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JULY

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DEATH IN THE SUN

A MARIANO MERCADO
NOVELETTE BY
D.L. CHAMPION

**LOADED FOR
MURDER**

A COUNSELOR MORT STORY
by JULIUS LONG



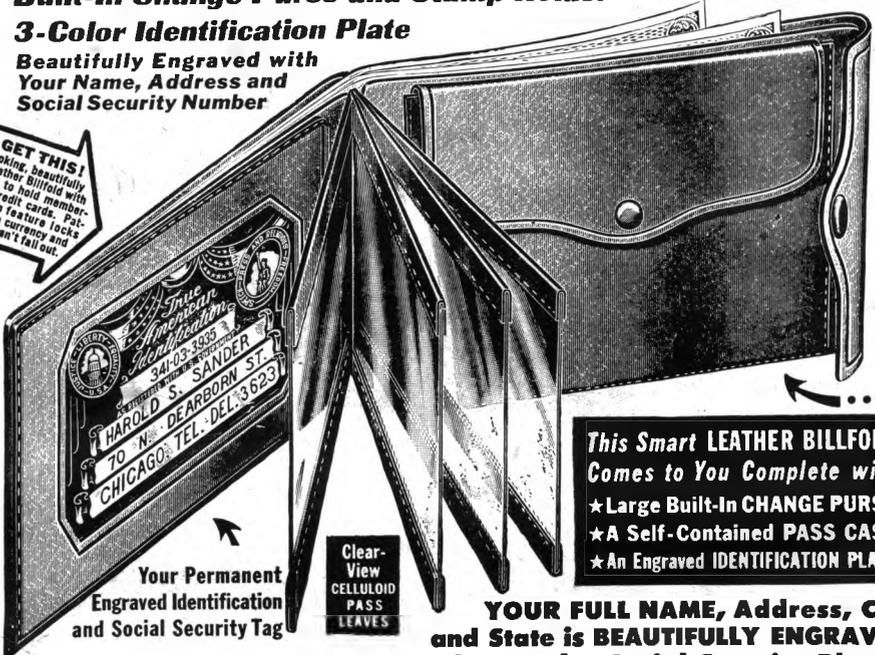
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Vol. 48

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A SMASHING COMPLETE SERIES-CHARACTER NOVELETTE

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Cover: "The man had been right, after all, when he claimed that tangling with the shaft was suicide!"

From: *The Dolly Shaft Rebellion*.

The August issue will be out July 3rd

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THE AUGUST THRILL DOCKET



REMEMBER CASH WALE? . . . Of course you do! . . . He hasn't been with us since *Death Stands By* appeared back in the February '43 issue shortly after which his creator left our contents page to enter the Army but he's coming back next month to unravel *The Riddle of Papa Rio*. Sergeant PETER PAIGE, stationed now at South Kelly Field, San Antonio, Texas, found a type-writer kicking around the barracks somewhere and managed to squeeze out time to use it between more military duties. This smashing new novelette by an old DIME DETECTIVE favorite is the result.

"When a dick hires a dick, that's news," Wale told Ramón. "What's the gag?"

The gag was, of course, a one-man missing-persons job to provide Ramón's bride-to-be with a past. But at the moment Cash had a more pressing problem—figuring out who had shot the crossbow arrow that had pinned Papa Rio to his own archery target—and trying to wriggle out of taking the rap for the murder of the old *caballero*.

It's Paige and Wale at their best with the marbles still rattling around in Sailor Duffy's head to beat out the accompaniment to the murder melody.

And H. H. STINSON signs us on the dotted line for a *Good Murder Policy* in another novelette about Pete Rousseau of Air Parts Inc. Plant Security. You remember the guy who fished his boss out of a king-sized murder rap in *Slay Binge* back in our March issue. This time it's a luscious lovely with a money mania who furnished the prime ingredient for the kill concoction. You could hardly blame Pete—a conscientious guy—for applying his particular brand of lead logic to the demise of Mike the Mex.

Plus additional novelettes and shorts by FREDERICK C. DAVIS, and others.

This great AUGUST issue will be out on JULY 3rd.

Ready for the Rackets A Department

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

KEEP a cool head on your shoulders and it follows naturally that you'll keep a warm coat on your back.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

The "Fidelity Storage Company" was what the outfit called itself. And though comparatively new in the city, the firm encountered little difficulty in weaning a substantial portion of the business away from the more established companies.

To begin with, Fidelity Storage offered lower—much lower—rates for the safe-keeping of valuable furs during the summer season. And, in addition, the rock-bottom rates covered a sort of blanket insurance against every conceivable hazard. In case of loss or damage, the company cheerfully agreed to pay full and liberal indemnities.

When a fur was brought in for storage the customer was asked to make her own evaluation of the garment. If she estimated its worth at one thousand dollars, Fidelity agreed on paper and in plain English to make full reparation if the fur lost so much as a single hair during the time it was in their custody. Naturally, business boomed.

Then came the fall season—and the pay-off. When the customers arrived to claim their property, they found Fidelity Storage had moved to a new address. Just what address was a deep mystery. Authorities were notified, of course, but there was little they could do. The swindler, along with the choicest of the furs, had disappeared.

Subsequent investigation revealed the gypster had operated behind the flimsiest of fronts. The building housing the firm, for instance, had been leased for a long period, with the first three months' occupancy rent-free. All equipment had been obtained on order for a trifling down-payment. The swindler's output was meager, his income enormous.

Your best insurance against such rackets is to know the firm with which you are dealing. Beware of low rates and other lures used by the easy-money fraternity.

Charles Shalashnov,
Columbus 15, Ohio.

(Continued on Page 92)

"Oh, she's OLD!
Almost thirty!"



At twenty, thirty seems ancient.

At thirty, forty is distant middle age.

At forty, well, it'll be a long time before you're fifty.

The point is that ten years *ahead* always seems like a long time. Yet, actually it passes "before you know it" . . . and you find yourself face to face with problems, opportunities, needs, that once seemed very far in the future.

This is a good thing to remember today, when you buy War Bonds to speed the winning of the war.

In ten years—*only* ten years—those bonds will bring you back \$4 for every \$3 you put into them today.

Think of what that money may mean to you in 1955. An education for your children . . . a home . . . maybe even retirement to the place and the life of your heart's desire.

All this your War Bonds can mean to you . . . if you buy all you can today and hold them to maturity.

It won't be long till 1955. Not half as long as you think.

DEATH IN THE SUN

By D. L. CHAMPION

Author of "Sealed With a Kris," etc.

A Mariano Mercado
Novelette



An odd, guttural sound emanated from Dumbross' throat. Then his knees buckled. As he fell, I saw the spot of blood at his temple.

I had seen Mariano Mercado face a thug's automatic with an impassive countenance, grapple with a murderer three times his weight, but the sight of an enlarged photograph of the most innocuous germ in Christendom, would cause him to tremble in abject terror. Thus Mercado's reluctance to throw an unwelcome guest out of his office—it would have necessitated physical contact with a human germ carrier. And the visitor could not very well leave under his own power with a bullet hole in his back!

CHAPTER ONE

The Tattooed Corpse

IT WAS winter but the birds sang songs of spring. It was January but the sun shone brilliant and warm. The palms in the *sócalo* were verdant and green. The air was crisp and rare upon the mile-high plateau



upon which Mexico City is ideally situated.

We had just finished an unrationed lunch, Mariano Mercado and I. I pushed away the remnant of Roquefort left upon my plate; drained my cup of *café negro* and lighted a cigar which would have cost three times as much back home in the States.

I glanced across the table at Mercado. I was possessed of such a sense of well being that for once his sartorial splendor failed to outrage me.

Today, he was conservatively caparisoned—that is, for Mariano Mercado.

His suit was a deep chocolate brown with

lapels as broad as a burlesque joke, as sweeping as a statement of Congressman Rankin. His tie was a violent green and spotted tastefully with saffron polka dots.

His vest was of merino wool but no sheep had ever been born that color. It was of a yellow which would have caused canaries to blink. His shoes were of the same hue, perhaps a trifle darker. The topcoat which now reposed in the checkroom was a delightful powder blue and his gloves a bright tan. His shirt, I forbear to mention.

The ensemble was, in a word, blinding. I take my oath that I have seen burros avert their heads when Mercado passed by.

The man who wore this regal raiment was a trifle under five feet tall. His skin was the color of old copper and his eyes were as shrewd and bright as those of a lynx. Now, he emptied his coffee cup, pushed back his chair and stood up.

"Well," I said, "what now?"

His gaze held mild disapproval.

"I am a professional man," he said. "These are business hours. I shall return to the office."

"For what? We have no clients at the moment. Nor any prospects. Why not spend this sunny afternoon sitting on the sidewalk in front of *La Cucaracha*, sipping *habanero* and watching the crowds go by?"

"You are a reckless man," he said.

"Why? *Habanero*, taken in limited quantities, won't hurt me."

"I do not speak of *habanero*," he said primly. "I speak of the people at the neighboring tables."

I knew what he was driving at. However, I pretended I didn't and lifted my eyebrows. "What's wrong with them. Some of the best people in town—"

"I speak neither of their characters nor their social attributes." He bent over and brandished a brown forefinger under my nose. "What do you know of their diseases? What do you know of the bacteria they carry with them? How many of them are tubercular? How many afflicted with other ills? Heaven only knows what malady you may pick up mixing with crowds such as frequent *La Cucaracha*."

A fat individual seated behind him coughed loudly. Mercado jumped as if he had heard a machine gun. Hurriedly, he put his handkerchief over his nose and walked briskly into the street.

"Well," I said, leaving him on the corner, "I'm going over to *La Cucaracha*."

"I," he said over his shoulder, "am going for my atomizer."

He dashed off mumbling about the number of germs foisted upon him by the fat man who had coughed.

I sighed and went on my way. Mariano Mercado was, for the most part, a brave man. I had seen him face a thug's automatic with an impassive countenance. I had seen him grapple with a murderer three times his weight. But the sight of an enlarged photograph of the most innocuous germ in Christendom would send him cowering under his sanitary bed, trembling in abject terror.

Compared to him, the average hypochondriac was a wreckless, addepleted fool.

I SAT down at a sidewalk table of the café and ordered my *habanero*. I sipped it slowly, letting the alcohol and sunshine permeate through my system. I ordered a second one. As I did so, something caught my eye. Something chaotic in color and shocking to the eye. It was Mercado and he had changed his shirt to a snappy pink number with little hand-worked scrolls on the collar.

"Sit down," I said. "I thought professional men remained in their offices during business hours."

"I need a drink," he said simply. He turned to the waiter and ordered one. He took a clean handkerchief from his pocket and a small vial containing a colorless liquid.

The waiter brought him a glass and a bottle. Mariano Mercado did not imbibe immediately. First he performed his rite of purification.

He uncorked the bottle and wiped its mouth carefully with the handkerchief. He then spilled three drops from the vial into the glass, and swabbed it with the handkerchief. Now that both bottle and glass were completely disinfected, he deigned to pour himself a drink.

He gulped down the *habanero*, set down the glass and looked around apprehensively as someone at the bar cleared his throat.

"What made you change your mind?" I asked. "Why did you suddenly decide you needed a drink?"

"I had a mild shock, *amigo*. And I need your help back at the office."

"My help?" Mariano Mercado didn't often need my help. "For what?"

"To get an unwelcome guest out of the office."

"Well," I said, "you're better at insult than I am, especially in Spanish. And if that didn't work you could have thrown him out, couldn't you?"

"You know how I dislike physical contact with strangers. Even a healthy man is a carrier of millions and millions—"

"I know," I said hastily, "and billions of bacteria. In a pinch you could have pulled a gun on the guy."

He smiled wryly. "I tried that. It didn't work."

I finished my drink. "You interest me," I told him. "Let's go over to the office."

We walked some five blocks to the building which held both Mariano Mercado's domicile and office. The flat, up a single flight of stairs was as bleak as it was sterile. Mercado permitted neither drapes nor upholstery. The furniture was of polished hard wood, constantly scrubbed in order that no germ could ever get comfortably settled.

The windows were screened and the floors were tiled and naked. No microbe-attracting rug had ever graced it.

Mercado led the way. He pushed the door open and with Latin courtesy propelled me in before him. I stood for a moment in the square room and saw, sitting on the far side of the desk, a man. He was a paunchy man whose features were of a definite Indian cast.

His hat was on the floor at the side of his chair. His head leaned against the back of the chair and he regarded me with glassy eyes.

"Señor," I said politely, "this is the *casa* of the Señor Mercado. He does not wish you here."

The man continued to regard me. He did not speak. I turned to Mercado. "What's the matter with him? Is he deaf?"

Mercado flashed me a melancholy smile.

"You are wrong by only one consonant, *amigo*. He is dead."

"Dead? Of what?"

"Steel, *amigo*. There is a bullet in his back."

I gulped. I walked around to the rear of the pudgy man. Through the cane back of the chair I saw the crimson stain on his coat. I saw the blood on the floor behind his hat. I sat down and lit a cigarette.

"For God's sake!" I said. "Tell me about it."

Mercado's shrug was graceful and expressive. "*Pero*, there is nothing to tell. Save that we are private detectives. And we now have a mystery delivered right to us. Fitting, *no es verdad?*"

I laughed, not without bitterness. "Fitting? A corpse in your house? Your relations with the police department of this town are already strained. They're going to want something detailed in the way of an explanation."

"Lupa admitted him." Lupa was the cook. "He said he wished to see me. She permitted him to wait while she went to market. In the meantime, I returned. I found him."

"Like this?"

"Si, like this."

"Who is he?"

Mercado shrugged again. "Would you mind searching him to find out? I prefer not to. Despite the fact that he is dead, the bacteria which doubtless infest him are not. Did you know that microbes can exist on a corpse for—"

"Well aware," I shut him off and ap-

proached the body with very little pleasure.

I went through him thoroughly, pocket by pocket. I found six paper pesos and seventy-five centavos in silver. I found a small dog-eared prayer book with no inscription in it. I found nothing else.

I put the money and the book on Mercado's desk. He looked at them curiously but did not risk catching any dire disease by touching them.

"No identification," I announced.

Mariano Mercado was looking beyond me to the corpse. While reaching for his inside pocket I had disarranged his tie. One button of his shirt was open. Mercado's eyes focused on that point.

"Open his shirt. There's something blue on his chest. Looks like tattooing."

I loosened the dead man's tie and opened his shirt. In garish red and blue a tattooing needle had written over his heart: *Miguel ama Rosa*.

"Ah," said Mercado, "Miguel loves Rosa. This, then, is Miguel."

"Now," I said, "we know exactly as much as we did before. What do we do? Call the coppers?"

"We can't keep the body here. In this climate it would invite an epidemic."

"Not to mention an investigation. I'll put in the phone call. You invent the story that goes with the body."

I PUT the necessary call through to Colonel Gomez of the *policia*. Mariano Mercado continued to stare blandly at the body. He was a man given neither to heat nor hysteria save when he went forth to battle the bacterial hordes which he was thoroughly convinced would eventually destroy not only him but all the civilized world.

I had run into him accidentally in a cheap saloon and later had retained him at the behest of a friend of mine. The result was an offer of a job as his assistant—though heaven knows I didn't assist much in a practical sense. I was principally of use in securing American clients who, for provincial reasons, seemed to have more faith in a foreigner when he was aided by one of their own countrymen.

At the moment, Mariano Mercado was taking the presence of Miguel's corpse much more calmly than I. Colonel Gomez was no friend of ours. He resented Mercado because the little overdressed man was possessed of a keener mind than any in Gomez' department. Moreover, Mercado was not a man to be overawed by authority and Gomez was a man who used his authority to achieve just that.

The revocation and reissuance of Mercado's gun permit had reached the stage of high farce. When Gomez was annoyed at him he canceled it. When he was compelled to ask a

favor he gave it back. The corpse of Miguel, I was sure, would result in another cancellation.

"Let us consider," said Mercado, "why a man should be murdered in my office. Obviously, he was sitting here alone awaiting my return."

"And," I said, "someone else came in and shot him in the back. It's at once as simple and difficult as that. So we can't get anywhere by sheer ratiocination."

A buzzer sounded from the hall. I went to the door reflecting that Colonel Gomez was moving faster than usual. I opened it and a man, obviously American, entered before I could stop him.

He nodded to me, then to Mercado. "I'm Charles Hendershot," he announced. "Perhaps, you've heard of me."

We had. Despite the fact that the city of Mexico possesses a population something in excess of a million souls, the permanent American colony is a tightly knit community. I had never met Hendershot but I knew who he was.

He had lived out near Chapultepec Park for about three years. He was a retired Wyoming rancher who had sold his vast holdings and come south to live in the sun. He had brought his family and some of his old hands and retainers with him. He dwelt in luxury on a huge estate and mixed very little with the night-club set which infests the metropolitan areas after dark.

He was a big man without being fat. His age I estimated at about fifty and his face was burned and darkened by the Wyoming wind. He bore himself with an aggressive air, tempered at the moment by a mild amazement as he stared at the figure of Miguel seated tranquilly in Mercado's antiseptic chair.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Oh, that," said Mercado, as if deceased guests were a common occurrence in this household. "That is Miguel."

Hendershot glanced at him sharply. He seemed about to say something, then apparently changed his mind and asked instead: "What's the matter with him?"

"He's dead," said Mercado blandly.

"Good Lord!" said Hendershot. "And do you keep dead men in your office?"

"Only until the *policia* remove them," said Mercado apologetically. "And did you want to see me on a business matter, *señor*?"

But Hendershot was far more fascinated by Miguel than any business he may have had with Mercado.

"But how did he get here? Who is he?"

Mercado sighed. He patiently explained what he knew of the corpse. When he had finished, Hendershot eyed him oddly.

"But if this is true," he said, "how can you

know his name? You never saw him before, did you?"

Mercado explained about the tattooing.

"Then," said Hendershot, "you have a problem. You can't really identify him. You don't know his last name, do you?"

Mercado conceded we didn't know Miguel's last name. For some peculiar reason, that seemed to appease Hendershot's curiosity. He sat down at the side of Mercado's desk and stated his mission.

"SEÑOR MERCADO, you have a reputation in this town as an honest and reliable man. For that reason I have come to offer you a commission."

Mercado nodded modestly. Hendershot continued.

"A friend of mine will arrive in Mexico City tomorrow. At *Buena Vista Estación*. After disembarking from the train, he will be driven to the airport. There he will take a chartered plane south. I want you to accompany him from the station to the airport."

"For what purpose?"

"My friend has a number of enemies. I want none of them to harm him as he passes through Mexico. You will simply meet the train and drive him to the airport. I shall supply the car. For this I am prepared to pay seven hundred and fifty pesos."

"I accept," said Mercado. "But is this all I am to know of your friend?"

"All save his name. That is Dumbross. Eric Dumbross."

"How will I know him?"

"He is a tall, gaunt man. He will disembark from the only Pullman car on the train. He will be carrying a bright yellow suitcase bearing his initials."

"And I am to protect him against what?"

Hendershot shrugged. "Against any harm. That's all I can tell you. But you must be alert and on guard during the entire journey."

Mercado nodded. Hendershot took out his wallet and began to count out several dirty notes. A Mexican dirty note, I may add parenthetically, is much dirtier than a dirty American dollar-bill. No notes are manufactured in Mexico itself. All are imported from the American Bank Note Company of the United States. Because of war time shortage, new Mexican money has not been printed in years.

Mercado watched the bills and shuddered. He said: "*Con permiso, señor*, I would prefer a check."

Hendershot seemed surprised. "I never heard anyone object to a cash transaction."

"There are less germs on a check," I explained.

Hendershot seemed even more surprised. However, he shrugged his shoulders, took a checkbook from his pocket and scribbled on it.

He handed it to Mercado, shook hands with us both and took his leave.

Before Mercado could fold the check and stow it away in his wallet, the buzzer rang again. This time it was Gomez.

Gomez was a fat, indolent *hombre*, about one-third Indian. There was cigar ash on the lapel of his uniform and a spray of dandruff on his shoulders. He fixed a pair of black and suspicious eyes on Mercado. Mercado, doubtless thinking of his pistol permit, forced a smile and said affably: "*Qué tal, mi coronel?*"

Gomez grunted. He shifted his eyes to Miguel and said: "Is that the corpse?"

"Indeed, it is," said Mercado.

"How did it get here?"

Mariano Mercado sighed and once more told what he knew of the body. Gomez smiled without humor. He said: "And do you expect me, an official of the *policía*, to believe such a story?"

"No," said Mariano Mercado sadly. He opened his desk drawer and took out his automatic. "I suppose you will want this?"

Gomez nodded. He stretched out his hand and then withdrew it. "Perhaps not."

Now it was our turn to become suspicious. Gomez had never in all his checkered career done anything for nothing. The more pleasant moments of his life were spent in taking Mercado's gun away from him. Now he hesitated.

"Perhaps not," he said again. He paced up and down the room. He came to a military halt before Mercado. "A man just left here. It was Hendershot. A rich *Americano*. Perhaps he retained you?"

"Perhaps," said Mercado noncommittally.

"Perhaps, he gave you a big fee?"

"It may have happened that way."

"Perhaps it is worth two hundred pesos to you to keep your pistol permit? Since you have just collected a large fee you can certainly afford it, and maybe in discharging your obligation to your client you will need your gun, no?"

Mercado sighed. It was a neat holdup. Normally, he needed a gun as little as he needed all the atomizers and germ repellants which cluttered his desk. But now he had accepted a fee to protect Dumbross from whatever might threaten him. Though he knew little enough regarding the menace, his gun was certainly called for.

He nodded in my direction. "Give him two hundred pesos, Latham."

As I took the bills from my pocket, Mercado sighed. "Ah, the life of a *detective particular* is a hard one."

Gomez tucked the bills in his pocket and showed his teeth in a smile.

"This, of course," he announced, "is good for this time only. If you get mixed up with any more corpses it will be revoked—forever."

Mercado nodded. "In the meantime what about Miguel here?"

"I'll have it removed," said Gomez. The door closed behind him and I heard his heavy footfalls descend the stairs.

CHAPTER TWO

Hendershot's Dead Indian

THE morning came up like every other morning in Mexico City. The sun shone brightly on the snow-capped peak of Popo and the weather was of a type which the California Chamber of Commerce would have given its eyeteeth for.

I rose early, bathed, dressed and set out in a taxicab for the home of Charles Hendershot, where it had been arranged I was to pick up the car with which we were to meet Dumbross.

I tugged at the bell pull outside the huge wrought iron gates of the estate. I waited a considerable time for them to be opened. The man who admitted me was some fifty years old. His cheeks were the color of red copper. His eyes were black and penetrating. I knew he was an Indian, but there was nothing either Aztec or Mayan about him.

I said to him in Spanish: "You're an American Indian, aren't you?"

He grinned at me revealing perfect teeth. He answered in English as good as my own. "Sure. From Wyoming. I used to work on the Hendershot ranch. The chief brought me along with him when he retired. Are you the guy from the detective agency?"

"I'm the guy."

"Come along with me to the garage. I've been told to give you the sedan."

We walked along a tree-lined gravel path to the enormous garage at the rear of the house. I noted there were four cars in it as we entered.

"You've got a lot of cars," I said. "And a lot of room in that house, too."

The Indian nodded. "We need them. Mr. Hendershot brought me, his old foreman and all his family down with him. . . Take that car there. The Buick sedan."

I climbed in and stepped on the starter. The Indian rode down to the gates with me, let me out and relocked them. I drove the car back to Mercado's office and picked him up there.

He wiped the upholstery carefully before he climbed in. Then, despite the spring temperature, he closed all the windows as a precaution against drafts and any loose germs which might be riding on the sunbeams.

We parked outside the station and went in to wait for the train. We waited. The National Railways of Mexico are not celebrated for

promptness. We waited for ninety minutes, dropping into the bar from time to time to wet our throats with tequilla. Mercado, of course, went through his bacteria-killing ritual before each drink.

The station was filled suddenly with steam and pandemonium as the train from the north steamed in. Mercado and I dashed through the gates and stood waiting outside the door of the rear car which was the only Pullman.

The fourth passenger to get off was a tall, gaunt man. His cheeks were sunken and dark rings encircled his eyes. He was clad in a black cape and a black fedora hat. In his thin, white hand he carried a pigskin bag initialed E. D.

I stepped forward. "Mr. Dumbross?"

Dumbross conceded his identity in a deep, melancholic voice. I introduced Mariano Mercado. Dumbross apparently knew all about the arrangements. He accepted my explanation without comment and accompanied us out to the sedan.

On the way, I reached out my hand to take his valise. He shook his head and, it seemed to me, gripped the bag more tightly with his emaciated fingers. He got into the rear seat of the sedan. I took my place behind the wheel. Mercado, I observed, loosened his coat in order to be able to reach his shoulder holster easily if necessary.

From *Buena Vista Estación* to the airport is about a thirty-five-minute ride if the traffic isn't too bad. Usually in Mexico, it's too bad. However, we got through the town itself with no difficulty and hit the road to the airport.

I drove a little beyond the main entrance to the field, as several other cars were parked there. Mercado got out on the right-hand side of the car, the side away from the field. I got out on the left side. Mercado held the door open for Dumbross who stepped onto the running board on the same side as Mercado.

As I rounded the rear end of the car, Mercado's head was less than six inches from the gaunt face of Dumbross. Still gripping his bag tightly, Dumbross put one foot on the ground, then seemed to hesitate. His head jerked back. An odd, guttural sound emanated from his throat. He remained absolutely immobile for a split second.

Then his knees buckled. As he fell, I saw the spot of blood at his temple.

"*Dios!*" said Mariano Mercado as he dropped to his knees and lifted Dumbross' head. He closed his eyes and cursed quietly. Then he stood up. I stared at him in bewildered inquiry.

"Dead," he said. "A bullet through the brain."

My mind refused to accept it. I stared off to my right. There was nothing there save a fence which encircled a field. There was

nothing in sight. Some seven hundred yards away a lazily revolving windmill was the only object that broke the flatness of the view.

"It's impossible," I said. "There wasn't anyone about to shoot him. Moreover, I didn't hear any shot."

Mercado nodded. "A high-powered rifle. Perhaps with telescopic sights. It could have been fired from the top of that windmill. That's why you didn't hear the shot. That's why you didn't see anyone."

"Well," I said, "let's get out there. Maybe we can catch up with the *hombre*."

He shook his head sadly. "He's out of the windmill and off through that tall grass. We'll never catch up with him."

Mercado paused for a long moment and sighed heavily. "I have bungled an assignment," he said sadly. "And I am out two hundred pesos."

That was true enough. Gomez was going to come very close to apoplexy when he discovered us with another inexplicable corpse. Mercado was most certainly going to lose his pistol permit again.

"Go ahead," he said resignedly. "Call Gomez. I'll watch the body."

I WENT into the airport and made the call.

Less than half an hour later, a huge limousine pulled up alongside our sedan. Gomez disembarked with three of his aides.

Mariano Mercado was waiting with his gun in his hand. Holding it by the barrel, he tendered it to Gomez.

"I have another corpse," he said sadly, "and this time I don't have two hundred pesos to spare. I suppose you will want this."

Gomez snatched the weapon. He stared down at the dead body of Dumbross, then lifted a pair of angry eyes to Mercado.

"And this?" he demanded. "How do you explain this?"

"He was shot," said Mercado. "In the brain."

"And I suppose you have no idea who shot him?"

Mercado shrugged. "None."

I interposed hastily and explained what little we knew of the killing. When I had finished, Gomez shook his head sadly.

"Very well," he said. "Go away. Both of you. Wherever Mercado is, there is also trouble."

I climbed in behind the wheel of Hendershot's car and drove back to Mercado's office. I followed his dejected figure up the stairs into the room where he sank, sighing, into the chair behind his desk.

"It is a most interesting case," he said. "I wonder if Hendershot will pay us to solve it?"

"That I don't know," I told him. "However, you'd better cook up some bright tale to

tell him. When I return the car I'll have to let him know what happened. He will not be pleased."

"The difficulty is," said Mercado, "that Hendershot, in all probability, knows something which would aid us. I do not think he will talk. He didn't when he engaged us. He undoubtedly knows what was in the bag."

"What bag?"

"Why, the bag Dumbross carried."

I puzzled over that one for a while, then thought I understood.

"So, you opened his bag while you were waiting in the car for the police to arrive?"

Mariano Mercado shook his head. "No," he said. "I tried and could not do so. That is why I know he carried something important. Probably he carried the thing for which he was killed."

"You're a little enigmatic," I said. "However, at least the killer didn't get the bag."

"I'm very much afraid he did."

"But it was right there in the car when Gomez arrived."

Mariano Mercado brought a sigh up from the very soles of his tiny feet. "Was it?" he said and lapsed into a brooding silence.

This nettled me. "Will you kindly tell me what you're talking about? I'm referring to the bag again."

"Oh, the bag. Well, when I was sitting in the car, I thought I should open the bag. Perhaps it would contain some clue to the killing. So I took a bunch of keys from the corpse. None of the keys would fit."

"So?"

"It is as obvious as pneumonia. The bag must have been switched. Certainly Dumbross would have carried the key to his own bag."

"But how? Why?"

"That I do not know. You will return the car to Hendershot and ask him if he cares to pay us to find out."

"Do you think he'll care to engage our services again after we fumbled the first assignment?"

Mercado nodded. "I think perhaps he might. Since he is an American, he will have a very low opinion of the Mexican Police Department. Moreover, there are not many private operatives in town. None who speak English grammatically. And I rather think Mr. Hendershot will be most interested in finding out who has Dumbross' bag—even more interested than in having someone indicted for murder."

I got up and sighed. "All right," I said. "But frankly, I don't think much of the assignment."

His dark eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute," he said.

I waited, while he stared at the bare and antiseptic wall.

"Look," he said at last, "you know that lottery store across the street?"

"I should. I keep them in business."

"You know Pancho?"

"Sure."

"Well, he's there all day leaning over that counter and thrusting his busy nose into whatever happens. Ask him if a truck or some sort of wagon pulled up in front of here yesterday. Just after we got back from lunch."

I blinked. "Why?"

"Just ask him."

It was my turn to shrug. I turned on my heel and left the room.

I went across the street, bought a lottery ticket and asked Pancho Mercado's question.

"Ayer?" he said. "Yesterday. *A las tres horas?* There was no truck. No cart. *Pero*, there was a station wagon. It went away after a little while. Why?"

Since I didn't know the answer to that myself, I said nothing, recrossed the street and climbed once more into the Hendershot car. I drove off slowly. I was in no great rush to face Charlie Hendershot. I was sure he wasn't going to like the news I had for him.

I BRAKED the car at the iron gates which led to the Hendershot estate, climbed out and tugged at the bell. After a short wait my

old pal, Indian Joe, arrived, grinned at me and opened the portals. He climbed into the front seat beside me as I drove around the house to the garage at the rear.

As I came out of the garage I said: "Is Mr. Hendershot in? I want to see him."

The Indian looked at me oddly, I thought. Then he shook his head. "He's downtown. But he should be back soon. Do you want to wait? I'll introduce you to his nephew. Come on."

We walked toward the house. The Indian stopped suddenly and stared into the sky. Curiously, my eyes followed his gaze. I peered into blue sky, nothing more.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Buzzards. Way the hell up."

I stared again. I still saw nothing but sky.

"I can't see any buzzards."

The Indian chuckled. "You will in a minute."

I kept on staring. A few second later I saw two black pinpoints in the heavens.

"I see them now," I said. Then added: "You have damned good eyes."

He nodded proudly. "The best in Wyoming. I can see anything that—"

A querulous voice interrupted us. "Bill, you talk too damned much. Who is this gentleman?"

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I turned around. Standing some few yards from us, beneath a huge bougainvillea, was a thin pale-faced individual of about thirty. He was well-dressed, and smiled mirthlessly at me in greeting.

Bill explained my identity and my mission. Then he announced to me that this was Walgreen Phillips, Hendershot's nephew.

"Come on up to the house," he said. "My uncle should return soon. In the meantime you can have a drink. You, Bill, get back to the caretaker's lodge."

I watched the glance the two exchanged and came to the conclusion that there was no great friendship between the Indian and Hendershot's nephew.

Phillips led me into the house. A few moments later, I was seated in a cushioned chair of which Mariano Mercado would have vehemently disapproved. Doubtless, a trillion germs had taken up their abode in the luxurious upholstery. However, it was comfortable.

Phillips brought me a Scotch and soda and chatted amiably. As we talked, a square-shouldered man with gray hair and a weathered face came into the room.

He said: "Where's the boss? Did Dumbross get through all right?"

I squirmed uneasily in my chair. Although the Indian had told Phillips who I was, I had not yet mentioned Dumbross. I only wanted to make that speech once and I was saving it for Hendershot.

Phillips shrugged. He said to me: "This is Hamilton. Used to be my uncle's foreman in Wyoming. He's still his right hand." Then he looked back at Hamilton and said: "Latham here can tell you about Dumbross. He's just returned the car in which he drove Dumbross to the airport."

Hamilton looked at me inquiringly. There was nothing I could do except tell the truth.

"Dumbross," I said, "is dead. He was shot through the head as he got out of the car at the airport."

HAMILTON inhaled swiftly. He stared at me as if he were holding me personally responsible for the murder.

"Shot?" he yelled. "I told Hendershot not to engage any damned fool local shamus. My God, where is he now?"

"You mean Mercado?"

"I mean Dumbross."

"The *policia* have taken over."

"And have they got—" He broke off. "Where have they taken him? Whom should I see?"

"Colonel Gomez. He seems to be in charge."

Hamilton cursed again and ran from the room. I gathered he was dashing to the garage for a car. Phillips seemed to have taken the news more or less quietly.

"Did they get the guy who shot Dumbross?" he asked.

I shook my head. I emptied my glass and began to wish that Mercado had handled this deal himself. A few moments later, Phillips got up. He said: "There's my uncle now."

I heard a door slam and a moment later, Hendershot entered the room. Phillips greeted him, waved a farewell to me and left us alone. Hendershot said: "Well?"

I stood up, took a deep breath and went into it. As I was finishing my story, Hendershot's face became an angry red. Before he could speak, I said hastily: "Mr. Hamilton has already gone down to the police who have the body and effects. And Señor Mercado wants to know if you would be interested in retaining him to help find the killer."

"Mercado!" he cried and it sounded very much like a dirty word.

He stared at me. He opened his mouth as if to ask a question then appeared to think better of it. As we stood there in silent and unpleasant tableau, Phillips raced into the room.

"Come with me!" he yelled. "They've got Bill. He's out in the back there, by the new chicken run. He's dead."

Hendershot blinked. Then, without a word, he ran after Phillips who raced out of the house, across the back lawn. I took a deep breath and dashed along after them. At least, I reflected, here was one corpse which Mercado wouldn't have to explain.

We ran over mowed grass, through a thicket of palm trees into a barren area where some concrete had been laid. We were forced to climb over a barrier of carpenter's horses and various tools in order to reach the space where the Indian lay.

He was on his back staring into the clear blue Mexican sky. As we came up to him I saw that there was a crimson stain over his heart. Hendershot looked down at him. He clapped a hand to his brow distractedly.

"For the love of heaven!" he cried. "Why, Bill? What on earth did Bill have to do with it?"

He knelt down at the Indian's side and touched his pulse. The Indian opened his eyes which surprised me. He certainly should have been dead by now. He apparently was a tough Indian who died very slowly.

He looked at Hendershot, then at me. Finally, his gaze traveled to Phillips. He shook his head slowly, then spoke in such a low tone I could scarcely hear him. He said, as closely as I could make out: "*Yo semiti.*"

Then he closed his eyes. Hendershot shook his head. "My God! Why would they do this? Why—"

He caught my eye. "All right," he said. "Get Mercado. I need all the help I can get. I've heard he's a bright boy, though the Lord

knows he certainly didn't demonstrate that fact today. Tell him to work on the case. I'll pay him a fat fee. But it's contingent. If he doesn't deliver he doesn't get paid. And there's one other thing."

"Yes?"

"When and if he finds this killer I want him delivered to me personally. Not to the cops. I want him handed over to me. Do you get that?"

I nodded.

"All right. Go get him. There isn't any time to lose. The trail's getting colder every minute."

CHAPTER THREE

Message from Garcia

I TURNED on my heel and left the estate. I found a taxi out in the street and after the usual spirited haggle, engaged it to take me back to Mercado's office.

I found him poring over a statistical pamphlet issued by an insurance company. He looked up as I came in. There was a worried expression on his face.

"Do you know," he asked, "how many Indians die from *pinta* each year in Patagonia?"

"No," I said. "However, three men have died from bullets within the past twenty-four hours. One right here in this room, one whom you were supposed to be guarding at the airport, and now Hendershot's Indian."

He blinked his black eyes mildly, said: "Hendershot's Indian?"

"Yes. I told you about him. Well, he just got a bullet in his heart out at Hendershot's place."

He sighed, ran his slim fingers through his raven hair and looked contemplative.

"Moreover, Hendershot's decided to retain you, on the condition that you hand the killer, if and when found, over to him—not to Gomez."

Mercado nodded slowly. "That checks with what I've been thinking. He really doesn't want the killer at all."

"Then why is he offering you dough to find him?"

Mariano Mercado glanced at his wrist-watch. He seized a blue bottle from the array on his desk, tipped a pill into his palm, placed it on his tongue and washed it down with a sterilized glass of triple-distilled water.

"All right," he said, "tell me about it. Tell me all that you know. And in English. You think better in your own language."

I lit a cigarette and went into it. I related every pertinent item which had occurred during my visit to the Hendershot establishment. I finished with the story of the dying Indian's last words.

"He looked at me, then at Hendershot, then at Phillips. Then he said, '*Yo semiti.*' Of course *yo* is Spanish for *I*. But I'm damned if I can figure the verb. What does it mean?"

He stared at me for a long, silent moment, then said: "What does it mean in Spanish?"

"Naturally."

He sighed. "Nothing."

"But it must mean something. A dying man doesn't talk jargon."

"It does mean something. But not in Spanish. The man was an American Indian, you know, not a Mexican Indian."

"Well, it certainly doesn't mean anything in English," I said testily.

He smiled faintly. "You have been wrong before, *amigo.*"

For the time being, he let it go at that. A few minutes later, we went out for our leisurely lunch. We had returned to the office for the siesta period, but before I could divest myself of my coat there were racing steps on the stairs and a sharp knocking at the door. I opened it to admit Hendershot.

His eyes blazed with fury and his cheeks flushed. He brushed past me into the presence of Mariano Mercado.

"That Colonel Gomez," he exploded. "He's a crook. A thief. A swindler."

Mercado bowed gravely and in whole-hearted accord. "*Es verdad,*" he said. "He is all of those things. And more."

"You've got to do something about it," roared Hendershot. "I'll pay you any reasonable price. But you've got to help me."

"What did *el coronel* do?" asked Mercado.

"Swindled me. I went to see him. I wanted to get Dumbross' effects, to send them to his relatives back in the States. Well, in order to cut red tape I offered Gomez a thousand pesos if he'd give me Dumbross' baggage."

"And he failed to do so?"

"He gave me the baggage all right. But he'd been through the valise first."

"You mean he'd stolen something from the bag?"

"He certainly had!"

"What was it that he stole?"

Hendershot opened his mouth and closed it again. "I happen to know," he said quietly, "that Dumbross carried something of great value in his bag. It isn't there now. Gomez has stolen it."

Mercado shook his head slowly. "I have a low opinion of Colonel Gomez. It is difficult for me to defend him. Nevertheless, *señor*, he did not steal anything from the Dumbross' bag."

"But it's not in the bag now," said Hendershot. "And I know he was carrying it when he arrived in Mexico."

"True," said Mercado. "But whatever it was, it was taken from him on the train."

I think that someone switched bags on him."

Hendershot stared at him incredulously.

"You see," Mercado explained patiently, "while I was waiting for the police to come for the body, I began to wonder. I felt rather responsible for the killing. I thought perhaps I might find some clue to the murder in his bag. So I took the keys from the corpse and tried to open it. None of the keys fitted."

Hendershot frowned. "But that's impossible. Dumbross certainly had a key for the valise."

Mercado nodded. "That's what I thought. It seemed strange that he should travel with the locked bag and no key. So I reached the conclusion that his bag had been switched for another which, externally, looked about the same."

HENDERSHOT looked at him keenly. "Go on," he said, "keep talking. I'd heard that you were a bright boy."

"It came to me," went on Mercado, "that perhaps whoever switched bags on him wanted Dumbross dead before he discovered what had happened. Why? Because when Dumbross opened the bag, he would know at once who had made the switch. So he was killed at the airport."

"Anything else?" said Hendershot. "It sounds all right so far."

"Possibly there is some more," said Mercado. "But, as yet, it's all conjecture. I couldn't prove any of it."

"Can you find the murderer?"

