be recognized.

One thing was certain. John Clement would keep his mouth shut until I saw him again.

Nurse Anne Gregory knew my identity because I'd had to tell her. The cops had learned about me from the gun. What would Pete Martin do if I should suddenly confront him?

It would be a joke—a six million dollar joke.

But the joke would be on me.

I piled out of bed and went into the bathroom. The water was still in the tub. And so was my missing belt.

It was around the neck of a small, dark girl.

Emotions are hard to describe. I leaned in the doorway, my mind blank. I didn't feel anything right right away. I just stood there in the doorway staring down at the dead body of a girl I'd never seen before.

She was wearing a blue dress, nylons, high-heeled slippers and glasses. My belt was around her white throat. None of this was important, really. What mattered was that she was dead.

The water was stained blue. Her eyes were wide open, staring behind the lenses of her glasses. I got the impression that she was staring at me.

I got dressed in the other room.

I still needed my belt. That was bad. I needed the belt and I couldn't leave it around the dead girl's neck. Unbuckling it was a pretty tough thing to go through. Around the dead girl's throat covered by the belt was a fine white line. It looked as if she'd been garroted by a piece of twine.

My room looked out on a back court. Two floors below was a cement areaway looking out on a back alley.

A knock came on the door. A feminine voice called out that it was room service. I closed the bathroom door and began running water in the washbowl. I yelled, "Come in. I'm taking a bath!" I could hear the maid stirring around in the next room. I kept the water running and tried not to look at the dead girl.

Somebody had sneaked her into my room while I was asleep. John Clement? I didn't know. But if somebody could sneak her into the hotel without being seen—maybe I could sneak her out.

Maybe I could still have made a getaway. But John Clement had said casually, "*There's some talk that your father really died of some slow poison. . . .*" I wasn't going to run away now. I was going to stay and find out.

It surprised me that Dutch Henning hadn't been around to pick me up. The cops knew I was a murderer.

After a while, the maid left. My heart was pounding. I let the water gurgle out of the tub, but I didn't try removing the body. That would take some planning.

I locked the door when I went out. The

muscles of my stomach felt cramped—only partly from my beating. I forced some food down. Then I strolled out to the edge of town, where the pawn shops and second-hand stores did business. I felt the need of a gun, even though my only previous experiences with firearms had been all bad.

But I couldn't get one.

I finally bought a second-hand hat and a hundred feet of clothesline rope. There was a tiny feather in the band of the hat. It lifted my morale. Not much. But a little. I went to the Pastime Tavern.

IT LOOKED about the same as the day before, except that the man in the green eyeshade had a partner at the snooker table. Dutch Henning was sitting loosely in a chair down at the end of the line, his hat tipped over his eyes. The only thing missing was the fly buzzing around his head.

I slid into a chair beside him. He tilted up his hat and shrugged his paunchy body upright. His muddy eyes were still blood-shot.

"You feel okay today?" he asked me.

"Guess."

"Yeah." He coughed apologetically. "We had to do it. You shooting off your face like that. We had to try to find out."

"Old man Carlin," I said carefully. "He died last night."

Dutch nodded. Too bad. Died in his sleep."

"Anybody there?"

"Only the nurse."

I lit a cigarette. Through the smoke I stared at Dutch Henning. He was looking down at his hands. John Clement had known I was there, but Dutch didn't. Otherwise, he'd have said so.

He lifted his eyes. "You're Tom Carlin."

My hand remained steady. I was getting used to having my identity learned. Clement had said that the cops had told him.

"We took your prints yesterday," Dutch

said. "The chief had 'em in a special file. Years ago you were printed. Your old man softened the chief. He kept the prints, though."

"You going to arrest me?"

Henning laughed. "Hell, no! What for? It's no crime in Carlinville to be old man Carlin's son."

"Who else knows about it?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Nobody. I'm not free with information." He grinned faintly. "I don't know why you came home hiding your identity. Maybe that's your business. It ain't mine—yet. For a while we'll go on saying Tom Carlin died in a bomber crash."

I saw he hadn't found out about Francie yet, and that meant I still had a little time. Not much. Time was running out.

"You didn't tell anybody I'm Tom Carlin," I said. "Only John Clement."

Him!" The legs of Dutch Henning's chair hit the floor hard. "I'd tell him nothin'."

I put out my cigarette. "There's talk that my father was murdered."

"Come again?"

"A slow poison."

Dutch Henning spoke deliberately. "Hadn't heard it. Your old man was a good guy. A lot of folks didn't like him because he happened to have a lot of dough."

"You knew him?" I asked.

He shook his head. Your old man probably didn't even know my name. But if he was murdered, I'd like to know about it." Under my gaze the back of his neck got red. "Okay, there's another reason! I'm kind of ambitious. I'd like the credit for cracking a murder." He looked up quickly. "That part about my admiring him—that part's kind of straight too." He tilted his hat over his eyes. "Drop around at the station about six tonight. I'll let you know if I've found anything out."

He looked like a fine example of ambition.

The man in the green eyeshade was still at the snooker table. He walked around

the table with his odd rolling gait. And I realized what seemed familiar about it. One of the cops who'd found me standing over Francie's body with a smoking gun in my hand had walked the same way.

CHAPTER THREE

Slated For A Rub-Out

A LITTLE before six, I headed for the police station. I hadn't been back to my hotel room all day. The body of the dead girl was in my bathtub, and I didn't want to look at her again until I had to.

I couldn't make up my mind about Dutch Henning. Was he on my side? He seemed to dislike John Clement, but that could be just a gag to throw me off.