"I think I can find him. But whether I can produce enough evidence for a conviction is something else again."

"I don't want evidence. I want *him*."

"You are going to punish him yourself, *señor*?"

"No. The police may have him when I'm done with him. I want him first. And I won't need the kind of evidence that a court will need."

Mercado smiled blandly. "Naturally. As a matter of fact you don't want the killer at all. You merely want to get your hands on the valise."

There was a long silence. Hendershot stared thoughtfully at Mercado. "You are a bright boy after all, aren't you?"

Mariano Mercado nodded a reluctant assent.

"*Con permiso*, I shall come out to your house this evening. There are some things I want to look into. There are some questions I desire to ask."

"All right," said Hendershot. "But let's not waste any more time. The killer could be in Siam by now."

"I think he will remain in Mexico City," said Mercado. "Until tonight, then."

Hendershot stalked out of the office. I

looked at Mercado in complete bewilderment.

"What's it all about?" I asked. "Have you really any idea?"

He spread his palms. "I have several ideas. I can almost explain precisely what happened. But I lack one fact. I do not know the exact motive. And I know nothing of Dumbross. Now, let us have a half hour's silence. I must think."

I picked up a magazine and immersed myself in it as Mariano Mercado gave himself over to thought. About twenty minutes later, footfalls sounded on the stairs. I answered the knock at the door to admit Gomez and a slim, mustachioed man of about thirty.

They followed me into Mercado's presence. "This," announced Gomez pompously, "is Señor Garcia. He is a confidential agent of the Federal Government."

Mercado bowed. Gomez sat down heavily. He looked around the room expansively, made a gesture in Garcia's direction.

"Ask him, *señor*. Ask him what we want to know."

Garcia regarded Gomez coldly. "You will leave us, *coronel*. I wish to speak to *este hombre* privately."

Gomez blinked. "But I am of the *policia*."

"Privately," said Garcia adamantly.

Gomez got up. Disgruntled, he left the room. As the door closed, Garcia said: "That one, I do not trust."

"Nor I," said Mercado. "Your business, *señor*?"

"You were with this Dumbross today when he was murdered?"

"I regret to admit that I was."

"And it was the *Americano* Hendershot who engaged you to travel to the airport with Dumbross?"

Mercado didn't answer right away. He stared at Garcia and his bright little eyes became brighter. "Wait a minute," he said. "Maybe this is it. Perhaps, it has fallen right into my lap. You are Garcia, a confidential agent of the Federal Government. Interested in political matters, maybe?"

Garcia nodded. "That's right. So I've come here to find out what you know about Dumbross."

"Perhaps," said Mercado, "it will be mutually advantageous if you tell me what you know instead."

Garcia shrugged. "Not much. His name was not Dumbross and he was an agent of the Falangist Party of Spain. That much I know. I suspect that he was traveling through Mexico to another country to foment a Fascist revolution."

Mariano Mercado smiled beatifically. "I love you," he said simply.

Garcia started. I hastened to explain that this was merely Mercado's method of sig-

nifying whole-hearted approval, nothing more.

"I love you," he explained, "because you have provided me with the missing piece of my puzzle. If what you say is true, could it be possible that Dumbross was carrying a large sum of money in his bag to be used in furthering his political plans?"

"It would be quite likely. Save that Gomez assures me he wasn't carrying any luggage at all."

"Gomez lies. He sold his bag to Señor Hendershot."

Garcia stood up. "Then let's get the bag," he said excitedly. "Perhaps there's something in it. Perhaps—"

"There isn't," said Mercado wearily. He went into an elaborate explanation of his switched valise theory.

Garcia nodded as he finished. "I am not particularly interested in what money he may have had in his bag, or the fact that it was stolen from him. Dumbross has been stopped. But I want his accomplices."

"If you will come to Señor Hendershot's home with us tonight," said Mercado, "I can deliver them to you. You may have to dig up your own evidence. I also think I can have a killer or two for Gomez. I need my gun back."

"Your gun back?"

Mercado sighed and explained his difficulties with Gomez.

"Don't worry," said Garcia. "I'll get you back your gun. Tell them at the house I'm a helper of yours. It won't be necessary to tell them my official position."

"I don't get it," I said. "Do you expect to find Dumbross' friends and his killer all at Hendershot's place?"

"I do," said Mariano Mercado.

"Then I still don't get it."

MERCADO didn't answer me. He looked over the array of bottles on his desk and selected those pills, antiseptics and various other nostrums which he thought he might need before the night's work was done.

He stuffed them in his topcoat pocket and then, despite the mildness of the night, carefully donned it, wrapped a white silk scarf about his thin neck, pulled on a pair of woolen gloves and announced he was ready to foray forth.

We were ushered into the Hendershot living room by a white-coated Indian. A fire burned brightly in the vast grate. Seated before it were Phillips and Hamilton. Hendershot rose from a desk as we entered.

Mariano Mercado introduced Garcia as his second assistant. I gathered that the implication was that I was his first. Then we all sat down while the servant mixed us a drink. Mercado rose once and closed a window some four yards away from which there was no

draft whatever. Then he sighed and said: "This is a bad business."

All of us watched anticipatorily. I knew him well enough to know that he really had something. There was a suppressed excitement about him. For the moment I doubted if he was even aware of the bacteriological peril which constantly threatened all mankind.

"Well," said Hendershot, "go ahead with your questions. When will you be able to turn the killer over to me?"

"Before the evening is over," said Mercado. He bowed in Garcia's direction as if tacitly making the promise to him at the same time.

"First," he went on to Hendershot, "you will forgive me if I clear up the matter which most concerns me. For that I would like you to call in the servants."

"The servants? What on earth can they have to do with it? They're all ignorant peons who couldn't possibly understand what is involved here."

"Nevertheless, will you call them, *por favor?*"

Hendershot shrugged and spoke to the butler. He disappeared and came back a few minutes later followed by an awed group of six people, three of them women.

Hendershot said: "I'll give you their names and positions."

Mercado shook his head. "That is not necessary."

He stood up and approached the huddled group. He smiled at them, said: "*Qué tal, amigos?*"

They bowed and smiled back at him uncertainly.

"I am your friend," he said. "I am your good friend. I come to bring you news of Miguel."

The response to that crack was amazing. Six voices rose in concert and cried: "Miguel?"

"Indeed," said Mercado. "You were his friends?"

They nodded in unison. A woman of about forty detached herself from the group. "I was to marry him, *señor*," she said. "I am the cook, Ulalia. I have been *triste* since he disappeared, *muy triste*."

"Of course," said Mercado, "Miguel was interested in politics? Interested in his country's welfare?"

"*Sí, señor*. I have told him politics was not for an ignorant peon such as he, but he would not listen. But tell me, *señor*, where is he? What has happened to him?"

Hendershot said: "What nonsense is this, Mercado? What has this to do with what I am paying you for? This is idiotic. Back to the kitchen, all of you."

"*Espere!*" snapped Mercado and his voice cracked like a whip. The servants halted.

Mercado crossed the room. He put a consoling hand on the cook's shoulder. "I regret, *señorita*, that your lover is dead."

The woman burst into tears. At a signal from the butler, the other servants led her from the room. Mercado sighed and resumed his chair. He sat still and silent, gazing thoughtfully into the fire.

Phillips, Hamilton and Garcia were staring at him.

Hendershot glowered, and said: "What the devil are you up to?"

"The matter in which I was most interested," said Mercado, "was naturally the murder committed in my office. That was what I wanted to check first."

Hendershot grunted. "And now have you checked it?"

"Indeed."

"And what have you learned?"

"I have learned nothing. I have merely corroborated what I knew from the beginning."

"And that is?"

"That you killed Miguel."

CHAPTER FOUR

It's In the Bag

THERE was a long silence. Phillips and Hamilton looked somewhat incredulously at Hendershot.

Hendershot said: "Are you *loco*? Why the devil should I kill an eighty-peso-a-month gardener?"

"First, let me tell *how* you did it. You came to my office and found Miguel there waiting for me. He had come to tell me of Dumbross—who the man was, and what he was about to do. Miguel was a democrat and a patriot. He does not approve of the Falangists. So you killed him in my office.

"You left immediately to get a conveyance in order to remove the body before discovery. When you came back with the station wagon, I had already returned. So you pretended you didn't know Miguel. It was safe enough. You'd taken all identification from his pockets. And who cares about a dead peon? The newspapers don't even mention such killings. It was a hundred-to-one that no one at this house would ever hear of the killing even if they read the papers, which they don't."

Hendershot licked his lips. "And how did you know that I knew Miguel?"

"Because you were so concerned when you learned that we knew his first name. You were terrified that you had overlooked some identification which would have established his last name as well as his first. Then he could have been traced to this house."

"And," said Hendershot, "to establish a

case you must also supply a motive for my killing him, you know."

"That is not too hard, even if it is only conjecture. You, *señor*, are a Falangist. It was your task to see that Dumbross was protected while going through this city. To that end, you planned to engage me. Miguel must have overheard you talking of it to Hamilton or your nephew. Miguel did not approve. He decided to call on me first to tell me what was afoot."

"You can prove this in a courtroom?" said Hendershot.

Mercado shook his head. "I am only trying to convince my friend, Señor Garcia here."

"I am convinced," said Garcia grimly.

"Then let us move on to other matters," said Mercado. "Now let us get to the murder in which you are interested—that of Dumbross."

"Of course," said Hendershot, not too convincingly, "this talk about my killing Miguel is absurd. I am glad you concede that you can't prove it, Mercado. But get to Dumbross."

"Dumbross," said Mercado, "was killed by a man about whom I can furnish no proof, either. However, in this case it doesn't matter."

"What the devil do you mean by that?" said Hendershot. "It certainly matters whether or not you can produce proof in the Miguel affair."

Mercado shook his head dreamily. "Oh, no, it doesn't," he said.

"Proof or no proof," said Hamilton moving uneasily in his chair, "we want the man who killed Dumbross."

"You'll have to dig him up," said Mercado. "By the way, where is he buried?"

"Who?" snapped Hamilton.

"Your Indian. Your American Indian. Bill, I think he was called."

Hendershot and Hamilton gaped at him. They said, almost in unison: "You mean that Bill killed Dumbross?"

Mercado nodded. Phillips blinked at him and, for that matter, so did I. How he had masterminded this was, at the moment, utterly beyond me.

"I have ceased to think you a bright boy," said Hendershot. "Bill didn't know what it was all about. He could have had no possible motive for killing Dumbross. He didn't even know who Dumbross was."

"He killed him for what was in that bag," said Mercado.

Hendershot took a deep breath. "You mean Bill switched those bags? He couldn't have. He was here on the estate almost all morning."

"Look," said Mercado mildly, "perhaps, it will be easier if I first tell you who killed Bill. Then we can work backwards."

"Very well," said Hamilton, "who killed Bill?"

Mercado looked around the room and at last his black eyes lighted on Phillips. "He did," he said.

PHILLIPS returned his gaze steadily for a moment, then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"This is good," he said. "The entire household is a nest of killers. First, Uncle Charlie killed Miguel. Next, Bill killed Dumbross. Then I killed Bill. Who has Hamilton murdered?"

Mercado spread his palms. "I have no idea," he said. "But that doesn't concern us."

Garcia turned to him anxiously. "You're sure of all this?"

Mercado nodded. "Surest of all that the men you want are Hendershot and Hamilton. Gomez will want Señor Phillips."

Hendershot said: "This is becoming a farce. Either you have cards, Mercado, or you haven't. If so, play them. Whom are you accusing and what is your evidence?"

"Bill is dead," said Mercado. "Hence I am accusing you of killing Miguel and your nephew of killing Bill."

"You've already given us the Miguel theory. What is this about my nephew killing the Indian?"

"It is simple and obvious. Your nephew was one of the people who knew of Dumbross' arrival?"

Hendershot nodded.

"And he also knew what was in that valise?"

"Yes, he knew."

"So what is simpler? He takes a taxi or perhaps one of your excellent cars and drives north to Barrientos or Lecheria or some other nearby town. There he boards the train. He doubtless knew from you what Dumbross would look like and what sort of bag he would be carrying. Your original information must have contained those items so that Dumbross could be identified when you sent me to guard him.

"So, Phillips had a substitute yellow bag made. It wouldn't have to be too exact a facsimile. The chances are Dumbross would not notice as long as the bag had the general characteristics of the original."

I glanced at Phillips. It was apparent that he possessed neither the stoicism nor the guts of his uncle. His face was pale and there was frank terror in his eyes.

Mercado continued: "It was simple enough for Phillips to inform Dumbross that discretion prevented you, Hendershot, from meeting him. Your nephew conveyed your greetings and then slipped off the train alone as soon as it arrived at *Buena Vista Estación*. Now Phillips had the bag. But sooner or later Dumbross would know that they had been switched. Moreover, it wouldn't be too difficult to figure out who had done it. So it was necessary to murder Dumbross."

There was blazing fury on Hendershot's face as he turned to his nephew. Phillips stammered: "He can't prove it. He's making it up just as he made up that yarn about your killing Miguel."

"Of course," said Mercado, "I knew this was what had happened but I did not know who had switched the bags until this morning



—that is, until after your Indian, Bill, had died."

Hendershot looked back at Mariano Mercado. "What has that to do with it?"

"The man who killed Dumbross fired the shot from a windmill a thousand kilometers away. Either he used a telescopic sight or he was possessed of uniquely splendid vision. Now, since the war such sights have been absolutely unobtainable in Mexico. The American Indian is reputed to have the eyes of an eagle. He—"

I thought of something. "He had!" I explained. I told of Bill's sighting the buzzards in the sky before I could even see them in pinpoint size.

"Naturally," said Mercado. "He was Phillips' accomplice. Phillips stole the bag. The Indian killed Dumbross. Apparently they were to split the swag."

There was a moment's silence in the room. Never in all my life had I seen such an expression of flaming rage as was on Hendershot's face at that moment.

"But," said Hamilton dubiously, "how can you know Phillips killed the Indian? You weren't even near here at the time."

"Why," said Mercado blandly, "the Indian himself accused Phillips. Before witnesses—Hendershot and Latham, here."

"That," said Hendershot, "is a lie."

Mercado shook his head. "What did Bill say when he died?"

"*Ya something*," said Hendershot. "Evidently he spoke in Spanish. I caught the word *yo*. I missed the verb."

"There was no verb. And there were not two words. There was only one. The word he spoke as he stared at Phillips was *yosemite*."

"Yosemite?" I said, "that's a national park in the States."

"Sure," said Mercado. "Remember Bill was an American Indian. In death he reverted to his natural language. Yosemite is an Indian word. It has two meanings. The first is grizzly bear."

"And the second?" asked Hamilton.

"Killer," said Mariano Mercado.

I watched Hendershot. It seemed to me that some of his wrath was abating, that there was a thoughtful, crafty expression in his eyes.

"It's all conjecture, said Phillips anxiously. "Don't believe him, Uncle Charles."

"It will cease to be conjecture," said Mercado, "when your fingerprints are found on the bag."

HENDERSHOT transferred his attention from his nephew and gaped at Mercado.

"You mean you know where the bag is?"

Mariano Mercado nodded. He lit a brown cigarette. "Look," said Hendershot, "tell me

where the bag is and name your own price."

Garcia said: "You really can locate the bag?"

Again Mercado nodded. "I shall deliver it to you, *señor*. It would do you no good, Hendershot. Remember, you must be punished for the murder of Miguel."

"Rot," snapped Hendershot. "You have no evidence there at all."

Mercado smiled faintly. "We don't need any. The men of Colonel Gomez have a most simple system. Since we have no capital punishment in Mexico, since a man's life is never taken by the law, it is amazing how many of them try to escape. No, Garcia?"

Garcia smiled without mirth. I knew what he was talking about. True, there is no capital punishment in Mexico. An ordinary murder of passion will get you something from two years to ten. However, a killing of which the police disapprove for reasons of politics or morality will get you a bullet in the back. The official announcement will state that you tried to escape.

I looked up at Hendershot. From the pallor on his face I realized he was aware of all this.

"First, and most important," said Garcia. "Where is the bag? The Government will want it."

"Well," said Mercado, "Latham here tells me that the Indian was killed out at the edge of the estate where some construction is going on, a place quite inaccessible and a little difficult to reach. One must, I am told, climb over carpenter's horses to get there. So—"

He broke off as Hamilton got to his feet and pulled a .38 from his hip pocket. Hamilton backed to the fire-place and covered us all with the gun.

"O.K.," he said. "I get it."

Mariano Mercado smiled and waved a palm. "You see," he said to Hendershot, "you had a bright boy in your employ all the time."

Hendershot said to Hamilton: "What the devil are you talking about?"

"It's easy to figure what he's going to say next. Bill was killed out in an inaccessible spot. What was he doing there?"

"He was hiding the bag," said Hendershot.

"Close," said Mercado. "He was digging it up."

"Of course," said Hamilton. "He and Phillips had hidden it out there. Bill decided on a doublecross. He went out to get the bag. Phillips caught him at it and killed him. Then Phillips dashed in here and said he'd found Bill shot."

Hendershot drew a deep breath. "We haven't lost yet, then. Hold them here. Keep that gun on them. I'll get some of the servants and a couple of shovels and find that bag if we have to dig all night. It must be somewhere near the spot we found the body."

Hamilton nodded. "After that we can lock 'em up and take the bag out of the country ourselves."

"Sure," said Hendershot from the doorway. He glared at Phillips. "Except for him."

I thought for a moment Phillips was going to faint. He was quite aware that a tacit death sentence had been passed upon him.

HENDERSHOT left the room. We heard his footsteps fade away down the long corridor. Phillips buried his head in his hands. Garcia looked at Mercado. Mercado heaved a heavy sigh, glanced over at me and raised his eyebrows.

I knew what he meant and I didn't like it. Some time ago we had agreed that when a situation similar to this occurred we should simply advance on the man with the gun from two directions simultaneously. It meant that one of us, quite likely, would get shot. But the man with the gun would lose it.

Mercado leaned forward in his chair. He was still smiling blandly. I braced myself and was aware of a strange emptiness at the pit of my stomach. I made no bones about the fact that I was as afraid of bullets as Mariano Mercado was of germs.

Mercado's voice cracked out. "*Adelante!*"

I sprang from the right and he hurtled through the air from the left. Rattled, Hamilton swung his gun's muzzle to Mercado, then hesitated and swung it around to me. I closed my eyes but kept going.

I opened them as I heard the sound of shot. I saw the gun shoot a hole in the ceiling as Hamilton went over backwards. Garcia had attacked from center and reached his objective with his head in the middle of Hamilton's stomach.

Hamilton fell screaming into the fireplace. Mercado seized his fallen gun.

Mercado said: "Garcia, have you a gun?"

"Naturally."

"Take these men in. Latham and I will get the bag."

Garcia prodded Phillips to his feet. I followed Mercado into the garden.

A lantern bobbing ahead of us in the darkness guided us. We approached silently, Mercado in the lead like a stalking cat. We came upon them as Hendershot, far too engrossed to hear, was staring down into an excavation in the earth just beyond the line of newly-laid concrete.

Two of the manservants were digging. Just as we came up, one of them lifted a dirt-stained pigskin bag.

"*Es este, señor?*"

Hendershot grabbed the bag as Mercado poked the gun in his ribs and said: "*Con permiso.*"

He snatched the bag with his left hand.

Hendershot turned around and wilted. The taller of the two servants leaped from the hole and put a hand on Mercado's throat. I slugged him and he fell.

Mercado handed me the bag. "Tell the peons to go to bed. We don't need them. We have the bag and Hendershot."

I spoke to the servants in Spanish. The man I had hit got up slowly and crossed himself. As he did so the yellow gleam of the lantern shone on his hand. Mercado stared at it and his face turned from coppery brown to tattle-tale gray.

"*Dios!*" he exclaimed. "*Mire!*"

I looked. There was something of a blemish on the man's right hand.

Mercado howled, "Ringworm! I am dead."

He dropped the gun. Hendershot and I grabbed for it. I won by a millimeter and thrust its muzzle into his ribs. Mercado was thrusting trembling hands into his pockets. One of them emerged a moment later with a tiny bottle of iodine. The bottle slipped in his hands and dropped on the concrete.

"*Dios!*" he shrieked. "And where will I find a *farmacia* open in this neighborhood? *Dios!*"

He had completely forgotten the matter in hand. He turned and fled into the night, racing down toward the main gate in search of a drugstore. I cursed him, sighed and took Hendershot back to the house.

I arrived at the Mercado domicile some two hours later. Mercado sat at his desk. Although his hand was red with iodine he was soaking it in a colorless solution.

"Listen," I said, annoyed, "when you dropped that gun, Hendershot could have snatched it and killed us both."

"Does it matter whether I die from a bullet or a disease? I *had* to get a disinfectant."

"So I noticed. We opened the bag."

He evinced a little interest. "What was in it?"

"Dough. Two hundred grand in American notes. He must have smuggled it across the border. Plus several political documents mentioning names which will not only interest the Mexican Government but also the American State Department."

Mercado sighed. "I should be given a pension," he said. "I have risked my life for my country."

"So did Garcia and I," I said. "We tackled Hamilton while he held that gun, too."

"Gun," he said contemptuously. "Who cares for a gun? But were you touched by a peon with ringworm? Was Garcia? Do you know what I have risked? Here, let me give you the statistics."

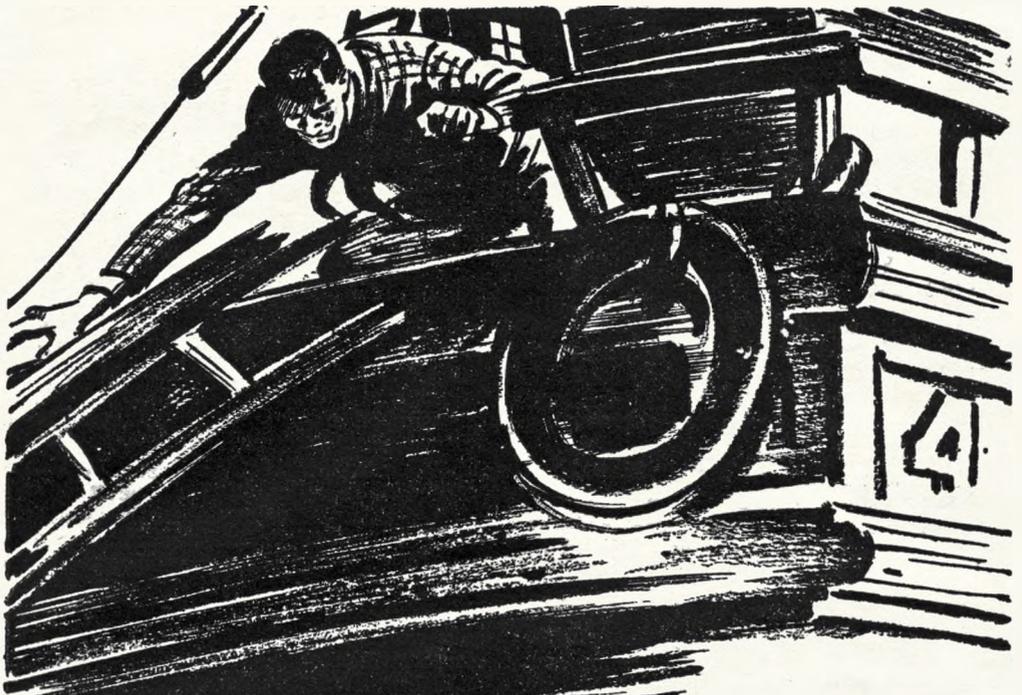
I sighed. I settled back and lit a cigarette. I got the statistics. In Spanish, in English and in detail.

Killing Is A Grave Business

By **C. WILLIAM
HARRISON**

The original Hannibal crossed the mountains. But the triple-threat businessman, ex-welterweight Hannibal Smith was a mountain. The fat man from Indianapolis took a trip to Arborville to protect one of its citizens from danger, arrived too late to prevent a murder, nearly drowned, and stated: "I'll never come nearer bein' killed while my life is bein' saved."





Hannibal Smith knew he was falling toward the churning screw of the barge. He knew a swift stab of horror, of panic.

CHAPTER ONE

Meet Hannibal Smith

THIS man Smith was, in a word, triplets. He was too obese for one man, and he had enough chins above his snug fitting collar to supply three individuals. But when a man supplants the strict training of the prize ring with five-course dinners and beer, as Hannibal Smith had done, he can expect nature to assert herself.

Still and all, Mr. Smith had never felt a serious need for concerning himself over his personal "battle of the bulge." He still had a neat left hook.

He lived and worked in what had been dubbed by his sundry friends as Hysteria Hall. Anything could happen there—and frequently did. It was a broad-fronted brick building at the rim of the city's seedy section, and Hysteria Hall's three deep wings were further testimony to Hannibal Smith's reputation as a triple-threat businessman.

When you walked through the front door, as

Roger Gileen did that gray wet day when the *Affair of the Homeless Cadaver* began, you were further impressed by three-in-one Hannibal Smith.

Mr. Smith was a cigar-chewing Buddha sitting behind his desk near the building's front door. He looked up as Roger Gileen entered, seeing a tall, well-made man in his late thirties. The stranger hesitated uncertainly. Hannibal Smith smiled affably.

"Sid-down," he invited. He had a low, whispy voice.

The stranger sat down, fidgeting with the brim of his Homburg. He was beginning to gray at his temples, and there was a certain tightness at the corners of his mouth that baited the curiosity of the fat man behind the desk.

Hannibal Smith waited. Then he said: "My mother used to tell me the best way to pitch a tepee was to start pitching. Of course that was back when they were building the U. P. railroad through Dakota Territory."

The tall man fidgeting on the edge of his chair frowned slightly. "The Union Pacific? Why, that was almost a hundred years ago."

"Uh-huh. We Sioux age slowly."

The tall stranger was uncertain. He showed it. But he was beginning to relax a little, and that was what Hannibal Smith wanted.

"I didn't know you were an Indian," the tall man said doubtfully. "Full blooded?" A polite, preoccupied question.

Hannibal Smith shook his head genially. "Half Injun, half engineer," he confided. "Like I said, there was a railroad goin' through the Sioux reservation . . . it was a bow-and-arrow wedding. Ma named me Phat-woolph. Which means Hannibal Smith."

It was fiction, simple and not too pure, but it got results. A smile loosened the tall man's mouth. It was usually as easy as that for Hannibal Smith to soften a customer. He had a way about him, lax and affable, pleasantly patient. He looked like an easy mark for a wise guy. But he wasn't.

Now that the ice was broken, the tall man spoke in a clipped, precise voice. "It wasn't easy for me to come here, Mr. Smith. You'll understand that when I give you the details." He glanced uneasily along the hall.

A leggy blonde was trotting toward them, shoving her right hand at some invisible object close in front of her.

She said: "How's this, chief?"

Now she scooped both hands down, gripping something that was not the least visible to the eyes of the tall man in the chair. She swept her hands up, and the invisible object she had held soared in an invisible arc toward an invisible target.

"Fine!" Hannibal Smith applauded. "Keep on practicing, Hannah."

Smith grinned at Roger Gileen. "I opened up a gym in one of the shanty districts. Kind of a hobby of mine—keeps the kids off the street while their folks work in war plants. Hannah is trying to get on the girls' basketball team, and this is her day to help out with my office work."

Smith pushed his round shape out of the chair. "So maybe we'd better hunt more privacy."

He had been a good welterweight in his day, this Hannibal Smith, but the weight he had picked up had taken none of the elasticity out of his muscles. He moved with surprising ease and smoothness down the hall. He paused at the entrance to the building's first wing. The door indicated: HANNIBAL SMITH, LOANS ON ANYTHING OF VALUE.

He looked at Roger Gileen. "Is that the nature of your business with me?"

"My name is Roger Gileen," he said, smiling, "and I don't need any money, Mr. Smith."

"Now," the fat man remarked, "I've heard everything."

He moved on. The door to the second of the building's three wings was inscribed: HANNIBAL SMITH, SALES.

Gileen shook his head.

"So that brings you to my 'Service Department,'" the fat man murmured. "And that department covers a multitude of evils, from matrimony to murder."

"There is only one name for what brought me here, Mr. Smith," Gileen said darkly. "It is murder!"

IT WAS a small and compact office. There were two well-worn leather chairs, a tall metal filing cabinet, and a desk that was built to Hannibal Smith's ample proportions, wide and solid.

There was a Brown County landscape on one of the oak-paneled walls, rather overbrilliant in oils and yet vividly true to the nature of that part of Indiana during autumn. And there was an enlarged photograph of a young man in boxing trunks, trim and poised, with his left hand pawed out and his right cocked, near his chin. Below it were the words: "Best wishes from Benny Leonard."

Hannibal Smith closed the door tightly. He motioned Gileen to a chair, and circled the end of his desk. He sat down. He reached for a pipe, stuffed its bowl with tobacco, and struck flame to the brown flakes. He sat there like that, with blue-gray smoke curling upward past his full lips and somewhat flattened nose, with his dark eyes seemingly lethargic and yet sub-surfaced with something that was shrewd and brittle.

He puffed contentedly for a while, then said interestedly: "So what brought you to me was murder."

Roger Gileen made a motion with his hand. "I'm not sure yet. That is, I can't definitely call it murder."

The fat man behind the desk said almost roughly: "Murder ain't a word to be careless with, Mr. Gileen. It's an ugly word, and I don't like it. I relish a good fight. I can swap knuckles with any man and enjoy it. But murder is something else. It's a knife in the back, it's slow poison or a bullet out of a dark alley. It's dirty fighting no matter how you look at it. So don't use that word in my office unless you're sure what you're talking about.

"Just be sure what color you've got on your brush before you start painting," Hannibal Smith said. "Stick to facts."

It was an unexpected outburst that startled Roger Gileen. He struggled his flat shoulders. Resentment stirred in his eyes. He rummaged through his pockets in a preoccupied way, found a cigarette, and struck flame to his lighter. He held the flame a full three inches out from the tobacco, and kept drawing absently on the cigarette, trying to get it lighted. He was struggling against his anger, and he showed it.

"You ought to stick to a pipe," Hannibal Smith suggested.

"I never smoked a pipe in my life," Gileen

stated evenly. He pulled the flame to the cigarette. "You ought to stick to the rules of business courtesy, Mr. Smith."

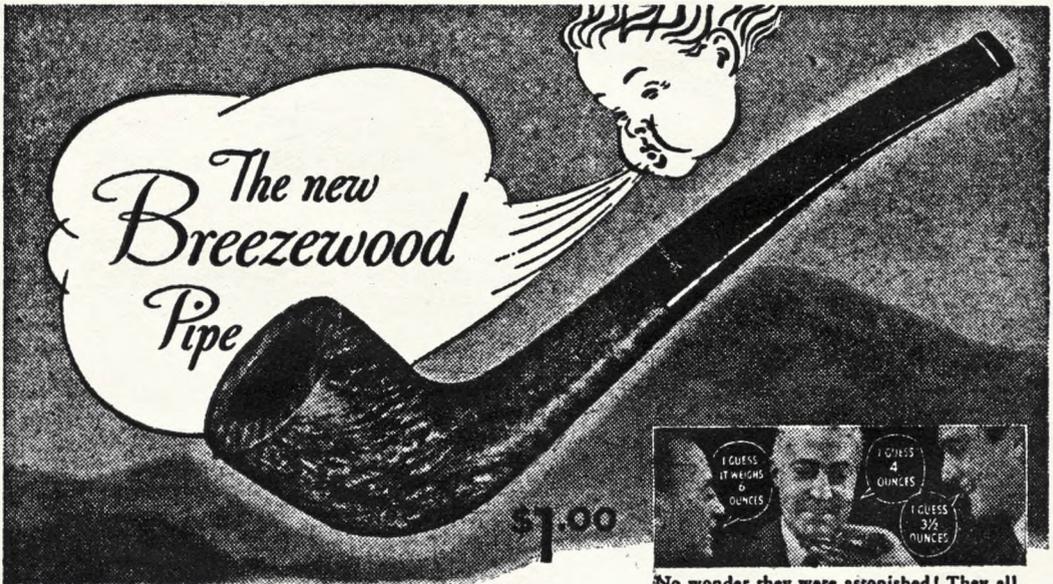
The fat man behind the desk answered calmly: "I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks, my friend. I've lived there most of my life. I've jerked sodas to pay my way through high school, and that's as far as I went with books. I fought in the prize ring, I've been a body guard, strike buster, and I've tangled with cops, killers, and con-men. Pink tea and pussyfoot conversation never got acquainted with me. I learned a long time ago that a straight left beats a roundhouse. So if you've got any business with me, spit it out, and stick to the facts."

It was blunt talk, tough talk, but then Hannibal Smith had never had a reputation of being a delicate man. Roger Gileen swallowed his anger, and began talking in a voice that was equally as blunt as the fat man's.

"My name you already know. I operate a small photographic supply store here in Indianapolis, but I spend most of my time on the road. In my line you have to keep scratching nowadays to find and buy merchandise."

Hannibal Smith murmured: "Uh-huh. And where does this murder that ain't definitely murder come in?"

"I'm getting to that. I have a brother, Phil-



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lip Gileen, whom I have seen but seldom during the past few years. No trouble between us, understand. It's just that his work and mine have given us little time for visiting each other. Phil lives downstate, in Arborville, on the Ohio river. You know where that is?"

Smith nodded. He waited.

Gileen went on. "Phil was always a conservative man. I thought it strange when he wrote me he had taken a partner in his shipping business. He operates a string of barges on the Ohio river.

"Phil admitted in his letters that his partner, John Nugent, leaned toward the radical. But they seemed to hit it off fine together. So much so that about a year ago they named each other beneficiaries in insurance policies they bought."

Interest stirred in Hannibal Smith's deep eyes. But he remained silent.

Worry began pinching Roger Gileen's voice. "But in Phil's last few letters he told of a growing friction between himself and John Nugent. Nugent had grown more radical in both politics and his ideas on managing their shipping business. On top of that, he had been gambling heavily with company money. Phil's last letter—I just got it this morning—told of an open quarrel, and knowing John Nugent as he does, Phil was frank in expressing his fear of violence. That's why I came to you."

GILEEN stopped talking. His skin had the healthy tanned look of one who used a sun lamp during the winter months. He showed a faint agitation under Hannibal Smith's steady silent gaze.

"So you want me to go down there and straighten out that trouble," Hannibal Smith stated.

Gileen nodded.

"I'll pay any reasonable fee you ask," he said.

The fat man's expression was lax. "You think I could do a better job than you? After all, he's your brother."

"You know how to handle such things," Gileen said anxiously. "I don't. You have both the experience and the ability to get tough when necessary. Phil never was one to scare easily, and I'm certain he is in real danger. You've got to help me."

Hannibal Smith hesitated. Then he began, almost irritably: "There's a few queer things—" But he didn't finish that. A scowl crawled into his placid features.

Gileen reached into his coat pocket, brought out several folded papers and leafed through them.

"I thought the letters Phil wrote me might help you. And here's a snapshot he had taken about a year ago. Until a year ago we almost

looked enough alike to be mistaken for twins. But he is a few years older than I. You'll find Phil considerably different from this photo. He picked up weight during the past year, grew a mustache."

The snapshot was in none too sharp focus. The image of the man was somewhat fuzzy, yet in spite of this Phil Gileen looked strikingly like this man who sat in front of Hannibal Smith's desk.

Phil Gileen was as tall, as lean, as clean-carved. He was standing near the wheel-house of an Ohio river barge, his strong shape outlined against the bluffs and hills in the background. Phil Gileen had been photographed in the act of jotting something in a small notebook.

Hannibal Smith looked up curiously. "Your brother left-handed?"

Roger Gileen smiled. "I was wondering if you were really as good as your reputation. You are. Yes," he admitted. "Phil is as natural with his left hand as I am with my right."

He glanced at his watch. "You'll have to hurry to catch the eleven-twenty train, Mr. Smith."

Smith stood up dourly. "I'm too fat to hurry."

"I'll drive you to the station. It's the least I can do to repay you for helping me."

"It would be the least you could do," the fat man reminded softly, "If it weren't for the price I'm going to charge you."

Gileen's was a well-equipped sedan of recent vintage. In one corner of the windshield was a collection of tax stickers, and a small label reading:

April 22, 1945

Your oil was changed at 22,504 miles.

Be good to your car, and it will be good to you. Handy's Service Station.

Hannibal Smith bulked deep in the sedan's seat, broodingly watching a misty rain fog the window. He didn't like wet weather. He was a fat man who liked sunshine and warm breezes, and he had lived long enough in Indianapolis to curse the futility of hoping for such weather as a steady diet.

The tires whispered on the wet pavement. "You got a nice little jalopy here," Smith said.

"It deserves more use than rationing lets me give it," Gileen said conversationally. "Six years old, and only—" he glanced down—22,741 miles on it. I haven't had it out of town for a month or more."

He braked at the curb in front of the railroad terminal. He hipped around in the seat, a grave, anxious man. He reached for his checkbook.

"If you'll tell me the amount of your fee—"

"I've been figurin' on that," the fat man

said. "It comes to four hundred and sixty-nine dollars and fifty cents."

Surprise widened Roger Gileen's eyes. "That's an odd amount to charge for helping my brother."

Hannibal Smith was scratching his pen on a sheet of paper. Date: Apr. 23, 1945. Name of Purchaser: Roger Gileen. He accepted Gileen's check.

"A very odd amount," Gileen repeated.

"Ain't it?" the fat man grinned. "I don't take pay for lending a hand to a man in trouble, Mr. Gileen. Your check pays for some merchandise that was hocked in my loan office a couple of months ago. Thanks—and good luck with the fifty gross of Easter Egg coloring you just bought."

CHAPTER TWO

"If I Should Die . . ."

IT WAS a small town pinched in by the hills to the north and the broad curving arm of the Ohio River. There had been a rain that afternoon, and at this hour of early evening the street's dust was still damp and the mingled smells of hills and river were in the air.

Hannibal Smith stood on the plank platform where the train had deposited him. He turned to the stationhand dawdling with a bag of mail. He had left too hastily to pack an overnight bag, and that faintly irritated the fat man's sense of care and comfort.

"You tell me where I can buy me a shirt and a pair of pajamas?" he asked.

The stationhand straightened laboriously and turned. He surveyed the fat man with frank curiosity. Presently he nodded to Smith's question.

"Yep. You ought to get a shirt your size at the Arborville Dry Goods Store. Don't know much about the pi-jamees, though. Don't wear 'em down here, we don't."

Hannibal Smith ogled the native. "You sleep in a nightie, I betcha."

"Nope. Raw."

The fat man grunted. He started to turn away.

"Only the Arborville Dry Goods Store is closed by now," the stationhand advised. "Doubt if you could get a shirt nohow, come to think of it. Fatso Mickmahan keeps 'em all bought up."

"I'm *not* fat," Hannibal Smith corrected.

"Friend, what you're looking at is a biological mirage called inflation. Maybe you can tell me if there's a place in town where I can hire a room for the night."

"Yep. Reckon you could get one at the Arborville Hotel, right down the main drag, mister."

"Thanks." Then Hannibal Smith remem-

bered Roger Gileen's parting instructions to telephone his brother as soon as possible. "Now if you will tell me where I can find a telephone, I'll be mighty obliged, friend."

"Shore," the stationhand offered. "They's a nickel-a-talk phone in the Arborville Drug-store."

Hannibal Smith showed dawning amazement. "Say! Is this—could this by any chance be Arborville, Indiana?"

The native rocked on his heels. "Yep. Not by chance, though. On purpose, stranger, plumb on purpose."

It was a typical Ohio river town, clean and pleasant and quiet. Arborville's main drag was comfortably wide, flanked with giant elms. It was a town where life at this hour moved placidly, where the deep chugging of river barges mingled with high-perched cardinals fluting salutes to the last light of day.

The directory in the drugstore was a wafer-thin document that devoted more space to advertising than to the telephone numbers. Hannibal Smith ran his blunt finger down the column, located the name, Phillip Gileen, 439 Hillcrest.

He thumbed a nickel into the slot, and dialed Gileen's number. The operator answered.

"Number, please?"

Hannibal Smith said: "I'm trying to get Elm 1-4-1."

There was a brief pause. Then: "Will you dial your number again in three minutes, please?"

"Now wait a minute, sis. I'm trying to get Mr. Phillip Gileen, and I'm in a hurry."

"I'm sorry, sir," the operator recited. "Dial El-um 1-4-1 in three minutes, and I'll try to connect you with your party."

THE phone clicked in the fat man's ear. He scowled, muttering something about the damnfool rules and regulations that made three minutes so important to a telephone operator.

He turned to find the druggist grinning at him from behind the soda counter.

"All you can do is wait, mister," the man said. "Phil Gileen frequently does that. He's an amateur chemist, and when he wants to spend a day in his lab he has his phone disconnected so he won't be disturbed. He probably ordered the operator to block off his phone until six o'clock."

He eyed Smith's bulk shrewdly. "How'd you like to try an Arborville Special while you're waiting? Chocolate syrup on ice cream, whipped cream, nuts, and . . ."

"I'd rather have an Arborville Fling-Ding."

"I don't believe I've ever heard of that, sir."

"Just make it a coke," the fat man grumbled.

He waited out the three minutes, and invested another nickel in the telephone. He

heard the beginning of a buzz at the other end of the line. Then the glassware on the drug-store counter rattled slightly, and an instant later a muffled boom shook the air.

He heard the druggist's startled oath. "What the hell?"

Hannibal Smith started running toward the front door.

A man on the street outside was shouting in a high-pitched voice. "Fire up on Hillcrest! They's a fire up near Gileen's place!"

Confusion ran along the street, and into that racket came the brassy clangor of a bell. A fire engine careened out of a building half a block away, swerved unsteadily then straightened its course, charging up the street toward Hannibal Smith.

The druggist squalled after Hannibal Smith: "Stay back on the curb, you! It'll turn there!"

But there was method in the apparent madness of the fat man. He moved with a balanced ease and swiftness that was surprising in one of his bulk. From his sketchy knowledge of the west half of town, gained during his brief walk from the train station, he had known that any traffic bound for the hilly residential section would have to turn at this corner.

Smith was running, cutting in from an angle, when the fire truck made its wide swing into the side street. The fat man reached for one of the polished stanchions. He leaped. For an instant he thought his arms would come out of their sockets.

A man on the truck yelled at him. "Get the hell off there!"

Hannibal Smith hung on.

IT TOOK the better part of an hour to beat down the flames, and in that time the entire north wing of Phillip Gileen's stone and stucco house was reduced to smoking ruins.

Hannibal Smith had not been idle. He had helped where he could, manning a hose or swinging an axe with all the power in his meaty shoulders. And when there was nothing for him to do, he had bitterly cursed the heat and the stubborn refusal of the flames to be killed.

Fire Chief Bexler was like a machine in the methodical way he worked and directed his men. He had a skill and knowledge that could have come only from experience in the fire department of some large city. Smith had recognized that within the first few minutes of the fire.

Bexler strode up as the flames began to release their grip on the house. A faint smile lurked in the corners of a grim and smoke-blackened mouth.

He said: "I'm Tom Bexler, stranger, the town's fire chief. You're the customer who hopped a ride on the hose truck, ain't you?"

Smith nodded.

Bexler's smile became more pronounced. "At first I thought you were just another thrill hunter. We get 'em, you know, every time they's a fire. But you were all right. The way you jumped into harness—an old fireman yourself, ain't you?"

"Not old," the fat man murmured. "And not a fire-fighter." He was wondering if those smoking walls of the building's wing would stay up long enough for him to have a look around inside. What was in his mind made him irritable, gave him a tough edge.

The fire chief's smile thinned out. "Just another citizen, huh. Kind of funny, though, the way you jumped into this job. Everybody else was runnin' around like chickens with their heads off. But not you. Yeah, kind of funny."

Bexler turned away, spoke to one of his men. "Seen the sheriff, Johnny?"

He strode off in the direction of Johnny's pointing hand.

Smoke still clung to the smoldering ruins of the wing. Hannibal Smith tried to get through a door, ignoring the warning of one of the firemen, but heat drove him back. Such delay, when murder was on his mind, rankled the fat man. He prowled the length of the wall, cursing the hiss of dying flames.

He had tried to call Phillip Gileen. He had heard the first buzz of a telephone at this end of the wire, and then the blast of the explosion had come.

"So you're the smoke-eating stranger!"

Hannibal Smith turned. He saw Tom Bexler, but it was not the fire chief who had spoken. The second man was short and lean, a rock-eyed hostile fellow.

Smith grumbled: "Something chewing on you, mister?"

Tom Bexler put in: "He's sheriff here—Sam Head."

"I figured that."

The sheriff said in a lean, scratchy tone: "You seem handy at figurin' a lot of things, stranger. I don't mind telling you, I'm a mite curious about you. I didn't catch your name."

"I didn't pitch it."

"Then start pitchin' right now!" Anger brightened the sheriff's dark eyes.

Hannibal Smith grinned. This was something he could understand and like—a little man who didn't consider size when he started chewing on a suspect. Sam Head was tough and he looked it.

Smith chuckled softly: "Ain't you a little thin to be roughing me up, Sheriff?"

"I can cut you down to my size if you make me."

The fat man drawled: "I wouldn't want you to go to all that trouble, Sheriff. Fact is, my name is Hannibal Smith."

The name meant nothing to the sheriff. He said so.

"I'm down here from Indianapolis," Smith added.

"Which don't mean nothin' to me." But Sam Head's eyes were narrowing, as if he were struggling with a memory he couldn't quite touch.

"Twenty years ago I fought in every tank town in the mid-west," Hannibal Smith suggested. "The name was Shadow Smith, then."

"So?" The sheriff's fist suddenly whipped out. It was a quick, stabbing blow, with power behind it.

He was close enough, plenty close, but his knuckles did not quite reach Smith's jaw. The fat man seemed to move everywhere at once, yet he never shifted out of his tracks. His head rolled with the sheriff's punch, just far enough, and then his head bobbed down. He reached up and batted Sam Head's arm, and that added momentum to the sheriff's swing, pivoting him half around. Hannibal Smith caught a firm grip on Head's nape.

"You want to cool off in that mud puddle, Sheriff?"

"You're Shadow Smith, all right," Sam Head said. "Now let go of me, and tell me what brought you down here at just this time."

Hannibal Smith talked. He said much, easily and persuasively, without giving any of the facts that had brought him to Arborville. He made it sound good, and Tom Bexler took it all in. But he didn't pull any cloth over the sheriff's eyes. Sam Head was a hard man to fool.

"You're talking circles, Smith," he said grimly. "Twenty years ago I saw every fight you had around these parts, and I always got my money's worth. I liked you for that. But don't get the idea I won't throw you in the can if I have to. Don't shadow box with me, Smith. Talk straight."

Hannibal Smith frowned innocently. "What about?"

"This fire, that's what about!"

"Well, what about this fire?"

THE sheriff said stonily: "Listen. The explosion up here set the whole town on end. Everybody was running around and wearing leather off his shoes, but not you. You jumped on that fire truck like you'd been expecting the fire to break loose. Hear me, Smith—like you'd been expecting it!"

"Are you saying I might have set it?"

"Not yet," Sam Head rapped back. "Phil Gileen was an amateur chemist, and he'd been workin' here in his lab all day. His lab was in this wing. Maybe something he was workin' on went haywire. But Phil was always a careful man. He didn't take many chances. So I figure maybe this fire wasn't an accident."

Hannibal Smith said softly: "That's what I figure, Sheriff."

"And what else?"

"I figure that if you'll stop flapping your gums long enough to go inside we'll find a body. Or what's left of a body."

They turned, picking their way through the debris that clogged the sagging door. It was dangerous business, walking into a structure that had been so thoroughly destroyed by flame and explosion.

Heat had cracked all mortar, and the stone walls of the wing gave out a constant deadly threat. The roof had been chewed up by flame and the rafters sagged.

This had once been a small laboratory, neat and well-furnished for an amateur chemist's pastime. Now it was a blackened, smoldering wreckage of tables destroyed, of bottles and vials shattered, of instruments twisted almost beyond recognition by intense heat.

They found the body at one end of the room, near what was left of a telephone. It was a man, and fire had wreaked havoc with his face and body. He was, what there was left of him, a grisly and pitiful thing to look at, sprawled on the charred floor, one seared hand



still gripping a fountain pen even in death.

This was what Hannibal Smith had somehow expected, but now, looking down at the body, he felt suddenly sick.

"You recognize him?" he asked.

Sam Head cursed. "Who could?"

Tom Bexler muttered through tight lips: "There ain't no question about it, seems to me. This is Phil Gileen's place, and the dead man is about Phil's build."

"John Nugent was a big man, too," the sheriff reminded.

Tom Bexler grunted drily. "You're winding yourself up, Sam. I don't see any reason to figure this man might be Gileen's partner."

The sheriff was a small, dark man, slow to form an opinion but certain of himself once he reached a decision.

"Just the same, I want to be sure," he said. He bent to hands and knees, an intent-eyed gnome crawling around the body. What he found he noted aloud in a low, brooding tone.

"Phil Gileen and his partner were about the same build. Nugent and Gileen wore mustaches, and so does this dead man—or did before the fire got to him. This is Gileen's wallet, all right. It's Gileen's wrist watch—wasn't another like it in town. And this was Gileen's workshop."

But the dark picture of this had already formed indelibly in Hannibal Smith's mind. He had had his premonition that this would happen, based on the fears of Roger Gileen.

"Murder," he whispered.

The sheriff looked up sharply. "You say something, Smith?"

Hannibal Smith shook his head.

Tom Bexler was bending over the dead man's outstretched left hand. He was saying tensely: "Look at this, Sam. He was writing something when the explosion got him. He still had the pen and paper in his hand—his left hand. Phil Gileen joked about his bein' left-handed a hundred times."

The fire chief bent lower, and strain brought florid color into his heavy face.

"Most of the paper was destroyed, but there's a piece under his hand I don't think the fire got. You want I should take a look?"

The sheriff nodded.

Bexler lifted the charred hand carefully. He squinted at a small triangle of paper that had not been touched by flame.

"'If I should die . . .'" he muttered. "That's all I can read, Sam—'If I should die . . .'"

CHAPTER THREE

Seeds of Satan

HANNIBAL SMITH rolled out of bed at eight the next morning. He tapered off his shower with cold water that stung ruddy

color into his meaty body. He scraped off his beard with the nearest thing to a razor that he could buy at the local drugstore. Standing there in the flesh, he surveyed himself critically in the full-length mirror. He had spent the night in the hotel's only available bed—in the bridal suite.

He dressed, donning by necessity the same clothes he had worn the day before. Fighting the Gileen fire had not been kind to his shirt and suit. He looked as if he had spent the night in a coal bin, except for the scrubbed cleanliness of his face.

He went out of his room, and with his first glance he saw the long-jawed man leaning with obvious indifference against a post at the head of the stairway. So Sam Head had staked out a man to watch his room during the night.

Hannibal Smith winked broadly at the waiting man.

"What's new from the sheriff's office, bud?" he asked.

The long-jawed man pretended shocked innocence. "I'm just waitin' on a friend," he replied.

The fat man bent close. "Don't tell a soul," he whispered, "but your friend ain't here. I saw him climb out a window with a whole troop of boy scouts under his arm. He was going to rub them together and start a fire under the court house."

Hannibal Smith went down the stairs, and into the dining room and enjoyed a huge breakfast.

Sheriff Sam Head was waiting in his office. The man had got but little sleep the night before, and he looked it. He gave Smith a thin, gritty smile.

"A little early for you to be up, ain't it?"

"The early bird is better than two in the bush," the fat man said placidly. "Or something like that."

He walked across the room, and gazed out of a window. Across Courthouse Square, life was following its usual currents along Arborville's main street. Women were shopping and gossiping, and those few men with idle time were gathered here and there in the yellow sunshine, voicing their own opinions on the death of Phillip Gileen. Far down an alley, Smith could see a tow-headed boy who was obviously playing hooky from school in favor of fishing in the river. The long-jawed man who had been loitering in the hotel hall was making himself comfortable on the courthouse liar's bench. Hannibal Smith turned back to the sheriff, irritation showing in his round face.

He said: "Do you want me, Sheriff, or don't you?"

Sam Head pretended innocence. "What's eating on you?"

"That long-jawed correspondence-course sleuth of yours, that's what," the fat man rapped back. "He tailed me to my room last night, and he was waiting in the hall when I came out this morning. He even peeked through the window while I ate my breakfast. I don't like to be tailed, Head."

The sheriff made a "tsk-tsk" sound with his tongue. Then he said softly: "Getting tough don't cut any ice with me, Smith. I'm tough, too. When it comes to murder, I don't believe any man's story until I've checked it. So I had you tailed. I got Roger Gileen on long-distance last night, and he admitted hiring you to try to break up the trouble between his brother and John Nugent."

"That was nice of him."

"Gileen will get in town on the nine-fifty train."

Hannibal Smith's irritation smoothed out. He broke out his pipe, stuffed it with tobacco, lit it.

"All right," he grunted. "All right." He regarded the sheriff with probing eyes. "Anything new since I felt you last night?"

"What could be new?"

"Don't be cagy, Sheriff. You're the rush-in-and-knock-'em-down type."

"Well, what could be new?" Sam Head repeated. "We haven't caught John Nugent yet. We've got the net out for him, but we haven't caught him."

"You sure he's your man?"

"I'm sure of only one thing: that Nugent's partner, Phil Gileen, was murdered last night. Nugent and Gileen were about the same size, but after that fire got through working on the dead man he could be anybody. But the fact is, it was Phil Gileen's personal effects we found on the corpse."

"That could be fixed easy enough," Hannibal Smith reminded. "You check fingerprints, teeth, hair?"

"J. Edgar Hoover couldn't get a print from a corpse burned like the one we found last night," Sam Head answered darkly. "Nugent and Gileen had hair of the same type. Neither had had any dental work done here in town, so that's out. But it was Phil Gileen's house that burned down on a dead man, wasn't it? The fountain pen was in the corpse's left hand, and the whole town knows Phil Gileen was left-handed."

"Do you?"

"What?"

"Do you know Gileen was left-handed?"

The sheriff swore righteously. "You're the damndest guy for questions! I never saw Phil write with his left hand, if that's what you're driving at. But I've seen him do things with his left hand that I use my right for. Load and light his pipe, tip his hat—hell, he used to make a joke out of his bein' left-

handed. Said it helped him out-fumble any man for a meal check."

Hannibal Smith said: "Uh-huh." He stared at his meaty hands, thinking. "What did you do about the charred paper you found near the corpse?"

"Got it between two plates of glass like you suggested, and had it flown to the police lab in Cincinnati. I just got a wire from them." He grinned stonily. "Maybe this will stop your fool questions. Like you said, they brought out the writing by photographing the burned paper with infra-red light and film. It said: 'If I should die suddenly it will be murder by my partner, John Nugent.' It was signed by Phil Gileen."

"And why would Nugent leave such incriminating evidence in the hand of the man he murdered?"

The sheriff flushed angrily. "How should I know? He probably killed Gileen in a fit of anger. Gileen must have known it was coming, and wrote the note. Nugent didn't know about the paper. Or he was too scared to get it after Gileen was dead. Anyhow, didn't he set fire to the lab to wipe out all evidence against him?"

"Did he?" Hannibal Smith murmured. His eyes were half closed, brooding. "I've been under the impression that I set that fire."

HE SAUNTERED out under the sheriff's acid stare. He found Tom Bexler soaking up sunshine in front of the firehouse.

"You look at peace with the world," the fat man drawled. "You got last night's fire scratched off your books already?"

The fire chief had spent the night making his investigation at the scene of the disaster, and writing out reports. Now that strain was leaving him, the muscles of his face were beginning to loosen.

He seemed to be using these idle minutes to review the case, and his answer to Hannibal Smith was preoccupied.

"It's all wrapped up."

The fat man had an easy way of slipping into a man's confidence. He shook ashes from his pipe, stoked up again.

"What kind of package?"

"Sam Head figures Nugent strangled Phil Gileen, and that sounds right to me. Then Nugent got scared, and he got smart. He lit the gas space-heater in Gileen's lab, turned the heat on full. There were several gallon-size bottles of naphtha, gasoline, and the like, in the room that Gileen used for his chemical experiments. All highly inflammable stuff, and tightly sealed. So when the room got overheated the stuff exploded and started the fire. Like a delayed action bomb. Pretty damn neat."

"Yeah," Hannibal Smith murmured.

"Wasn't it?" He glanced at his watch, and turned away.

Tom Bexler seemed to realize for the first time how much he had been talking. "Don't you tell Sam Head I told you that," he called. "I was supposed to keep it under my hat."

The train pulled in ten minutes late, and on it was Roger Gileen. He strode into the sheriff's office, tall and straight, clean-haven. He nodded to Smith, identified himself to the sheriff, and then turned again to the fat man.

"I know you must feel badly about not getting here in time, Mr. Smith. It was tragic, but you did your best, and I'm grateful to you. Perhaps we can get together some time when I get back to Indianapolis."

It was a dismissal, and the fat man knew it. But he didn't accept it. "I'm going to stick around and see this case wound up."

Roger Gileen frowned slightly. "There'll be no fee in it for you, so I don't see any reason—"

"I'm staying because I don't like murder, Mr. Gileen. I don't like any part of it. I've got my own ideas on this case, and I want to see if they jibe with the sheriff's."

Gileen shrugged his shoulders. He turned to Sam Head. "You haven't caught this man Nugent yet?"

The sheriff shook his head. "But he can't stay hidden from us for long."

"I only hope I'm on hand when you capture him," Gileen said harshly. He lit a cigarette, and behind the smoke, his eyes were haggard. He was a man who pinched his cigarette hard between his lips, who smoked unusually fast.

"I'd like to clean up a bit, and then pay my respects to Phil," he said finally. "After that I'll meet you for any questions you want to ask."

"Make it in your brother's office," Hannibal Smith suggested. "Say in an hour? The sheriff is taking me down there to look over some things."

After Gileen was gone, Smith said to the sheriff: "He looks a lot like Phil Gileen, doesn't he?"

"Enough like him so that anyone might think they were twins."

"Maybe they're both the same man," Hannibal Smith suggested.

For an instant Sam Head was startled. Then he exploded. "When are you going to stop trying to find something deep and dark in this case?" he flared. "If you'd known Phil Gileen, you wouldn't have asked that fool question. Phil was left-handed, and this Roger Gileen is right-handed. Phil wore a mustache, and Roger don't."

"A mustache can be shaved off."

"Not without leavin' a change in skin tone where the mustache was," the sheriff snapped. "Anyhow, there are other things. Phil was

slow and easy—Roger moves quick. Phil was stooped, and this brother is straight. Phil was careless with his clothes—Roger looks like he stepped out of a bandbox. Phil was a pipe man, and his brother uses cigarettes. I knew Phil Gileen for a year or more, and now I've seen his brother, and I'll swear away ten years of my life that they're not the same man."

"Excuse me," Hannibal Smith murmured, "for opening my big mouth."

"Now what's this bright idea of yours about lookin' over Phil's office?"

"*Quien sabe?*" Hannibal Smith drawled. "I read that once in a cowboy story. It means 'who knows'."

ROGER GILEEN met them at the appointed time in his brother's barge office, and at Smith's insistence they hitched a ride on one of the empty, low-riding freight craft. It moved ponderously out into the river, turned laboriously into the current, a flat craft designed to carry huge weights in freight. The river had been roiled by spring rains, floating the debris of up-stream floods in its muddy currents.

Half a mile down-river, Hannibal Smith could see another barge with a string of powerless craft in tow, laboring against the heavy current. The oncoming barge blew a warning signal.

They were standing aft, and below them the screw was churning up the water into a muddy froth. They left a sluggish wake. Smith's glance was roving the Indiana bank of the river.

Roger Gileen said impatiently: "I don't like this. We're taking a joy ride while my brother's murderer is loose. John Nugent must be insane to have done what he did. He's mad enough to blame us indirectly for the trouble he's in."

"We'll get him," Sam Head said.

"We'll not be safe as long as that man runs free," Gileen said harshly. He waited for the steam whistle on the nearing barge train to stop blowing. Then he said: "For all we know Nugent could be in that brush along the bank right now with a rifle." He began watching the river shore narrowly.

They came into view of a house perched on a hillcrest overlooking the river. It was a house that must have dated back to Civil War days, a stately, white-columned mansion, with a wall of tall poplars guarding the east lawn.

Staring at the place, Hannibal Smith murmured: "There's something funny about—"

He got no further. The oncoming barge train sent out a short, piercing whistle.

Roger Gileen suddenly yelled: "Someone is in that brush over there. I saw him—look out!"

He straight-armed the sheriff back across the deck, and at that instant the barge shredded the air with its whistle. Roger Gileen moved with desperate violence. He sent the sheriff reeling back, and then slammed his shoulder into the chest of the fat man.

There was a brief instant when everything was a flashing, disconnected dream for Hannibal Smith. He saw Sam Head stumble and fall—he saw Roger Gileen hit the deck, face down.

There was a heartbeat of time when Hannibal Smith could feel himself going backward over the guard rail on the barge. He twisted his body instinctively, violently—grabbed for the rail, and missed. He could see the whipped-up foam of the river below him, and he knew he was falling toward the churning screw of the barge. He knew a swift stab of horror, of panic.

He kicked frantically, and one foot struck something solid, a post of the guard rail. The impact of that changed the direction of his fall slightly, slanting him further away from the barge.

He hit the water. A roaring filled his ears, and, heavy as he was, he could feel himself slammed around by the violent roiling of the propeller-churned water. He thought, *Get away from it, Smith. Get away from that screw!*

A thought dug into him from some remote corner of his brain that a marine propeller will suck an object toward it. Or did a propeller throw the object away from it? He wasn't sure.

He slugged out with hands and feet, beating the water with the windless desperation of a drowning man. He didn't fully realize it when at last he broke surface. He kept blindly threshing the water until he heard Sam Head's high-pitched yell.

"This way, Smith! Grab this rope, and we'll pull you in."

CHAPTER FOUR

Left-Handed Legacy

THEY found the empty brass cylinder in the brush where Roger Gileen said he had seen a rifleman crouching, near the bank of the river. Sheriff Head picked it out of a pool of water, examined it with intent dark eyes.

"It's a thirty-two rimfire," he stated. "It ain't heavy caliber, but one of these can kill a man mighty dead. Nugent was gunning for one of us, sure. Gileen, I reckon we owe you a vote of thanks for movin' fast as you did on that barge."

"Yeah," Hannibal Smith growled. "I'll never come nearer bein' killed while my life is bein' saved."

He was wet and cold and in a mean humor. His suit would never be the same, and he had his last ration stamp on his feet. And the distance he had walked to reach this spot on the river bank was too great to put a fat man in a pleasant mood. He glared at the little sheriff.

"All right, so you found a rifle shell. Where's your murderer?"

"We'll get him," Head answered stonily. A pair of liver-colored hounds pulled restlessly on the leash he gripped. "Nugent left tracks that will lead us to him when I put these dawgs on his trail."

"Then you won't need me," Hannibal Smith grumbled. "I never was any good following the hound and horn."

He turned away from them. He walked slowly, favoring his sore feet and the steepness of the hill he had set out to climb. He was a city man, and he lost the narrow path within the first few rods. He turned directly up the pitch, kicking his way through tangles of brush and savagely cursing the act of nature that had impeded his progress with such thickets.

Somewhere up toward the crest of the hill, where the white Colonial house he had seen from the river barge stood, a dog began barking out an alarm. He cursed that yelping, and he cursed the sloshing of water in his shoes. He came to a small clearing and saw a rabbit eyeing him warily from the edge of a briar patch.

Hannibal Smith yelled, "Boo!" and the rabbit bounded away. The fat man felt better after that.

He came out of the woods and onto a long sloping lawn that led up to the big house. He was tired, but he was too stubborn to halt for rest. The house, he decided, had known better days, yet it made a pretty picture with its tall white columns and broad lawns and ancient poplars marching in file along the east crest of the hill. It reminded Smith of lavender and old lace, of darkies and soft music and hoop-skirts and steamboats on the river.

The yelping of a mongrel dog at the end of its chain brought an old man out of the house. He eyed Hannibal Smith in open amazement, but he kept his curiosity to himself. He quieted the dog with a wave of his hand.

"Is there something I can do for you, sir?"

Smith pulled his briar out of his pocket. "You might loan me a little tobacco," he suggested. He filled his pipe from the pouch the old man offered. He squeezed water from his coat. "I'm Neptune, king of the deep," he explained.

The old man suddenly smiled. "Why, you must be the man who fell from the barge. I was in my chair, watching the river, and I saw three men on the barge. . ."

Hannibal Smith cut in. "Did you hear a shot when you saw all that? A rifle shot down near the river?"

The man shook his head, smiling. He touched his ears. "My hearing is none too good, you see. I can hear the boat whistles on the river, I can hear my dogs barking, but I doubt if I could hear a rifle shot from that distance." He asked politely: "Is there some trouble?"

Smith asked his own question. "Did your dog bark at anyone last night?"

The old man nodded. "About midnight Jason here started barking at someone he heard down near the river. Several minutes later the dog I keep out back of the place began barking. He must have heard someone over near the old stone quarry. Some man out for a little night fishing, I suppose."

Hannibal Smith said: "Thanks. I'll cut around your house, if you don't mind."

He moved on, stolidly ignoring his protesting feet. A quarter mile behind the house, he picked up an old corduroy road that led through a marshy area. Beyond this, he found fragments of limestone, and he knew he was on the right trail.

He came upon the open pit of the abandoned quarry just as Roger Gileen strode out of the brush with the sheriff and his dogs. They stared at the fat man in surprise.

"The paths of all men lead to the same end," Hannibal Smith said.

Suspicion was in Sam Head's stare. "How did you know we'd come here?" he demanded.

"I didn't," Smith answered. "I was referring to the more final end of allegorical paths, Sheriff—death, in other words."

The sheriff's mouth was thin and tight. "What are you driving at, Smith?"

"I don't know," the fat man said honestly. "If I did I could have saved myself a lot of walking. So your dogs led you here."

"My dogs and John Nugent's tracks."

Roger Gileen said darkly: "Your allegorical remark may have a lot of truth in it, Smith." He pointed to the waste heaps of limestone that banked the abandoned quarry. "If Nugent is hiding in there, he won't give up without a fight. He's cornered if he's here. He's desperate enough to kill himself if he can't kill us."

SAM HEAD pulled his dogs away from the trail they had followed. Followed by Gileen and the fat man, he cut a wide and cautious circle around the quarry, but the hounds picked up no scent of a man escaping the place from another direction.

"Rocks leave no scent, and there are plenty of them for your killer to walk on if he wanted to hide his trail," Hannibal Smith said.

"Nugent ain't that smart," Sam Head mut-

tered darkly. "He's down there, all right."

They began a slow and cautious descent into the pit. In those tangled wastes of stone and rubble there were a hundred places for a man to hide, and yet they found their man with surprising ease. He didn't even put up a fight. He was dead.

They stood there, staring down at him. He had been a tall man, with a close-cropped mustache, a rather ill-kept man. But other than the mustache, there was little left of his face. The gun, a combined rifle and shotgun, was still gripped in his left hand. It was the shotgun that had done the final work. Its close blast had completely mutilated the man's features.

"Phil!"

Sam Head said, startled: "What!"

"Phil!" Roger Gileen said again. His tone was low, tragic. "Sheriff, this man is my brother!"

They stared at Roger Gileen, and a gray sickness was in his face. He seemed no longer aware of their presence. He stooped, and what he said came out as if he were talking futilely to himself.

"The gun is in his left hand, and Phil was left-handed. This man wears a mustache. So did my brother." He slipped his hand into the dead man's coat pocket, brought out a stubby black pipe. "You must have seen this a hundred times, Sheriff. Phil wrote me he'd never part with it after I mailed it to him last year for Christmas."

He pointed to the dead man's hands. They were swollen, raw-red and almost fleshless.

Gileen said: "Those look like acid burns to me, and they must have given him untold agony."

It was Sam Head who put the facts together. He said grimly: "Phil Gileen and Nugent must have had a fight in the laboratory. It was Nugent whose body we found, and not Gileen, and Phil must have got acid on his hands during the fight."

"When Phil saw what he'd done, he got scared. But he was smart, maybe crazy-smart. He put his clothes and papers on Nugent, but habit made him hang onto his pipe. When he left the lab he knew it would overheat and explode, destroying Nugent's features. That's what Phil must have put his hopes on. He knew we'd think Nugent was Phil Gileen, and that we'd be hunting a man who was already dead. It would have worked, too, if those acid burns Phil got hadn't driven him crazy enough to try to kill us out there on the river."

Silence closed around the three men. Here in the quarry pit it was warm, and Hannibal Smith was sweating. Yet he was strangely cold, as he looked at Roger Gileen.

"Is that what you wanted us to think?" he

asked seriously, his voice becoming tense. Surprise touched Gileen's face. "I don't understand."

The fat man lifted his voice a notch, a stony, bitter run of words. "This must be how you planned it. It leaves you pretty well fixed, doesn't it, Gileen? It gives you two double-indemnity insurance policies to cash in."

Gileen flushed angrily. "Smith, I don't like your implications!" he flared. "My brother and his partner had insurance in each other's favor, yes. When Nugent was killed, his policy became payable to Phil. With Phil dead I suppose I am in line to collect on both policies, since Phil named me his alternate heir. But I won't have you suggesting these two crimes are work of mine!"

Sam Head said sourly: "Ever since I met you, you've been dreaming up ghost stories, Smith. He's punch drunk, Mr. Gileen, leather-loopy. Why don't you let him shadow box himself into a good libel suit? It'll give me a good laugh."

Hannibal Smith smiled coldly. "Sheriff, it might interest you to know this chum of yours is Roger Gileen, alias Phillip Gileen. They're both the same man."

"So now you're tellin' me I don't see what I see."

"You've been seeing double and didn't know it," the fat man said grimly. "This man moved into Arborville a couple years ago with a long-range plan in mind. He said he was Phillip Gileen, and set himself up in the barge business, and finally picked himself the partner he needed to complete his plan."

"He manufactured himself a brother out of whole cloth. Or I should say he manufactured *himself* as a brother of *himself*. At any rate, as Roger Gileen, he set up a photo supply business in Indianapolis, and for a year used traveling as his excuse for not being in his store. Actually, he was down here all the time, posing as Phillip Gileen."

Gileen said harshly: "I've had enough of this, Sheriff. I demand—"

"Let him shoot off his mouth, Mr. Gileen. Talk don't hurt anyone," the sheriff put in.

Smith went on: "Down here, Gileen gave himself the reputation of being left-handed. He let out rumors, either real or fiction, that he had been threatened by his partner."

Gileen broke in harshly. "I gave you letters I received from Phil, telling about Nugent's threats. I gave you a snapshot that proves Phil was left-handed."

"You wrote those letters to yourself in Indianapolis," the fat man answered. "When you took them out of your pocket I thought you were pretty agile with your left hand to be a right-handed man. That was one place you slipped up in my office. So far as that

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snapshot goes, it's nothing but a print from a reversed negative. You had someone snap you, careful to set the camera so you would be out of focus, and then reversed the negative in printing so you would appear to be left-handed. I didn't catch that until this afternoon on the barge. You were out of focus, but the background was in sharp focus. The snapshot shows a white Colonial house on a hill above the river with a row of poplars growing on the left side. Actually, facing the house, the poplars are growing on the right side, the east side of the house."

GILEEN began desperately: "Sheriff, I'm within my rights in demanding that you make this fool—"

"You keep quiet!" Sam Head snapped. "Now I want to hear the rest of Smith's story."

"There's not much left that you can't guess for yourself," Hannibal Smith answered. Now he was watching Gileen with wary interest. "As I said, posing down here as Phil, Gileen had certain habits that got me curious while he was in my office. He used his left hand pretty damn expertly when he rifled through the letters he gave me. Later he tried to light a cigarette and forgot about the pipe he'd been in the habit of smoking down here. After all, he was Phil Gileen a lot more this past year than he was Roger Gileen. He kept waving his lighter about a pipe-length out from his cigarette, absently trying to get a light, but when I suggested he should stick to a pipe he claimed he had never smoked one.

"He murdered Nugent down here, and left the note we found. He did that to give a logical reason for 'Phil's' suicide. Only you didn't guess the explosion right. I set that off."

"You!"

"Yeah, me." Gileen had his hand near the front of his coat. Smith went on. "Gileen told me to phone his so-called brother as soon as I got here. What he'd done was take a train from here, go to Indianapolis where he kept his car. He needed transportation that couldn't be checked. He drove back down here, murdered Nugent, plugged up all openings in the lab after opening the gas jets in the heater. Then he drove back to Indianapolis to see me. Meanwhile, he'd shaved off the mustache he had worn as Phil, and used women's leg dye to even the tone of the skin where the mustache had been. I noticed that in my office when he nervously pressed his upper lip hard, and the skin didn't show a pallor.

"What made me more suspicious was his story about seldom using his car the past month. Yet there was a garage sticker showing he'd had the oil changed the day before.

The sticker and mileage meter measured the distance from Indianapolis to here and back."

Gileen's hand was trembling slightly, and Smith had a moment's doubt that he was doing this right.

Head reminded: "But you said you set off the explosion—"

"I did," the fat man went on. "When I finally got my phone call through to Gileen's lab, it was a spark caused in the buzzer that set off the explosion in the gas-filled room. You long-distanced Gileen after we put the fire out, and he told you he'd be down this morning. Only he took a train that brought him in here last night. In the meanwhile, he must have got the idea I might get in his hair. He must have had this man, some itinerant probably, tied up and waiting to take on the identity of Phil Gileen.

"But when he got in last night, he left that empty rifle shell on the river bank where we found it. Then he made tracks for us to follow, leading us here. I know that because the old man I just talked to at the house on the hill told me his dogs had barked last night at someone near the river.

"When Gileen got here, to where he had his victim tied and waiting, he used the shotgun, and then left here by walking on stones that leave no trail for a dog. After that, he hiked to some town up the line, and waited for the train that brought him here at the right time."

The sheriff said, softly harsh: "And what he did on the barge was just to build up his plan and try to get you out of—"

Gileen tried again, and if death had come close to Hannibal Smith on the river barge, it came even closer this time. The fat man had been waiting, and he had been watching, and yet when it came he was not entirely ready.

Gileen's hand stabbed into his coat pocket, fast. The cloth of his pocket jumped, and there was smoke, a roar. The wind of the bullet fanned Hannibal Smith's throat.

Even at that, the fat man did not fully realize how close death had come to him. Not until later. He was quietly deliberate in what he did, almost brutal. He closed in on Gileen, knocked aside the hand that gripped the gun.

The fat man used his left fist expertly, once in the stomach and once along the side of Gileen's jaw. That was enough. Gileen swung around slowly, lost balance and slid into the clear surface of the flooded quarry pit.

Sam Head spoke up quickly. "We've got to get him out of there before he drowns!"

"I'm fat and I'm tired," Hannibal Smith grumbled. "You fish him out, Sheriff."

It hit him then, the memory of that close-passing bullet, and he sat down weakly on a rock.

"Godalmighty!" he said. "That bullet might have killed me!"

Furiously, Jerry began clawing at the pile of rubble blocking the mine tunnel.



THE DOLLY SHAFT REBELLION

By **STANLEY C. VICKERS**

There had been lots of danger signals and murmurings of unrest among the men over the Dolly Shaft operation. One man claimed that tangling with the shaft was suicide and he ought to have known—for it was he who had plotted and set the death trap!

JERRY SLAGLE sat on the windowsill in his dad's office and looked at the high, green Adirondack hills which circled the open pit and the three shaft houses of the Slagle Iron Mines. "You know," he said, "I saw some pretty country, knocking around with the engineers. But nothing in the South Pacific had this topped."

Mike Slagle tilted back in his chair and squinted at his son. "You're prejudiced," he barked. "You're seeing those iron mines in the foreground as well as the mountains. Besides, I suppose any view looks better when a lot of dead Japs aren't cluttering it up."

"And dead Americans," his son amended

slowly. He turned quickly from the window. "We talked about the South Pacific last night," he reminded. "What about the trouble here?"

"Why don't you loaf for a while?"

"Straightening out a little personnel problem will seem like loafing now. Besides," he grinned, "you always were better at the end of a diamond drill than trying to handle a bunch of miners."

His father grunted, lifted his huge hulk out of the chair and walked to the window. "The trouble is that I've got to work the Dolly Shaft, and the miners have some fool notion that it's dangerous."

Jerry lit a cigarette, trying to remember how the Dolly Shaft fitted into the mining scheme. His father had left Republic Steel shortly before the war to buy the long abandoned mines at Blastville and Jerry had joined the Army Engineers before he had had a chance to become thoroughly acquainted with mine operations.

"Wasn't that the shaft that had been worked so hard?"

His father nodded. "Those old boys back in 1860 weren't spending all their time on it for nothing either. The vein is the richest we own."

"Didn't they pretty well clean it out though?" Jerry asked.

"In one respect, yes," Mike Slagle answered. "But the Dolly Shaft has huge vertical deposits. And the way the old boys mined it, they left these high pillars of practically pure ore standing to hold up the roofs of the different levels they worked."

Jerry Slagle nodded in growing understanding. "And you want to grab off those pillars."

His dad nodded. "I went over that mine with a fine-tooth comb. And I know damn well that removing those pillars isn't going to cause the roof of the mine to collapse. The whole roof forms a natural arch. All we have to do to be on the healthy side of a safety margin is leave a couple of the pillars near the center of that arch."

"When did the men begin to kick?" Jerry asked.

"About two weeks ago when they got wise to what I had in mind. Right then, the work slowed down to a walk. Unless I can change their damn fool minds for them, we'll be all summer making the first pillar slash down there. The company couldn't stand it."

Jerry grimaced. "Things that bad?"

His father nodded grimly. "In normal times we could forget the Dolly Shaft and go to work on the newer cuts. But in those other shafts, it's going to take plenty of man-hours of cutting and blasting before the ore really starts moving out to the crusher plant. And with the wartime shortage of manpower, I just

can't get ore out quickly enough that way to keep even reasonably close to operating expenses. That's why the Dolly Shaft was a life-saver. When I started thinking about those pillars, standing there just waiting for blasting, I figured I'd come up with the idea of the century. Especially after I worked and sweated to prove to myself that it was absolutely safe."

Jerry smiled at his red-faced, irate father. "You're a crackerjack engineer," he kidded, "but you're a poor manager. I can see a mistake as big as that open pit down there. You worked like hell to prove to yourself that the Dolly Shaft was safe, but I'll bet you didn't spend half a day proving it to the guys who are going to have to work down in it."

"I'm responsible for their safety!" Mike Slagle roared. "If they don't trust my engineering, why don't they get out and quit?"

"They probably have that in mind," Jerry pointed out calmly, "otherwise your production wouldn't have dropped so low. Let me handle this, Dad. It's meat for me."

"O.K.," Mike grunted. "It's your baby."

Jerry strode toward the office door. "Guess I'll ride down the Dolly Shaft and take a look around."

His dad glanced at his watch. "Better stick around a while," he advised. "Herbie Banner is coming up here. He's around those miners when they're doing their beefing—over a beer. He's been keeping me posted on what they're thinking and why."

Jerry nodded and resumed his seat on the windowsill. He remembered Banner. Banner was an old-time miner from somewhere in the Middle West. He'd come to Blastville shortly after Mike had reopened the mines. He ran the Banner House, the principal boarding place in Blastville, and also owned the only bar.

HERBIE BANNER puffed into Mike's office, flopped down in a chair, then bounced to his feet again when he caught sight of Jerry. "Hiya, Jerry," he boomed, crossing the room to encase Jerry's hand in his huge, fleshy grip. "Back from the wars to take up mining again, huh? And with a Silver Star, I understand. How're you feeling?" he added in a lowered, solicitous tone.

"They sewed me up so I'm practically as good as new," Jerry answered, grinning. "About the only thing they advised me not to do was to try eating one of those steaks you serve over at the Banner House."

Herbie chuckled, cocking his head at Mike who was watching them.

"Herbie, have you heard anything more from the men about the Dolly Shaft?" Mike Slagle asked.

Herbie's jowls dropped in sudden seriousness. He flopped back into the chair. "I don't

like what they're saying," he pronounced dismally. "They say they're not going to work the shaft—that is, some of 'em say that," he amended more brightly.

"Who are the guys stirring up the trouble?" Mike asked sharply.

Herbie rubbed a pudgy palm over his brow despairingly. "Listen Mike," he pleaded, "I'm right on the spot. I want you guys to have smooth going here, because I like you and because I wouldn't make any dough if it weren't for that payroll you hand out to the miners. And I don't want to be any stoolie on the men, because I like them and if they stopped spending their payroll at my joint, I wouldn't make a living."

"That's right," Jerry offered quickly from his perch on the windowsill. "We don't want you to squeal on the men. But how the devil are we supposed to try and make them happier if we don't know what's bothering them?" He turned to his father. "None of the men ever came to you complaining about the Dolly Shaft operation being unsafe, did they?"

"No," Mike grunted. "Outside of the gradual work slow-down, I wouldn't even have known that anything was wrong if Herbie here hadn't come and told me."

"Mike," Herbie questioned, "was that straight stuff you gave me a couple of weeks ago about maybe having to shut down if you couldn't work the Dolly Shaft?"

"You're damn right it was," Mike Slagle emphasized grimly. "Maybe if I tell the men that, they'll quit being so kittenish about that shaft collapsing on them."