He was waiting for me when I reached the station. "Come on in the chief's office," he told me. "Park the body."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"So you couldn't buy a gun," he said, slumping into a chair. "My, my! What's this town coming to? A stranger can't buy a gun no more without a permit."

I stared at him. He got around after all. He reached down, pulled open a drawer of the desk and got out my gun. Then he dropped it on the desk between us. I didn't touch it. He nodded and laid a permit beside it.

"It's kind of funny," he said softly, so the man at the PBX board in the main office couldn't hear. "You come back to town after an absence of eleven years. You come back the day your old man dies."

"Coincidence."

"Maybe. I'll even go that far with you. But look," he sat forward, "you blow into town like a bum. You don't announce yourself. You claim your name is Tom Jones." He sat back, putting his hands behind his graying head. "It don't make sense. You can claim six million dollars by opening your yap. That's a lot of money. Or maybe

you don't like money. Maybe that's it."

"I like it," I said. "I like it just as much as the next guy. But maybe I was left out of the will."

"You could break it. Your old man thought you were dead. The court would take that into account."

"You're not a bad egg, Dutch—even if you did beat me up."

He grinned faintly. "I like you too."

So I told him. I didn't hide any of it. I told him all that had happened to me until I hit Carlinville yesterday. I didn't try to whitewash myself. I told him the whole story.

And it was funny, but I felt a whole lot better afterwards. I'd carried the guilt too long. Telling somebody about it made me feel a lot better.

Dutch Henning had listened attentively, but now, was silent.

I held out my wrists. "Slip on the cuffs," I said.

He shook his head. "Tom, we've got a job to do. You won't haul freight before it's over, will you?"

"I'm sticking around," I said. "I've got to find out if my old man was murdered."

"I figured so." Dutch was watching me shrewdly. "I'm not crazy. But you must be—almost." He examined a spot on the wall a foot above my head. "Tom, you ain't wanted. You've never been wanted for murder. I don't get it, but it's true. If you were ever wanted for murder, we'd have got a flimsy on it. We never did."

I opened my mouth, staring at him

He poked delicately at my gun with one finger. "This the gun you killed her with?"

My vocal chords seemed paralyzed. I nodded.

"You ever examine it, Tom?"

"No."

He asked, "How does it feel?"

How does it feel to find out suddenly you aren't wanted for murder? I couldn't tell. I was all mixed up. Here was no feeling of relief—not right then. First I'd have to

understand just how it had all happened.

All I felt at the moment was that I'd been cheated out of more than ten years of living. For, all that time, I'd had the shadow of murder hanging over my head. Maybe I was crazy mad. It wasn't rational thinking. T. B. would have robbed me, anyway, of nine years. But it was still different.

Again, Dutch Henning delicately touched the gun. "Tom, it was loaded with blanks," he said.

I snatched up the automatic and started fumbling with the clip.

"It's loaded with real bullets now," he said. "Tom, you were framed. Somehow. Don't ask me why. Maybe Francie wanted most of your monthly allowance check without having you around underfoot. Maybe it had been Francie and Deacon Clarke all the time—"

"But the newspaper clipping!"

"You didn't see the paper—only the clipping. That could have been run off on a small job press."

I tried to remember. Francie lying on the floor. The smoking gun in my hand. The cops laughing. Deacon Clarke swinging a sap. Everything was all mixed up. Then it came to me: *I hadn't seen any blood.*

MY BONES chilled. Francie and Deacon Clarke had known I was insanely jealous. They knew Francie could goad me into shooting. My mind roved. I remembered how she had fallen when I'd pulled the trigger and saw the cops barging in. Then I knew. *They hadn't been real cops.* The cops didn't hire a man with a bum leg.

"All that," I said, feeling cold inside. "All that for my monthly check."

"Maybe," Dutch Henning said carefully. "It was a neat frame. And maybe it went further. Who would gain the most by having you disappear?"

There was ice in my stomach now. I whispered, "Pete. Pete Martin."

"It's an angle, Tom."

"Why didn't he just have me killed?"

"Too much fuss. Too much bother. Murder's always dangerous. This way would be safer." He held up a hand. "I'm not saying he planned it. I'm thinking out loud." He shrugged. "Let's go have dinner."

I didn't know what we ate. I was stunned. I sat there thinking how real the frame had been.

"There's got to be an autopsy," I said suddenly. "If my old man was poisoned—everything will fit."

Dutch looked pained. "It ain't that easy. Authority will have to come from Pete Martin. Or you'll have to step forward."

"I can't," I said. "Not yet. Not till after we find out for sure."

"The funeral's tomorrow," Henning said.

I grasped his arm. "You've got to make sure there's an autopsy," I said.

He shook his head. "I can't do it, Tom. Even if it should prove out murder, it'd still be my job. I can't fake authority. The coroner wouldn't believe it."

"You can swing it," I said, "what's stopping you."

Henning looked sick. "Twenty years on the Carlinville cops. Before long I'll have a pension." His eyes, muddy and blood-shot, were pleading. "Tom, I can't—" Then he grinned tightly. "Okay, I'll give it a try."

We parted. It was getting dark now. I headed toward the hotel, still carrying the sack of rope under my arm.

About a block from the hotel, I watched a man jockey a small half-ton truck into a parking place at the curb. He climbed out and went up the street. I looked into the cab. He'd taken the keys with him.

I walked slowly along the street, past my hotel. In the next block, was a small, dilapidated pick-up truck. I leaned inside. The keys were in the ignition.

The truck was parked in front of a lunch

room. Men were eating inside. A man in overalls and a leather coat was eating a bowl of soup. Maybe he owned the truck. The radiator of the truck was warm. I had maybe half an hour.

I started the engine and drove around to the alley back of the hotel. It was easy—so far. But I was sweating.

Leaving the truck in the cement areaway, I hurried up to my room. Nobody paid any attention to me. That meant the dead girl hadn't been found.

The next part was pretty tough. I tugged the body out of the tub, dragged it to the window in the other room. Sharp heels made furrows in the rug. I looped one end of my rope around the dead girl's chest, under her arms, and tied the loop securely. Then I opened the window and balanced her body on the sill. Getting a firm grip on the rope, I pushed her out and lowered her slowly to the ground.

It wasn't easy. Here was a girl I didn't know. A girl I'd met first in death. Had she been afraid to die? Yes. Everybody's afraid to die. Or maybe it'd been so sudden she never had a chance to know what had happened.

Why had she been killed? Maybe because she knew too much about something. Why had she been planted in my room? Maybe to get rid of the body and make me look like a killer.

The rope slacked off when she folded on the ground. I tossed the rope out after her. Then I went downstairs, out to the street, back around to the alley. I tried to breathe normally. I tried to walk normally. I tried—

And nobody gave me a second glance.

It took only a minute to load the body into the pick-up truck. There was a tarp in back. I covered the body. I didn't bother to untie the rope.

I drove out to the old First Street bridge over Hanford's Slough. It was seldom used any more, its plank decking rough and worn. A new bridge farther along took the traffic

now. The bridge was a relic of the past.

I stopped the truck in the middle of the bridge. Light from street lamps at either end of the bridge was a dismal failure. The evening air was cool, the darkness a secret and fearful thing. From below came the chirping of crickets, the sound of frogs.

Now to finish the job. First I untied the rope. Then I unloaded the dead girl and carried her to the rail. Up and over. I was sweating. Uhh-uhh-uhh! It was done. I stood tense, waiting. It took a lifetime for the splash to reach my ears.

I climbed into the truck, turned it around, drove back and parked it where I had found it. I left the rope under the tarp at the back. The man in the leather jacket was just finishing a wedge of pie.

"Pal," I told myself, "you've done it. Weep no more for me!"

I walked back to my hotel, breathing as hard as if I'd run a mile.

There was a message for me. A girl had called. She'd call again. A cup of coffee helped put my heart back down my throat. Another cup put it back in my chest. I sat down in the lobby to wait. Then the desk clerk signalled me.

"Tom—Jones?" The voice over the wire was soft, muted. "Is this Tom Jones?"

"Speaking," I said.

"I want to see you," the voice said. "I'm at the Marlowe Arms. It's—"

"I know where it is. What do you want?"

"I can't say over the phone. It's about the death of your father."

"Who is this?" I snapped.

"Anne Gregory."

"I'll be there right away."

HER apartment was in a new three-story brick building a block off Mill Street. A car was parked in front of the entrance, its engine purring. I started to swing past and then the voice that had talked to me over the telephone cut out of the darkness.

"Here, Mr. Carlin. I'm Anne Gregory."

Warily I approached. The door was snapped open and a shadow leaned out. The muted voice again. "Get in." I stood still. "Don't ask questions now. My apartment is being watched. Get in!"

I piled into the seat and the coupe shot away from the curb. She drove expertly, but not too fast. Not fast enough to make anybody suspicious.

She was an indistinct figure behind the wheel. The dashlight was burned out, and I only caught brief glimpses of her when we passed a street lamp.

She seemed to have the right number of hands and feet. She wore glasses, and her dark hair was long, brushing her shoulders. A silly hat was crushed down over it. Her perfume was elusive—sandalwood.

That brought back memories. Francie. . . . Francie had always liked sandalwood.

"We're both in danger," Anne Gregory said, without turning from the wheel. "My apartment is being watched night and day. I'm afraid."

I looked through the back window. "Headlights behind. A little more gas." The coupe lurched ahead. Swing right at the next corner. Then slow down."

She obeyed. The headlights of the car behind swung in a wide arc.

"We're being followed," I said.

"I told you. Maybe you'd better drive."

She took her foot off the gas pedal. The engine began to cough under compression. We switched places. I drove to the end of the block, turned right again and headed into the traffic along Mill Street.

"Maybe you're in danger," I said. "I'm not."

"Call me Anne."

"Why is somebody after you?"

"I was Amos Carlin's nurse," she whispered. "I know that he was—poisoned."

There was a slight grade ahead, a curve at the top. A big diesel semi-trailer thundered ahead. It hit the hill and shifted into a compound gear. I swung out around it.

A string of three cars came down the hill. The car following us couldn't pass.

At the first side road, I swung left and gave the coupe its head. It really galloped. I dodged behind a row of frame houses, down an alley, then headed back toward town along a road that paralleled Mill Street. The car behind was gone now. It had been almost too easy.

"You lost them," Anne Gregory said.

"A cinch," I said. "Can you prove my father was murdered?"

She hesitated. "I'm not sure of the proof. I saw it going on but I wasn't sure. I'm sure now."

"An autopsy will tell."

"Pete Martin won't allow—"

"There'll be an autopsy anyway." For a moment I drove in silence. "Who's the killer?"

She had an answer. "Pete Martin," she said. "He's the only one to gain."

BACK of my neck I felt wet. Dutch Henning and I had talked about it before. It seemed worse now, coming from nurse Anne Gregory. Conjecture had become a fact. I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "You didn't tell the cops about me, did you?"