"Well," Herbie sighed, struggling to his feet, "I hope you get it worked out. If you fellows shut down, my joint won't be worth the glassware under the bar." He waddled out of the office, shaking his head ruefully.

Jerry jumped off the windowsill. "We've got to bring this thing to the men before they bring it to us," he declared. "Write a letter to the United States Bureau of Mines office at Albany. Explain our problem and ask them to send a man up to make a geo-physical investigation of the shaft. I know you're sure it's safe," he answered his father's expression of impatience, "but maybe if we had an impartial investigation made, the men would feel better. Meanwhile, I'll call a mass meeting of the miners and see if I can't talk them into continuing operations until we get the results of the Bureau survey."

Mike Slagle sat frowning a moment, then he looked up at his son and grinned. "I feel better already," he admitted. "It's nice to have you back."

Jerry started for the door, then turned back. "Say, I was thinking while Herbie was here . . . if we should get stymied on the Dolly Shaft, wouldn't the next best thing be

to buy that old mine on the Jarvis property? I looked that shaft over before I went away and there's some quick tonnage in it. We could begin working there and reclaim those pillars after this thing blows over."

"I haven't been entirely asleep," Mike said. "I offered Old Man Jarvis twenty grand for that property two months ago. He wants fifty!"

Jerry whistled. "That penniless buzzard is crazy!"

"One of us is," Mike concluded gloomily.

Trying not to succumb to the feeling that matters were hopelessly tangled for Slagle Mines on its slim operating capital, Jerry strode to the change house, opened his old locker and donned mining cap and lamp, a heavy sweater and boots. At the Dolly Shaft house he found the man-hoist empty at the lift platform. He climbed into the car, jerked a rope to signal the man at the controls back in the powerhouse and began sliding down the steep, black incline.

It felt familiar and good to leave the hot, sticky day behind and glide down into the inky, cool well of the mine. In a few moments the lighted platform of the 220-level appeared below him and he jerked the signal rope. He had only to walk a couple of hundred feet down the tunnel to find where the men were working.

It was in one of the immense caverns left by the old-style heading-and-bluff system of mining. Toward the rear center of the huge room rose the thick, 150-foot pillar which had been marked as the first to be reclaimed. Sectional ladders were braced against it and catwalks had been suspended from the roof of the room. On top of the pillar a team of drillers was working at the slash which would free the pillar from the roof. Another team was making a slash at the bottom of the pillar.

When the operation was complete, diamond drillers would bore holes the length of the pillar and these would be filled with ammonia gelatin explosive. Recalling what his father had said concerning the richness of the veins contained in the pillars, Jerry estimated that over 16,000 tons of magnetic iron ore could be broken in the first blast.

Someone shouted above the rocketing din of the pneumatic wet drills and Jerry turned to the man striding toward him. "Hello, Whitey," he greeted the elderly, well-liked mine foreman.

"Good to see you back, Jerry," Whitey shouted. He pushed his miner's cap back, disclosing bushy, ore-streaked white hair.

Jerry grabbed Whitey's arm and steered him back toward the tunnel, where the noise of the drills was muffled. "How they coming on the pillar slash, Whitey?"

"Their hearts ain't in their work," Whitey

said simply. "But slow as it's goin', they can't make it last much longer unless they quit entirely."

"And when they make the slash, that roof is on its own as far as that particular pillar goes," Jerry stated.

"Right," Whitey agreed.

"Well, if they're as scared of a roof slide as I hear they are, how come they'll make the slash at all?"

"I'm not sure they will," Whitey said. He shrugged. "I'm figurin' on a strike before tomorrow night."

"Why the hell haven't they sent a delegation to see Dad before this?" Jerry demanded, puzzled.

Whitey shrugged again. "What the hell!" he said. "Your dad knows how things are—and they know he knows. They're just not organized, I guess, and nobody has had the guts to go to Mike on his own. But that pillar slash comin' up is bringin' things to a quick head."

Jerry gazed at Whitey quizzically in the gloom. "What's your opinion, Whitey?"

The foreman kicked at the cinder-packed bed of the tunnel with his boot. "I think maybe I'd just as soon be outside on a different shift when that final slash is made," he said. Then he added: "But I reckon I'd take Mike's word that it was safe if it was a question of quittin' or workin'. Trouble is, I'm not sure enough in my own mind so I can't help sympathizin' a little with the guys who are practically dead certain that the roof is goin' to go!"

HERBIE BANNER'S saloon was packed tightly with men. Some wore the grime of a day underground, and others, lunchboxes under their arms, constituted the eight P.M. shift who would already have been checking in had the surprise mass meeting of Slagle Mine employees not been called.

Herbie was leaning inconspicuously against the back wall of the room, surveying the rows of chairs and boxes he had arranged after the sudden, telephoned request from Jerry Slagle, when the latter appeared at his elbow.

"Looks as if just about everybody is here—enough anyway," Jerry murmured.

"They're curious," Herbie said. "And so am I."

Jerry smiled. "I'll explain to you from the front of the room." Then he walked swiftly around the chairs to the end of the room and climbed up on a packing box.

"I'm going to make this short and to the point," he addressed the quickly hushed crowd. "We understand that you fellows think it's dangerous to make that pillar slash in the Dolly Snaft. You've got a perfect right to think so. On the other hand, we've got good

reasons for the operation. First, we need those pillars badly or we wouldn't be going ahead with the operation in the face of all this unrest. Secondly, from our own investigations, it's safe."

Jerry raised his hands for quiet at the growing murmur precipitated by his last statement. "Here's what we intend to do," he shouted. "We're having a Bureau of Mines man come up to make an independent survey. Meanwhile, we've got to ask you fellows to go ahead on that first pillar. Operations are way behind schedule now. And to prove that we're sure it's safe, either Mike or I will be down there under that pillar up to and including the time when the final slash is made. Now does that satisfy you fellows?"

He paused, not expecting an answer, but confident that he had swung them over by the very fairness of his argument. He gazed at the men, roving his eyes over their faces—then the room plunged into darkness. Somebody shouted unintelligibly, there was a crash of splintering glass and Jerry, ducking instinctively, felt a spray of liquid shower his head.

His fists doubled and he remained crouched in a growing, smothering rage. Then his anger began subsiding and he was grateful that Mike was not present with his red-hot temper.

The tense, waiting silence which had followed the darkness and the crash was suddenly broken as the voice of Whitey Hennegan roared: "Put on those lights!"

"O.K., O.K." It was the voice of Herbie. In another moment, the wall lights went on again.

Jerry slowly straightened up. He looked out over the wide-eyed faces and then to the back of the room where a flabbergasted Herbie Banner was standing with his hand still on the lightswitch near the door. Then Jerry turned and thoughtfully surveyed the debris of the shattered whiskey bottle scattering the floor. The stain left by the bottle's impact against the wall was directly behind his head.

"That was a stinking trick!" It was Whitey who spoke and he had risen to say it. He looked around at the crowd contemptuously and belligerently.

Jerry shook his head. He still couldn't figure it. The men all looked as surprised about the thing as Herbie Banner, whose fat face was still screwed up in wonder.

"I was asking you guys if you were satisfied with the arrangements I listed," Jerry said coldly. "Apparently somebody wasn't." He waited a moment but nobody spoke. "The eight o'clock shift can report in," Jerry concluded. "Any one found dogging it is going to be laid off." He stepped off the packing case and strode to the back of the room.

Whitey Hennegan was waiting for him by

the door, but before he reached Whitey, Herbie Banner grabbed him. "I'm sorry that damn thing happened," Herbie blurted. "Jeez, it all happened so quick . . . I can't imagine what dirty—"

"Wasn't your fault, Herbie," Jerry said quickly and stepped around him to the door. There Whitey fell in step beside him and they walked toward the mines.

"Bet you'd like to lay hands on some guy," Whitey remarked laconically.

"I'd like to find out just what he expected to accomplish by it," Jerry burst out angrily.

"There's somethin' funny about all this," Whitey puzzled. "But I've decided that I'm on your side anyway. I was neutral before."

"Thanks Whitey," Jerry said, then added: "What strikes you as funny?"

Whitey hunched his shoulders, struggling for words. "I—I don't know exactly. Damn it, for one thing, I've never seen men opposed to somethin' who talk about it so little. Hell, I'm around them plenty. I never hear them worryin' out loud about the Dolly roof tumblin' down around their ears. It's more like—like some kind of a whisperin' campaign, you get what I mean?"

"Yeah, kind of," Jerry replied thoughtfully. "But who the devil started it?"

"I can help you out on that," Whitey said. They had reached the mine gates. "I've got to get down with the shift," he continued quickly. "I'll have a chance to run up to the office in about two hours. I'll try to have it with me."

"Have what with you?" Jerry asked.

"The book," Whitey said. "Jake Wisner's old diary. That's what started this mess." He turned into the change house where the second shift was donning its mining clothes.

JERRY was alone in the office when Whitey arrived about ten o'clock. According to the new schedule, Mike was down in the Dolly Shaft with the drillers working on the pillar slash. "How did the shift start off, Whitey?" Jerry asked.

"Not bad," Whitey said. "Mike told Pete Jarvis to wrestle his drill a little faster and Pete walked out. That was the only trouble."

Jerry nodded. Pete Jarvis was the son of Henry Jarvis, the Blastville scrub dairy farmer who wanted the outrageous price for the property that Slagle Mines needed.

"Now who the devil is Jake Wisner, Whitey?" Jerry asked.

"Jake Wisner was the mine foreman of this place back in the 1880's," Whitey said, drawing up a chair. "Seems he kept a diary."

"Isn't there a Wisner family still in town?" Jerry asked.

"The last one, an old spinster daughter, died about six months ago," Whitey answered.

"She was about ninety and I guess the diary had been handed down to her. All I know about it is that this little yellow-leaved trouble-maker has been kickin' around among the miners for the past three weeks. I first saw it over at Herbie's boarding place. Right now, Steve Kowlowski has it. I tried to get it from him just now but he wouldn't let me have it. He's a pal of Pete Jarvis's and he was probably sore about the trouble between Pete and Mike."

"What is there in the diary that—"

"I got the important part of it copied down," Whitey said. He pulled a tattered piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to Jerry. "Most of the diary is just routine stuff. You know—broke so many tons of muck today . . . so and so got conked with a hunk of rock, and so on. But this part I copied down—that's what's causin' all the trouble."

Jerry smoothed out the slip of paper under the desk light and read the words Whitey had written in his loose scrawl.

Against my better judgment we pried loose one of the pillars of ore in the Dolly mine today. The roof buckled and what I would guess was some 350 tons of horse rock slid and buried four of the men killing them instantly. It would be murderous to continue dislodging any more pillars and, naturally, the operations will be halted . . . although it seems now, a little like locking the barn doors too late.

Jerry looked up from the paper. "This is word for word, Whitey?" he questioned eagerly.

"Word for word," Whitey affirmed. He stood up. "I got to get back underground. You can keep that paper."

"Whitey, keep trying to get that diary," Jerry said. "I've got to get hold of it. It's important!"

Jerry was still in the office when Mike stamped in at two in the morning.

"They're beginning to move ahead on that slash now," Mike grunted. "Damned if I don't think you shamed them into it with your little speech tonight."

Jerry nodded. He had not told Mike of the bottle throwing episode but he had told him what he had said at the meeting.

"Way things are moving now," Mike continued, "that pillar will be floating clear of the roof by Saturday night. Then the thick-headed worriers will have their proof that the operation is safe."

Jerry nodded again. "Guess I'd better get down there."

"I'll relieve you at seven tomorrow morning," Mike promised.

Mike looked fresh and rested when he came down into the Dolly Shaft the next

morning to relieve Jerry. It was apparent that he felt the labor trouble crisis was over. Jerry didn't think so, but he was glad to see his dad cheerful again, anyway.

"I believe I'll look up Pete Jarvis and see if I can't get him straightened out," he told Mike.

"You'd better get some sleep first," Mike ordered. But he added: "I'd like to get Pete back in here as long as everybody else seems so satisfied. I hated to order him out of the mine last night, but I had to do it to maintain some kind of discipline. How is the work coming?"

"Good," Jerry admitted. "I guess you'll have a pillar ready for blasting next week all right."

He rode the man-hoist up to the surface, wondering what made him feel so apprehensive. What he had told Mike was true. The drilling crew was working as though it had decided to slash the pillar free and clean of the roof without further soldering.

But, climbing out of his mining togs in the change house, he realized that he was still worried because there were so many different danger signals which had flashed since he had been home. As Whitey had said, it was as if some secret, whispering campaign were being waged against the mine management.

First, there was the focus of the trouble—the miner's fear of the pillar-removing job. That was easy to understand on the basis of the Wisner diary which had been circulating among the men. But, if nobody else realized it, it was very apparent to Jerry that something was fishy about that diary. It was such an obvious falsity that he felt he would have no difficulty in proving it to the men. What bothered him more was the identity of the person or persons who would make such a planned attempt to stir up unrest.

And another unnatural, bothersome thing was why Henry Jarvis, a poor farmer with 3,000 acres of worthless land—worthless unless the Blastville mines were expanded—should refuse a legitimate offer of twenty thousand dollars for that land. That fact actually was beginning to prey on Jerry's mind more than the origin of the fake diary. And it was why he intended to see Henry and Pete Jarvis. The episode between Pete and Mike the previous night afforded him an excellent excuse for driving out to the ramshackle Jarvis farm.

OLD MAN JARVIS was sitting on the unpainted steps of the Jarvis porch when Jerry drove up. He was clad in his undershirt and leaning back against a porch post that looked ready to topple. If he had any real hopes of getting fifty thousand for his acreage Jerry couldn't blame him for loafing.

"Hello Mr. Jarvis," Jerry greeted him. "Where's Pete?"

"Sleepin'."

Henry Jarvis gave no indication of calling his son so Jerry sat down on the porch steps beside him. "I'm sorry Pete got sore last night. We'd like him to come back if he'd care to."

"I ain't sure he wants to come back," Henry Jarvis said sleepily.

Jerry gazed thoughtfully at the weather-beaten Jarvis outbuildings. Nearby, ten scrawny cows foraged industriously in the rock- and scrub pine-filled grazing pasture. Jerry throttled his rising tide of impatience and remarked carefully: "Pete thinking about going into farming with you?"

"Nope. Reckon he's just decided to wait for a better job," Henry Jarvis declared.

Jerry grinned. It was either that or swear. The only job for anybody in Blastville was a job at the Slagle Mines. "Henry," he ventured, "you apparently realize that Mike needs this property of yours, otherwise you wouldn't have turned down his offer."

"Keerect." Henry grinned sleepily.

"But do you know that if Mike doesn't get the property he may eventually be forced to abandon the mines?" Jerry said grimly. "Then your land you're so proud of won't bring ten cents an acre at tax sale. There's a slight difference between drawing a fine bargain and ruining a good sale!"

Henry seemed undisturbed. "Reckon you and your pa ain't the only folks that mine iron in this state."

"Pa, keep your damn mouth shut!"

Jerry stood up and turned around. Pete Jarvis, sleep-rimmed eyes narrowed against the sunlight, glared angrily at him. "You don't have to come out here and pump Pa," he growled. "You wanta talk business, you see me."

Jerry dusted his pants. "No, Pete," he corrected evenly. "If there's any more business about land sales between us it'll be in our office when you come there wanting to sell at a reasonable price."

The next time he had an opportunity to speak with Mike alone, Jerry asked him if there had been any competitors when he had purchased the Blastville mining properties.

"No," Mike answered. "'Course, since I came up here and proved that there was still money lying around underground, I had an offer to sell lock, stock and barrel to some outfit from Minnesota, the Eagle Mining Corporation. The price wasn't good, but it would have let me out of this thing without losing my shirt." Mike chuckled. "For a while there, I thought of writing to them and asking if they were still interested—'til you came back and fixed up the Dolly Shaft operations for me."

Jerry felt he was getting closer to the answer. Henry Jarvis apparently knew something that Pete Jarvis didn't want disclosed. And from what little Henry had said, that something was the fact that another mining group was waiting to operate the Slagle Mines if Mike moved out. That was the only possible answer to why an offer of twenty thousand had been turned down.

If that were the case, and if the other mining group would buy the Jarvis land at a higher price, it was to the Jarvis' interest to drive Mike Slagle out. Following that reasoning, it was easy to tie up the Dolly Shaft trouble with the Eagle Mining Corporation of Minnesota and the Jarvises. But there was one slight flaw. It was inconceivable to Jerry that any moneyed group would deal directly with Henry and Pete Jarvis. And it was inconceivable that either of the Jarvises would have had brains enough to realize the importance of the Dolly Shaft operations and plan the attack against it.

Jerry, feeling sure now that some alien force was directing an insidious attack against Slagle Mines, decided finally to wait for something concrete on which to prove his suspicions before taking them to Mike.

SPLITTING the shifts with Mike so that one of them would always be down in the shaft kept Jerry busy and didn't leave him very much time for sleuthing down his suspicions. Besides, he found himself beginning to share Mike's opinion that after the first pillar had been removed and the men found the roof still standing, the victory would be won.

When Mike relieved Jerry on the Saturday morning shift, the tension in the shaft was almost unbearable. The drilling team working at the top of the pillar was nearly through. The team at the base of the pillar had quit entirely and was waiting. If they cut through first, the roof would not only have to stand without support, but would also have to hold the entire weight of the pillar.

Jerry hated to leave, but he was groggy. He went up to the office and flopped down on a cot, intending to return down the shaft in a couple of hours. When he awoke he was amazed to find that it was dark. Mike was working at his desk. He glanced at his wrist-watch and saw that it was almost nine o'clock. "Why the deuce didn't you call me?" he grumbled.

Mike looked up and smiled. "I figured you needed the sleep. Besides there wasn't any need to bother you. The shaft is shut down until Monday morning."

Jerry would have been scared stiff by that news if Mike hadn't looked so happy. "What's the matter?"

"The pillar slash was completed at five-thirty this afternoon," Mike said. "I figured it was a good time to shut down. Everybody's been pretty nervous on the job. Now it's over and they can see the roof is O.K. They'll come back Monday morning raring to go."

Jerry nodded. "A good idea," he agreed. "And the Bureau of Mines inspector will probably have started his survey here before we're ready to reclaim the next pillar."

"Why don't you drive over to Corinth and see a movie or something," Mike suggested. "I'm behind on my paper work and I'm going to work late. Besides, Whitey and I are going down the shaft a little later and look things over. We've got to decide which pillar we're going to move in on next."

Jerry stretched. "Maybe I will drive over to Corinth," he said. He left Mike and headed for Herbie Banner's to get something to eat before making the fifteen-mile drive to Corinth, the nearest town of over 5,000 inhabitants within 70 miles of Blastville.

Before he reached Banner's place, he encountered Whitey Hennegan on the street. Whitey stopped him.

"Here's that diary," he said, pulling a tattered, small, leather-bound book from his shirt front. "The guy I borrowed it from wants it back by tomorrow mornin'."

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"Who's that?" Jerry asked.

"Herbie Banner," Whitey answered. "Don't ask me who loaned it to him. About everybody has had it one time or another."

Whitey continued down the street toward the mine gates and Jerry walked on to Banner's after tucking the diary in his coat pocket.

The barroom was well-filled. Jerry slid into a rear booth and ordered a sandwich and coffee. Before it arrived, Herbie spotted him and left his busy post behind the bar to waddle over to the booth.

"Understand you Slagle boys are feelin' pretty good tonight," Herbie grinned. He waved to include the packed room, then added: "Fact, everybody is feeling pretty damn good about that roof still standing."

Jerry nodded absently. "Say Herbie," he asked gravely, "you heard anything about a diary that's making the rounds?"

Herbie frowned and slid into the booth. "Sure," he said softly. "Everybody's heard about it. I saw it first some three weeks ago. I gave it to Whitey Hennegan about a half hour ago." He shrugged. "I don't know where the damn thing came from, but it's sure been circulating."

"Why didn't you put us wise to it?" Jerry demanded.

Herbie scratched his head in obvious discomfort. "I'm everybody's friend," he said finally. "And I can't afford to take sides. If some of these guys heard I ran to you fellows"—he glanced expressively at the packed bar—"little Herbie's cash register would stop playing those beautiful Saturday night tunes."

"Sometimes I think you're a little mercenary, Herbie," Jerry said.

After he finished his sandwich, he decided to go back to the mine office and study the Wisner diary. He'd already forgotten about the movie at Corinth.

He reached the office at 10 o'clock and found it empty. He laid the diary on Mike's desk, sat down and finally found the paragraph at the very last page. He peered at the scrawled words beneath the light and tried to remember all he had ever read about forgery detection. He had to admit that it was a good job, at least to his inexpert appraisal. The scrawl certainly resembled the handwriting of the rest of the diary but Jerry, scrutinizing the ink shade at nose distance, was almost positive he could detect a difference. The ink in the suspicious paragraph looked blacker than the rest as though the color pigment had not stood as long a test of age.

Jerry was rummaging through Mike's desk in search of a magnifying glass when he felt the office structure vibrate. He strode to the open window and listened to the roaring echoes which emanated from the Dolly Shaft.

Jerry racked his brain for an answer and

couldn't find any. Mine operations were halted for the weekend—the only persons underground were Mike and Whitey making their reconnaissance tour, and they certainly wouldn't be doing any blasting.

TRYING to fight down the growing dread within him, Jerry bolted from the office and ran to the shaft house. There was only a dim light burning near the lift platform and the man-hoist was up. Jerry leaped into it and pulled the signal rope viciously. Nothing happened and he realized that there would be nobody at the powerhouse to work the cable which hauled the hoist.

He raced to the change house, got a carbide lamp and began running down the long, seemingly endless steps which paralleled the man-hoist track. Diving into the well of pitch darkness, Jerry became aware of the growing dustiness of the air. Before he reached the 220-level, he was choking for breath. There was no doubt that something had happened.

When he turned into the tunnel off the 220-level, the ray of his lamp was blunted on the packed dust particles in the air. He almost ran into the heap of broken rubble before he realized it. His heart in his mouth, he shifted the light ray up and down and around the mountain of jagged rock. It had blocked the tunnel completely.

Furiously, he began clawing his way up the pile, pulling at loose rock with his hands before he came to his senses. Then, stumbling over the rock-littered floor, he turned back to the shaft stairway and began climbing.

Before he was halfway back to the surface, he was sobbing for breath. The dim light at the top of the shaft seemed miles away, and no nearer than when he had begun climbing. Finally, the fierce pain in his side made him stop and rest despite the tortured realization of the seconds he was wasting.

He was grimmer and calmer when he resumed the climb. He went more slowly, but he didn't stop again and he reached the top of the shaft just as the lights blazed on. There were ten or twelve miners there and they had obviously just arrived. None of them was in mining togs.

"What the hell happened?"

Jerry, breathing hard, recognized Sloan, one of the scrapers. "I—I don't know," he gasped. "But there's about a thousand ton of rock off the 220-level—tunnel is blocked tight and Mike and Whitey are in there somewhere."

"Christ!" Sloan whispered. Everybody got very quiet, even the newcomers who were streaming into the shaft house. "We were over at Herbie's," Sloan went on. "We heard the noise and—and we knew everything was shut down."

"That damn roof wasn't so safe after all," somebody in back said.

Jerry realized it was up to him to give some orders. "Murphy, Hendricks, Bilonsku," he called out sharply, picking the drillers out in the crowd, "hustle down there and start making holes through the top of the muck. "Peterson, get your fuses and explosive ready. Jones, get the power on so we can use the man-hoist. Rest of you guys grab picks. I don't know how far the tunnel block extends."

The men began running for their lockers. Jerry, pale and shaky, followed them. He was afraid that the tunnel block was a bad one from the looks of it. It would probably take days at best before they could break through. But, right now, there wasn't anything better he could think of than to start digging and blasting. Meanwhile, he intended to go back to the office and pore over the cross-section diagrams of the Dolly Shaft in the forlorn hope that he would find some existing passageway leading from another level to the level on which his father and Whitey were trapped.

He was crossing from the shaft house to the office when two men fell in step with him—Pete Jarvis and Steve Kowlowski. "The block look bad, Jerry?" Peter asked.

"Yeah," Jerry answered impatiently. "You guys want to help, you can get to work down there."

"I think I know a better way to help," Pete said, as Jerry continued his march to the office. "I know those old abandoned shafts on our property pretty well. I'm pretty sure we can get into the 220-level from one of them. We'll have to walk down and the goin' ain't too good but it'd be a helluva lot faster than waiting for those guys to break through down here."

Jerry listened, open-mouthed. Then he slapped Pete on the back. "Good boy," he said. "Let's get going!"

They got in Jerry's car, Steve Kowlowski still accompanying them. Jerry didn't see how running down this possibility could hurt. He couldn't do very much himself otherwise and meanwhile the men would be going ahead full speed at the job of blasting and prying loose the muck block. It would have to be removed anyway before mining operations could be continued.

Following Pete's directions, Jerry drove past the Jarvis farmhouse for almost a mile down a dirt road. Then Pete instructed him to turn into the meadow which contained the crumbling shaft house of one of the long unused mines on the Jarvis property.

They adjusted their mining caps and he and Kowlowski fell behind Pete as he began picking his way down the steep shaft. It wasn't too difficult going. The old stairway had collapsed

until it was more treacherous than helpful. But the ties were still imbedded in the shaft rail track and they walked on them.

Then they turned off the shaft into a side tunnel. Pete set a fast pace and seemed to know exactly where he was going.

They had been walking for over half an hour when Pete suddenly halted. "Hear that?" he asked.

Jerry listened. At first he could hear nothing but his own hard breathing. Then he heard the faint humming vibrations ahead of them in the blackness. "That must be the noise of the drillers working on the other side of the cave-in!" he exclaimed.

"We can't be too far away then," Steve Kowlowski said.

Jerry took a deep breath. "Hey Mike!" he belted.

The words rumbled and echoed away, carrying the clanging overtones of the rock. Almost before the last whisper had faded, an unintelligible shout sounded.

"They're up ahead somewhere," Pete said, striding out again. "Let's get 'em before they wander off the main tunnel."

They rounded a bend and saw two pinpoints of light ahead, bobbing and swaying. Jerry felt a flood of relief. He could have hugged Pete Jarvis. He started trotting until the ray of his lamp disclosed the unbelieving faces of Mike and Whitey.

"Where in blazes did you come from?" Mike gasped.

THEY were all pretty weary, driving back to the village. Mike and Whitey were especially quiet, and had been throughout the tiring climb out of the shaft. Jerry realized that Mike was probably taking it pretty hard. Something he had insisted was safe had turned out to be almost a death-trap. Jerry didn't even want to think of what the incident was going to do to Slatte Mine operations. It would certainly deal a death blow to further pillar reclamations in the Dolly Shaft.

They drove in the mine gates unnoticed. Lights were still blazing in the shaft house and it was evident that most of the men were underground, still working on the tunnel block.

They all piled out of the car and stood uncertainly, waiting for Mike to say something. "I'm grateful for your help, Pete—and Steve," Mike said finally.

"That goes for me, too," Whitey echoed.

It all sounded dismal and unenthusiastic to Jerry. Of course, anyone would have done what Pete had done. It was just fortunate that he happened to know a back way into the Dolly Shaft. But Jerry was annoyed that Mike and Whitey couldn't show a little more gratitude, even if Pete and Steve hadn't done anything heroic, or even if Mike was half

crazy worrying what he was going to do next or how he was going to explain the cave-in to the miners.

"Whitey," Mike continued, "go on down and tell those men the emergency is over and to go on home." Whitey left and Mike turned again to Pete and Steve. "You fellows better come up in the office with Jerry and me," he said shortly. "Least I can do is be above-board with you."

Pete and Steve hesitated momentarily, then began marching behind Mike to the office. Jerry, completely bewildered, followed.

Mike motioned them to chairs in the office, then proceeded to light a cigar. "Whitey and I had a lot of time for quiet discussion down in the mine tonight," he said casually. "He told me about this Wisner diary that's been floating around, and we also discussed the explosion in the shaft tonight."

Jerry was listening so hard he completely missed the implication for a moment. Then he burst: "Did you say explosion?"

"That's right," Mike said grimly. "There was no mistaking it. Whitey and I have both smelled powder smoke in our time and we weren't too far away from that part of the tunnel when it went off."

"Wait a minute," Jerry burst out incredulously, oblivious of the silently watching Pete and Steve, "you mean to say that tunnel roof was drilled and plugged with explosive and fuse, without Whitey or anybody knowing about it?"

"Sounds impossible, doesn't it?" Mike said evenly, his gaze on Pete and Steve. "We couldn't figure it out either, and then it came to us all at once. Came to us when you fellows marched up to us in that tunnel." He paused. "You see we didn't know about that back entrance to the Dolly Shaft."

There was silence. Jerry was thinking hard, trying to catch up. Sure, it would have been possible for anybody using that back entrance to set the tunnel for an explosion—in fact, it was the perfect solution. No danger of being seen going down the Dolly Shaft itself at suspicious times. Just sneak in that back way and pick your own working time.

"I guess you two guys know what I've been thinking," Mike said to Pete and Steve. "I hope I'm wrong, but I'm having a helluva time trying to convince myself."

Pete was rubbing his hands together, his brows knit. Steve Kowlowski looked white and scared. Jerry looked at them and the full

weight of Mike's suspicions dawned on him. Pete and Steve—the malcontents from the start. . .

"Who else besides you and Steve knew about that route into the Dolly Shaft, Pete?" Mike asked softly.

Pete leaned forward in his chair. "I'm not going to squeal," he said tightly. "And I'm not going to admit anything, see? But I want to get one thing straight—I'm no murderer. There are some guys around here who believed that—that the Dolly Shaft operations were suicide. I was one of 'em. Maybe I knew it was an explosion and no cave-in down there tonight. O.K. But I didn't know you and Whitey were going to be down the shaft, either!"

Jerry was finally beginning to get the picture. All the loose pieces which had been chasing themselves around in his head were starting to fall into place. "You thought you were going to get the fifty thousand dollars for your property out of all this, didn't you, Pete?"

"Sure," Pete returned. "But I also figured I was doing every miner in this place a favor. I figured Old Man Wisner knew what he was talking about when he called that shaft a death trap."

"This is the damnedest thing I've ever run into," Mike gasped. "You sit there and practically admit you blew up that tunnel, Pete, and yet Whitey and I would be still there if you hadn't got us out!" He turned helplessly to Jerry. "And what in hell has Pete's property got to do with it?"

Instead of answering, Jerry shifted his gaze to Pete. "Isn't the Eagle Mining Corporation mixed up in this?"

Pete nodded unhappily.

"How about explaining these things to me?" Mike roared.

"Look, Mike," Jerry said quickly, "who's the guy who's been eeling in and out of this from the start? The one who brought you the first stories of dissension among the men, and the guy who kept pumping you as to just how serious a shut-down in the Dolly Shaft would be?"

"**H**ERBIE BANNER?" Mike exclaimed incredulously.

"The guy who came out here from the middle west," Jerry continued. "The guy who was urging Pete to hold out for more dough for his property, and the guy who put the Wisner

A WORD TO THE WISE

Waste paper is still an important war material—it's essential for packing ammunition. So in order to make sure there's enough left over to go 'round for your favorite publication, don't forget to save all waste paper and turn it in for scrap.

diary in circulation, after adding that little forgery about the shaft!"

"What do you mean, forgery?" Pete barked.

"According to the diary, a cave-in occurred after they had removed a pillar," Jerry said. "But you can search every room in the Dolly Shaft and you'll find a pillar in each one."

"By God, I hadn't thought of that," Mike said.

"Neither had Herbie Banner when he added that paragraph to the diary," Jerry said. "But I bet the miners who fell for it are going to be sore when they get wise."

"I don't know where this leaves me standing with you guys," Pete growled, "but I got a proposition. I'll sell at the original offer. And I'll see that all the fellows who believed that diary stuff get the lowdown. Banner sold me two arguments. He said the Eagle outfit would move in here as soon as you guys moved out, and would buy the property at a better price. He convinced me, after showing me that diary, that we'd be doing everybody a favor by shutting you down."

"You were played for a sucker, Pete. Banner isn't going to take this lying down. He's got too much invested in this town. He'll claim that was a genuine cave-in and not a planted blast. You and Steve are the only guys who can testify it wasn't. But if you do you'll have to admit you fixed the explosion and that will land you right in state prison!" said Mike.

"Let's go see Banner," Jerry suggested. "Maybe we can make a deal with him. The most important thing is to get him the hell out of this territory so we can get back to mining."

Looking at Mike's face, Jerry knew how tough it was going to be for him to crawl to Banner. Yet, it was either that or sacrifice Pete. And, while Pete had been on Banner's side for a while, he had been willing to give himself away to get Mike and Whitey out of the tunnel. You couldn't just forget that.

"O.K.," Mike said abruptly, "let's go."

Then a humbled Pete and the grim operators of Slagle Mines continued on to the Banner House. The first gray shafts of dawn were in the sky when they entered the open barroom.

Herbie's chef was sleeping with his head on a table. He roused himself to peer at them. "They want more coffee down in the shaft?" he asked. "I been running it down there all night. If I could find Banner I'd tell him to

take this job and—" He looked at them querulously. "Where the hell is that fat guy?"

"That's what we came to find out," Jerry said.

The chef stood up and removed his apron. "When you find him, tell him I just quit," he said. "Last I saw of him was about eight o'clock last night. He drove off somewhere."

Puzzled, Jerry followed Mike and Pete back to the car.

"Maybe he took a run-out powder," Pete remarked hopefully.

"Small chance," Mike said sourly. "We won't get rid of him that easy."

Jerry climbed thoughtfully behind the wheel. "What was the exact set-up on the explosion, Pete?" he asked.

"Me and Steve had it all planted a week ago," Pete answered. "A couple of days ago, Herbie went down to look it over. I took him down that back way. Then he told me he'd let me know when to set the charge off. But when I heard the mine was going to shut down Sunday, I figured it was the time to do it. I lit the fuse about six o'clock last night."

"Did you see Banner at all last night?" Jerry asked.

Pete shook his head. "I heard he was looking for me, but I didn't see him."

Jerry started the motor and began driving.

"Where you headed in such a hurry?" Mike gasped.

"Out to the old shaft," Jerry replied.

He pulled up at the entrance to the meadow containing the abandoned shaft house which led underground to the Dolly mine. He didn't even have to get out of the car to see that his wild hunch had been correct. The dawn disclosed what the darkness had hidden.

"Hey!" Pete exclaimed. "That's Banner's car parked over in back of that shaft house."

"Herbie figured last night was an ideal time for pulling the tunnel blast, too," Jerry said slowly. "Only he didn't know you'd already started the fuse, Pete."

"But—but," Mike sputtered, "do you realize what it means? He must have been ahead of us in the tunnel when that blast went off or—or we would have seen him. And if he was any closer than we were he would have been—been. . ."

"Killed," Jerry finished evenly. "He was right after all, I guess, when he claimed that tangling with that shaft was suicide."

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ESPRIT DE CORPSE

By **E. HOFFMANN PRICE**

Author of "My Body Lies Over the Ocean," etc.

Lucky Nolan's girl grew up while he was away fighting Japs. Together, they learned that suffering and brutality are not confined to the battle-front. The murder of her father created a wide breach of suspicion between them, but Lucky, about whom it was said that "if he fell in a cesspool he'd come up with a gold watch in each hand," patched together the details that finally exonerated them—in a very soldierly way.

Before the gap in the red dress was twisted out of Lucky's line of vision, he noted the welts on Julia's side.



CHAPTER ONE

Delayed-Action Fuse

BACK from prison camp at Cabanatuan. Casper Nolan was already used to being back, and used to eating—and as for looking forward, it was easy, since he'd done nothing else during those three years.

Lucky Nolan, they'd called him at Bataan, and now it seemed that the tag was right. "Fell in a cesspool and came up with a gold watch in each hand." Being twenty-one years and six months old, he could come back a lot quicker than the old buzzards of thirty or so. He'd found a new job, for the leave in which he was supposed merely to recuperate—and Julia was helping him with his chore.

Shoulder to shoulder, they hunched over the books on the living room table in Gregg Tyson's farmhouse. The lanky, thin faced boy, burned to a deep tan, with his eyes still squinting from Philippine sun, and the shapely blond girl in the blue house dress who was anxiously following Lucky's campaign against quadratic equations.

Finally: "No, darling! You can't divide by X minus one."

He looked up, frowning and determined, then grinned amiably and ran his fingers through his GI haircut. "There's X minus one on both sides, and—"

But Julia had the answer, and he got the point, saying: "Well, that goes to show, I've forgotten bonehead algebra, to say nothing about this stuff!" He picked up the specimen examination for West Point candidates. "Lady, lady, what a life I'll lead, whipping one of these in four hours!"

She patted his hand. "It's been done before. Pershing didn't have as much schooling as you've had." But she added: "Though he didn't have Bataan to knock X-square out of his head."

"Me and Pershing!"

"There is also a four-hour session with grammar, big boy!"



They'd finished High together, in 1941. She'd gone to U. C., and he to the army. Captain Ross, the chaplain at the hospital, had asked him how keenly he was interested in winning a commission, once Lucky had sounded off about how from now on, soldiering would be an honorable necessity, and not a loafer's gag for dodging honest work.

So here he was, bent on passing the West Point exams if he could, and failing that, to get a commission direct. "Hell, no, I don't want it to read, 'Army of the United States,'" he declared. "It's going to be United States Army for mine. Now, or later."

The difference between the two was one thing he was able to explain to the girl who had gone to college for two years, quit to chalk up one hasty marriage, and a hastier divorce, and then come back to her father's farm. Julia's return to the farm made Lucky wonder, but her first evasive, half-embarrassed answer had made him drop the subject.

A door opened, closed—there was the sound of someone coming in from the front, almost furtively. Lucky looked up, and said to the newcomer: "Hi, Wally, how's the show?"

Julia's brother was not quite the age Lucky had been when he had enlisted. He was a tall, well-built, tow-headed fellow with a man's body, and a boy's face. "Pretty good," he answered, diffidently, and after a moment of fumbling for sociability, he edged away and about his own affairs.

The kid seemed terribly young to Lucky, but unless he got a farm deferment, he'd soon be in khaki. Quiet, reserved, retiring—Julia's brother was, in a way of speaking, too big for his size. Whatever aces he had, they were up his sleeve. Wallace Tyson somehow made Lucky Nolan feel uncomfortable. He wanted to meet him, man to man, yet he couldn't. And he didn't know why.

Wallace gave the impression of being smothered, weighted down, but his sister was forceful and sparkling enough for two. Impulsive, high-tempered, and somehow defiant. Invisible chip on the shoulder.

Mrs. Tyson was in Hollister, a hundred-odd miles west of Tres Palos. For a farm woman, she was away a good deal of the time. Maybe that's why Julia had come home, instead of finding work more suited to her education.

Then Gregg Tyson came into the room, slid a chair along the gleaming linoleum, and turned on the radio. He was a big man, like his son—dark, with a truculent face, and deep-set, brooding eyes. He hadn't acknowledged the presence of the two at the table.

"Dad," Julia said, "would you mind turning it down just a bit?"

"It's all right," Lucky said hastily. "I'm leaving anyway."

"You sit down, you've not even started!"

She caught his hand, and drew him back to his chair. Then, a bit louder, with a perceptible edge to her voice, "Dad, if you'd be kind enough to turn it down just a bit, I'd thank you."

Gregg Tyson popped out of his chair, and crumpled the newspaper he had been reading. "Seems to me that a bullet dodger ought to learn to concentrate with a bit of noise," he drawled, smiling contemptuously.

THAT brought Lucky to his feet. His tropican tan was now an unpleasant shade of yellow, his lips had become grayish, his mouth was tight, and his knuckles were white—but he said nothing. Julia flared up: "Bullet dodger? My God, what a silly thing to say to—to—"

Tyson cut in: "Instead of joining a young gentleman's club, and spending four years away from all fronts, learning to be a professional soldier, living off the taxpayers and retiring on a nice income, he could get back and finish his job! Like the others are doing. Like your cousin, Sam, did, the one that isn't coming back!"

Lucky said, slowly: "Mr. Tyson, if you were alone, I'd not respect your house, any more than I do you. Now shut up before I forget your daughter's here, you lousy old—you—"

Choking, he stalked out.

Tyson reached for the books. "He forgot something!"

"You dare throw those books out," the girl said, evenly, "and I'll go out after them, and not come back!"

Lucky heard this, for he had left without slamming the door.

He was halfway down the walk, when Julia called, breathlessly: "Here they are." She choked a sob. "I'm sorry—he's just out of sorts—he was awfully fond of his nephew, Sam Hale. Maybe I could meet you at your folks' place."

She followed him to his father's car, and got in, sliding clear of the wheel to make room. "That was a horrible thing to say. He didn't mean it. He's just human enough to be resentful about your chance to—to—"

"To get out of the war."

"That's not why you're studying! You're looking forward to keeping peace, the only way it can ever be kept, not beg for it and bribe for it the way we tried. Getting out of active service for a while, that burns him up, I guess. He was hit hard by Sam's being killed in action."

Lucky nodded. "Maybe he's right. I guess I ought to tend to the main job, first."

"But they've discharged a lot of those chaps from Cabanatuan."

"Because they were finished. I'm good as

new, except I used to like rice, and now it's a fighting word."

Julia looked at him with interest and the moonlight did tricks to her hair and eyes. "You'll go places. You made part of your luck, and you were born with part of it."

"Most of it," he said, then frowned a little. "But a fact's a fact. He's halfway right." Then, looking at the girl whose head was pillowed on his shoulder. "You're another reason, honey."

"How?"

"West Point's a bachelor's club. It's a long time—"

The way they kissed each other made it clear how long four years would be. This was different from the good nights after dances at High. She was a lot more grown-up, and that short, sour marriage, the story of which he'd never heard, had stood between them until this moment. He said: "Four years is too long! Kreuger wears three stars and came out of the ranks. Hodges enlisted in the infantry, and look at him. If you're good enough, you make it anyway!"

She regarded him fondly, shook her head. "Sounds as if Dad sold you something! But don't let him. He—"

"No. I said to the chaplain: 'Captain, I'm a skillet head at math, I don't see how I can cram enough between now and the exams, but heck, there's next season's crop.' And he told me that by next year I'd be over the age limit—it's either make it now or bust. So I got myself all primed for the other way, in case I flunk this way. You and I, we can get into the army together. Three year's sergeant's pay isn't hay—let's go, honey!"

She almost agreed, and then froze up. Without saying a word, she had told him that he'd better stick to the Bachelor's Club.

"He's holding it against me," Julia said, after a long silence, "the expense of two years of college, and not making anything of it." Then with a rueful little smile: "I did mess things up, too! That's why I want you to go places, amount to something." She sparkled again, in that unpredictable way she had of flashing from somber to vivacious. "Maybe I'll be waiting for a bid to your graduation ball, class of '49."

She got out, and as she hurried back to the house, Julia looked back and called: "Come out tomorrow, Lucky."

LUCKY didn't sleep much that night, and he drove back to Tyson's early in the morning. He reasoned: "The old buzzard's tired and griped by night—catch him fresh, talk to him, man to man. He probably got stuck for Julia's divorce, and the two of us huddling over algebra looked like more headaches for him."

It had rained all night. It was still dark and murky when he toiled his way down the Tyson drive.

An inch of water buried the front yard. The light in the kitchen was feeble and yellow. There was a fine, persistent drizzle, with a dark horizon which gave no hope of brightness. The wet air reeked with a scorched smell. Smoke billowed out of the kitchen, rank and acrid.

The radio was silent. Funny, Julia always listened to that buckwheat program, she'd laughingly told him, though she loathed buckwheat cakes. "The only thing we all agree on, in this house . . ."

Maybe someone had been hurt in the barn. Lucky splashed through water which swirled about the yard, and plowed through deep mud. He followed footprints half obliterated by the rain.

A cow bawled. When he stepped to the gaping doorway, he got a blend of dairy bouquet, and of gasoline for the tractor. A few yards ahead of him, a man lay face up on the clean-swept earth floor. The man was Gregg Tyson, Julia's father.

Lucky snapped the switch at the door. The light made the blood show up clearly, though there was little of it. Apparently, it had soaked into the floor. Coming nearer, he got a good look at the battered head. Someone had conked Tyson from the rear.

On the floor lay a key-holder, a driver's license, an identification card, coupons for bulk delivery of gasoline, a jackknife, a quarter, two nickels, and a penny. Tyson's pockets had been turned inside out.

The farmer wore rubber boots. His hat, which had no bloodstains, was eight or ten feet from the body, as though it had been knocked off when the first blow had sent him staggering forward.

Lucky got all this as he knelt for a closer look, though he'd seen enough dead men to have an expert's eye.

Scalp wounds usually bleed a lot, even small ones—yet, even allowing for the thirsty earth, Tyson could not have bled very much. However, Lucky couldn't get a good view, as the wound was at the back of the head, against the earth.

Lucky paddled back through the mud, and stamped up the back steps. He rattled the kitchen door. "Julia!" he yelled. "Wally! Turn out!"

The screen was not hooked. He barged into the kitchen annex, a large alcove opening into the room beyond, which was living room, dining room, all in one.

He stopped short. There'd been no struggle. There wasn't a thing disturbed, there wasn't even a muddied footprint on the gleaming linoleum which covered the floor ahead of

him. He trailed mud after him for a few yards, went to the kerosene stove, turned it off. The bacon in the skillet had been reduced to six shreds of carbon. The tea-kettle boiled fiercely. A drip coffee-pot was all set for its quota of water.

He stepped back toward the door, to get out of the stench of grease. He came up against the jamb, and jerked his hand away from the clammy touch of a mop, up-ended against the wall.

He was sure now that neither Julia nor her brother had been harmed, so he decided not to track mud all over the front rooms to get to the bedrooms. They could not have been harmed without some signs of disturbance.

Lucky backed into the rain. He reopened the screen, to reach for the kitchen switch when a whimsical voice drawled: "Well, well, pal. What are you doing here?"

The pie-faced man smiled amiably. Water trickled down his ruddy cheeks. While he did not look any too bright, his little eyes were level and purposeful, and failed to participate in the joviality of the other features. The man with him came up abreast—he was thin-faced and leathery, with a tobacco-stained mustache. Under his raincoat, he fumbled with something which made a bulge that Lucky understood all too well.

"Looking for the Tysons. Who are you?"

The ruddy man flipped his lapel, and showed a star. "Seems to me I've seen you before. You're Berg Nolan's boy, huh?"

"That's right."

"Back from Bataan, huh? How come you're out of uniform?"

"I'm in uniform. Ever hear of fatigues?"

Lucky batted back at him. "Anyway, I'm on furlough. I've seen you, but I can't place the name. It's about time you showed up."

"Meeker. Think we're too late?"

Lucky jerked a thumb at the barn. "Tyson's dead. Where's the family?"

"You been inside, looking?"

"Sure. Something was burning."

"So you know Tyson's dead?" the leathery man said.

"One look's enough. Where's the family?"

"You're pretty far from home for this time of the morning," Meeker pointed out, bland and amiable as ever. "Come over to borrow something?"

THE front door opened. Footfalls sounded from the hard floor. Wet shoes squished. A woman spoke, and a man answered. Julia and Wally—then it became clear that the girl was crying, and trying not to.

"Good heavens, Lucky, what're you doing here?" Julia exclaimed.

"Came to see your dad. To settle the business we talked about last night." At this,

Julia frowned to shush him, but he went on, doggedly: "That's why I came. I'm awfully sorry this—it must've been a shock—well, you found him, I guess."

Wally stared glumly at the linoleum, and the muddy tracks he had made. He looked as though shock kept him from feeling anything.

The sour and silent deputy let Meeker carry the ball. "What kind of business did you have with Mr. Tyson that was so important that you came this early?"

Lucky hesitated. Meeker amiably continued: "Shucks, you don't have to tell me if it's personal. I'm just interested."

Julia said: "Oh, tell him! He has a right to know!"

Meeker turned to Julia. "Let's hear it your way."

"Lucky's been coming out to study for the West Point examination, and I've been coaching him evenings. Dad didn't think much of professional soldiers, peace-time soldiering, and he thought it wasn't worth studying for."

"So you came back to tell him being a future general is grand stuff and he oughtn't to gripe about Julia spending her time that way?" Meeker asked.

Lucky drew a deep breath, and resolutely faced the stupid-smiling deputy. "I'll tell you all of it. Julia's father has been griped about his providing for two years' college, and her marrying, wasting the expense, so she's here at home, working it out. That's one reason we couldn't get married."

Darrow, the sour-faced deputy, finally spoke. "She tell you that?"

"Not in so many words. I put two and two together."

"You don't look like you slept much."

"I was figuring things out, all night."

The sour face rearranged itself, and indicated that a conclusion had been drawn.

"That's just about it," Julia offered. "But I didn't mean I had to work out the bill. I just said—well—it was kind of a moral obligation."

Meeker agreed, cheerily. He was entirely too amiable. Lucky did not know which of the two deputies was the more dangerous. As at Bataan, Lucky felt a doom closing in, long before the face of it became plain.

"So you came early this morning to settle it. Well, that's often a good way, settling things quick, before grudges develop."

Lucky flared up: "He was dead when I found him. You might take a look instead of wasting your time on me!"

"We just went over to the neighbors to get Julia and Wally and here we find you."

"Oh, don't be silly!" Julia cried. "I told you Dad got up at four, started the fire in the

front room stove, and went out to do the chores. Wally slept late, and when breakfast was ready, I called Dad, and went out to see why—"

"That just shows your father was O.K. till he went to the barn."

"But don't you think I'd hear Lucky's old clunk pull up?"

"Sure, if he pulled it up where it's at now. But this might be his second showing up."

Lucky took a step forward. "Now that you're out in the open, I'll show you something."

He dug into his pocket, a quick, impatient gesture.

Darrow was 'way ahead of him, with a short-barreled .38 S&W. "Don't try it, bub!"

Meeker hadn't batted an eye. "Shucks, he ain't going for a gun. Unlax, Darrow. All right, what is it?"

"Check-book."

He produced it. "I wrote this at home, so we'd not be bumbling around the house, looking for a pen. I didn't want Julia to know what I was doing."

Meeker looked at the check, still attached to the stub. "Two thousand, three hundred-eighteen bucks and twenty-two cents, payable to order of Gregg Tyson. Well, I'll be darned. That's more'n I earn in a whole month. Black-jack or poker?"

"Back pay, three years. I spent a bit of it, but I figured there was enough to bail Julia out of this bond-servant business!"

"You wrote this at home?" He glanced at the desk in the corner. "I'll give you a receipt for it, it's evidence. Say, you really got that much dough at the Farmers Trust?"

"Ask 'em and see!"

"Maybe Mr. Tyson asked you the same question," Meeker observed, and pocketed the check-book. "Make him a receipt, Darrow. Well, that's all for you, Nolan. You run along, but don't leave town."

But Lucky Nolan went to his parked car, and waited. Later, he watched the ambulance and the car with the cameraman pull up. Flash bulbs made blue-white winks in the barn, the flashes reached out to the trees which dripped water on the jalopy. "They want me, only they're pretending they don't," he told himself. "Delayed-action fuse, that's all."

CHAPTER TWO

Blood Runs Uphill

LATER, Julia was saying to Lucky: "That check-book saved you a lot of trouble. Aubrey Sather—we went to Sather's to phone—told the deputies that Dad had mentioned having nine hundred and fifty dollars in his wallet. He'd got his check from the packing

house the night before. I was so afraid you'd have important money in your pocket!"

"Why'd I be running around with a thousand bucks?"

"Well—last night you said—"

"You thought I'd come to get you and run out?"

She nodded.

"I was thinking of that. All night. Guess they're over home, asking Dad what time I left."

"You didn't leave 'way early?"

"Too early. But with slick tires and a jammed windshield-wiper, bouncing into a puddle and splashing water through the front and knocking the ignition out, it was slow going. Couldn't sleep, so I checked out, figuring I'd wait till your lights went on."

"Of all things. Sitting out, waiting. An hour?"

"Hour and a half's what I calculated, but I skidded to the shoulder and had a hell of a time pulling out." He eyed her sharply. "You think—you think with *them*?"

"Oh, heavens, no! But such an early start!"

"I wanted to park where we'd sat last night, so I could make the remembering of it real. You'd said nothing definite, but it sounded like a promise."

"I meant it that way. But now—"

"I guess that's that. Where'd Wally go?"

"Caught the bus for Hollister to tell Mom. We could have wired, but that'd be a shock. It's stopped raining. Where'd you park?"

He eyed her with amazement. "You went out there with me, last night."

"Answer me anyway, Lucky."

He pointed. "Under that sycamore by the drive."

Still puzzled, he followed her to the tree, which grew from ground not flooded by the downpour. Her heel prints were clear, showing how she'd approached the car from the left, and got out on the right.

"Now you see? Two sets of tire tracks. Both smooth. And one cuts across my foot-prints and yours."

"How'd you come to notice this?"

"Aub Sather told the sheriff's men he saw a car pull up a bit after four and he saw the headlights shine at the front of our house. They went off, then on, as though someone blinked them at my window. He thought it was someone bringing me home from a date, and paid no attention—anyway, he doesn't know when the car pulled out."

"I was going to park here, so I could watch for your light to go on. But I didn't get here in time. Honey, give it to me straight, or it's good-by to my chances to stay in the service. Your dad have any neighborhood troubles?"

"Only what I told the sheriff. He and Steve Poole wrangled about irrigation. Dad claimed

that the way Poole irrigated, the water seeped over on us, hit hardpan, and brought up alkali to the surface and spoiled something like five or six acres. Dad opened a flood-gate on him, and Poole got a gun and—oh, I don't know, Dad never would tell all the truth. It was so far away I couldn't really be sure whether or not a shot was fired."

Lucky pondered as he stood there, he and Julia making a leaning post of the sycamore. "It does go that way, when people live close together, twenty-thirty-forty years, they either become awfully good friends, or they hate each other's guts. Some of us got short-tempered being crowded there in the Islands. Even with all our other gripes, we had to gripe at each other."

"You're seriously picking Steve Poole?"

"They've seriously picked me! And one more thing. You seen your ex-husband since the blow-up?"

"I've not invited him out, I guarantee you!"

She hadn't answered the question. Picking on Cyril Stroud was ticklish business. "Well, it won't be X square minus one tonight. Too bad Wally's gone, leaving you alone."

"Oh, I'm staying with the Sathers. They asked me already."

LUCKY Nolan walked off, got into his car. When Julia turned back to wave, she had all her sparkle. "Don't let playing Sherlock Holmes keep you from being a general!"

He drove to Highway 32, on which Poole's hundred and sixty acres fronted—his and Tyson's farm had only part of a rear boundary in common, just enough to cause trouble.

Umbrella trees, somber blue-green, shaded the white farmhouse from the front. Along the side, locust trees raised their bare, thorny arms—in summer they would shed pink blossoms and black pods on the porch roof. At the end of the drive was an old barn, painted red.

The loft was filled with baled alfalfa for the cows. Tractor, IHC truck, a late model V-8, gang-plow, disc, mower, rake, everything better than Tyson's, and better than what Lucky's father had.

He listened for a moment to the cluck and cackle of chickens. In the house, a vacuum cleaner began to growl. Mrs. Poole couldn't hear him knock, and she hadn't paid attention to his driving up. Under pretext of getting out his tool kit and jack, he let the air out of the spare tire.

Once he had a convincing scatter of tools on the ground, he headed for the barn.

Poole's V-8 was splashed with mud, still wet, except where it had dried on radiator shell and hood. The radiator was definitely not cooled to air temperature.

He noticed the freshly grazed fender, the paint had been only lightly splashed with mud. Poole hadn't driven far after raking a tree. Fine shreds of bark adhered, porous, pale brown bark that crumbled—the layer just beneath the silvery skin of a sycamore.

Sycamore, like the one under which he, Lucky, had parked.

It was dim in the shed. He couldn't see what messed up the rear floor mat, but the reek of whiskey billowed out, and he noted a bottle containing perhaps an ounce of bourbon. There was a green bonding stamp on the neck.

A pack of matches, half used. NINETY-NINE CAFE—"DRINK, DANCE, MAKE MARY." There was a strip-tease gal on the cover, with salient points embossed, to make her bra realistic. He pocketed the match book, and went to try the luggage compartment.

Crunching footsteps made him turn to face a big man silhouetted against the lead-colored sky. Steve Poole, square jaw jutting, and forehead puckered in a scowl, had a monkey wrench in his hand.

"What're you snooping around for? Get out of there!" he snarled, and hunched forward in a lunge, ungainly, yet quick.

"I was looking for a tire pump!"

"Why don't you ask?"

"She didn't hear me knock!" The vacuum cleaner's hideous wail became louder. "So I looked—"

"Casper Nolan, eh?"

"That's right."

"Get about your business."

"My tire—"

"I'll get you a pump," Poole grumbled.

He made way, and Lucky, edging past him, watched the man from the corner of his eye. Wrath had not subsided with recognition.

Poole followed him to the car.

"Where's that flat?"

"It's the spare." Lucky pointed. "I changed, and they're getting down to the fabric—"

The vacuum cleaner cut off. A stern-faced, middle-aged woman in a pink house dress came to the side door. "Steve, what's all the yelling?"

Lucky turned.

Then he blacked out. He didn't know what hit him. He felt an impact, and heard the first note of the woman's cry of amazement.

LATER, Lucky decided he'd been hit with a fist, not a monkey wrench. Steve Poole had his V-8 in the yard, and was hosing the mud from it. Mrs. Poole was saying: "It's all plumb foolishness, washing that car. It'll get muddied up before it's gone a mile."

"So'll your damn house, but you're running that howling hootenanny till a man gets driven

crazy!" Then, seeing Lucky clamber to his feet, he yelled: "And you, you knock and ask. I've lost enough tools loaning 'em, without having 'em borrowed without asking!"

"You oughtn't to act that way. I've been gone for a few years, and I didn't know people quit being neighborly," Lucky said.

Poole's eyes were bloodshot. His leathery cheeks twitched.

"I don't like sneaks," he grumbled, a bit shamefacedly, as though grudgingly acknowledging the justice of the accusation.

Lucky, still smiling, uncorked a punch. As Poole's knees buckled, Lucky gasped: "That'll teach you manners, you old buzzard, and you're going to hear more from me—understand?"

Lucky then went back to the Tyson's, to get a good look at the sycamore tree. It had been grazed, as by a fender, and the paint smudge was greenish. He ran to the front door and knocked. This was something to tell Julia.

No one answered. He got no response at the kitchen door. It was only then that he looked, and saw that the car was gone. He'd somehow assumed she'd be at home, but a second thought reminded him that Julia had probably gone to Tres Palos to make funeral arrangements.

Lucky went to the barn where he had found Gregg Tyson. There were chalk marks on the hard earth, outlining the position of the body, and of the legs, and of the one hand which had been outstretched. The coroner's deputy had drawn a rough circle to outline the head. There were similar marks to indicate the positions of the things taken from Tyson's pockets. While he wasn't any too sure as to the reason for such lines, particularly since they'd photographed the corpse before removing it, he remembered that sometimes it was important to get a record of what had lain under the body.

There wasn't much to meet the eye—just packed earth. He judged it had been prepared the way Mexicans fixed the floor of a dobe.

Nothing remained of the murder but chalk marks, a memory, and that stain. Bloodstain. Not much, either, and scalp wounds bled like sin.

He fingered the seamed scar which his hair almost concealed, and remembered how blood had blinded him, left him fairly swimming in it, and from no more than the rake of a shell fragment. Gregg Tyson had been hit at least twice, and fatally. Hard ground *might* soak it up quickly . . .

Still, there was something funny about it all. Blood under the head, running toward the shoulders. His recollection of the body's position would have made that clear, even if the chalk marks hadn't. He eyed the floor, and confirmed his hunch. However, he didn't have long to get all the implications, for someone was ambling around the barnyard.

It didn't sound like a woman, but since it couldn't be Wally, he called: "Hey, Julia, come here. I got something to tell you."

A familiar voice answered: "Julia's downtown seeing the undertaker, but I'll take a listen."

It was pie-faced Meeker, the deputy, still smiling.

"You hunting more clues?" Lucky demanded.

"What's the use of looking, you're doing it for me."

"Every time I come here, you pop up. Damn near think you're following me around."

"If you snitch anything, you're obstructing justice. Might even make you an accessory after the fact."

"Well, that's a lot better'n being the principal! Which is what you're trying to make me."

"You're touchy." Meeker hunched down at the threshold. "Your dad was worried after he found out why I wanted to know what time you left him. If he hadn't been so disgusted when I asked him, he probably wouldn't have blatted it out. Tyson was killed about four—"

"Julia says that's when he got up!"



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"Well, the doc admits he can't place it closer'n maybe an hour, so it could be five, and anyway, between you and me, this post-mortem stuff is guesswork unless you can back it with something solid. Such as the time you left home and probably pulled up in front of the house."

"I shorted out the engine and had a sweet time getting it going—you can see the muddy splashes all over the cylinder head. And I went into the ditch—I'll show you the place, and the blanket I used to get her to pull. Why'n't you shake the lead out of your feet and suspect a few other people? Why should I conk Mr. Tyson?"

"Well, allowing you got twenty-three hundred in the bank, you could still use another nine hundred and fifty. It costs money having a girl follow you from post to post. We forgot to search you, and now it's too late. You coulda ditched the money. Now what is there to tell Julia?"

Lucky pointed at the stain. "I've seen a lot of blood running, and none of it ever went uphill. This barn floor pitches, for drainage. Used to be horses stabled here. Pitches toward those manure chutes. All right, Mr. Tyson lay that way—with the blood leaking in the down-his-back direction instead of the down-hill direction."

Meeker went goggle-eyed. "I'll be any dirty name if you're wrong. Bub, you ought to be a depitty. It's interesting work."

"You meet so many nice people."

"Well, you do. Like Mrs. Wildox, that poisoned her aunt, her mother, and her old man. Prettier'n a pair of lace pants, that girl, finest manners, like she'd been raised with royalty." He sighed. "And a nice girl like that, in Tehachapi, locked up for keeps. Nice as Julia, almost."

THIS gave Lucky a chill. Murder often was a family affair in the San Joaquin farm belt, because farmers don't get around much, and so they have to pick on neighbors or kin-folk. "That's a nasty hint! She thought a lot of her dad, and she was all broken up this morning."

"Her dad insulted you, he was making the girl work out her college bill, he crabbed all the time about her marrying Cyril Stroud, and he told her if there were any more young bucks hanging around to take her away before she worked out the bill he'd pepper their pants with quail shot. And a frisky lady like her gets lonesome and hostile."

"Now, don't look like you're going to hit me—assaulting an officer is against the law—Say who socked you? I forgot to ask you this morning, me and Darrow both forgot."

Lucky rubbed the bruised jaw. The swelling was conspicuous.

"Steve Poole laid me out, half an hour ago. I left him alive—his wife's a witness to that."

"Soldiering makes people quarrelsome. Well, they meet some onery people in their business, it's natural."

The garrulous idiot was beginning to drive Lucky Nolan frantic. A guilty man would blow up under that studied, ponderous humor a lot sooner than he would from being slugged with a rubber hose.

"All right, Mr. I.Q.! Look at that sycamore out there, it's been barked by a green car with smooth tires. Steve Poole's got a green V-8. It was muddier'n all get out when I looked at it. He socked me and when I came to, he was hosing it like it was a Cadillac. Why'n't you ask him things, instead of pointing at me?"

"And at Julia," Meeker placidly added.

"Come on and look!"

"I done looked this morning, but with so many green cars, I felt low about stopping 'em all. Now you get the hell off the premises. You got no call to be here, while everyone's gone."

Lucky wiped sweat from his forehead. "Look here, Mr. Meeker, if you got something on me, say so! Quit hounding me and hinting around. I got studying to do. I'm trying to amount to something in this man's army, and with you fellows throwing dirt at me, and captain can't recommend me. I'm blown up, just from your sounding off about things you know nothing about."

LUCKY went to see Aub Sather, the neighbor who had seen a car flash its headlights at Tyson's house, and bluntly told the old man how things were. He concluded: "I think you ought to tell me anything that'll help prove I'm on the level."

Sather's thin face twisted. He spat out a cud of tobacco, got his plug and his jack-knife, and carefully cut a fresh piece of Star. "My damn teeth," he grumbled, "I usta bite off my chews. I got swindled when I bought these here teeth, they're good for nothing but biting vittles. They ought to make it unlawful—"

"They ought to pass a law against thick-headed deputies! I need help, and either you're for me, or against me."

"Son, I ain't against you. You got nothing to worry about."

Lucky persisted: "What do you know about Steve Poole and Gregg Tyson?"

"Knowing things about neighbors makes trouble."

Same old clamming up, somewhat from unwillingness to testify, somewhat from integrity that kept him from loose talk, and somewhat because Steve Poole was not the kind of

man to chatter about or fool around with.

"Well, what kind of man is Poole? I've been gone a long time."

"He runs a good farm. Don't see much of him." Sather snapped his knife shut. "You're making a big to-do about nothing. Don't be so uneasy acting, it looks bad."

"I'd like to see you stay calm when they're knifing you about a murder you're innocent of."

"Wait till they start hounding me."

"What do you know about Cyril Stroud?"

"Ask Julia, she married the guy, I didn't." Then, seeing Lucky's expression of controlled impatience, Sather chuckled. "You're too hot-tempered. That'll make people think things about you."

Lucky was ready to give it up, when Sather cocked one foot on the low porch, and planted an elbow on his knee. "Cyril Stroud is a no-good character. Gregg Tyson never liked him. Good-looking, slick-talking, and always needed money. He was a coffee salesman who collected from the customers, and bawled up the accounts—so Gregg made good a couple of hundred dollars Cyril was short. Said he'd square things with the bonding company, provided Julia quit him for keeps."

"What's he doing now?"

"Ain't heard. He's a 4-F."

"You used to be a soldier?"

"About twenty-five years afore you were born. Let me tell you something. There's as many stinkers in the service as there are in civvies. You young fellows, you get flighty as a gal expecting her first baby."

Lucky reddened, gulped. "All right, Mr. Sather. I'll figure this out myself."

The farmer cackled and wagged his head. "Near as I can remember, Cyril is assistant manager of the Mission Theater in Fresno. He did come to patch things up with Julia, and her old man run him out. I think you're idiotic, playing detective when you oughta be studying."

Before Lucky left, Julia phoned the Sathers to say she wouldn't be in for supper. The old man relayed the news, and said: "You're in too much of an itch to set tight, so you better trail her around Tres Palos and when you find her, ask her about Cyril. That girl likes you more'n you deserve."

CHAPTER THREE

"One Chance in "Ninety-Nine"

ONCE in Tres Palos, Lucky learned, in two quick inquiries, that Julia had completed her father's funeral arrangements. Spotting the car did not take long—but from then on he ran into a dead end. She had stopped at MacLean's Store, but was gone. He in-

quired at the Palace Theatre, where she might have tried the matinée as a sedative, but the cashier hadn't seen Julia.

It was not until nearly five that Lucky picked up the trail at the drugstore soda fountain. She'd been in for a coke, and with her ex-husband, Cyril Stroud.

Lucky grumbled, "Give me a double Bromo," and then, when the soda-jerk took him at his word, he downed the drink, and went out to give the town the eye.

He grabbed the first copy of the *Tres Palos Tribune* from the bundle dumped off at Sam's Smoke Shop. The headline which had caught his eye explained the hour's delay in publication. They'd held the press for news which crowded the war to a skimpy quarter of the front page.

BLUDGEON MURDER— POOLE ALIBI GOOD

Meeker had lost no time in asking Steve Poole about the green V-8's tour in the mud. Poole, however, had a good story. He said he'd driven to one Manouk Garabidian's nursery for some muscat vines—hence the mud. There were plenty of green Fords, and plenty of gate posts and trees against which they could have scraped. As for the rest, Poole's wife stated that he had been home the entire night, and had got up at five to do his chores.

The paper implied that Luella Poole was one of a fine old pioneer family whose word was a lot more reliable than the sworn statements of ordinary people. The editor had found space to name her church, the several Ladies Auxiliaries, the anti-drinking, anti-gambling, and all the other anti-good time leagues of which she was president, or secretary, or past exalted matron. She also belonged to the Tres Palos Improvement Association.

Lucky bought a cigar which he didn't want. "They give that battle-axe a real build up, don't they?"

Sam, the Smoke Man, rang up a quarter. "She could shoot the mayor right in front of the town council, and claim she wasn't even there, and that'd be the end of it. Say, how much bail they holding you for?"

"Why—say, what's this?"

"You paid for it, try reading it," Sam advised.

Lucky read, and saw that he was named only as one of those who had made a statement. His wrangle with Poole was not mentioned.

"I meant," Sam rambled on, "account of you being in the army, they'd probably try to sew you up so you'd be handy for a witness when this is through cooking. Heck, no one thinks you conked Old Man Tyson. Anyway, he had it coming."

"What was wrong with Tyson?"

"One of those smiling fellows when he's around town, and tough on his own premises. He got thataway the past couple years—too much worrying about the war, I guess. Told Julia he'd thrash her if she didn't get a divorce, once and for all, and keep her nose clean from now on."

"I guess she told you that?"

"Well, her brother, he told me."

Lucky headed for the sidewalk. He was thinking: "Mrs. Poole doesn't believe in drinking, gambling, dancing, or any women unless they're over forty and built like a Mark V tank. So she'd lie like hell to keep from having a red face at the next club meeting."

But that would take a lot of proving, and Lucky's pondering came to an abrupt halt when he saw a green Hudson convertible pull up to the curbing. The top was down, and while the drizzle had stopped, it was still a silly business, gambling on the weather.

Nobody but a fool for showing off would have gone to the trouble of lowering the top—but the man at the wheel had plenty to show off. Julia, though neither gay nor laughing, lolled cosily against the red leather upholstery. She made the car look as if it belonged about three price brackets higher.

The driver held the door open, while Julia stepped to the curbing. He was big and broad, and wore Glen Urquhart tweeds, a bold, rugged pattern, cut just right.

Julia was saying: "Darling, do be reasonable! I can't have dinner with you. Ma and Wally may be back on the next bus, and who's going to pick them up?" She patted his arm, smiled sweetly. "So you'd better be running along. Thanks for everything."

Cyril Stroud shrugged, and took it gracefully enough. Much more gracefully than Lucky did. The friendly, intimate little exchange suggested to him that divorces are trifling formalities. He squared his shoulders, and for all his conscious effort, he still looked grim as he approached Julia, who was busy watching the green Hudson pull away from the curbing.

Too late, he realized he'd not looked at either fender of the gleaming and freshly-washed convertible.

WHEN the last passenger had stepped from the bus, Lucky said to Julia: "All right, your mother and Wallace won't be home tonight, and we can get the deadwood on Steve Poole."

"Won't that keep? That wild notion of yours!"

Lucky realized how tired and worried she was, and but for having seen that last minute with her ex-husband, he would have been reasonable. His plan *was* wild. It would keep. But Julia had found time for Cyril Stroud, so

he persisted: "Phone and see if they'll take the late bus. If not, we have the whole evening ahead of us."

Reluctantly, she called the relatives her mother was visiting in Hollister. When she stepped out of the booth, Julia looked more somber than ever. "Wally said she was all broken up by the shock. And Aunt Kate's very busy making up a mourning outfit for her."

Though she let him nudge her into his car, the fact that she shied away from investigating Steve Poole worried Lucky. He said: "There were matches from the Ninety-nine Cafe in Poole's car and I think we should look into it."

"You do have an imagination! You don't know for a fact that Poole was at the Ninety-Nine Cafe last night, and even if he had been, they close at midnight."

"Huh! Front lights go out, the MP's frisk it, and who's going to know about the back room?"

"Poole needn't have been there last night. It could've been the night before, and his wife swears—"

He broke in: "How long do you think he'd dare leave his car stinking from whiskey? If he'd not been red-eyed and foggy, he'd've had it polished up the first thing in the morning. He was there, and last night."

"If you're so sure he was at the Ninety-Nine, tell that deputy, and he can check it."

"Honey, all I have is a pack of matches. And if Poole was there a couple of hours after legal closing time, would the bartender say so, and put himself on the spot?"

Julia drew a deep breath. "I'll go through with it. Now let's eat. I haven't had a bite all day."

"Where'd you like to go?"

"To the Ninety-Nine, silly! So I can get used to things. I hope we don't run into Cyril."

"You would think of something like that!"

The Ninety-Nine, originally a tourist court gone broke because of gas rationing, had been brought to new and louder life by a bar and dining room. The sprawling fire-trap's front glowed with red and blue neon—and when Lucky stepped in, he felt the floor shudder. Someday, the juke box would blow the joint apart.

The steaks, however, were good enough to draw customers from both Fresno and Madera, and the cabins made Grade A private dining room for conservative people who didn't like noise.

Lucky got the key to Number Eight at the office. At the cabin door, he said: "In case Cyril happens to barge in, you'd better be out of sight. His feelings'd be hurt if he saw you here, after you gave him a brushoff."

"But I'll have to phone."

"Not just yet. First, I want to talk to the bartender."

LOTS of noise, only a few customers, and those were in the booths. Lucky had hit it just right. A glance at the name stitched on the barman's jacket gave him his cue. "Hi, Barney, howya been?"

"Getting along," the thin, dark man answered. "Long time no see."

Barney's cordiality had the "we-sure-have-missed-you" touch, but without overdoing it. Plainly, he did not have a photographic memory, else he'd not have implied that he remembered Lucky.

Lucky held his palm about two inches above the bar, and made a quick, cutting stroke. "Same old stuff, and have one yourself."

Barney poured straight bourbon.

Lucky squinted at the glass for a moment, and downed it. Then: "What's the fun for tonight?"

"Same as usual."

"Confidentially, don't you get fed up with the same singing and stuff?"

Barney made an elaborate grimace. "If it wasn't for that juke box, you'd be deaf right now. She's touchy as hell—right in back of you."

In the mirror, Lucky saw the opulent blonde who nursed the long, pink drink a soldier had bought her. "Well, maybe she can't *sing* very much." He fished out the match book with the embossed lady. "She model for this? Say, that's a good gag. *Make Mary*. You think it up, or is Mary really her name?"

"Name's Ida, and the boss thinks up the

advertising. That man really has a brain."

"Speaking of brains," Lucky said, "I wonder what happened to Steve Poole last night! Man, oh, man! Who drove him home?"

Now that Lucky had established himself as an old customer, Barney could not be too smooth and glib. "Poole? Poole . . . kind of thin and sandy-haired?"

"Gosh, no! Big, square, sour-looking when he's sober, with a jaw like a wolf trap. Drinks bourbon."

"Oh, Poole! Sure, I make it now. He rolled out of the back room about two-thirty."

"All by himself?"

"Yeah, *that's* what griped him."

"All Ida could do was sing," Lucky mused, and fingered his glass.

Barney laughed, said something about being psychic. Then: "This one's on the house."

"Where's a phone without so much noise?"

"Booth near the office door. Good luck!"

A FEW minutes later, Julia was saying to Lucky: "I couldn't eat a bite if they paid me, honestly, I couldn't. Let's get it over with."

"How about a drink?"

"Not on an empty stomach, darling."

"Maybe we'd better call it off. If you blow up—heck, forget it all, and we'll eat," he said, and almost meant it.

Julia shook her head. "Where's the phone?"

He pointed. She followed him to the booth.

"Bet Steve Poole doesn't dare answer," Lucky muttered, and made room for Julia to wedge in with him.

He got the number and fed in a dime. A stern "hello" reached his ear.

He answered: "Mrs. Poole, this is Brad

"DEAD, JOEY!" GASPED THE LOVELY RUTHIE

Penny-pinching Rex Sackler's assistant and his fiancée find themselves stuck with a ninety-dollar check and their host dead in a telephone booth. Sackler, meanwhile, is busy tracking down the perpetrators of \$100,000 worth of blackmail. This smells like a very fat fee to Sackler, in this new novelette of the popular series by D. L. CHAMPION,

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BLACK MASK

Britten. May I speak to Mr. Poole, please?"

"Brad Britten?" Silence—she was going over the roster of everyone within a radius of a dozen miles. Then: "Steve! There's a Brad Britten wants to talk to you."

Considering that there wasn't any such person in the neighborhood, Lucky was encouraged when Poole said: "Hello, Brad, how'd you make out on those tires?"

"Keep talking tires, and then listen. A friend of yours asked me to phone and—"

Lucky handed Julia the receiver, and then edged out of the booth, closing the door behind him. He didn't want to hear whether she put it across, or whether she mangled things.

Lucky, pacing back and forth, mopped his forehead.

Then Julia came out, smiling and tucking her hair into shape. "May be late, but he'll be here. Now let's go in and eat. I've got to have a peep at that Ida I'm supposed to've sounded like."

"Huh-uh! I'm having it sent in. No point your seeing her, and the less you're seen around this dive, the better," and Lucky escorted her into their private dining room and dinner.

It was the best of black market steaks, and the cabin was large enough to avoid that bedroom effect. The blue curtains of the two alcoves were parted only enough to give a glimpse of pink chenille coverlets.

Lucky offered Julia a cigarette. "When that old battle-axe catches her husband here, we'll get the truth about that hard-boiled farmer who thinks he's a wolf."

"But when he sees I'm not Ida?"

Lucky laughed. "Tell him she asked you to wait till she got off duty, you're a girl-friend from out of town. He won't gripe."

"But we're neighbors, and he'd know me right away. He'd be sure something was cooking. That deputy questioned him—you said he did, didn't you?"

"You make me sound like the defense plans for the Islands," he grumbled. "But wait a second. Have you seen Old Man Poole since you left Cyril and came home?"

"Mmmm . . . no, I haven't. The police and the Tysons haven't been speaking for Lord knows how long."

"O.K., and you didn't come home from college during vacations—that secretary work for the prof at summer school kept you busy."

"And didn't pay enough to keep Dad from feeling he'd spent a fortune for nothing."

"Another thing, honey—Poole was out of town all during our last year at high school."

"I remember. Back east, settling an estate."

"Well, that's four years all told, and gals change a lot in that time. Now when I came back, it'd only been three years since I'd seen

you, and you looked so grown up, you had me half scared. You sounded different, had a different manner, different expression, you walked like a woman who'd been places, and not like a kid."

"Social graces learned at school." There was a tinge of bitterness in her laugh. "And in the school of matrimony." Then, with a descriptive gesture: "And there is somewhat more of me."

"That's what I meant, though you weren't skinny in high school. Matter of proportion, difference betwixt a week-old colt, and the same critter when it's a yearling. But mainly, it's the voice and expression and the hair-do and the make-up."

He bounced to his feet, snapped off the ceiling lights, and cocked the pink shades of the dresser lamps. "In this light, it's a cinch."

Julia was convinced. "We could fix the lights a bit pinker. I'll snip a bit off my slip and pin it under the bulb."

"He'll be hoping Ida drops dead!"

"Oh, but how'll you get *her* out here?"

"Old Lady Poole? One hint, and two tractors wouldn't have the draw-bar pull to hold her at home. I tell you—"

There was a lot he could have told Julia. Such as, that the severely disciplined farmer was entirely too afraid of women to get rough, that he'd eagerly gulp the yarn about Ida's having asked a girl-friend to help him wait for her. Lucky had everything figured out, when there was a tapping at the door.

"Gosh," he whispered, "how'd he make it this fast? He must've—"

Julia hustled to the curtained alcove. At the same time, she said: "Just a moment, Steve—"

BUT the door hadn't been latched. The man who lurched in was Cyril Stroud. He wore a prepared scowl, and his fists were clenched.

Julia recoiled, raised a hand, gasped.

It was plain now that Stroud, pretending graceful acceptance of the brushoff in Tres Palos, had gone to watch at the bus station, and then had followed his ex-wife and Lucky.

"You little bum!" he snarled. "Your father not even in his coffin!"

"It's none of your business! I'm—I'm free, white, twenty-one, and—get out of here before—" Her voice rose, cracked a little. "Before you're carried out, you snooping tramp! I told you I was busy—get out!"

Lucky came from cover. Before the curtain rings had stopped clashing, he said: "Back out, now!" And without waiting for answer or move, Lucky snatched and flicked the ash tray, whisking the contents right into Cyril Stroud's face.

Lucky Nolan had been trained for results, not for sporting qualities. He closed in, fist

and knee simultaneously. The ex-husband doubled up and turned gray-green. The sound he made when he hit the broadloom carpet told Lucky what Cyril would have done, had he had half a chance to get into action.

"Open the door," Lucky gasped. "While I throw this guy out and boot his teeth loose!"

He stood over Cyril, ready to stamp him into the floor at the first sign of renewed activity, but Julia wasn't opening the door.

"Open it, I'm watching him!" Lucky snapped.

Then, looking up for an instant, he saw Julia's face, and it shocked him. Her eyes were saucer-wide, and her color had receded until her make-up became grotesque. The sudden change from fierce indignation to something which made her look sick took all the fury out of Lucky Nolan.

What'd the girl expect him to do? Slug it out in good old British fashion, with stinging rights and lefts? The man outweighed him by a good fifty pounds. Was this a game, or was the idea to get the man laid out with the least possible risk?

Something beyond Lucky's reckoning had taken hold of Julia. Where she had been all for him, she was now far off, and he had no friend for miles around.