"Of course not," she said. "Mr. Carlin loved you—even though you hurt him so terribly. I knew he'd want you to get away."

Her perfume bothered me. It brought back the past in too big chunks. She thought I was still a murderer. She'd probably listened when I'd told my old man everything.

"I won't give you away," she said. "I know you'll want your father's murderer brought to justice." She paused. "And I'm not asking you to believe me! Mr. Carlin's chauffeur—he's suspicious of Pete Martin too. I want you to talk to him. He's frightened, too. We're meeting him tonight. Do you know where the First Street bridge is—over Hanford's Slough?"

My mouth was dry. "I know."

Obediently I turned the car around.

There were little warning bells in my mind. I shrugged them off. Things were moving too fast—too fast for me to keep up with them.

We reached the bridge and I headed across it. Midway, I felt a hand on my arm.

"Stop here," Anne Gregory said. "We're a little early. You'd better leave the engine running."

For a moment, we sat there in silence. I felt her closeness. Sandalwood was strong in my nostrils. It reminded me of Francie. I told her so.

"You remind me of a girl I knew once," I said. "A tramp."

She laughed. "Maybe I'm the same way."

"Nobody could be that bad."

"I'm not a tramp. . . ." She stiffened. "Look! There's the chauffeur."

Through the windshield, I could see a man at the edge of the bridge. The street lamp painted a long shadow in front of him. The shadow moved out along the bridge. The man was walking with a sort of rolling motion.

It brought back memories. Francie. A smoking gun in my hand. The cops who had barged in.

"Does the chauffeur limp?" I asked.

She reached past me, clicked open the car door. She said swiftly, "He limps."

I stepped out of the car, one foot still inside. Another man was coming along the bridge from the opposite end. I could hear his tread. And woven into it was the accented beat of the lame man's gait.

"A trap!" cried nurse Anne Gregory. "It's a trap!"

The car leaped ahead. It spilled me to the plank decking of the bridge. Splinters dug into the palms of my hand. The car sped toward the limping man, its door banging wildly. The limping man fired. The coupe kept going, the red tail-light winking smaller and smaller.

I got to one knee. My heart was bang-

ing against my ribs. Both men were walking toward me again. A trap. The sort of horrible inexorability of it all submerged me. My own gun wouldn't help against the two of them.

I went up on my toes, like a sprinter at the start of a race. Then I was dashing for the bridge rail while a long way back in space and time, my brain plodded along in an effort to catch up.

A shot whistled close and I hoped I could keep on being a moving target. Another shot rang out. I went over the rail and plunged downward into empty darkness.

As a kid I'd gone swimming in Hanford's Slough. We'd dive off the bridge rail into the water below. In daylight it was a forty foot dive.

That had been a long time ago. And at night the dive seemed like a thousand feet. Or ten thousand.

I hit the water and my hands came up and smacked me in the forehead.

The impact stunned me, but the cold water brought me out of it. I paddled weakly. On the shore was the dim outline of the big Carlin Lumber Company mill. *My mill*. Part of the inheritance Pete Martin was trying to take away from me.

There was a small night watchman's shack at the water's edge. Light spilled through a window onto the ground. A voice was calling something. My chest hurt as I swam toward it.

Nothing more had come from the two men on the bridge.

Old hands helped me out of the water. I staggered inside the shack. A hot fire was going in a stove made from an empty oil drum.

"That ties it!" The watchman's voice was querulous. "Two in one night."

My teeth chattered. "Two what?" I sputtered.

"Two suicides."

"You're kidding."

"Naw," said the old man, "I'm not."

CHAPTER FOUR

Pav Dirt

DUTCH HENNING was waiting for me in my room. The desk clerk told me. He also told me that somebody had been trying to reach me by telephone every five minutes for the past half hour.

"It sounded like the same girl," he said.

My thoughts were bitter. Anne Gregory's ears should have been burning. My clothes were a rumpled mess. The night watchman had let me dry out in front of his stove. He'd wanted to call the cops but I'd talked him out of it.

The telephone rang and it was nurse Anne Gregory. The clerk passed it across to me and then went away.

"Tom! You got away!"

"Not because of you," I said.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was soft again. "But I was scared to death." She sucked in her breath. "All I could think about was getting away."

"What happened to the chauffeur?"

"I don't know. He must've seen trouble ahead—stayed away." She paused. "Pete Martin knows who you are. We'll have to talk to the chauffeur later. I'm not asking you to believe me—"

"I believe you," I said. "Where's Pete Martin now?"

"I'm not sure—"

"I'll get in touch with you later," I said.

I walked slowly up the stairs. Everything was becoming clear to me now. The two men on the bridge. One of them walking with a limp. Pete Martin was behind it. Pete Martin had always been behind it. He'd framed me that other time. Now he was trying to have me killed.

How else could it be? He hadn't wanted to kill me before—only scare me into running away. He'd hired Deacon Clarke and maybe Francie and the phoney cops. My

appearance in Carlinville after eleven years had upset his plans. He couldn't let me live.

Anger replaced the bitterness in my mind. A red haze was in front of my eyes. I wasn't feeling sorry for myself now. All I wanted to do was get my hands on Pete Martin. My cousin, a killer. Neatly framing me for everything.

Dutch Henning was sitting lax in a chair when I entered my room. He looked as weary as ever—except for his hands which were knotted tightly in his lap.

"Where've you been?" he demanded.

"You found something?" I asked.

"You and me," he said woodenly. "We ain't friends no longer. Me, I'm cleaning out my desk. The ax falls tomorrow."

"What happened?"