The way he had cooled Cyril Stroud—

Good Lord, fighting is fighting. Fighting isn't playing!

But he couldn't tell her that, not when she looked the way she did. She couldn't understand the way he was wired up, wired for business, no holds barred.

Then he got it, and it made him sick.

By coming to her defense and his own, he had given her the idea that in a similar fury, he had finished her father.

"I didn't—I didn't—" he stuttered, and stopped.

Cyril Stroud was a hard and solid man. Though his face still twitched and twisted, and he could breathe only in short, painful gasps, he was getting up for more. But what took all the life out of Lucky was Julia dipping a napkin into a glass of water and kneeling to mop the man's face.

"Lucky—stop it—that's enough!"

Stroud blinked the water out of his eyes. Jaw clenched, he labored to his feet, and stood there, ready to buckle, yet he stood, and there was a ferocious frown on his pale face.

"If you know what's good for you," he said to Julia, "you'll get out, now."

He turned his back and she followed. They got into the green Hudson. The engine roared, and gravel spattered as the convertible headed for Fresno.

Lucky sat down in the armchair next to the dresser and held his head, as though he had been slugged.

"Oh, to hell with everything—damn women! They yap their heads off, and then when you get in and pitch, they stop just short of spitting in your face. Brutality, huh? That's what I got on alternate Tuesdays, with a bayonet prod in the rear on Wednesdays.

"I'm a smart guy. I'm so smart I rook myself," he said to himself, bitterly. "I'm a brute. I'm a snooper, I'm everything but the guy that killed Julia's old man, and Meeker is electing me. I haven't lived right, that must be it."

Then he revolted at being sorry for himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Parlor Commandos

"**L**OTS of farmers go broke," he thought. "Some farmers hit the rocks. But who ever heard of one hanging around a dive and swilling down bourbon and trying to make Ida? And why didn't his old lady call a lunacy commission before he got the bankroll totally gutted?"

"That guy has been playing around, and his wife's lied about it," Lucky reasoned, "to protect her Lodge and Improvement Association reputation. But he hasn't spent too much dough, or she'd have turned him in. A battle-axe like that wants security—she'd forget reputations if the kitty got lean.

"Where do you get cash, if you can't dip into the bank account?"

Lucky began to reconstruct his run-in with Steve Poole. Suppose the son of a distant neighbor did snoop around looking for a tire pump, and found someone had spilled whiskey over the floor mats? Furthermore, Poole had been hostile before he knew that Lucky had been stalling about the flat tire.

Poole was touchy about something in that barn.

Although professional pleasantness kept Barney, the bartender, from being reliable in his opening remarks, once he'd been built up, he couldn't very well have quipped about Poole, unless there'd been something in it. It was a cinch he had not been at home the entire night. And since Aub Sather knew about Tyson's \$950, Poole may have known . . .

Lucky looked at the littered table. It would have been his best meal in four years, had it not been for Julia's turning against him.

He thought: "Poole would sneak out. Poole would insist that he had to get bootleg tires for the Ford, which wasn't essential, like the truck. You can take Ida out in a Ford, but not in an IHC truck . . . So Poole would be at the Ninety-Nine, and he'd find no girl in Cabin Eight. Well, O.K., then, let's find out what made Poole so touchy . . ."

Lucky considered whacking up a deal with Ida. "Look, baby, how about doing a song and dance for a few friends of mine? No rough stuff, just clean fun. I'll fix it up with you."

But he hadn't the knack of making a whopping lie sound like truth. His proposition would sound fishy, and how could she get away from the dance floor and bar-room in time to be waiting for Poole?

"And suppose I do get the old lady to bust in, like Cyril busted in, would she be fool enough to blow her top and tell the old man: 'One more trick like this and I'll tell when you came home the other night?'" This was exactly what he had counted on, but now his strategy seemed silly. "And suppose she did say that, where's my witness? Husband and wife would cool down, and make a liar of me. . ."

He'd lost all faith, now that Julia had turned against him, so that a plan which might well have worked no longer seemed worth backing. Lucky left the key on the dresser, and headed for his car.

He didn't know where Cyril Stroud and Julia had gone, and he didn't want to think of the matter. The minute that Tall and Handsome gets a bit of commando stuff, she's all for him again. . .

HE parked his car on the shoulder, a quarter of a mile from Poole's, and hoofed the remainder of the distance. At the foot of an umbrella tree he found a spot dry enough for comfortable squatting. There he settled down to watch the lights of the farmhouse.

An hour passed. The side screen-door slammed. A big man was silhouetted by the glow from a half-shaded window. Poole was jumping the gun, perhaps to make the tire story more convincing.

As the green V-8 nosed to the highway, Lucky made for the trees which skirted the drive. Side windows blacked out. Nevertheless, when he reached the spot where the Ford had been, he waited and listened.

The lower branches of a tree at its near end reflected glow from the windows of the far side. Mrs. Poole thinking—the radio silence indicated that she was busy with thoughts on the tire situation and her husband.

Truck, tractor, harrow and disc and plough—he remembered them from his daylight survey. It was so dark that even when he hunched down, he could not pick out their shapes. And now that he faced the challenge, he was appalled by the amount of space he had to cover. Shed and granary—Poole's unreasonable fury no longer seemed such a good guide.

"But something's hidden—bloody gloves, shirt—he hauled Gregg Tyson to the barn.

Afraid to bury the stuff, maybe a stray dog'd dig it up. Scared to burn it, the old lady might begin wondering. . ."

With his flashlight, he probed the shadows along the wall which divided granary from parking slab. All solid tongued-and-grooved—nothing rickety, nothing loose.

And no shiny new nailheads.

He played the beam to the rafters. That got him nowhere, the shadows were against him. Beyond the harrow was a stepladder, but using it took guts of a sort Lucky didn't have. This was different from an army risk, for in the jungle, however far from comrades, a soldier wasn't really alone.

Lucky learned the meaning of "esprit de corps," because, for the first time, he had none. While his snooping was justifiable, he had no one in back of him. He ignored the ladder, saying he'd get to that later, after he'd tried out the tool kits of tractor and mowing machine.

Nothing but grease, chaff, rags, wrenches. Who'd be crazy enough to pick such spots? He mounted to the truck bed, which gave him enough elevation to get some light between rafters and shakes. But the coverage was limited.

"Stepladder." Though he made scarcely a sound, he spoke the word, to give himself a command.

He catfooted for the tailgate. He'd start in the far corner, with the ladder, and to hell with everyone.

But he had scarcely gained victory over his qualms when the darkness exploded in a blaze. Lucky hit the deck. Porch lights, and lights just under the eaves, had been snapped on.

The screen slammed.

Mrs. Poole was on the way. Farmwomen, many of them, were a lot handier with a shotgun than their town sisters were with a can opener. You can't duck a twelve-gauge at close range.

Though the footfalls were resolute and quick, Lucky had time to break into a splendid sweat. She was making a beeline for the truck.

She opened the cab door. He almost bolted, and then he was glad he didn't. It slammed shut.

"I'll tear him apart," she said, and her voice had a cold ferocity that made Lucky see all the merits of the Bachelors' Club. "That old fool!"

The starter roared, and with scarcely a split second lag, the truck took off, gears howling.

And it grazed the post at the driveway entrance. Lucky jumped and rolled. The rainsoaked shoulder made a long, sizzling skid of what otherwise would have been a

ruinous impact. He didn't even let go his flashlight.

Thirty-five an hour—conserve rubber—is this trip necessary—Luella Poole had forgotten the slogans.

Lucky began to laugh from reaction.

"There's no bigger fool than me in this country! All set to see the show, and I jump from being scared of that battle-axe at the wheel!"

Actually he had moved instinctively, still driven by the first urge to dodge Luella Poole. At the rate that the truck was hightailing, he could never get to his car in time to overtake her. Moreover, he hadn't the foggiest idea as to Luella Poole's destination. There was a good chance that she hadn't, either—wrath and suspicion could have put her at the wheel. Maybe she figured on frisking every dive between Madera and Fresno.

Steady where he had once been shaky, he went back and set to work, methodically, as though policing barracks or parade ground. And not far from where the truck had been, he found a board which, bashed in by some piece of equipment, had been shifted sufficiently to leave a half-inch gap between its lower edge, and the floor of the granary. A well-worn wallet had been shoved under, and up, apparently between the inner side and a bin set near the wall.

The color of the leather made good camouflage. The break was old. The discovery was more luck than search.

Gregg Tyson's wallet, all right. It contained \$610, not the \$950 Aub Sather had mentioned.

"Party money!" Lucky exclaimed, accounting for the difference.

And then Lucky realized that luck isn't worth a hoot when there is nothing on earth you can do with it.

You walk up to Meeker and say: "Look what I found in Steve Poole's barn. Here it is."

No, not if you have any sense, you'd not do that.

Lucky wiped the wallet carefully, and put it back.

Even if he'd had witnesses, he'd still not be proving that he had not planted the roll in the first place.

He couldn't remember which of the old infantry crowd had first started calling him "Lucky", but he decided it was the regimental moron.

He left the lights on, and headed for his car. No doubt there was justice in the world, but it wasn't being issued in cellophane packages.

At breakfast, Lucky told his parents that he'd had an evening of bushwhacking which might end by clearing him of suspicion.

His mother started to say something, but

changed her mind. The old man wiped his mouth, nodded, coughed. "Keep your nose clean, son, and don't go looking for trouble. My idea is, you got Julia on the brain, which is making this business look bigger'n it really is. Don't do anything reckless just to play up to her."

"I'm not," Lucky declared, somewhat grimly, thinking of the past night's run-out. "But I'm digging into the neighborhood grudges they've got buried all over."

WITH parental blessing, and qualms about the furlough gas he was burning at a dismaying rate, Lucky headed for Tres Palos.

He remembered a gag G-men had used in a ransom case—paying off with bills soaked in silver nitrate, with the result that everyone touching them got his fingers stained with a black which only a chemist could remove. And finally, since the money didn't darken right away, some of it had been passed, and the innocent receiver, checking his cash some hours later, would have a pretty clear recollection of who'd given him the paper.

In Tres Palos he got a bottle of silver nitrate from the photo department of the chain drug-store. He'd seen the stuff in an Army engineer picture section, and played his hunch accordingly. To buy it at the prescription counter, he might have been required to sign the poison register.

Waiting for darkness was not so easy. Meanwhile, whether he liked it or not, it was up to him to see Julia, even though he had no reason to think that he could get either information or help from her.

He had scarcely made his decision when Meeker hailed him from across the street. The deputy jaywalked as though his grin gave him right of way. Lucky halted and resolved to remain calm.

"You look plumb *un*Lucky! Something worrying you?"

"Who, me? Just what I've already told you."

Meeker cackled, jabbed his index finger at Lucky's chest. "You're the trouble-borrowing fellow I ever saw. Plumb worried about Steve Poole. Bet you think you know something about him I don't know, huh?"

"I talked out of turn at the start, and doing it a second time won't improve matters."

"You're getting suspicious. You been reading too many stories about cops keeping a fellow without grub or water for twenty-four, thirty-six hours, with a light shining in his eyes. Do I look like that kind of man?"

Lucky laughed right out at Meeker's aggrieved innocence.

"You been hinting dirty things about me. And never mind cracking off about if the shoe fits and so forth," Lucky retorted.

"You listen to me, I'll tell you something about Steve Poole, providing you tell me what you're hiding. You're scared I'm trying to trip you."

"What have I got to tell? You know all the answers."

"How do police find things out except by asking folks? Huh? We ain't fortune tellers. Mind-reading and crystal gazing is against the law, when maybe it oughtn't to be. It really riled me, having to arrest that nice looking fortune teller for doing business in town here."

"She was pretty as a pair of lace pants, huh?"

"You took the words out of my mouth. So now I can't consult her, and you're holding out. I'll tell you things anyway, and if I can't trust a fellow that's aiming to be an officer and a gentleman to deal fair, I might as well quit."

"Mr. Meeker, I am not buying a pig in a poke."

"And anything I say is going to be held against me? All right. You're smart. That's why I finished a play for you last night."

"You did which?"

"I was out to the Ninety-Nine Club. Purely coincidental. Well, you and Julia pulled up to Cabin Eight, and I figured, she's a grown woman, and one thing at a time, so I just did some tactful snooping."

Lucky was beginning to look like sunset in the islands. "Listen—uh—it wasn't that kind of thing—"

Meeker slapped his thigh, and laughed heartily. "Course it wasn't! Well, I traced that toll call you put through, and then comes Cyril and the ruckus, and there wasn't anything more for me to snoop around about, so I began thinking and thinking. First time I ever heard of a badger game to get facts instead of cash, but it sure did sound like you had something."

"You got Ida to take Julia's place?"

"Heck, no! She'd not dare have Old Lady Poole catch her—she'd get run out of the country—so I borrowed some of Ida's things that she doesn't wear for singing, and scattered 'em around, home-like. And put in a note written in lip-stick, 'Wait around a bit.' And when he got there, he waited."

Meeker chuckled. "It was worth hearing, when Old Lady Poole busted in—"

"How'd she—"

"I phoned, and she come driving up like Barney Oldfield! Well, she blew off about how she'd be damned if she'd make a liar of herself for a man catting around with strange women, and you'da died, listening to him. When she got through saying, if he ever left the house again after sunset, she'd go right to the sheriff and say she'd lied like hell to protect a no-good husband—"

"You bounced in?"

Meeker grinned. "Had to save Poole. He was mighty glad to see me, until he realized I'd heard the works, and knew he came home stinking drunk, about five A.M."

"Boy, oh, boy! So you got him?"

"What for? Driving around drunk ain't a crime unless the cop catches you."

"Who was he with? Ida?"

"He wasn't with anybody at all. Just drunk, and bumbling around and pulling up to the shoulder to sober up a bit, then driving on, and skidding around. Singing in the rain, sort of, till he got home. So we get nowhere—nobody to say Poole didn't do it, nothing to prove he done did it. So I ask you to tell me what else you know."

"Hey! Wait a second! If there wasn't any girl in Cabin Eight, that's all crap about Mrs. Poole blowing her top last night."

"Bub, you don't know much about women. Those spare clothes and stuff scattered around, and a couple glasses, one of them with lip-stick on the edge, it made the old lady yell right away, 'Where's that no-good hussy? Where's she hiding, et cetera.' If there'd been a sure enough woman around, she'da not talked, Mrs. Poole, I mean, she'da mopped up. No, you don't know nothing about women."

"That's gospel," Lucky admitted, glumly. "Well, I haven't got a thing to tell you, Mr. Meeker."

The deputy looked grieved as a child hearing that the dime is for a war stamp and not for an ice cream cone.

"Well, so long, Lucky, if you feel you're dealing fair with me, everybody is happy."

LUCKY found Julia at home. Embarrassment was mutual. He began stamping and scraping the door mat.

"Oh, come on in, the linoleum's already tracked up."

He sat down on the lounge which, from the opposite wall, faced the radio, and the table at which he had studied, and the easy chair from which Gregg Tyson had got up to grumble.

"Wally and your mother come back?"

"Probably this evening. The funeral's tomorrow at ten."

He regarded the crisp red-striped gingham dress. "I guess you don't really need mourning for house work."

"I won't have it, but Mother's old-fashioned."

Then a long, dripping silence. Lucky fumbled with the brim of his pre-war hat, and stirred uneasily. The girl sitting within arm's reach of him was just as uneasy and uncomfortable. War had made him acutely sensitive to unspoken thoughts and feelings. The thing that made a man lucky in jungle bush-

whacking or plain battle was the knack of sensing an enemy he could neither hear nor see. Sometimes a fellow got a feeling that a sniper was pulling down on him, or that a machine gun was going to cut loose from a new location, and the sensing came without any volition. Indeed, anyone who tried to force hunches usually went wrong, and was knocked off.

Julia wasn't really hostile. Julia, however, was far more complex than any battle—he couldn't read *her*.

"I had to leave with Cyril," she finally said, flatly. "Don't ask me why."

"He was forcing your hand. When he busted in, you bawled him out. Then, all of a sudden, you turned against me, and began fussing over him."

"You'd've killed him. And with dirty fighting."

"That sounds right according to the book, honey, only it doesn't ring true. Anyway, the kind of fighting I'm used to, it's business first, and talk later. If a man his size can't take care of himself, he'd better not crash doors without an invitation."

Julia dummied up, rather sullenly.

Lucky met and held her stare. "He was buttering you up, yesterday afternoon, trying to talk you into something that didn't interest you. I sensed that when you two were at the curbing, just before I came up to go to the bus with you. You didn't like being followed—and you don't take things you don't like—not unless you have to—and you had to knuckle down. He's got something on you."

"It would have been pretty, a hospital case coming from the Ninety-Nine, with me mixed up in it, right before my father's funeral!"

"All right," he conceded, "it was a dirty game to ask you to enter into, but I didn't know how to make a deal with one of those—uh—hostesses. Heck, I'm in a jam. Meeker is riding my tail—always that smile and pat on the head. He's a walking, grinning booby trap! Sure I was wrong, I admit that freely,

but don't tell me you blame me too much."

She made no comment. She gave nothing. Julia was a rocky blank.

Lucky, however, was going stubborn. While it was her right to care or not care for him, first encouraging and then letting him down was something else. "You're really divorced from Cyril Stroud? Y'don't have to tell me. I can look it up myself, if you want to make me use time and gas."

"Yes."

"But it's not had time to be final, you haven't waited your year before you can marry someone else."

"That's right."

"But you're still not married to him. So not being his wife, you could testify against him."

Only a lawyer could be sure of that, and Julia was no lawyer.

"For God's sake, shut up! Please, Lucky, skip it! Haven't I enough on my mind already?"

She'd let him down in a tight fix—and if hammering away would knock the truth out of her, then that was the ticket.

A green Hudson rolled up, erasing the influence. Lucky got up, and stuttered: "If you think I'm leaving because I'm afraid of him, go ahead and think it. You're all his, and he's welcome. I'm getting to the bottom of this mess, and if you're protecting him because he's got something on you, it's your business. But don't holler if you get burned along with him, from trying to protect him. Make yourself an accessory to murder if you like the man enough."

But Julia caught his hand. The pressure was warm and insistent, and when she spoke, she was for a moment her old self. "No, darling, it'd look worse if you left. Stay here. He's seen your car, and even if he mightn't recognize it, he'd—"

The tapping at the door cut her short.

"Oh, hello, Cyril, aren't you working—"

He started to answer, then his glance picked



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Lucky. And Stroud brushed past her, not red-eyed, but primed for trouble.

"Getting to be a habit, isn't it?"

"Pipe down, Stroud." Lucky's glance flicked about to chart each chair that might later be a handicap to footwork. "We're in a house that's—"

"Been touched by the Grim Reaper," he said, nastily. "That gives you an out, does it?"

Julia's eyes were fully ablaze, until Stroud's look wilted her, and she implored: "Quit it, quit it! *Please!*"

"Oh, I'm still not welcome? Even though your father is dead."

Julia didn't answer in words, but what Stroud saw in her eyes infuriated him.

HE DID not really strike the girl. Rather, he brushed her aside, as part of a move to turn on Lucky, but impatience made the gesture far too heavy. Julia's ankle twisted enough to throw her off balance. She clutched for the easy chair, and missed, and snagged her dress, ripping it from waist to armpit. She thumped against the radio, jarring, but not overturning it.

The entire clash was like a slow motion film, or so it seemed to Lucky. Before the gap in the red dress was twisted out of his line of vision, he noted the welts on Julia's side—she wore only a bra under the gingham dress.

And at the same time, Lucky was shouting, "Why, you lousy b — —!" and closing in to make a real job of it.

But Cyril Stroud knew with what manner of fighter he dealt, and Cyril was all wound up. He blocked Lucky's attack, not entirely, but sufficiently to keep from being really hurt. And while he hadn't been trained in military street fighting, Cyril could handle himself, and he did.

Since Lucky couldn't get his man on the first attack, he had little chance—he had overestimated his recovery from prison camp. The room exploded in a red blaze, and his head went numb. His knees buckled, and the floor came up to meet him. Ceiling and floor began to spin, and at the same time, tip end for end.

He tried to claw the linoleum for support, but couldn't get a hold. The red glare became black. . .

But he heard the pop, the high wrathful scream, and he felt the floor shudder from a solid weight. "God-amighty, he's gone and finished her!" This was Lucky's final thought.

When Lucky sat up, Julia was drenching him with a fifty-fifty mixture of tears and tap water. "He sure cooled me!" Then, taking her hand, because he needed it, he got up and held himself by clutching the table. "Good Lord, woman! How—"

Cyril Stroud was out cold. There was blood

on the linoleum. A chunk of stovewood lay on the floor. "I didn't crack him with that—how come—"

"I did!"

Julia was white and shaky, and now that Lucky was navigating, she folded up, just as she reached the lounge.

Stroud's face didn't look right. Lucky looked at the man's eyes. A lusty wallop, but not a fracture—at least, not a bad one. No blood from the ears. Another good sign.

"He'll be O. K."

Julia didn't answer. She'd cracked up, now that it was over.

He got Stroud's wallet. It was jammed with twenties and fifties, about three hundred dollars' worth.

Lucky went over to Julia and shook her. He got a second look through the rip in her dress. She'd been whipped, not slugged or knocked around. Then he gave her a hand. "Honey, your ex isn't very spry. We better get him to town, just in case. And look at the dough in his wallet. Look at it!"

She looked. Her expression changed. Then, unsteadily, she went to her room to dress.

Lucky went out to Stroud's car. Both fenders were lightly grazed, wiped down to the primer coat. The tires, moreover, were bald, and while they were 6.25x16s instead of 6.00x16s, a difference of a few pounds air-pressure would make a softer though smaller tire leave a track very much like a larger one inflated to higher pressure.

There wasn't any evidence of blood in the green Hudson.

"Put him in your bus," Lucky advised, as Julia helped him carry Stroud. "I'll follow in his."

At the hospital, Julia reported: "He slipped and hit his head on a piece of wood."

The interne studied Lucky's face, but kept his opinion to himself, except to say: "Just concussion. He'll be all right in an hour or so, Mrs. Stroud."

Lucky said to Julia: "I'm going to find Meeker and report the run-in. That'll keep your ex from having the jump on me."

He found the deputy at Sam's Cigar Store, and told his story. "He barged in, got hostile, slapped Julia down, and I cold-caulked him. Then he bopped his head against the wood box. We left him at the hospital. And I'd swap heads with him, if he'd swap wallets with me."

"Well-heeled, huh?"

"More'n three hundred bucks."

"Well, well."

"There's something funny about those bills, kind of light brownish stains on them."

"Money gets kind of sweaty sometimes, and they put lousy leather in wallets these days," Meeker observed, after pondering.

But he wasn't saying all he thought, that

was a cinch, judging from his over-casualness.

"Green paint wiped from fender?" Meeker went on.

"Gosh, I forgot to look. Well, Julia's waiting for me. If he wants to make charges, you know where to find me."

"You going to Old Man Tyson's funeral tomorrow?"

Lucky nodded. "I ought to."

But Meeker detained him. "You ever hear of a spectroscope?"

"It's a gadget for analyzing chemicals."

"And paint is chemicals. We know now for a fact that Steve Poole raked that sycamore. It's not factory Ford paint, it's a repaint. Where'd you say Stroud's Hudson is?"

"A&A Garage."

And since Stroud's Hudson had been repainted, it was still possible that the spectroscope would indicate that its green could have wiped the sycamore. Scientific detective work, Lucky began to realize, did not eliminate leg work—which made his single-handed effort seem somewhat less futile.

CHAPTER FIVE

Justifiable Homicide

LUCKY had an over-all glow, when, soon after Poole's farmhouse lights had gone out, he approached the vehicle and tool shed. Whether it was Cyril Stroud or Steve Poole—the man who had hidden Gregg Tyson's roll was due to get his loot marked, and an anonymous tip, however obscure the source, would put Meeker on the job.

The way he'd followed through at the Nine-ty-Nine Club had settled Lucky's last doubts as to the deputy's shrewdness.

An owl hooted. There were small stirrings in the granary—field mice had found their way to the Egyptian corn. But in the main, darkness and silence flooded the level floor of the broad valley as Lucky crept between V-8 and truck.

When he got to the wall, he felt his way along. Apprehension began to set him on edge. Perhaps Poole, hearing rodents in the corn, had checked up and found the wallet behind the loosened board.

Cyril could have planted the roll on Poole's premises, and for a double purpose—security against a personal frisking, or to hang the crime on a surly neighbor. That guess fit Cyril Stroud, who, after settling the father-in-law he blamed for the trouble with Julia, had learned that Julia hadn't required much persuasion to make her sue for divorce. That tied in with Stroud's having beaten Julia.

But find the wallet. . .

"Got it! God, I'm shaky!" The wallet was right where he'd last seen it, two yards beyond

the mower, not even two yards beyond the disc.

He took a paper cup from his pocket and filled it with silver nitrate solution. He corked and returned the bottle. He put on cloth gloves, got the wallet, wiped it lest some trace of his handling remained, then took out the bills.

He turned on the flash, locked it, and laid it so that the beam made a spot on the wall no larger than a silver dollar. The reflection from the seasoned wood was faint, yet sufficient.

Too much nitrate would be conspicuous. Except by pure coincidence, the killer wouldn't be back for another dip into the loot before the solution dried—and once dry, it could not put stain on his fingers. So, just a little mark on each bill.

All done. And the wallet back in hiding. He flipped out the unused solution, crumpled the cup and thrust it into his pocket. He was almost whistling when he turned to creep to the driveway.

Then it happened. A blaze of light, and the click of a pistol hammer, and a whisper that seemed as loud as a banzai charge. "Don't sound off, Lucky, or I'll plug you. Meeker speaking. You couldn't trust me, I didn't trust you."

"I might've known, I might've known," Lucky groaned, helpless, and trapped by his own device.

"Don't make any noise," Meeker continued, low-voiced. "Come after me slow, and don't try to get the light out of your eyes. You got no chance."

Lucky was too sick for anything but obedience.

They were abreast of the side door of Poole's house when the light winked off, leaving him in blackness. Chilly steel snicked about Lucky's wrist, the other cuff was about the deputy's.

Silently, they walked up the drive.

"Son, you were plumb foolish, going back to that money, after you told me how much money Cyril had on him."

And that was too much for Lucky. "You go back there and I'll show you what I was doing! I haven't got the money, I left it there. I put chemicals on it to mark it—look in my pocket and see the bottle. I came to town this afternoon to buy it. I can prove it by the clerk at the photo counter at the chain drugstore."

Once they reached the highway, Meeker proposed: "You set down on this here culvert and tell me out loud. I don't understand chemicals and acids. Only way I work is just dogging people, day and night, until they pull a boner." He chuckled amiably. "And they always do. You know, bub, a man's got just so much smartness, that's all God rations for him in a lifetime, and when he uses up too much in one period, he finds he ain't got any later on when he needs it bad. It's purty near like gas coupons."

The way Meeker said it made Lucky feel as good as tried and sentenced, but he came back fighting. "You listen to me. I'll tell you why-for the silver nitrate—"

And he told the deputy.

Meeker got the bottle of solution. He got the crumpled cup. "You done a fool thing. Now, me, I'm smart, because the best thing I know is a full list of everything I do not know anything about."

"What was so dumb about marking that money?"

"Just supposing you had wrote me about the doped money, without signing your John Hancock, how'd that help, if the man saw the black marks on the bills? He'd get rid of them before he spent any."

"He'd not notice it, a big shot with a lot of dough. He's too big to look what he lays on a bar, he's too big to count his change. Didn't I see soldiers that'd won a regimental payroll playing blackjack, didn't I see how they flung it around?"

"Yeah, but they stole it honestly, with crooked dice. Suppose the man saw the black corners?"

"He might figure it was laundry marking ink, or something of the kind."

"But suppose he'd be scared out, and throw the bills away?"

"That nitrate'd spot the inside of his wallet."

"Not unless he came to make a dip before that wad was dry."

"Oh, all right. Look here, if I'd killed Mr. Tyson, what did I doctor that money for? Why'd I plant it in Poole's place? Why'd Poole sock me cross-eyed before he found out my tire wasn't flat that morning, only the spare? You see what I mean?"

"Mmm . . . I watched you soak those bills, Lucky."

"The hell you did!"

"I was closer'n three yards from you. I wasn't bulling when I told you a dumb man has to work overtime to beat a smart man."

A long pause. "How do I stand with you?"

"I ain't the sheriff, I ain't the district attorney, I ain't the judge. You ask them how you stand. All I do is bring 'em in."

"Get the Exhibit-A money, get it over with. But I tell you what I'd like. I want a clear run tonight. No strings. I'll see you at Dad's place, or any other place."

"You never trusted me, Lucky."

"No, I didn't. But I'm on furlough. Maybe I'd run out on you, but do you think I'd go AWOL from the army?"

"Man values his hide. You ever read your Bible?"

"Not too much."

"Ever hear of Job?"

"Um-huh. He had more patience than I got, and less of an itch."

"But he said: *Skin for a skin, all that a man has will he give for his life.*"

"Satan said that, Job didn't!"

Meeker cackled. "That's right, and you ain't Satan. All bets are off." And as he spoke, he used his key. "So's the bracelets. Now quit itching, and I'll see you at your dad's, around breakfast time."

Lucky parked some distance from the sycamore at the entrance of Tyson's drive, and went afoot. He had not yet got the feel of handcuffs off his wrists, and he was trying to figure out why he had been released.

No lights.

But Lucky didn't want to go home—they'd read his face and ask him things. Come in just in time for breakfast, then wipe the eggs from his chin and ask Meeker to have some coffee, and then. . .

X-Square minus one equals zero.

If Poole had been with any companions from the Ninety-Nine, he'd not have come to Tyson's to settle a grudge. Or if he had been with a party of drunks, and had stopped, and called Tyson out from the barn to start an argument which ended in a fatal brawl, there would have been enough noise to have awakened the family. And there'd be witnesses, somewhere. . .

Lucky searched the blackness of the broad San Joaquin Valley. One man running out, to beat the law—that wasn't so tough, but one man couldn't beat the army. A man of draft age had to be ready, day and night, to produce his card. Lucky had none. A man on the loose had to flash his card, whereas a man staying in his own town, among his own people, didn't have to.

Meeker wasn't so generous.

With seven thousand islands in which to hide, Lucky hadn't found a chance to dodge the Japs. Crooks who thought they could beat the cops were suckers who hadn't ever been really hunted, boobs who didn't know the facts of life and death. Dumb-looking Meeker, knowing this, had unlocked the handcuffs, just to be a good fellow, and without any risk. . .

Lucky Nolan began to understand where he stood. The logic of a few drops of silver nitrate didn't make any difference.

Aub Sather's lights were out.

The whole broad valley slept and the quiet was good. He continued to sit there, on the steps of the empty house.

Finally, headlights reached down the road. He got behind the sycamore in the shadow. The car was Tyson's Plymouth.

It pulled up at the house. Julia got out. Headlights, reflected from the white siding, made face and figure and the glint of hair plain as day. Wally opened the rear door. A

woman in black got out. He took her arm with awkward solicitude. She wore a veil that blacked out her face. Mrs. Tyson, the widow, had come from Hollister. Julia made for the house.

Wally carried a very small bag. Lucky wondered why Mrs. Tyson had left with such light luggage to visit her sister Kate. His own mother toted enough for a bride's trousseau, no matter how short a visit.

He watched Wally and the somber figure in black.

"Careful, Mom."

Wasn't a thing to be careful of, Julia had snapped on the house lights.

This was as good as any moment that might come later. Lucky came from cover, and knocked at the door.

Julia came to answer. "Oh, hello, Lucky, we got in just this minute."

"I waited for you some time. Good evening, Mrs. Tyson. I'm awfully sorry—I don't know just how to put it—about Mr. Tyson—"

He bogged down. The widow said: "Thank you, Casper. Wally's been such a consolation. Do sit down."

But they all remained standing. Wally had barely spoken. Mrs. Tyson kept on her hat and heavy black veil. That was odd, and so was her voice when she said, "I'm all worn out, you'll excuse me," and hurried from the room.

Lucky wondered why she hadn't at least lifted the heavy veil, if only as a matter of comfort, since she'd worn it at least four hours.

Mrs. Tyson's hand and voice had conveyed something strange, uneasy, as though the sight of a familiar caller had unnerved her. It was grief, but something else was wrong. This was accentuated when, the moment her mother left the room, Julia exclaimed, with forced animation: "Don't stand there like a statue, sit down!"

She set the example. Wally observed: "Mom's worn out."

"Bus travel is no treat."

Julia headed for the kitchen. "I'll make some coffee."

Wally sat staring at the linoleum. He started violently when someone tapped at the door. Aubrey Sather and his wife, who had obviously dressed in haste, were at the threshold.

"We came to pay your mother our respects," the old lady said. "My man's up to his neck in work and he can't even go to the services tomorrow."

Julia hurried to greet the callers and ask them in. Unease again thickened the air, and the Sathers seemed to feel it.

"Mom is worn out," Julia said, "and hopes you'll excuse her."

Mrs. Sather looked injured. This wasn't being neighborly. Her husband fingered his

hat brim, and then got up, abruptly. "Pretty tiring, all right."

"I'll go in for just a minute," Mrs. Sather said, brightly, her face showing resolution to be neighborly, regardless.

From the other room came Mrs. Tyson's anxious voice. "I'll be right out, Agnes!"

WHEN she stepped into the room, she was wearing her veil, and since she'd now been home for nearly half an hour, she volunteered: "I thought I'd show you the one hat you'll never want to borrow."

That jarred Lucky. Mrs. Sather seemed taken aback. Condolences were dutifully tendered, and the neighbors left. Mrs. Tyson hurried back to her room.

When Julia brought the percolator to the front, Lucky shook his head. "Thanks, but it keeps me awake."

Julia gave him an odd look. "You used to drink it by the gallon."

He rolled a cigarette, and made as if to offer Wally his tobacco, then pocketed the bag. "It's too late to be sociable," Lucky led off. "What I came to say is that maybe I can help you, maybe you can help me. We need help."

"How do you mean that?" Wally asked.

"Did Julia have time to tell you about the run-in with her ex-husband?" And at Wally's head-shake, Lucky gave him the details of the encounter. He concluded: "The way her dress was ripped, I couldn't help seeing she'd been whipped. I know a thing or two about being beaten with everything from cleaning rods to bamboo and palm ribs and carabao-hide cat-o'-nine-tails. For reasons I won't go into unless it is awfully necessary, I think Cyril Stroud did it. He had a chance to, anyway."

Wally tightened. "You really think Cyril did it?"

"Julia won't say. She's afraid. It looks to me as if the things that'd lead Cyril Stroud to whip his ex-wife could've led him to—well—lay for your father. He's a big man, big enough to have carried your father to the barn to make it look as though he'd been robbed there, when he went to do the chores.

"The deputy sheriff says the doctors can't always decide the time of death. They may be off an hour or more in either direction. Specially if the doctor doesn't know the truth about what time the man ate his last meal.

"Julia, if you're being frightened into covering your ex, all you have to do is lie about when your father ate his supper. Now, I'm under suspicion, a deputy has been hounding me, and that makes it my business to clear myself, and no holds barred."

Julia and her brother were troubled by this accusation. The girl demanded: "What makes you think Dad was carried to the barn, after

—after it was done?” Her voice faltered. “Blood doesn’t flow uphill. Never did, not once of the too many times I saw it flow,” was the grim answer. “Somebody scooped up blood from, say a rubber floor mat, soaked it up with a cloth or something, and squeezed it on the barn floor. Then someone carried him and dumped him, only he wasn’t laid right. The barn floor slopes a bit. And if he’d been bleeding while he was on the floor, the blood would’ve run just opposite to the way it actually did. So I know the set-up was a fake to keep the law from guessing he was killed somewhere else.

“He could’ve gone out to a car parked under the sycamore, and been hit, so he’d fall and bleed all over a running board, or floor mat. The deputy sheriff knows about the green car paint wiped on the tree. Two cars fit the picture, but both seem to have been cleaned well. Steve Poole might’ve done it, Cyril Stroud might’ve done it, but there’s no proof against either. The best case is against me.”

“We’re not shielding anyone,” Julia said, and backed it with a steadfast eye.

“That whipping you got—”

And then Julia screamed. The scream had been due for several moments—ever since Lucky had held his cigarette butt against a dotted Swiss curtain.

“Fire! Behind you!”

“Huh?” Lucky sat fast, gaping.

“Fire!” Wally yelled, and knocked a chair over.

LUCKY bounded to the lounge, snatched the curtain rod, tore it from its brackets, and flung the blazing cloth to the center of the room. He wasn’t badly scorched, and the pain paid off, richly.

Mrs. Tyson came racing out in a flannelette nightgown. She didn’t wear hat and veil this time. But she did wear two remarkable discolorations about her eyes. Her nose was perceptibly awry, and mottled a yellowish-purple-brown. She’d been beaten royally.

“Good Lord!” she cried, and stood there, fingers plucking air. “You’ll burn the house down—”

“It’s all right, Mom,” Julia cut in, and hustled her out of the room.

Julia came back panting exertion and excitement.

Lucky was trembling all over. He felt as he had the first time under enemy fire.

“Julia, you killed your father. Those old bruises—it takes a week or ten days for a beaten-up face to go that color. That’s why your mother went to see Aunt Kate, that’s why she came back wearing a veil, and wore it in the house so long—her face would be a dead-give-away. Bad family trouble, and the sheriff wouldn’t have to depend on clammed-up neigh-

bors’ answers. He could see things for himself.”

Julia was white now. Her eyes looked like coals against snow. “Lucky—you’re crazy—”

He went on, sweating, and stubborn: “You gave him hell after he beat your mother. Then he ribbed me, and when I left, you piled into him and brought up that quarrel he had with your mother. Thinking about that was what made him snap at me. So he up and whales you. I thought Cyril did it, but seeing your mother’s black eyes makes it too plain who beat you.

“And you got a snootful. You conked him, maybe with a hunk of stovewood, like the one you bopped Cyril with. You got the linoleum all bloodied up. That’s why you had to take him to the barn, because nothing on God’s green earth could explain how come he was killed in his own living room, without you and Wally hearing the ruckus!”

Julia moaned, and stumbled to the lounge, and flung herself on it.

Wally’s face was a dirty ash gray. It twitched. He clenched and unclenched his hands. “Lucky, you telling the sheriff all this?”

Lucky made a helpless gesture. “God-almighty, look! I’m a soldier, and there’s a lot of work still to be done. Can I sit in a comfortable jail, awaiting trial for a murder I didn’t commit?”

Julia sat up. Lucky turned on her. “I’m no sheriff, I’m not under oath. I’ve seen so many men knocked off, I can’t get too excited about one man who beat the tar out of his wife, and horsewhipped his daughter. But you did it, and you better get it off your chest. It’s going to leak out, or it’s going to stay hid and eat at you. Turn yourself in, while the beating shows fresh on you. You’ll get a better break, and you sure deserve the best you can get.”

Wally said, slowly: “If the sheriff arrests you, you’ll pretty nearly have to tell on sis?”

“I don’t know if I’m soldier enough to tell, or not to tell. You can wait and see.”

Julia drew a deep breath. “I’m going over to Sather’s to phone the sheriff and get it over, while the marks are fresh—”

“You little fool!” the widow cried, and came rushing out. “You’ll do nothing of the sort!”

“I am. Mother, there’s no help for it.”

Then Wally blew up. “She’s a liar! I did it. We wrangled till pretty nearly four and then he—beat her—and—”

The widow cried out, and crumpled up.

Lucky went to the door, paused. “Where’d you hide the money, faking the robbery?”

“Steve Poole’s tool shed. Recognized his car when it scraped the tree. I heard him

(Continued on page 96)

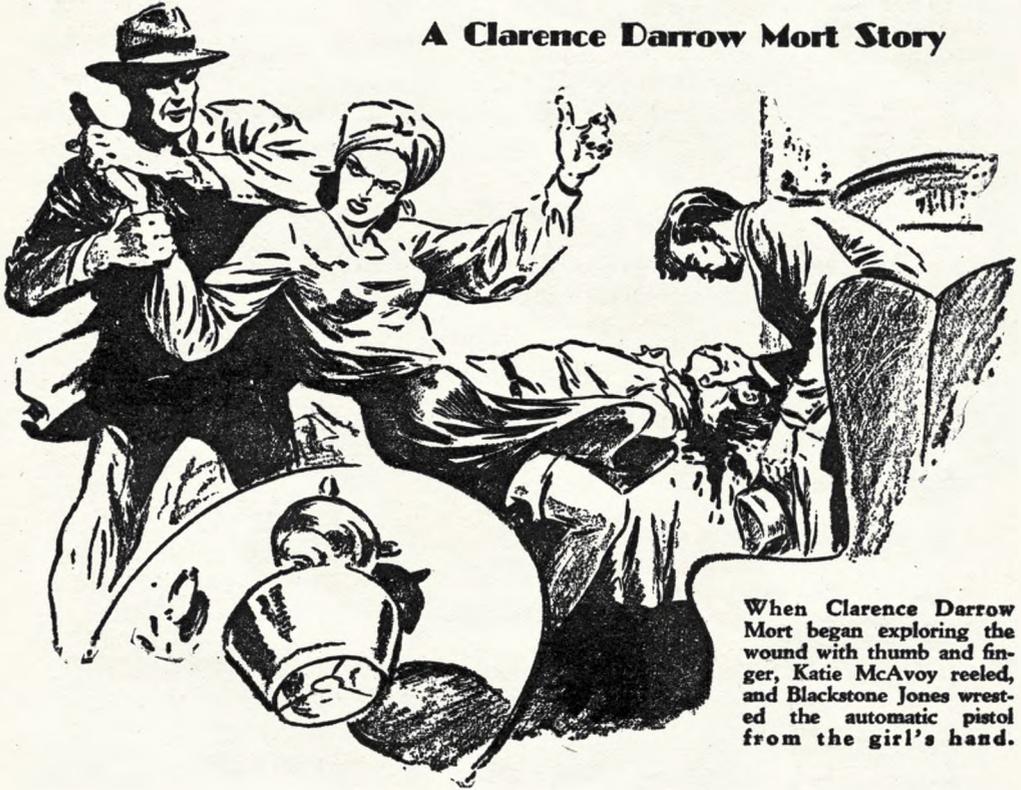
LOADED FOR MURDER

By JULIUS LONG

Author of "No Minimum for Murder," etc.

What's in a name? Apparently everything—at least in the case of Clarence Darrow Mort and Blackstone Jones. Together they lifted a man from the hot-seat and saw to it that the right person got the voltage.

A Clarence Darrow Mort Story



When Clarence Darrow Mort began exploring the wound with thumb and finger, Katie McAvoy reeled, and Blackstone Jones wrested the automatic pistol from the girl's hand.

CLARENCE DARROW MORT alighted from his cab in front of the Baker Building, which housed his offices.

"One-fifty," said the driver. Instantly his eyes lighted as a five-dollar bill was flicked toward him with a gesture that said: "Keep the change." He repeated his fervid thanks until his fare had disappeared beyond the door of the corner drugstore.

Clarence Darrow Mort halted at the soda fountain, ordered a double dose of a nationally known acid-indigestion nostrum. He gulped down the sizzling panacea.

"That'll be ten cents," said the fountain girl.

Mort put his hand in his pocket. His fingers explored without success.

"Well, I declare! I left my money in my other clothes!"

"Mr. Oakley!" the fountain girl yelled shrilly. A dapper man with a toothbrush mustache came quickly forward. "This guy orders and he ain't got the ten cents," accused the girl.

Mr. Oakley laughed deprecatingly. He reached into his pocket and tossed a dime onto the fountain. He beamed upon Mort.

"Please overlook the incident, Mr. Mort. The girl is new here." He faced the girl with

tolerant severity. "This gentlemen is Clarence Darrow Mort, the famous criminal lawyer."

The girl eyed her customer glumly.

"He didn't have the ten cents."

Mr. Oakley turned quickly back to Mort, his face reddened at such an exhibition of tactlessness by his help.

"No wonder you came out without your wallet today, Mr. Mort," he sympathized. "Losing the Brenner case must have been an awful blow to you. Why, I guess that's the first murder case you ever lost!"

Mort's face grew white. He turned on his heel and walked from the store. The manager stared while the fountain girl regarded him gloatingly. She guessed she had more tact in her little finger than the big ape had all over.

Mort reached the sidewalk and paused to breathe deeply. The ten-cent fizz had only aggravated the horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach. He had been a fool for eating that big steak at Luigi's on the south side. But then, he realized, the feeling would have been there regardless.

He walked the several steps to the building entrance, peered inside the dimly-lighted lobby. It was well after office hours, and nary a soul was in sight. Mort rose on his toes and managed to press the button that signaled the night caretaker. Presently a round little man ambled forth.

"Why, good evening, Mr. Mort! I guess I was wrong telling that young fellow you never came back after dark. Good thing he was stubborn."

Mort frowned. "What young fellow?"

"Jones is his name. He's a lawyer, so I guess it's all right I let him into the building."

Mort was too curious to remark about the inconsistency. He asked, frowning: "Where is the guy?"

The round little man looked around. "Why, he was right here a minute ago." Suddenly his face wrinkled with worry. "I told him he had to stay right here. Do you suppose he could have been lying about being a lawyer? Golly, he might be a thief!"

Mort laughed, to the caretaker's puzzlement, and walked on to the single elevator left in use. "Never mind, he probably got tired waiting and walked out."

He entered the car, and the caretaker took him to his floor. He used the door to his private office, unlocking it with his key. He had closed it before he observed his visitor. He said: "I hope I'm not intruding."

THE youth occupied Mort's swivel chair, and he was making the most of it, leaning far back and propping his feet upon the polished surface of a truly distinguished walnut desk. The feet came down, but the occupant

remained comfortably ensconced in the chair.

"Hello, Mr. Mort. The cleaning woman let me in. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. I hope you're comfortable."

The youth smiled, but with no embarrassment. "Oh, yes, I'm quite comfortable. You're probably wondering who I am. My name is Jones."

"Attorney Jones," Mort mused aloud. He crossed to a chair and subsided wearily, staring across his desk at the occupant of his own chair. His gaze was half amused, half irritated.

"Supposing you tell me what's on your mind."

"Sure, Mr. Mort. I wanted to tell you about the Brenner case."

Stunned, Mort came back slowly: "You wanted to tell *me* about the Brenner case?"

"Yes, Mr. Mort. Of course I can see why you think that's funny, me wanting to tell you about the case when you handled it and have been trying it for the last two weeks. But I've got an idea you missed."

Mort was in no condition to exercise diplomacy. For the first time that afternoon he had heard a jury doom a client of his to the electric chair. He could not have felt worse if he had been his client. He said: "Get the hell out of here before I throw you out!"

The youth's eyes widened incredulously. He got out of Mort's chair and seemed to rise in sections. Mort stared. He had never seen a bigger man. The idea of a man of his own size, standing barely five-feet-four, throwing such a giant out of his office or anywhere else was absurd.

"But you don't understand," protested the youth. "I can tell you how to save Brenner's life! I can tell you how to get him free!"

In spite of his visitor's size, Mort rose threateningly.

"Get out, I say!" His face impressed the bigger man, for it was racked by torment. "Get out of here before I—" Mort left off helplessly. "Get out," he begged.

Moved, the youth retreated to the door. Still, he argued.

"But, Mr. Mort, I know you want to save Paul Brenner if possible. And I'm sure I can tell you how to do it!"

Mort silently implored him, and opened the door.

"All right, Mr. Mort, I'll go. But if you want to get in touch with me, you can find me at the Hotel Norwood. The name is Jones. Blackstone Jones."

The youth smiled sheepishly. "Yes, that's right. My father named me after William Blackstone. I tried to get everybody to call me 'Bill,' but somehow they always insisted on Blackstone. I guess it was just natural that I should turn out to be a lawyer."

Mort eyed him with touching sympathy.

"Come back, my boy. Sit down. I'm sorry for my lack of manners. It's just that I've taken such an awful jolt today. I really didn't mean it."

Slightly bewildered, Blackstone Jones resumed his seat in Mort's swivel chair. Mort glared at him like a long-lost brother. He shook his head solemnly.

"We are kindred souls, Blackstone Jones. I, too, was doomed to the law by my namesake. My father was an idolator of Darrow. If I had not been named Clarence Darrow Mort, I might have turned out to be a doctor, a musician, or even a barber."

"But, Mr. Mort! You're the greatest living criminal lawyer! You should be forever grateful to your father for suggesting your destiny by naming you after Darrow, one of the greatest men of his time and certainly the greatest criminal lawyer!"

Mort shook his head forlornly.

"I envy you—if only I could share your sentiments! I'd rather drive a truck. At least I would have some peace of mind and money in my pocket. As it is, I'm a chronic nervous wreck and usually broke."

"You, broke! Why, Mr. Mort, you must make tens of thousands!"

"When my client is sufficiently well-heeled

to pay—yes. But well-heeled clients do not get off every street car. Take my last client, Paul Brenner, the cab driver. When I first interviewed him in his cell he had the total sum of thirty-seven dollars in his pants. This he offered me, but I handed it back. To date I have spent a thousand dollars on private detectives who have failed to turn up either hide or hair of his mysterious missing witness. Aside from two weeks of trial work, I spent another month on the case. My overhead kept right on going. So you see me now as penniless as a vagrant, without a solitary dime in my pocket."

"But, Mr. Mort, your fee in the Brenner case has been the personal satisfaction of devoting your legal skill on behalf of a friendless, helpless man whom nobody believes! Certainly it must be a source of immeasurable pride to know that despite all odds you have fought for the freedom of an innocent man!"

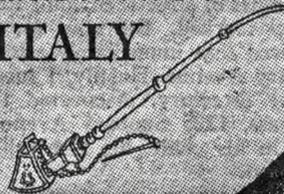
Mort's brows lifted in amazement. "What—you think Brenner innocent?"

"Of course. Don't you?"

MORT shrugged. Blackstone Jones nodded knowingly.

"I think I understand now why you have lost this case. You yourself do not believe in the innocence of your client. Why, then,

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did you defend him with no hope of payment?"

"Because, my lad, I can feel for the guilty as well as the innocent. The constitution of our country provides that every accused man shall be entitled to counsel. It is part of the Bill of Rights. And there's nothing there that says the right belongs only to the innocent. It's the right of the guilty as well."

"But, I'm sure Brenner's innocent! Consider his story. On the night of October 18th, last, he was waiting at his usual stand outside the Lucky Club when the doorman whistled. Brenner pulled up for his fare, who was Oliver Hayworth.

"Brenner knew Hayworth, as did almost everybody in town, for he was its richest man. Outside of his manufacturing interests he had many others, principally real estate, though he dabbled in anything he could make money out of. He was no miser—he just got a personal satisfaction out of making money. He didn't need it to spend on himself or anybody else. He just wanted to make money.

"Brenner was elated at picking up such a fare, especially when Hayworth told him he had just won five thousand dollars at the Lucky Club. It was foolish of Hayworth to tell this to a strange cab driver, but he was pretty drunk. All this Brenner admitted when the police arrested him the next morning. Hayworth's body had been found in a vacant lot on the south side of town. He had been clubbed to death, and his pockets had been emptied.

"Brenner was, of course, charged with the murder. He protested his innocence, saying that he had dropped Hayworth downtown in the vicinity of the Weems Hotel, a cheap place with a shady reputation. But circumstances were not in Brenner's favor. When the police walked in he was packing all his belongings. And a frisk of his clothes produced a one thousand-dollar bill.

"Brenner's explanation was simple but hardly convincing. When Hayworth had paid his fare, he said, he had tossed the bill and told him to keep the change. It had been a shock to find that it was a thousand-dollar bill. Brenner's reaction was one of mingled joy and panic. Surely Hayworth would regret his generosity when he sobered and claim that he had made a mistake in tossing Brenner such a huge bill. He would want it back.

"So Brenner decided to get out of town. This was his story, and he was stuck with it because he immediately weakened it by promising to prove it by a witness, another fare whom he had picked up as he had left Hayworth near the Weems.

"This second fare was also a drunk, and he had said merely that he had wanted to go home. He gave an address, which Brenner remembered, for remembering addresses had

become a habit with him. The police could easily check the address, 1225 Summit Road. They found the house bearing that number to be occupied by an aged couple, neither of whom had any knowledge of a younger man answering Brenner's description of his fare. Am I correct, Mr. Mort, in saying that it was the failure of Brenner's corroborating evidence which undermined whatever credibility his story might have possessed?"

"Correct, Jones. Once the D. A. had proved Brenner a liar with respect to the second fare, the jury refused to believe any part of his story."

"That is why, Mr. Mort, I think I can save Paul Brenner's life. I am positive that I can produce the missing fare."

Mort sat up straight.

"Go on."

"Being a stranger in the city, I am unfamiliar with its streets. Parenthetically, I tell you that my sole reason for visiting it was to complete my legal education by seeing you in action.

"In order to listen intelligently to the trial I wanted to know something about the locale of the crime. For example, I wanted to know where the Lucky Club was, so I went out and spent an evening there. The better to inform myself I bought a city directory and map.

"It wasn't until today during the district attorney's final argument that I made what I believe to be an important discovery. I was idly fingering the directory, and my eyes traveled down the list of streets. Summit Road was already check-marked. But now, for the first time, I noticed that immediately after it was listed Sunbary Avenue. Hastily, I turned the pages of the directory, discovered that there is an address, 1225 Sunbary Avenue."

Mort relaxed in his chair, his face falling with disappointment.

"So you think Brenner, a seasoned cab driver, could have mistaken instructions to go to Sunbary Avenue for instructions to go to Summit Road?"

"I do. And I have already some proof that he did. I visited 1225 Sunbary Avenue this evening. It is a boarding house. The landlady was most cooperative. One of her tenants answers the description of Brenner's missing fare. And, the lady confided, the man is quite a drinker. Of course she couldn't remember whether he had been drunk on the night of October 18. But, if he wasn't, she says, it was a red-letter day in his life."

THE house numbered 1225 Sunbary Avenue was a large, rambling one. Alighting from the cab, Mort eyed it speculatively.

"Understand, Jones, that I'm on this wild-goose chase against my better judgment. If Brenner had actually misunderstood the ad-

dress given him by his drunken fare and delivered him over on the other side of town on Summit Road as a result, the fare would have had to travel about five miles to get here. He would have remembered the mistake. And he would have come forward after all the newspaper publicity about the missing witness."

Blackstone Jones shook his head.

"Not necessarily. In the first place, the man was drunk. Drunk enough not to speak plainly when he uttered the name of the street he lived on. And very probably drunk enough to take another five-mile ride without remembering it. Besides, even if he did realize that he was the missing witness, his unflattering description in the newspapers would not encourage him to come forward. He might have had ridicule as his reward, possibly even the loss of his job, for this prospective witness happens to be a newspaperman himself. Maybe you know him, Eddie Davis."

Mort stopped short at the foot of the veranda steps.

"Then let's go back right now. Sure I know Eddie Davis. He's a court reporter for the *Standard*. And he covered the Brenner trial. He even interviewed Brenner in his cell. Do you think Brenner wouldn't have identified him?"

Blackstone Jones also halted. He stared down at the older lawyer.

"You—you're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! And I'm also sure that even if Brenner had failed to recognize Davis, Davis himself would have had his memory jogged and would have placed Brenner before the long-winded trial was over. Sorry, Jones, but what I hoped would be a long-shot coming through seems just to be a coincidence."

Blackstone Jones looked like a crestfallen little boy in spite of his size. Then his jaw hardened.

"But, still, Mr. Mort, I think it's not just coincidence. I still want to talk to Davis!"

"Well, you'll have your chance. Here he comes now."

Blackstone Jones turned. A flashy crimson convertible had pulled up at the curb, though the crimson of the car was dulled by the flaming red hair of the girl driving it. Blackstone Jones could not hold back a low whistle.

"If you can take your eyes off Katie McAvoy," said Mort, "the guy with her is Eddie Davis."

The man got out of the car. "I won't be long," he said. He was a man not very much out of the ordinary, except that he was obviously much older than the red-top. She couldn't have been over twenty-two. Mort noted the frown on his youthful companion's face and smiled.

"It's the manpower shortage. Eddie's a

squirt compared to most of Katie's admirers at the Lucky Club. She sings there."

Blackstone Jones nodded with enthusiasm. "I know, I know! I saw her the night I was there. She's wonderful!"

Mort gave him a quick glance, then smiled as Davis came up the walk.

"Hello, Eddie. We were just coming to see you."

Davis stared at Blackstone Jones. Mort said: "This is Attorney Jones, from out of town. He's got an interesting slant on the Brenner case. He says you're the mysterious missing witness."

Davis' eyes popped. He laughed.

"That's good!" He grinned at Blackstone Jones. "What crystal ball have you been looking into, Tarzan?"

Something in Blackstone Jones' face made Davis take a backward step, put up a hand in mock defense and add quickly: "Take it easy, guy! I couldn't help making the crack—you're about the biggest guy I've seen in a long while, especially since the draft."

Instantly, Blackstone Jones was on the defensive.

"I'm an inch too tall for the army. The limit is six-feet-six. I tried to scrunch down, but—"

"Sure, sure," said Davis in a very friendly manner. "You can't help being out of the army any more than I can. With me it's the old blood pressure."

"Then you shouldn't drink," Blackstone Jones said severely. "Were you drinking on the night of Hayworth's murder?"

Davis looked blankly at Mort. Mort grinned. Davis looked back at his inquisitor.

"Listen, fellow, that's none of your business! And what's more, I don't like this gag about me being the missing witness, the guy Brenner says he hauled. Whatever gave you that idea?"

Mort sighed. "The street address Brenner gave as his fare's destination. It's the same as yours, only on Summit. Jones thinks Brenner might have made a mistake and dumped you out on the wrong street."

"And then didn't spot me all through the trial? Are you crazy?"

"No, Eddie, just desperate. They're going to fry Brenner. That won't be good for my business."

"Well, I hope you come up with a better idea than this one. Me, the missing witness—that's good!"

He went on into his rooming house. Mort nodded to Blackstone Jones, and they went down the walk.

"Katie," said Mort, walking up to the crimson car, "I want you to meet one of your most ardent admirers. He caught your act at the Lucky Club, and he thinks you're wonderful.

The name is Jones—one of the Jones boys.”

Blackstone Jones' face was almost as red as Katie McAvoy's hair. She smiled and said: "Thanks for the plug."

Blackstone Jones came through with a lot of silence. Mort said casually: "You wouldn't happen to be on your way to the Lucky Club now, would you? If you are, you can give us a lift."

"Sure, climb in back. Eddie just went in to pick up something. He'll be right out."

DAVIS was almost on the run as he came out of his rooming house. He slowed unhappily when he saw the passengers in the convertible's rear seat.

"We're not going downtown, C.D. We're going to the Lucky Club."

"So are we, Eddie. Climb in."

Davis didn't like it. He slammed the door hard and had barely a word to say all the way. At the Lucky Club he saw to it that Katie McAvoy had no opportunity to linger in the vicinity of Blackstone Jones. Mort led the youth straight past the bar, never once faltering. Three bartenders looked stunned.

Inside the gambling room, to which the pair was immediately admitted, Mort cast a roving glance. His gaze stopped at a man who seemed to be concentrating on the play at a roulette table. A keen observer would have noted that his eyes had the split-vision cultivated by basketball players who can observe the entire floor. This was demonstrated when Mort nodded and the man came immediately in answer to his nod.

"Good evening, Mr. Mort. You're a little early today."

"I didn't come to lose my shirt this time, Phil. I want to see Lucky."

Phil Sinton enjoyed his employer's confidence because of his careful discretion.

"Certainly, Mr. Mort. I don't know if Mr. Page has come in yet, but I'll see."

Sinton vanished through a corridor, returned a minute later.

"Go right in, Mr. Mort."

"Thanks. Will you come along, Phil? You're really the man I want to talk to."

A short corridor led to the Lucky Club office. It was as sumptuously furnished as the inner sanctum of a movie mogul, and the occupant of the high-backed chair at a hand-carved desk looked at home. He smiled a warm welcome that indicated he had been seeing a lot of Edward Arnold movies lately. He kept in character throughout the introductions.

"Always glad to see you, C.D. What can I do for you now?"

"Just tell Phil that he can answer one question. I want to know if Eddie Davis was here the night of the Hayworth murder."

Only the shell of Page's smile remained.

"What's your angle, C.D.? I don't like a tie-up between the club and that Hayworth thing. Just because he'd won five grand here before he got bumped is no reason for dragging the club into the picture."

"Of course not, Lucky. But the jury hung it on Brenner this afternoon. Perhaps you had heard."

"I heard. That's bad for you, C.D. Your first loser, isn't it?"

"I haven't counted it lost yet. That's why I'm interested in Eddie's whereabouts the night of the murder. A court reporter of a paper like the *Standard* would be noticed. Phil would remember him if he was here. That's all I want to know."

Page thought this over a moment, then gave Sinton an expressive look.

Sinton said: "He wasn't here, Mr. Mort. That's definite."

"Well, that's that." Mort rose, and Blackstone Jones took his cue. Then Mort paused.

"By the way, the dealer that Hayworth won the money from, is he around?"

Page said: "He comes on at ten."

Mort chuckled, as if to himself. "I thought maybe you'd canned him, Lucky. I didn't suppose any dealer in the world could give away five grand of your money and hang up his hat here again."

Page shrugged. "I charged it up to advertisement, C.D. Besides, Hayworth was having a hot streak. Everybody has a hot streak if they gamble long enough. Sooner or later they cool off. I figured Hayworth'd give us back our money and maybe a little bit more. But it wasn't in the cards—he got picked up by the wrong cab. That's why I hope they do fry Brenner, C.D. That was my money he stole."

"So it wasn't just a hit and run? Hayworth had a hot streak, did he?"

"Yeah. The week before he got killed he came in here and took the dice game for three grand. That makes eight he took me for."

Mort smiled. "If I were a cynical man, Lucky, I might think two and two tied you with the Hayworth kill." Mort added quickly: "But I'm not cynical."

Lucky Page leaned forward in his chair.

"I don't like that, C.D."

"And I don't either!" snapped Phil Sinton. He took two steps forward and towered over the lawyer. Mort understood perfectly well that Sinton was merely putting on a loyalty act to impress his boss, but Blackstone Jones didn't. Before Sinton knew what was happening to him, he was hoisted from the floor.

Sinton swore. His hand clutched in impotent fury toward the left lapel of his coat, for Blackstone Jones, whatever the naiveté that had prompted him to maltreat Sinton, saw to it that the man could not reach his armpit hardware.

Lucky Page sat wide-eyed. "What the hell, C.D.? Tell the big guy to put Phil down. He didn't mean it!"

Mort laughed. "Put him down, Jones. And you, Lucky, tell your muscleman to keep away from me!"

Page chose to laugh it off as Sinton's feet again rested on the floor. Sinton's face was scarlet, and his fingers quivered. They did not, however, reach under his coat-lapel. Mort lifted himself from his chair.

"Come along, Jones. It's time we got out of here."

This time Mort did not pass the bar. He lifted an eyebrow to Blackstone Jones.

"By the way, I haven't had a drink today. Frankly, this Brenner thing got me down so bad that I knew a drink wouldn't help. But now my spirits are picking up. Unfortunately, however, I happen to be financially embarrassed. I—"

"I'd be delighted to buy you a drink," said Blackstone Jones, "though I never touch the stuff myself."

Mort surveyed him with appreciative thoughtfulness.

"I respect your abstinence, Jones. Also your generosity. I wonder if your offer to buy a drink could be construed to mean a double."

"Of course, Mr. Mort."

BLACKSTONE JONES watched with mingled disapproval and respect at the speed with which the criminal lawyer downed a double bourbon. Mort licked his lips, happened to think of appearances and piously took a sip from his chaser.

"What do you think now?" Blackstone Jones asked. "Do you still think the use of the same street number was just a coincidence?"

Mort shrugged. "Perhaps, if subconscious motivation is not outlawed from the realm of coincidence. But suppose we occupy ourselves with more pleasant pursuits. The early show

is about to begin. Move up a little closer."

The lights had been lowered. A master of ceremonies stepped forth and began to play with a microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, after telling two borderline jokes, "I regret to have to tell you that our lovely songstress, Miss Katie McAvoy, who usually appears at this time to do her inimitable numbers, has been unable to reach the club owing to a benefit performance at a well-known charitable institution. However, Miss McAvoy will make the next show."

The master of ceremonies then launched into another story, while Blackstone Jones turned uncomprehendingly to Mort.

"Why, Mr. Mort, that's a downright lie! We know Miss McAvoy came here!"

"Indeed we do. It would seem that the red-headed lady has departed. That being the case, I think we are wasting our time here. Suppose we go back to the gambling room, Jones."

"But, Mr. Mort, you have no money, and I don't gamble."

"I'm still gambling, Jones." He checked his watch. "Brownie Coombs comes on at ten. It's about that now. I'd like a word with Brownie."

The two men skirted the night club, re-entered the gambling room. Mort affected an interest in a dice game while Blackstone Jones looked on disdainfully, but with ill-concealed curiosity. After ten minutes Mort checked his watch. Brownie Coombs had not appeared at his blackjack table. Spying Sinton, Mort crossed to him casually.

"Brownie's a little late, isn't he?"

"He's not coming. He called in and said he had a cold."

"That's a shame. Would you mind giving me his address?"

"Not at all. The Marbury Arms. Know where that is?"

"Sure."

In a phone booth, Mort learned at the ex-

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The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging

backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

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pense of a borrowed nickel that Brownie Coombs was not in at the Marbury Arms, that he had gone out an hour ago and had not stated when he would be back. Mort returned to the bar, looked so longingly at the array of bottles that Blackstone Jones offered him another drink. The offer was accepted.

"Coincidence," said Mort, when he had downed the double, "is a strange thing. When it becomes common, I'm inclined to wonder if it isn't design in disguise. Now, I've just found that Brownie Coombs is among the missing. So is Katie McAvoy. I wonder if anybody has seen Eddie Davis."

A bartender looked up.

"Eddie went out of here twenty minutes ago, Mr. Mort."

"Well, there you are! All three of them missing. Now I'd like to know if such a coincidence isn't synthetic."

"Something's up, Mr. Mort. I'm sure of it."

"Me, too. I think it calls for another drink."

Blackstone Jones looked pained but acquiesced. Mort saw a bartender coming, and he was about to order when the man said: "There's a call for you, Mr. Mort. The middle booth."

When Mort answered, a voice said: "I'm at the Weems, Room 408. If you want the low-down on the Hayworth thing, come on the run."

The connection was broken. Mort went back to the bar. A drink awaited him.

"Never mind that drink, though thanks for ordering. I hope you've got more cab-fare."

Outside they had to wait. From the parking lot a torpedo-bodied sedan rolled into the street, headed past them downtown.

"Dammit," said Mort, "he might have picked us up. It was Phil Sinton."

"Where are we going?"

"The Weems Hotel. I just got a call from there. It was Brownie Coombs. He's ready to sing."

Blackstone Jones trembled with excitement. "Then we've got to get there! Somebody may try to stop him!"

"Well, unless you want to carry me there piggy-back, it looks as if there's nothing we can do about it."

It was ten minutes before the Lucky Club doorman could whistle down a cab. "Give him a dollar," said Mort. Blackstone Jones handed over a bill as if it were the end of his finger. He appeared to brood over the tip all the way to the Weems.

"Keep the change," said Mort, when the youth handed over a five in front of the Weems. He might have had a rebellion on his hands if Mort hadn't called his attention to the crimson convertible parked near the hotel entrance.

"Looks as if Brownie has visitors. Let's go."

The clerk asked no questions as they walked to the elevator. At the fourth floor Mort led the way down a rear corridor. At No. 408 he rapped on the panels vigorously. There was no answer.

Mort tried the door. It opened easily.

"Oh, my!" said Blackstone Jones.

The girl had red hair and an automatic pistol.

"All right," she said, "come in, both of you. And don't make a row."

"Delighted," said Mort. He held the door until Blackstone Jones had entered, then closed it. "You seem to be quite a gal, Katie. Are you responsible for that, too?"

SHE didn't follow the direction of his gaze. Blackstone Jones was already staring, wide-eyed, at the man trussed up on the bed. The man's throat was cut, and his head lay back making the gash appear like a second mouth. "Don't talk nonsense!" snapped Katie McAvoy. "How could I have tied him up like that and put him there?"

"If you didn't, who did?"

"How would I know? I just got here."

"Of course the clerk downstairs will verify that."

"He won't. I got the room number wrong—I thought Brownie said it was 508. I wandered around on the fifth floor for fifteen minutes. Then I tried this floor. The door was open, and Brownie was like that."

"That," said Mort, "is not a very nice way to be."

He walked over to the dead man. He stooped slightly. Then, without hesitation, he began to explore the gaping wound with his thumb and finger.

"My God!" said Katie McAvoy. She reeled. Blackstone Jones had also been shocked by Mort's behavior. But he recovered in time to wrest the automatic pistol from the girl's hand. Despite her make-up, she was white. She turned her back to the bed. Blackstone Jones steadied her.

Mort finished what he was doing. He took several bloodied fragments of paper that he had removed from Coombs' throat and spread them on a stand. He flattened them out and put them together like a crossword puzzle. Then he scrutinized his assembled work for some minutes. He then turned about, found a wall phone and dialed. When he got an answer he asked for Captain Randolph of Homicide.

"Sorry to bother you at this hour," Mort told him. "But you can crack two murder cases with one stone if you get Paul Brenner and bring him over to the Lucky Club. I'll meet you in Lucky's office."

He turned from the phone, carefully picked up the gory pieces of his jig-saw puzzle. He

emptied a legal-size envelope from his inside coat pocket and tucked in the pieces. Then he eyed Blackstone Jones.

"The gun, Jones. I'll handle that."

He accepted the proffered gun, gripped it with his left hand and jacked back the slide. No cartridge popped out. Mort laughed.

"Why, it wasn't even loaded!"

"Of course not! I don't even know how to shoot one of those things!"

"Then why did you carry it?"

"I don't have to tell you."

Mort shrugged. "Suit yourself. You'll have to tell Captain Randolph. You're coming with us to Lucky's office."

She showed no sign of resistance. Mort found the "Do Not Disturb" sign, hung it on the outside doorknob, doused the lights and locked the door upon the room. Downstairs, he led the way to the red convertible.

"You can drive us, Katie. A snazzy car for a chirp, if you ask me."

"You may as well know. It's not mine. It belongs to Eddie Davis."

Mort's brows lifted. "That's still more surprising! A newspaper reporter makes more money than I thought."

Katie McAvoy drove away sullenly. She parked in the Lucky Club lot, and they used the rear entrance. Lucky Page had evidently been advised of their arrival. He met them as they came out of the kitchen.

"We want to use your office," said Mort. "Captain Randolph's on his way with Paul Brenner. You can help us by rounding up Phil Sinton. Also Eddie Davis, if he should happen to pop in."

Neither man had put in an appearance fifteen minutes later when Randolph, accompanied by two detectives, arrived with his prisoner. They crowded into Page's office.

"Now, if you guys will just tell me what this is all about," Page said.

Mort nodded. "Sure. It's about murder. When it strikes once, it's apt to strike twice, like tonight."

"Twice?" Randolph looked down his nose.

"Brownie Coombs," said Mort. "He got it in Number 408 at the Weems Hotel."

"Then, why—"

"Skip it, Randolph," Mort interrupted him.

"You'll get your killer this way. Here's the only piece of evidence that was in that room. I fished it out of Brownie's throat."

Katie McAvoy looked on in horror as Mort handed over the envelope.

"It was terrible! How could you have done such a thing?" She got a handkerchief out of her bag and dabbed her eyes. Randolph began to spread the contents of the envelope on Page's desk, to the consternation of the latter. When he had finished assembling the pieces he read them and whistled.

"This is the pay-off! I can't read all of it on account of the blood, but I can read enough!" he said to Mort.

Then he turned on Paul Brenner. "What do you know about this affidavit?"

THE cab driver was a thin, beaten-down man of forty-five. His gray, haggard face trembled. He stared from Randolph to Mort.

"What do I know about what?"

"The affidavit," Mort told him, "states that on a night about a week before Hayworth's murder you hauled Hayworth to his home. Is that right, Brenner?"

Brenner looked bewildered. "Maybe, Mr. Mort. I'd hauled Hayworth several times. Like I told you, I had my stand here at the Lucky Club."

"Do you remember on one particular night after you had hauled Hayworth, your next fare was Eddie Davis? You should remember, for the affidavit states that Davis asked you who your last fare was, and you told him it was Hayworth. Now, does that help?"

Brenner's brow wrinkled, then he suddenly nodded.

"Come to think of it, I do remember. I took Davis home."

"Exactly. What you never knew was the reason for Davis' curiosity about your previous fare. He had found a pair of dice on the floor of your cab. The next day he learned two things. One was that the dice were wrong—that Hayworth had won three thousand dollars at the Lucky Club the night before.

"Eddie Davis knew that he had something. He sat down at his typewriter and dictated an affidavit, which the office notary signed. He had an idea Hayworth wouldn't care to have the contents of that affidavit made public.

"He knew Hayworth was a hard nut to crack. (I'm going on pure supposition now.) However, a couple of days later, Hayworth received a visit. The visitor was almost apologetic in making reference to the wrong dice and the existence of an affidavit. The visitor used the technique of all blackmailers. The victim was made to believe that the blackmailer was a friend, that in the end the victim would actually make a profit out of the transaction.

"The blackmailer voiced an understanding disposition and a desire to assist Hayworth in taking Lucky Page's games. For example, the blackmailer had won a little money at the friendly blackjack table at which Brownie Coombs dealt. Not much money, because both Lucky Page and Phil Sinton knew the blackmailer was friendly with Brownie, and they would quickly smell a rat if the thing were carried too far.

"But a man like Hayworth would be above suspicion—that was why he had been able to

get away with those wrong dice. The stick man would have palmed them if anybody else had made that many passes. Now, if Hayworth played blackjack with the benefit of some code words, the three of them would split a nice piece of loot.

"Hayworth understood perfectly. He was getting off easy. If he didn't comply with the blackmailer's wish, the situation would become embarrassing. If he did, it wouldn't cost anything, and he would make some money besides. So he practiced up on Brownie's code words and went back to the Lucky Club for a whirl at blackjack.

"He won five thousand, and left in Brenner's cab, for Brenner was at his usual stand. The thing had got Hayworth's nerves, and he had stopped first at the bar. He was in such a drunken condition that he gave Brenner a thousand-dollar bill instead of what he probably thought was a ten. Brenner rightly surmised that his fare had made a mistake, and he made ready to leave town before Hayworth sobered up.

"Now picture Hayworth visiting a room at the Weems Hotel, the room in which he was to meet the blackmailer. He's ready to split the loot, but the blackmailer says there has been a slight change in plans. The loot is to be split, all right, but Hayworth will not be a party to it. The money Hayworth was to hand over now was only the beginning.

"Hayworth got the idea. The affidavit about the dice hadn't been very much against him, but now there was plenty. There were witnesses of his conspiracy to defraud Page. A thing like that might not be pushed in a criminal court, but Lucky Page had a way of settling his own scores. If Hayworth decided to face the music, the blackmailer and Brownie Coombs could get out of town quickly enough, but Hayworth's manifold investments were there, and he had to stay.

"The blackmailer had known Hayworth would be a tough nut to crack, but not how tough. Hayworth came to a quick decision. He walked to the wall phone and began to dial police headquarters. The blackmailer came to another quick decision. Hayworth was struck down before he could make the call. Afterwards the blackmailer and Brownie Coombs dumped the body in a south-side lot. That's the story, Randolph."

Randolph nodded. "It sounds convincing to me, C.D., but it's all theory. The affidavit is the only fact we have to go on."

"It's enough. Get Eddie Davis in here, and I'll wrap it up."

There was a rap on the door. A detective admitted Phil Sinton.

"Where have you been?" Randolph demanded.

Sinton replied: "The Weems Hotel.

Brownie phoned me. Lucky will tell you that."

"Brownie's dead," said Lucky dully. Sinton nodded.

"I know," he said. "I took a glim at the room and got out."

"What did Brownie want to see you about?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure it was plenty."

"Where have you been since?"

"Looking for Eddie Davis."

"You find him?"

"Sure. He's at the bar."

"Why were you looking for him, Phil?"

"He was a pal of Brownie's. I thought maybe he might know something."

Randolph spoke to a detective. "Bring him in."

EDDIE DAVIS looked calm and carefree. "This is quite a party. I hope there's a good story in it."

"There will be," said Mort. "Did you know Brownie Coombs was murdered?"

"The hell he was!"

"Take a look at this affidavit, Eddie. Tell us if you've ever seen it before."

Davis whitened as he spied the fragments.

"Wh—where did you find that?"

"In Brownie's throat," said Mort. "He had eaten it."

Davis trembled. "You can't tie me in with this—or with Hayworth's murder! I had nothing to do with either one."

"Oh, yes you did," said Mort grimly. "That affidavit was used to blackmail Hayworth. When that deal went haywire, the same affidavit was used again. This time on Brownie. Brownie had decided to bow out of the deal. Though he'd helped dispose of the body, there's no such thing as an accessory after the fact in this state, and he'd have immunity for turning state's evidence. He was worried about Lucky's reaction, so he called Sinton to the Weems as well as me. But Hayworth's murderer smelled a rat and killed him."

"You might get off with life," said Randolph, "if you confess now. It's the best way."

"Are you crazy?" Mort barked at Randolph. "Davis had the affidavit, didn't he?"

"No I didn't! It was gone when I tried to find it this evening!"

Randolph laughed in his face, but Mort said: "I believe you Eddie. That should teach you never to smuggle red-headed ladies into your room. You did tell Katie about that affidavit shortly after you signed it, didn't you?"

Davis' face froze. Mort went on.

"Sure, Eddie, I know you got cold feet and dropped the idea of blackmailing Hayworth. But when you told Katie about it, she put it to work. She killed Hayworth, and tonight she took care of Brownie, making him eat that affidavit so it would point directly to

(Continued on page 98)

SHAME ON MALACHI!

By **WILLIAM R. COX**

Author of "Malachi Attends a Party," etc.

A Malachi Manatee Story



I got away from the table and blocked off any possible interference. Malachi took him by the nose twisted it and said: "That's just a beginning."

It's the standing around, not sure of what it's all about, knowing there's a killer loose that get's you. I'm of the hit-first-and-think-about-it-later school. But Malachi had some regrets about the final fist-fest. "I'm ashamed, Tack," he told me later. "I should have been able to handle an old woman without slugging her."

MALACHI MANATEE and I were living in one suite, Ilene Carver was living in another, all very kosher, and on the ground floor lived Mrs. John Sudan and her bachelor son, John Jr. It was a fine apartment house, called the Poinsettia Arms, owned by Mrs. Sudan, who owned a good deal of Bay City, a town on the West Coast of Florida. Malachi's father had known Mrs. Sudan many years before and she must have been one hell of a girl in her heyday. . .

Malachi is quite a character, of course, being so tall and blond and arrogant and kindly and tough and ruthless all at one time. Ilene is the best looking redhead in America. Before the Japs put scar tissue on my lung I was a tough sort of fellow, I suppose.

But Mrs. John Sudan was something else again.

We were in her place, drinking bourbon, the kind you can't get any more. Mrs. Sudan had cottony white hair, very neatly arranged atop her head, the remnants of some beauty, and black, snapping, young eyes behind steel-rimmed spectacles. She wore dark clothing, obviously expensive, yet somehow ancient in style. She was not quite Godey's Ladies Book, but she was not up to date either. She drank from a tumbler and took plenty of drinks.

She said: "A man named Doney Beedle controls the vice in this town. He's a vicious, depraved character. He poses as a citrus grower and has ingratiated himself with Dolf Cartier and the leading men of this community, who have no social responsibility. He even got himself into our poker game!"

Malachi said: "You still play with the men, Mrs. John?"

"Cartier, Solvey, Marshal, Carey Flowers and I have played poker for twenty-five years," she said. "Now they let Beedle play. He cheats."

John Sudan, Jr. said: "Now Ma! That's not true!" John Jr. had no hair at all and his eyes were too close to his big nose. He looked like a tired old billiard ball. He didn't work at anything in particular except jumping horses, of which he owned several, yet he did not look like a horseman. He was not jaunty.

Mrs. John said: "I lost seven thousand dollars to Beedle last night."

John Jr. didn't bat an eye. "That's not surprising. You always play two pair too strong before the draw."

"You fool!" snapped his mother. "You play them too strong *after* the draw!"

John Jr. said stubbornly: "Doney Beedle is not a cheater. He was a bootlegger, yes. He came up the hard way. But he's a legitimate business man and Dolph deals with him and so do all the others. They trust him."

"They're all fools!" declared Mrs. John. Her black eyes gave off fire. "I've been rooked by a damned Cracker crook who has crooked cops like Sam Heppner and his partner, Lodi, do all his dirty work and I won't stand for it."

Ilene sat in a deep chair with her legs slung over the arm, drinking a highball. She said: "Hear! Hear! You tell 'em, Mrs. John. Malachi can fix it for you. He loves fixing things."

Malachi said: "I knew Doney Beedle when he was legging the boot. I was only a kid, but Father always said Doney was square."

John Jr. said: "That's right. Ma's just sore because she dropped some money."

"Seven thousand dollars!" stormed Mrs. John. "Is that hay?"