"Me. Twenty years on the Carlinville cops. Now I'm washed up. That's what comes of listenin' to you goof off." His look was savage. "The chief's got to do it. He found out about the autopsy. It was half over, so they had to finish. I get the can tied to me tomorrow."

"Poison?" I asked mechanically. "What kind?"

"Poison—hell!" Dutch said. "Your old man died of natural causes. Bum ticker."

I stared at him. He was lying. He had to be lying. You couldn't trust anybody. Dutch Henning was in with Pete Martini. I tried to keep my anger out of my face.

"Tell me about John Clement," I said.

"Him?" Dutch snorted. "He came to town a couple of years ago. A shady lawyer. Brought a couple of stumblebums along with him. He built himself up fast. His wife kept in the background. He talked a lot about your old man owning the town. Folks listened to him—a lot of 'em were jealous of your old man's wealth. That happens all the time. Your old man and Pete Martin were trying to fight him. Maybe he'll make it now." Dutch Henning made an angry gesture. "He'll take the town to hell in a basket."

I smiled. The smile felt stiff on my face. John Clement was against Pete Martin. Dutch Henning was against John Clement. Maybe John Clement was a shady character—he'd known about my past and tried to use it as a bribe. But at least he was not a part of the plot against me.

"Funny thing," Dutch Henning was saying. "We had a murder tonight. Somebody tried to make it look like suicide. A gal. She was picked up in Hanford's Slough. No water in the lungs. She was strangled first and then dumped in the water."

"Who was it?" I asked, on guard mechanically.

"Your old man's nurse. A gal named Anne Gregory."

There was no doubt in my mind now. Dutch was in with Pete Martin. This second lie was all the proof I needed. I'd talked to nurse Ann Gregory only a few minutes before.

"I got a car outside," Dutch said. "Pete Martin's a swell guy. I can't believe he'd ever frame you. Let's you and me have a talk with him. It can't do no harm. And maybe we'll be able to figure out something."

I was laughing inside. Not from humor. Here was Dutch leading me into a trap. If he and Pete Martin ever got me alone, I'd be finished.

"Where's Pete now?" I asked.

"Up at the lodge on Gravel Lake," Dutch said. "He took your old man's death pretty hard. Your old man was like a father to him. He wanted to be alone. Work things out in his mind. He'll be back tomorrow for the funeral."

I took my gun out of my pocket and examined it. Then I pointed it at Dutch. He said, "Hey guy! That's loaded." I reversed the gun, grabbing it by the barrel. I took two forward steps and then swung the butt against his head. He went down as limp as a sack of feed. The car keys were on a ring in his pocket. . . .

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Wallace Umphrey

FIR and cedar and hemlock circled the lake. Underneath the trees was a tangle of huckleberry and salal. I left the car at the edge of the road and hiked down a wide were a thick soft carpet underfoot.

Moonlight made a slivery path on the water. In the distance a loon cried eerily. The lodge squatted on the shore, a long low building made of fir logs tightly chinked. Light came softly through the windows.

I had it pegged now. I felt just as I'd felt the time Deacon Clarke had told me that Francie was stepping out. I wasn't rational.

I patted the gun in my pocket. It felt good. I pounded a fist on the door.

Through the French doors from the porch I could see into the room. Only a small table lamp was lit. The rest of the light came from a fire in the big stone fireplace. Pete had been sitting on a sofa in front of the fire. He stood up now, blinking. He was dressed in pajamas and a navy blue robe. His blond hair looked crisp.

He swung open one of the French doors. "Pete," I said.

"I don't know you," he said, peering. I took out my gun and shoved it hard against his belly. His stomach was flat, smoothly muscled. He bent forward, staring in deep surprise.

"Move," I told him. "Inside."

He didn't move away from the doorway. He just stood there, bent over a little, one hand on the door jamb. I shoved harder with the gun and he took a couple of slow backward steps. He straightened, still regarding me with surprise. I kicked the door shut.

"Don't rib me," I said. "I'm Tom."

A strange light crept into his eyes. For a brief moment his bones seemed jellied. Then, ignoring the gun, he began pounding me on the back.

"Tom!" he yelled. "Oh, my God! Tom Carlin. Where've you been all these years?"

Killer, Come Home!

We thought you were dead. . . . Tom Carlin! How'd you find me here? What's the gun for? For God's sake, Tom. Did you hear about your father? . . . Come in, Tom! Come in, come in, come in!"

Everything was run together. A good show. But that's all it was—a show. If I hadn't known better I'd have thought he was genuinely surprised to see me.

Still ignoring the gun, he pulled me over to a chair. He sat down across from me. His eyes strayed from my face to the gun in my hand and back to my face again. He smiled uncertainly.

I should have shot him from the porch. The longer I delayed the harder it was going to be. You have to stay keyed-up to kill a man.

He stirred the fire, then pitched on a fresh chunk of fir. The fire blazed.

"A drink, Tom?" he asked, turning. "Hey! Put that gun away. What's the joke?"

"Come on, Pete, you ought to know. Sit down."

Slowly he shook his head. His smile teetered and slipped. I jerked the gun at him and he sank carefully into a chair. His smile was gone completely now. But he still looked puzzled. Puzzled rather than frightened.

One-handed, I lit a cigarette. Pete kept on staring at me. He didn't speak but I knew what he was thinking. *Tom's crazy, he was thinking, he's got a gun and he's crazy as a loon.*

I stared at him. He still didn't look scared. . . . My mind talked to me. *Key yourself up. Build it up so you can shoot.*

I began to talk. Told him everything.

His eyes were alert now. He was struggling to understand. A good act. I kept on talking.

And it was working. I was getting there. Keyed up. Pretty soon, I'd pull the trigger.

"It's crazy," he said. "You were framed.



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Wallace Umphrey

I didn't do it. Maybe they just wanted a cut of your allowance check. Your father didn't die of poison. Me poison him?" He shook his head. "And I didn't try to have you killed earlier. Why would I do that? I haven't hired anybody—"

"Six million dollars," I said, "says you're lying."

"You don't know about the will, Tom. You haven't bothered to find out." A desperate look had come into his eyes. He was aware of his danger now. "No matter what happens, I run the business. I know it backward and forward. You don't. But the rest of the estate, Tom—it's in escrow."

HE MADE himself relax. "Your father never gave up the idea that you might return. It broke his heart when you disappeared. He had pride, Tom. That's why he told the newspaper that you'd been killed in the war. But he never gave up hope. The bulk of the estate was left to you."

He laughed shakily. "Would I frame you, or have you killed? Listen, we were kids together! And your father—was almost like a father to me."

Sweat dripped down my collar. I was as keyed-up as I'd ever be; I slowly took lane to the lodge. Fir and hemlock needles aim.

"Tom," Pete Martin said, standing up and walking toward me. "Give me that gun, Tom. We've got to talk this thing out. Tom, the gun."

"Stay away from me!" I whispered hoarsely.

He kept on coming. Slowly and carefully but still coming. This was it. I couldn't let him talk me out of it.

I pulled the trigger.

And nothing happened. The gun misfired. My ducking in Hanford's Slough had ruined it. I fell back into the chair. I began to blubber.

Pete was standing beside me now. His hand was gentle on my shoulder.

Killer, Come Home!

"It's bad, Tom," Pete said. "Somebody's behind all this. It's not me. We've got to talk."

A car stopped outside.

Dutch Henning came inside fast. Close behind, was John Clement. And behind him was a girl.

There was a gun in Dutch's hand. He stared at Pete and then at me. Then he turned to Clement.

"What the hell! This ain't murder," he snapped.

John Clement was dressed in his blue double-breasted business suit. He looked confused. The girl was standing beside him now. She had dark hair brushing her shoulders. Her greenish eyes stared at me.

"Mrs. Clement," Pete said, with an awkward bow.

I was staring back at her. There was something. . . . No, it couldn't be. No, no, no. *Francie!*

"Tom," Dutch Henning was saying to me. "You were supposed to have killed Pete Martin. Clement told me. When you laid me out, I figured you were ready for anything. I'm a cop till tomorrow."

It was Francie. I was still staring at her. Her hair was dyed. She'd changed in other ways. Nine years was a long time. But it was Francie.

"My gun misfired," I told Dutch Henning.

"Good. There's something here to be stirred up."

I hardly heard him. The sight of Francie was taking my mind back in a slow lazy spiral. She was lying on the floor and I was standing over her with a smoking gun in my hand and the cops barged in.

Phony Francie. Phony cops.

"Better talk, Tom," Dutch said. "That dead girl we hauled out of Hanford's Slough tonight was strangled and blue stains were found in your bathtub. There were rope marks on the window sill. You

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Wallace Umphrey

bought a rope today, Tom. You'd better talk."

"She was planted on me, Dutch. I had to get rid of her."

"A nurse. Anne Gregory. Killed twenty-four hours ago. She knew too much." Dutch Henning had his jaw out. "You think that's what it was, Tom?"

WHILE I talked I stared at Francie. No. I hadn't seen Anne Gregory a couple of hours ago. The light had been too dim. I'd never seen her, really. That's why I didn't know her when she was lying in my bathtub.

Sandalwood's odor came faintly to me.

It was Francie in the car with me! She'd taken the chance I wouldn't recognize her. She'd driven me into that trap.

But was it a trap? No. They could have shot to kill. But they didn't. They wanted me to get away so I'd blame Pete. They wanted me to kill Pete for them.

Framed once. Framed twice.

I turned on John Clement. He'd known all about my past. Francie had told him. His eyes wavered and dropped away. He began nibbling at his lower lip.

"Hullo, Francie," I said, turning. "Where's Deacon Clarke?"

She stiffened a little, but that was all. "So you know me. I'm not surprised." She shrugged. "I haven't seen the Deacon for a long, long time."

"You never got a divorce from me, Francie. You couldn't—you were dead. You're not married to Clement."

"No."

"You're still married to me."

She smiled. "That's right, Tom. I'm still married to you. How does it feel?"

And everything was suddenly crystal clear. She'd come to Carlinville to wait. To wait for Amos Carlin to die. She'd taken up with John Clement and brought him along to wait.

Killer, Come Home!

John Clement was the restless type. He was taking a flyer in local politics hoping for the Carlin wealth—and the town to boot. It would be a nice little town to own.

"Francie," I said. "You were my widow. When my father died you'd step forward and claim my share of the estate."

She smiled. Her face was white, but she was still poised. She nodded silently.

"And Francie. If anything happened to Pete—you'd inherit everything."

"You're so right, Tom."

"You came here as my widow," I said. "You thought me dead. When I showed up, it complicated everything. But not for long. It gave you a chance to frame me again."

I heard Pete suck in his breath. Dutch Henning was standing with his sturdy legs spread apart, trying to make up his mind. John Clement was tense. Only Francie was poised.

Then John Clement stooped and snatched up my automatic from the floor. He aimed at Dutch Henning.

Dutch had made up his mind. He shot Clement in the head.

Clement fell. Reflex pulled the trigger. The gun fired a shot into the ceiling.

It had misfired once—for me. But only once.

Glass shattered. Two men had kicked open the French door. Both fired together. Something heavy caught my left shoulder and spun me around. I stumbled and fell.

Dutch Henning fired carefully. One of the men fell away with a horrible scream.

And then, three slugs from the other gun drilled Dutch Henning in the chest.

I pried the gun out of John Clement's hand. This time it fired for me. The second man on the porch stumbled. He tried to flee, stumbling away with an odd rolling motion. Then he fell.

The room was full of smoke. Pete Martin hadn't moved since it all started. My

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Wallace Umphrey

shoulder was on fire. I crawled over to Dutch Henning's side. He was still alive—his breathing labored and his pulse slow. His eyes were closed. I lifted his head and he opened them.

"Call me sucker, Tom," he said with an effort. "I've always been a good cop. Kind of. But I never had ambition. Ask anybody. This is what I get for being ambitious."

Francie laughed suddenly. I'd forgotten all about her. I stood up slowly, facing her. She jerked the gun and Pete Martin moved over to my side.

"Francie," I said. "Dear, sweet lovable Francie. Wait a minute. Why was Anne Gregory killed?"

The gun didn't waver. "We lived in the same apartment. She must have heard John talking to me. She got suspicious."

"Wait a minute, Francie—"

PAINFULLY, Dutch Henning's body stirred. His hand, still holding a gun, began to lift. His face was wet. Francie watched and shifted her gun as his hand was up then his gun roared. Francie fell over backward. She was dead.

"I don't feel bad about that," Dutch Henning whispered. "I guess I don't feel bad about nothing. Can you hear me, Tom?"

"I can hear you."

"That's good. . . . The lights are out, Tom. It's getting kind of dark in here. Ain't it?"

His eyes were open, but they were blank now. He smiled once and then his body sagged. I closed his eyes for him.

Pete Martin was breathing heavily. "It's over, Tom. I'd better call town."

He moved away. I could hear him furiously jiggling the hook, trying to get the operator. I tried to withdraw from the death all around me.

My mind wouldn't allow it. The past was gone. Maybe later I could think about the future.



Deadly Downbeat

(Continued from page 65)

I picked out the photos of the two mugs who had gotten wind of the load of narcotics that Steve was carrying on his projected tour of the country, and I left old Morrison with him telling me that if ever I wanted to become a detective to see him first. I thanked him but I had other ideas, ideas that I liked much better.

It was about ten a.m. when I reached Lee Fuller by telephone. I'd already gotten a new drummer and a new piano player—all I needed now was a new gal singer.

"You've got until noon to be packed and sitting in the bus in the Metropolitan Garage on West 110th Street, baby," I said.

"What? . . . What did you say?"

"Mitch Irwin's Orchestra is leaving at twelve, noon, on a cross country tour," I tossed at her. "I need a thrush . . . a red-headed thrush. "How about it, honey?"

"Oh, Mitch," she whispered, "you're a darling . . . I'll . . . I'll be there!"

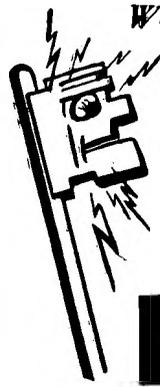
I was about to hang up when I thought of something.

"Hey, Lee, baby," I said into the mouth-piece, "I forgot to ask you . . . can you really sing?"

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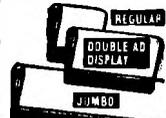
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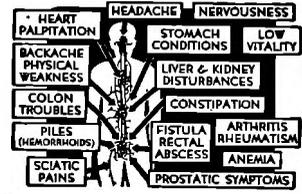
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Murray Leinster

(Continued from page 46)

ered himself. He screamed so shrilly and so long that he could not believe that he could go unheard.

But nobody came. When it grew dark, his voice was a croak, and he knew that nobody would come. By that time, too, his hands were raw and bleeding from desperate attempts to climb the smooth, concrete wall. When night fell and the thin, rectangular bit of sky above him grew dark and cold, incurious stars looked down into the well upon him, he wept in utter despair.

He could think about the vast satisfaction he'd had in killing Doren, to be sure, but it was no comfort. He even knew that some time, maybe one month, maybe two, or even three months hence, his letter would bring somebody here to look for him. But that was no comfort either. From this instant, until starvation ended it, he would be dying . . . slowly. In murdering Doren and arranging so cleverly to escape all suspicion, he'd been remarkably successful. No one would ever dream that he'd killed Doren. But he'd planned a single murder and it had turned out a double one. . . .

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(Continued from page 69)

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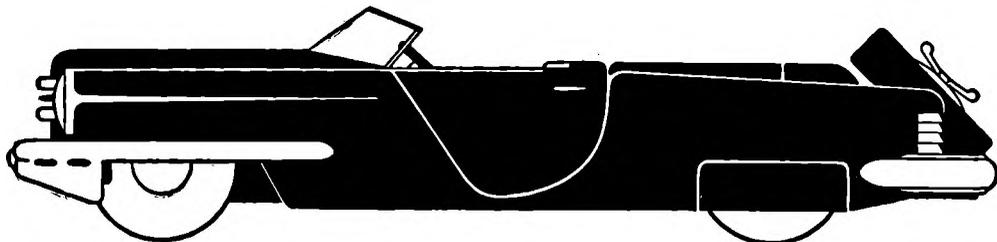
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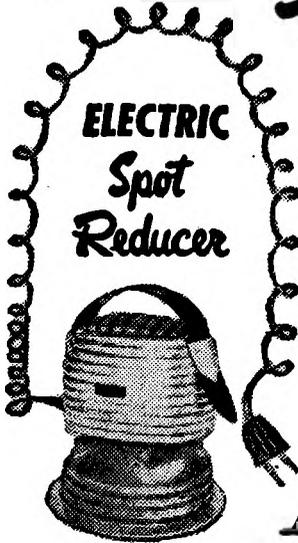
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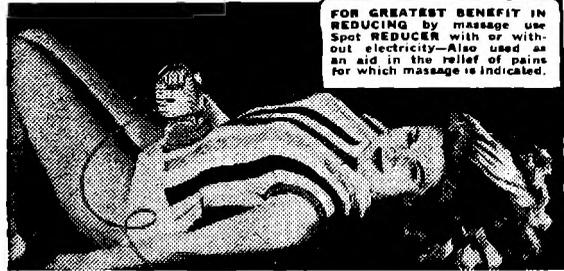
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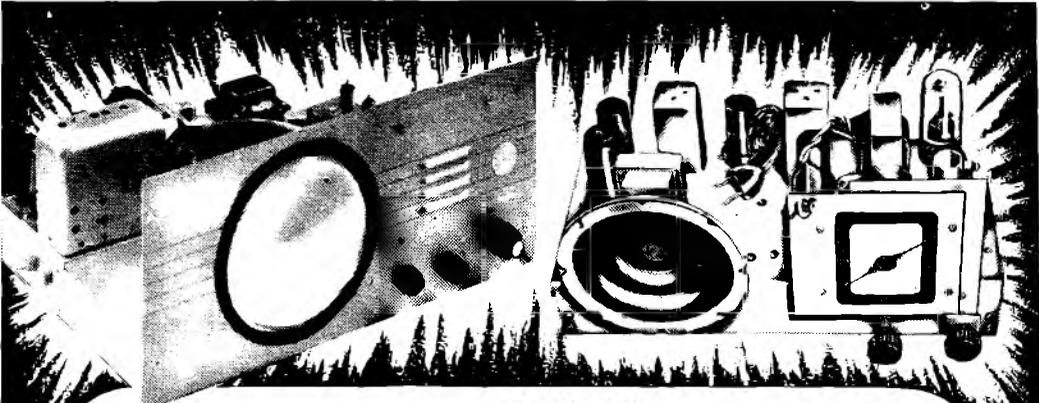
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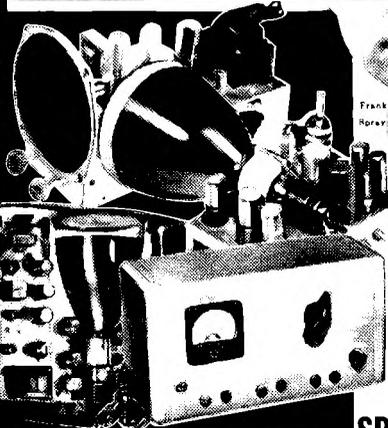


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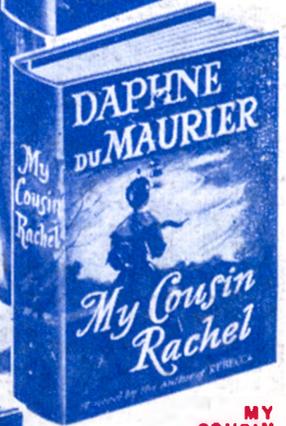
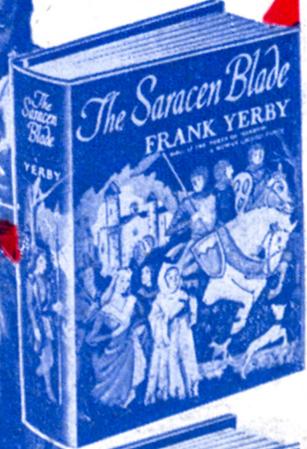
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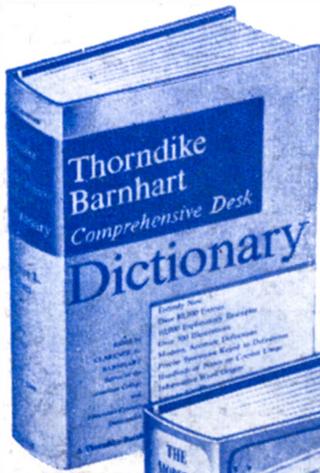
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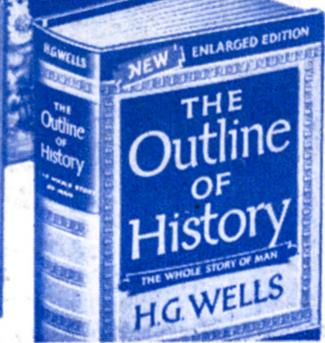
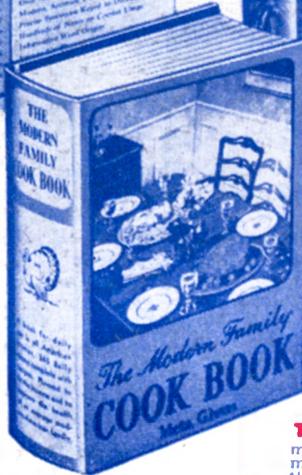
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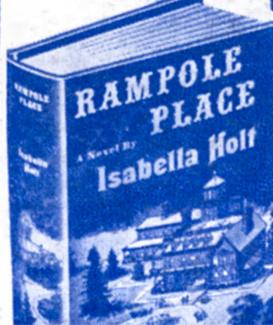
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