"The way you talk!" John said admonishingly. "Like a Yankee tough!"

Malachi said: "Dolph Cartier is no fool. The others have played a lot of poker. How could Beedle cheat them?"

"Me!" shouted Mrs. John. "He just cheated me!"

"Why?" asked Malachi.

"To get my money, you dolt!" Mrs. John spat at him.

It was a comfortable room, with old furniture and a fireplace with real andirons and things. It was spring in Florida, very nice and warm. I looked at Ilene's wonderful legs and wished she was in love with me, instead of with Malachi and wondered for the millionth time why they didn't get married between squabbles some day. Old Mrs. John was beginning to bore me with her big squeal.

Malachi had been looking into things in Bay City, as he usually does these days. There was a tie-up between the cops, under Chief Asa Larabee, a porcine moron, and the gambling and vice interests. Things like that excite Malachi. He's against them. He's a crusader. He hires me to crusade with him, and although I was raised on Tammany, it's nice to go along with Malachi and be supported by him and occasionally get some excitement. Malachi and I had had a lot of excitement before the Japs winged his leg and my chest and put us out of it. Now we need some action once in a while.

Malachi was saying: "O.K., Mrs. John. I'll see Doney."

Ilene said: "A lot of good that'll do. Sam Heppner and Lodi and Chief Larabee will see you and raise you."

Malachi said: "I'll see Dolph, too. And Ilene can check with the women."

"What women?" demanded Ilene suspiciously.

"Dolph's wife and the wives of the others," said Malachi. "I want to know what they think about Doney Beedle playing in the game with their husbands. And if they think he cheats. . ."

"Those bags!" Ilene screamed. "You mean I've got to sit with them and listen to their arteries harden and hear about their operations?"

Malachi said: "You want to help Mrs. John. You got me into it. Do your part or shut up."

Mrs. John said: "I don't blame the child. Those women. . ."

WE GOT out of there while they were still arguing. John Jr. followed us to the street and said anxiously: "You won't be hard on Doney Beedle, will you Malachi? Fella like that, he's sensitive. Came up from nothin', you know."

"Friend of yours?" asked Malachi.

"It's not that," said John Jr. rather too

quickly. "I just hate to see Ma indulge her grudges. She's too tough on folks."

Malachi said. "Beedle and Larabee are cutting things up, aren't they?"

"I wouldn't know," said John gloomily. When he frowned he looked even more pathetic than usual. He was a likable enough fellow, with an honest way of looking straight at you when he talked. "I don't go around town much—I'm busy at the stables. But I know Doney isn't such a bad egg."

"Why doesn't Mrs. John like him?" asked Malachi.

"I don't know that, either," sighed John Jr. "I'm dumb. But I'm for the underdog. Cartier and the rest have been nice to Doney. Why can't Ma?"

Malachi said: "It's true that Sam Heppner and Lodi have been shaking down the little gamblers and everyone else who will hold still for a touch. If Beedle's in with them, you needn't feel sorry for him."

John Jr. put his hands down in the pockets of his riding pants and said, half-defiantly: "That's none of my business, what people do downtown. Everyone knows there is graft. We don't pay our public employees enough to keep them clean."

Malachi said: "Same old story. . . Well, let's not go into that now. People like you, John, don't help matters."

We got into the car. Malachi was burned up and John Jr. knew it. He seemed unhappy, staring after us, the wrinkles flowing up and down his baldness like little waves.

Malachi said: "He's too moronic to lecture to." He drove down Aiken Street to the Flamingo Hotel. We got out and went into a dimly lit grill. In a corner a man sat alone. We went over and sat down at his table.

Doney Beedle was carefully barbered, but he had the weather-beaten red neck of a man who had spent his youth outdoors at arduous labor. He had narrow shoulders and clever, watery eyes. He said to Malachi: "Am I glad to see you!"

He stared hard at me and Malachi said: "This is Tack Hinton. He works with me. He doesn't bite."

"He could," said Beedle. His voice was flat and toneless. "With both his teeth, I betcha."

Malachi said: "You want somebody bitten?"

"No," said Beedle. "I just wanta give you some dough."

He took a wallet from his pocket. He counted green money on the table. When he reached seven thousand dollars, he said: "For your old pal, Mrs. John. She claims I cheated her at cards."

"Why, Doney!" said Malachi innocently. "You wouldn't cheat in a card game!"

"I couldn't," said Beedle in his expressionless voice. "I ain't that smart. . . What's she got against me, Malachi?"

"How would I know?"

Beedle said: "She led into me. She waited until she knew I had her beat, then threw seven grand at me. Then she beefed all over town that I was a cheater."

Malachi said: "Sounds batty."

"Not Mrs. John," said Beedle. "She never was batty, not one little bit. She owns half the burg. She's richer'n Dolf Cartier and he owns the lectric company. She's got it in for me, all right."

Malachi lit a cigarette. He said: "Could it have anything to do with the vice take, Doney?"

There was silence. A waitress came and we ordered a drink. She brought it and still no one had spoken. We drank half our portions. Two beefy men drifted past the table, batting their eyes at Doney Beedle. They were Sam Heppner and Lodi, his partner—a couple of crooked gees wearing detective shields. They went out the door and Doney Beedle said: "Some things ain't nobody's business. . ."

Malachi put the money in his pocket. He took an envelope from his wallet, wrote a receipt on the back of it and gave it to Doney Beedle. Then he said: "I've been away. I've been busy with guys who are still busy doing what I couldn't finish. Those guys are taking it because they believe they have a good home to come back to. They think places like Bay City are the best places in the world."

"My brother's on Iwo Jima," said Doney defensively. "I buy a war bond every week for him."

Malachi said: "With the graft? I hear you're quite a politician nowadays. I remember when I bought a shine from you, and now you're telling me to mind my own business in my own home town."

Doney Beedle said: "Now don't go off half-cocked, Malachi. . ."

I got away from the table and blocked off any possible interference. Malachi leaned over and said in Beedle's face: "You'll clean it up, pal. You'll clean it up inside a week. Or else!"

Beedle said: "You can't talk to me like that. . ."

Malachi took him by the nose and twisted it hard. Beedle tried to reach inside his coat, but Malachi's other hand snapped him against the wall and held him there. After a moment, Beedle screeched with pain and defeat. Malachi dropped him and said: "That's just a beginning. Every time I see you it'll get worse. Unless you clean house."

We walked out of the hotel. It was late afternoon and Malachi was burning. We stormed into police headquarters. Chief Lara-

bee, his thick neck sweating, sat and listened for a moment or two and then tried to interrupt. "We closed all the houses, didn't we?" he whined. "You can't butt in on us, Malachi. If I didn't know yore pappy. . ."

Malachi said: "One week! Then I'm coming at you with everything I own and can hire."

We went out and Malachi felt better. Sam Heppner and Lodi passed us going into the Chief's office. We got into the car and drove to the other side of town.

PEOPLE didn't seem to want to let us into the office of the president of the power company, but Malachi brushed them aside. Dolph Cartier barely had time to get the blond secretary off his knee. He was a big, white-haired man, handsome in a pink-and-white way. He started to storm, then recognized Malachi. He said stiffly: "Really, my boy, this is no way to enter a man's private office. . ."

Malachi said: "Sit down and cool off, Dolf. What about Doney Beedle and how come you associate with him?"

Cartier said: "You're very abrupt. What do you mean?"

"Doney was a common bootlegger, then a grove owner. Now he's a political boss," said Malachi. "You and Ed Solvey and the rest play poker with him—and allow him to cheat Mrs. John."

"Ridiculous!" said Cartier angrily. "Mrs. J. made a fool of herself, tilting at Doney. She threw money at him, a large amount."

"What hold has Doney on you?" Malachi insisted. "John Jr. defends him. You defend him. Yet he's tied in with Larabee and taking vice money hand over fist."

Cartier said: "Malachi, you were always headstrong. But this time you've gone too far. If you're insinuating that I and my friends are intimidated by any man. . ."

"Stuffed shirts!" Malachi said, sneering. "My father's friends! Scared silly, all of you, except Mrs. John. Bah!"

We went out, got into the car and Malachi drove toward home. He said: "Doney Beedle's pretty tough, eh? He's running the old town. All the old families are taking him up. All the old idiots are scared of him and all the young guys who could eat him are off to war. A hell of a thing!"

I said: "I don't get the part where Mrs. John throws dough at him. Did she think she could run him out by accusing him of cheating? Hell, even a dope like Cartier didn't go for that."

Malachi said: "Mrs. John isn't scared of him. The others are. Her own son. . ." He quieted suddenly, fell into thought. He almost ran down a lady who was walking against the green light at an intersection. A police car

swung around and nearly ran into us and I saw the two hulking figures of Heppner and Lodi in the front seat. I figured those two would be watching us now, and it made my hands itch. I hate fat, crooked cops.

We got to the apartment and rang Mrs. John's bell. There was no answer. It was late in the afternoon and the Florida sun was pushing long shadows behind it. We went upstairs and found no trace of Ilene. We came back down again. Both of us were uneasy. I listened at Mrs. John's door. It didn't seem right that she wasn't at home, since she never went out for dinner and it was after six o'clock.

Malachi said: "I'll try the back door." I waited in the hall. After a while I heard movement within. Then Malachi opened the front door, nodded to me and I went in.

John Sudan, Jr. lay in the middle of the living room floor. Sun came through the slats of a partially open venetian blind and shone upon his balding head, making a nimbus of dripping scarlet. The rug was stained with it.

Malachi said: "John is not with us any more."

"Dead as hell, ain't he?" I said.

"Mrs. John always would keep the fire-set out all summer," said Malachi. "Said it looked cozy."

The old-fashioned, heavy poker lay alongside John Jr.'s body. There was blood and hair on it, but no fingerprints, I decided, leaning close for a look without touching it. There was no sign of a struggle, which seemed funny, as John Jr. kept in fair physical condition.

Malachi said: "Either someone distracted his attention, or he was conked from the side. Could have been either way."

"He's still warm," I said. "It wasn't long ago."

"Could have been while we were upstairs," said Malachi. "Could have been before we got home. He's still bleeding a bit."

"He sure is dead," I said. "Where is Mrs. John?"

"In the bedroom," said Malachi. "She's alive."

We went into the bedroom. There was a bruise on the old lady's temple, on the right side. She lay across the bed on her left side, her skirts disarranged, one shoe off. Malachi put her head on a pillow and got some whiskey.

She strangled a bit, then came up fighting. She felt for her hair first thing and her fingers flew, fixing it into place. She said hoarsely: "Who did it? Who hit me? I'll break every bone in his damned body, the son—"

Malachi said: "Just how did it happen?"

"I was giving John Jr. hell, the fool!" she said. "I came in here to get—something—and someone hit me."

Malachi said: "Someone hit John Jr., too."

"Not hard enough, I'll bet," she snapped. "The dolt!"

"Too hard," Malachi said gravely.

Her hands dropped from her hair. She stared at Malachi. She said: "You mean . . . someone killed him?"

Malachi said: "With your poker."

She slid from the bed, wavered, but managed to remain on her feet. She said: "He was my son . . . He was an awful fool, but why should they kill him?"

"Why?" echoed Malachi.

For one instant she was a weary, frightened old woman. She held onto the bedpost, looking into space and there were a thousand lines in her face. Then she stiffened, got her chin up and began walking toward the parlor.

We were in the hall when the door banged open and feet marched heavily into the place. A harsh voice said: "Look! Another damn corpus!"

Sam Heppner heaved into view. He held a gun in his hand and he held it right, low and steady. He said: "You two git away from Miz John. Yore under arrest!"

Mrs. John said: "Don't be dumber than usual, Sam. These men are my friends. They didn't kill John."

"Mebbe not," leered Sam Heppner. "But they shore as hell kilt Doney Beedle!"

Lodi was waiting, with another gun, as we all marched into the room where the body still lay before the hearth. Malachi said sharply: "Put away that gun, Heppner. You know damned well we didn't kill anyone."

"No?" said Heppner. "You gave Beedle a receipt for seven grand. Think that'll git you anythin'? If you got seven grand on yore person it's his'n an' yore it, brother."

Malachi said: "Ten people saw us leave him in the Flamingo Grill."

"Ten people seen him foller you out," said Heppner, "inta the alley alongside the hotel, where you gave it to him, you and yore buddy."

Lodi also knew how to handle a gun. I was very careful not to make a bad move. If Mrs. John hadn't been there, I might have tried. . .

The door to the hall leading outdoors was open. If I could have made a play on the two of them, the way was clear to our car. We needed time, right now. I remembered that Malachi had made himself obnoxious to Chief Larabee and to other people that day. I could see the rubber hose coming at me, down at Headquarters. Heppner was getting out his handcuffs. . .

Mrs. John was staring at her son's body. She didn't approach it, just stood, looking at it. Heppner suddenly remembered that John Jr. was her son, I guess. He backed up a step to let her get by, not relaxing his vigilance, however. This placed him right in the doorway.

I NEVER saw or heard Ilene. But all of a sudden Sam Heppner buckled at the knees. As he did, Malachi dove head foremost at Lodi. I went in as fast as I could behind Malachi. As Lodi's gun came down, aimed at Malachi's head, I grabbed it and took it away from him and smacked him on the jaw with it.

I was in time to kick Heppner on the skull. Ilene held a limp blackjack in her hand and said: "I heard the tail end of the hippodrome. . . . My God, is that John Jr.?"

Malachi said: "You take it from here, Mrs. John. We'll be back and give you John Jr.'s murderer."

As we went out the door, I heard her say: "Never saw such quick shenanigans in my life! Lawdy me!" She was a tough old girl, all right, say what you will. She never tried to stop us from lamming out of there.

The police sirens were coming closer, like banshees in the dusk. The three of us got into the car and Malachi drove slowly out the street, turned a corner, then stepped on it until we had put a few miles between us and the Poinsettia Arms. There was a small saloon he knew, in the poorer section of town and the man let us have the back room all to ourselves.

Ilene drank a quick bourbon and exhaled hard. She said: "Those clowns! They could never have made it stick. People know you in this town, Malachi. Seven thousand dollars wouldn't tempt you to murder. What goes with our comic cops?"

Malachi said: "They only wanted to get us downtown and beat hell out of us, or maybe just detain us. . . . Now why would they want to detain us?"

I said: "Beedle killed—John killed. They were pals. . . ."

"Mrs. John quarreling with her son," said Malachi. "Hating Beedle, for some reason we don't know."

Ilene said: "I saw all those women. They were having a meeting of their silly Garden Club. Mrs. Cartier with her asthma and her bangs from 1925. The Solvey with her thick, drippy southern accent. The Marshal with her relatives in Chicago, rich like mad. Mrs. Carey Flowers, all nose and big mouth. Ugh!"

Malachi said: "What did you learn?"

"They hate Mrs. John. She's always played poker with their husbands for high stakes and usually wins. The night Beedle won made them the happiest old hags in Florida. Most of them hate their husbands, too—especially the Cartier. She thinks he cheats. At his age!"

I remembered the blonde sliding from Cartier's lap as we barged in on him at his office. These pink-cheeked old guys who resemble Esky on the mag cover always have hand trouble. . . . Things began to piece together just a little bit.

Malachi said sharply: "There's a clean-up

going on. Beedle was eliminated as part of it. But it's not a clean-up of the city vice. It's a civil war among the grifters."

"Those two coppers," I said, "could have done it. They could have been coming from Mrs. John's when we saw them driving down Aiken Street. They could have bumped Beedle, then rushed back and closed in on us."

Ilene said: "Then there will be a next. Those women, hating their husbands, hating everyone, those old, tired women and their Garden Club, which is a gossip soirée. . . ."

I said: "We can't hide out here forever. I got some sports clothes I'd hate to lose back at Poinsettia Arms." I had Sam Heppner's gun in my pocket, too. It was loaded and felt very good. Going against cops or robbers without guns is all right sometimes, but the steel felt cold and fine to my touch.

Malachi said: "That is a point well taken, Tack. I think we can return, by devious ways, to our rooms."

Ilene said: "They'll have a guard."

Malachi was onto something. I could tell by the slow way he spoke, the angle at which he cocked his head. He said: "There are a few things I'd like to check, just for the hell of it. Such as why did Mrs. John hate Beedle so? And what about the seven thousand dollars? Also some things I heard today which didn't make sense at the time. Let's return to the scene of the crime. Let's kill a few birds with a couple of stones."

"When he talks like that," said Ilene bitterly, "I always have need of my trusty black-jack. And usually I get my clothing torn. Let's have another drink."

We had another drink. Then Malachi borrowed the car belonging to the saloonkeeper, an old battered Chevy. We all scooped down, as we are very tall people, even Ilene, and easily recognizable. Malachi drove carefully around town. There were squad cars all over. We made a detour through the select residential district near the golf course. Malachi paused a moment before a large house set well back from the road.

A big sedan came out and rolled swiftly toward town. Malachi followed it. The car didn't pause until it was near the Poinsettia Arms, then the driver hesitated, pulled to the curb and stopped. A man got out and walked along the shadows.

Malachi parked behind the sedan, which gave us cover to crawl out and follow. The man turned into the Poinsettia and disappeared immediately from our view.

Malachi said: "Two and two make four and carry six."

"I don't like this pussy-footing," muttered Ilene. "It gives me the lergy wampus."

Malachi said: "I'll take the back way. Tack will do in front. You bring up the rear guard,

Ilene. You always make such a fine rear. . . ."

"If you say 'end' I'll hit you with the black-jack," Ilene warned. "You get too damned cute when you think you know something and refuse to tell us. What's this all about?"

"It's a charade," I grumbled. "Malachi's playing games."

"Don't kill anyone until I give the word," said Malachi. "Mostly just spy around and wait for me."

"Those are damned poor-orders-of-the-day," I complained.

"He's a damned poor actor," said Ilene. "He thinks he's Dick Tracy—in technicolor."

Malachi had already gone through the alley of the house next door to the apartment. His hurrying tall form disappeared from sight. Ilene sighed and said: "Why do I love that big extrovert? Why don't I marry some safe, nice guy and raise babies?"

"How could a safe, nice guy stand you?" I asked. "Why don't you marry Malachi and go ahead and raise babies? It would make one of you settle down."

"That would be me," she said darkly. "He'd never stay still. He'd always prowl nights, looking for trouble. And you with him, you big trambol! Hadn't you better go ahead and keep him from getting killed?"

I went up to the front of the Poinsettia Arms the quickest and quietest way, jungle style. I slid up to the front door which was open. There were no cops. This seemed odd. There should have been someone around to guard Mrs. John and watch the premises from which a murdered man had recently been removed.

I got into the hall without trouble. There was a light shining beneath the door of Mrs. John's apartment. There were low voices, which I couldn't hear. I thought I recognized the man's voice, but wasn't sure. Mrs. John was sounding off, as usual. She was certainly a rugged old gal.

WAITING in a dark place is bad, no matter what experience you've had in warfare. It never gets any better, the standing around, not sure of what it's all about, knowing there's a killer loose—or killers—which is worse. They can come at you from two sides. The way John Jr. got it, while one distracted his attention. . .

But if there were two in on it when John Jr. got his, how did they manage to keep him from battling them? If Heppner and Lodi closed in, it was ten-to-one even John Jr. would have suspected trouble and attempted to ward it off. . .

The whole thing was giddy. It had happened so suddenly, with so many people involved, that I got dizzy trying to follow my own train of thought. Malachi knew these people, which made it easier for him. It's better if

you know what to expect from certain parties. . .

I wondered where Malachi was, and if there were cops prowling the neighborhood and if Ilene was in any danger. Bay City is a pretty good-sized town, but if anyone hurt Ilene we would take it apart and throw it into the bay.

I was getting a complete set of nerves when I heard Malachi's voice. He was inside the apartment. He had, of course, come through Mrs. John's back door. I heard him say: "No you don't, not this time!"

So I hit the door. It was a tough door and I had to hit it twice. Down the stairs men came tumbling, shouting orders. There were Sam Heppner and Lodi, at last! The door gave and we all seemed to pile into Mrs. John's apartment at once.

Heppner tried me high and Lodi tried me low. I caught one glimpse of Malachi, all tangled up with someone. I took another quick look, my mouth hanging open and Heppner seized the opportunity to slug me with something hard alongside the jaw. Lodi was trying to throw me to the floor.

I had to turn a little to get Heppner within range. I forgot all about the gun in my pocket when he socked me with the mace. Lodi had not been trained on the football field and could not get my legs together to throw me. I got an arm free and rapped my knuckles into the spot behind Heppner's ear. He stumbled just a moment, which was all I wanted.

Ilene came charging in. She stopped dead in the doorway and cried: "Malachi! Shame on you!"

I stabbed two stiff fingers into Heppner's eyes. He reeled into Ilene and without pausing to think, she hit him with her blackjack on top of the head, collapsing him into a heap on the floor. I leaned down and got Lodi.

He was a chunky guy, full of fight. He busted me one in the groin, but I turned my hip and kneed him a little. Then I got him on his feet and hauled off to belt him out. But Ilene again absent-mindedly swung the blackjack and Lodi went limp in my hands. I deposited him atop of Heppner and turned to see what in hell Malachi was doing.

Malachi was picking Dolf Cartier off the floor. He was placing Cartier on the couch in the corner of Mrs. John's comfortable living room. Outside someone blew a whistle and Chief Larabee came wheezing into the apartment. I held Heppner's gun on the fat man and the cops behind him. Ilene started to slug him from habit, then refrained as Malachi said: "Hold it, everybody. This is all cleared up."

I kept looking at Mrs. John. She was groggy. She was holding her jaw with both hands. She sat on the floor near the hearth

and was shaking her head slowly back and forth.

Ilene said: "Malachi, are you completely insane? I saw you slug Mrs. John!"

Larabee said: "You're under arrest, all three of you!"

The cops didn't say anything. They looked from the gun in my mitt to Ilene's swinging blackjack and were quite still. On the couch, Dolf Cartier moved and whispered: "She—she would have—done it. . ."

Malachi said: "You should have known it, you dope. She owns half the property in the old vice district."

Mrs. John sat on the floor. She stopped feeling her jaw and began fixing her white hair. She said in a muffled voice: "They thought they could move in on me. I showed 'em. . ."

Malachi said: "You certainly did! You tried to bribe Doney Beedle by tossing him seven thousand dollars in a poker game. Cartier couldn't understand that, and almost got killed for questioning you about it just now."

She said: "You're too smart. I thought you'd clean 'em up. I thought you'd be on my side."

"You had the vice racket going your way for years," said Malachi. "You owned the property and you had connections."

Larabee said hastily: "That's enough double-talk. You're all under arrest."

"Talks like a parrot, doesn't he?" grinned Malachi. "All he knows is to arrest people. If they oppose him, arrest them. Consider yourself finished, Larabee. You and Mrs. John ran things long enough. You had it all your way until Doney Beedle moved in. Then he took most of the vice graft away from you, building his political machine. John Jr., who was ashamed of your racket, threw in with Doney Beedle. He didn't know that his income depended mainly on the take. When he found out, he turned on you and you picked up the poker and let him have it, didn't you, Mrs. John?"

Her face changed. It broke into little pieces, right before us. She whined in a voice I had never heard: "I'm an old lady. You're persecuting me. . . I want a lawyer—Dolf, get me a good lawyer. . ."

Cartier got off the couch. I saw the poker, then, under the chair. He had a bruise on his face. He said in a low voice: "She's lost her mind, hasn't she, Malachi?"

"You can call it that," said Malachi. "All I know is that she and Larabee have been shaking down gamblers and petty crooks for years. She got her gambling money that way, she increased her holdings that way. I don't care whether she goes up for murder. I just want Bay City cleaned up—for guys like Doney Beedle's brother and your own son and others who are taking it the hard way and hope to

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come home to a decent living here some day." Cartier said: "Mrs. John, the killer of her own son—"

"And of Doney Beedle," said Malachi grimly. "Heppner and Lodi are grafters and crooks and thugs, but they were on Doney's side in this deadly warfare. It was Larabee and Mrs. John against the newcomers. She slid downtown, parleyed with Doney in the alley outside the Flamingo Grill where he always was available and killed him. Then she came home, slugged herself and pretended she had been attacked. Heppner and Lodi were dumb enough to think we might have been in on Doney's killing because Doney and I had a little argument about cleaning up the town."

Mrs. John said in her trembling accents: "Malachi Manatee, you should be ashamed of yourself, hitting an old woman!"

"An old murderess," Cartier said sternly.

Malachi said: "Larabee might be called an accessory, I imagine. . ."

Lodi got up first, then Heppner. They looked at Larabee and grinned through their bruises. Larabee immediately fell to squawking. He directed his talk at Cartier. He squawked loud and long. He laid it all on Mrs. John. He protested he had had nothing to do with any murders. He said the old gal went berserk when John Jr. jumped her and tried to warn her off the vice take. She had hit John Jr. without meaning to kill him, and then had gone after Beedle, blaming him for what had happened. It was a very bad beef and Larabee looked bad delivering it, but it was mostly the truth.

They all got out, after a while. Cartier kept saying: "I can't believe it. I've known her all my life. . ."

Malachi looked him in the eye. "And always knew she was an old rip, grafter, and the owner of fire-trap property. Think it over, Dolf—it nearly got you killed. Think it over the next time you get that blonde on your lap. Your wife is hating you, too! Maybe you'll get a dish of poison from her some day. You stand for anything while it's under cover, you and your kind. Then when it's brought into the open, you holler in dismay. I hope your son is safe in Germany. I hope he comes back and you can face him—I hope!"

We went upstairs. Ilene poured a quick drink, then another. We finished a bottle. Ilene said: "Let's take a trip. Let's do something. I didn't like this affair."

Malachi said slowly: "I never thought I'd hit an old woman. You know what? I'm ashamed. I should have been able to handle her without slugging her. . ."

THE END



THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

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MAGAZINE, 250 Sportsman's Bldg., Boston, Mass.

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

AND still the swindle-schemes capitalizing on the wartime shortage of rooms and apartments continue. Watch out for these latest gyps:

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

This phony team works as a pair of real estate agents in large cities that have a housing shortage.

The accomplice, most always a woman, will rent a furnished apartment and move in. The crooked real estate agent will rent a store, hang a sign in the window saying ROOMS AND APARTMENTS FOR RENT, and wait for his first customer.

His first customer is usually a married couple. The crook goes through a long line of talk and ends up by giving them the address of the apartment his accomplice has rented, telling the couple to go right out and look it over. He phones the apartment as soon as they leave and tells his woman companion that a couple is on their way out to look over the apartment.

After the pair has looked the apartment over and reached the conclusion that they would like to rent it, the woman accomplice then goes into her act, telling the couple that she only pays twenty-five dollars a month for rent, and that her lease isn't up for six months. However, if they will give her the one hundred and fifty dollars she has paid for her lease, she will vacate within thirty days. The couple realizes that they will never find another apartment for only twenty-five per month, so they give her the one hundred and fifty on the guarantee that they can move in within thirty days.

These two operators will continue to lease this apartment, and a day or two before the first tenants are supposed to move in, they will skip town, leaving the same apartment rented or leased to maybe a hundred different couples.

People seeking rooms or apartments nowadays should make sure they are dealing directly with a landlord or with a well-known real estate firm.

Doc Riley, Jr.,
Columbus 15, Ohio.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

Another "rent racket" has sprung up here in the Middle West. This is what happens:

People answer advertisements offering apartments at reasonable rates. But when they arrive, they are informed that the owner is leaving town and before it can be rented, the tenant must purchase six hundred dollars' worth of cheap, second-hand furniture already in the apartment.

The rent-option racket is also flourishing. Prospective tenants sign an optional lease with the home owner to purchase the home at

one hundred dollars monthly for a year. At the end of that time, it can be canceled by either side. It also is a blind to get higher rents in a competitive rental field.

The following is what has been happening to wounded servicemen and war workers: A serviceman starts looking for a place to live. Meanwhile, a homeowner, with an open eye for profit, and some added income, divides up a home which previously has not been rented. Therefore, no rent ceiling has ever been filed with the OPA on this house. The serviceman sees a "For Rent" sign and inquires as to the amount. He is told it is one hundred dollars for a three-room upstairs suite. Sometimes, others are interested, too, and the renting transaction goes on a bidding basis. After the rent is paid, the landlord files the amount according to law, with the OPA. After OPA investigation, the rent is usually ordered cut. But there is no way to recover the initial overpayment.

This is a warning to all prospective tenants to be on guard against these schemes. You may rest assured that despite a threat by landlords that tenants will be evicted if they "squeal," the rent regulations afford protection. No one can be evicted on the grounds of trying to have his rent lowered and stamping out black market rental practices. The OPA will guarantee full protection to every tenant who reports rent violations.

Leland H. McElroy,
Columbus 15, Ohio.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

Due to the shortage of hotel rooms, "rooking the rookies" has become a popular means of increasing the bankrolls of small-time crooks in large cities such as Los Angeles, where single rooms are practically unobtainable at any price. The racket works like this:

The crook, well-groomed of course, sits in the lobby of the hotel. A soldier on furlough or with a week-end pass will be turned down at the desk since the only available rooms are doubles and those, according to OPA regulations, must be signed for by two people. The chiseler approaches the soldier as he leaves the lobby, asking him for a light for his cigarette. Then he says: "You can't get a room, buddy? Tough!"

The soldier usually says: "Sure, I could get a double—I'd be willing to pay for it—but two have to register."

This is the cue for the promoter to say: "O.K. I'll sign with you if you want to pay for the room."

Once in the room, the crook suggests that he bring the serviceman a bottle of whiskey since the soldier can't buy any liquor until five P.M. He gets the bottle, tacking a dollar or two extra on the price, after which he returns to the lobby. He watches the desk closely and approaches the first soldier he sees turned down on a single room request,



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SAYMAN SALVE

Ready for the Rackets

offering to rent him direct for half the price of a double room his share of the room he has already finagled. He takes the second soldier upstairs, introduces him to the first serviceman and everybody is happy—for a time. Before either soldier gets around to discovering the neat swindle, the promoter is on his way, several dollars richer, looking for another soldier sucker.

J. Armour,
Los Angeles, Calif.

HERE'S another vicious chapter in the book of gyp-schemes aimed at servicemen's families:

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

Generally, families of servicemen are the innocent victims of this cleverly conceived petty racket that is being worked with much success in different parts of the country.

This gang of chiselers first establishes connection with its intended victims by a timely telephone call. The caller, using a fictitious name, will inform you that he is an official of Western Union and that there is a collect telegram for you.

He'll give you time to think the information over, then casually ask if you will call for the message, or should he have the messenger boy deliver it. Invariably you will order him to have the boy deliver the telegram since you must pay for it anyway.

A boy in his teens rings the doorbell of your home a few minutes later and hands you the collect telegram which in your case happens to cost two dollars and fifteen cents. You will, of course, hastily rip open the yellow envelope and read the message, presumably from your son who is in the Service. The wire states that he will be home on a five-day furlough the following Thursday.

Perhaps you are one of those believing souls and you do not hesitate one minute in paying the collect charges. But just in case you should doubt the authenticity of the message, the messenger boy will invariably produce a handful of identical yellow envelopes which he says contain communications he is in the act of delivering to other parents.

When your son fails to arrive home the following Thursday, your suspicions are confirmed. But of course it is too late then to get your money back. The gang, having skipped to another city, is seeking new victims on whom to practice their nefarious scheme.

Police in one large city had thirty-two reports in one week from families of servicemen about the fake telegram racket. The police learned in one case that the messenger boys had been innocent dupes of the cunning sharpers, and that they had collected over two hundred and fifty dollars in one day from their unsuspecting victims.

If you should ever be contacted by chiselers working the fake telegram swindle, it is ad-

Ready for the Rackets

visible that you immediately get in touch with your local Western Union.

C. F. J.,
Columbus 15, Ohio.

THE urge which most of us have to take advantage of a "bargain" is the very thing unscrupulous sharpers count on in victimizing the unsuspecting.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

One day not so long ago, a small truck stopped before my house and a man came to the door saying he had just finished a job of laying a linoleum floor nearby and had a large piece left over. Noticing that our house was being remodeled, he wondered if I could use it; he would give me a good price on it since he was on his way home and the piece remaining was of no use to him. He said it was genuine inlaid linoleum, first quality.

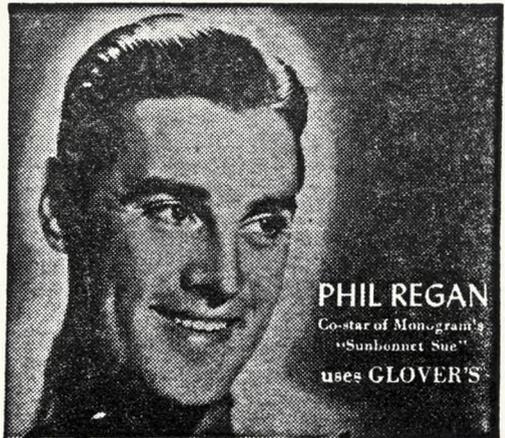
We were planning to buy linoleum for our kitchen floor, a room 10x16, and I thought it could do no harm to look at it. So I let them come in with the roll. They spread it out very cleverly, one man at each end, standing it on edge so I could see the pattern. It was the color I wanted and seemed to be very good quality. They maneuvered around, rolled it up, and unrolled it again to show me there was sufficient for my needs. I didn't notice at the time how adroitly they managed to conceal their actual movements. They said I could have the roll for eight dollars—they figured it to be about twelve square yards, more than enough. So I bought it.

After they had gone, I began to feel very pleased with my purchase. I had expected to pay about twenty dollars for linoleum and I was congratulating myself on getting such a bargain. Then, looking more closely at the roll, I noticed that it looked rather thin as if there weren't many coils in it. I took it out and spread it on the lawn and to my surprise and chagrin, it was only nine feet in length—six square yards instead of the twelve they had guaranteed—not nearly enough to cover the kitchen floor. I had paid about a dollar thirty-five per square yard for it! I could have done better at any store for that price.

I phoned the police to see if they knew of the name I had noticed on the truck, but it was unknown in town. I phoned to several houses nearby to see if I could find who had had linoleum laid that day but no one knew anything about it.

It taught me a lesson. I don't buy from door-to-door peddlers now, nor do I buy anything without seeing for myself exactly what and how much I am receiving for my money. The men had told me the linoleum was a very well-known make, but nowhere was any brand name to be seen on it. It was of no use to me whatever and my eight dollars had flown out the window.

Mrs. Dorothy F. Blanchard,
Gardner, Mass.



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E. Hoffmann Price

(Continued from page 72)

swearing and coughing, all drunk. Rest of the money's in our barn."

"Keeping the secret is going to hurt you worse'n it's hurting me. You folks have been good to me, I can't sound off, and I can't keep from sounding off. Murder isn't a private business—"

He jerked the door open.

He jumped back a foot, and yelled, startled.

THE pie-faced deputy waddled in, with his foolish smile. "Folks, I didn't ask you to tell me, so you can't make a point of not being warned that anything you said'd be used against you."

"God damn you!" Lucky croaked. "Using me for a stooge!"

"You done that for yourself, I didn't." Meeker eyed the family. "Lucky was in a sweat, account I kept him thataway. Family killings are funny, the witnesses all lie about things. It's mighty tough, protecting your relatives and knowing it's dead wrong to do so.

"Lucky was expecting me to pick him up at breakfast. I had him handcuffed, but I turned him loose till morning."

"All right, Mr. Meeker," Wally said. "Sis, you stay here with Mom." He drew a deep breath. "This way, I don't have to go to the funeral. Thinking of having to go came near killing me."

He went with the deputy.

Lucky was glad to be in the clear, and he also wanted to crawl into a hole. He hated to look Julia in the eye.

"It's halfway my fault. Wally won't be getting into uniform. So I'm not taking the exams, I'm going straight back to fighting this war. I'm still all wrong in this house, but I won't be so much wrong with myself if I go back to combat duty. Hate me as much as you want, you're entitled to."

"No, Lucky!" She caught his arm, drew him back. "You listen to me! Look what I faced! I helped Wally carry him to the barn, and faked things just like you said. Turning him in couldn't have brought Father back to life. What good would it do, letting him turn himself in?"

"Not a bit of good. Only, I turned him in. That's what I meant."

"Oh, but I couldn't turn my own brother in, and neither could I go on, not saying a thing. No matter what I did, I was wrong, all wrong. Not just wrong with the law, but wrong inside. Lucky, darling, see what you've saved me. Suppose I had blurted it out?"

He regarded her with wonder. Julia's brimming eyes told him that she meant it.

"But why'd you accuse me?" she asked.

Esprit De Corpse

"It was either you or Wally. I couldn't accuse him, for if you'd protected him this far, you'd protect him again. But if I threw it at you, Wally'd go to bat for you, just like he did when you were whipped."

"You mean my torn dress and then Mom's bruised face were really the first hunches?"

"Well, when I saw that far, I went back to the beginning, the bad break you made, the one that didn't mean any more to me than it did to Meeker."

"You mean, the slope of the ground, and the faking that failed?"

"No, the clean linoleum. You'd've been nuts, mopping the linoleum right after you'd muddied it up when you came back from the barn, after you'd gone to see what was keeping your father. You ran in to wake Wally—that was your story. When you came from Sather's, the floor was shining, all of it. Only I didn't get the point, at the time.

"But after getting blood on the floor, you had to clean up, plenty. Now, what about you and Cyril, at the Ninety-Nine Club?"

"I had to go with him, that night. You know you would have been in a jam, if he'd had to leave in an ambulance. Another thing, he was furious, jealous, and he knew about our horrible family wrangles, Dad had been getting worse and worse. He as much as said he'd not be amazed if Wally had done it, and if I didn't consider going back to him, he'd tell what he knew about the family. So—I was protecting Wally, or thinking I was—until I saw red, and smacked Cyril with a chunk of stove wood. I don't know what he's said, since we took him to the hospital. Maybe he'll have sense enough to realize that if I wouldn't go back to him willingly, I'd certainly never go after he'd set the sheriff on Wally!"

"You might've killed Cyril."

"We have terrible tempers, all of us. Dad had always been nasty to Wally, taking advantage of the kid's quietness."

Lucky put on his hat.

"And I threw Wally to the sheriff. Everything's snafu. To hell with the rest of furlough. I'm reporting back for duty right now. I ought to stay away a good long time."

"But you saved me from a horrible predicament when you got at the truth."

"Makes no difference. I'm right, but I'm also wrong when it comes to you and me. Wally is going to get off easy, the way I guess it, but even so, this war'll be over before he gets out. With him still in, and—"

"And you and I free, and together—oh, Lucky, it's terrible!" Then, the old sparkle in her eyes. "You join the Bachelor's Club, and I'll be there for graduation in 1949!"

THE END



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(Continued from page 82)

you! She asked you to get it for her this evening to put you off guard, didn't she?"

"You're a liar!" Katie McAvoy jumped out of her chair. "You can't prove anything on me! I went to Brownie's room when he called me. I had a gun when you walked in because I was frightened. The gun's Eddie's."

Mort shook his head. "That's not good enough, Katie. The gun's probably Eddie's, but it's not the one you used when you made him eat that affidavit. And it's not the one you used when you made him turn around so you could slug him. Where you got the knife, I don't know, but I will."

Katie McAvoy's hand darted into her purse. It was full of automatic pistol when it emerged.

"I really know how to use one of these, Mort. And this one's loaded!"

"So's the one in my pocket," said Mort.

Katie McAvoy glanced long enough at Mort's bulging pocket to permit Randolph to twist the automatic from her hand.

At the bar, Phil Sinton told Mort: "What I don't understand, was where Katie was when I looked into that room."

"Behind the door, probably. If you'd made the mistake of entering, you'd probably have been Suspect Number Two, Eddie."

Eddie Davis said: "And to think I hocked everything I owned for that red-headed cluck!"

"Now, now," said Mort. "Be careful not to speak ill of ladies, for we all are the pawns of Lady Luck."

"I see what you mean," said Blackstone Jones. "Without pure coincidence, you'd never have cracked the Hayworth case. The coincidence was that Brenner told you he'd taken a fare to the same address on Summit as Davis has on Sunbary."

Mort shook his head. "That's not a very pure variety of coincidence. Brenner's use of the same street address was not luck. It was the working of his subconscious. He had hauled Hayworth a week before, then hauled Davis home. When he had to fake a story for his alibi, the sequence of events had remained in his mind, though he had forgotten the facts themselves. The number popped out of his subconscious, and Sunbary Avenue came to him in disguise as Summit Road. Have you ever read Freud?"

Jones shook his head. "No, but I will."

"I hope you have time enough. After this case the firm of Mort & Jones will probably be very busy."

"You mean—why—that will be wonderful! I'll be Boswell to your Johnson, Arthur Train to your Tutt!"

"Be careful," counseled Mort, "not to get your Tutt caught!"

THE END

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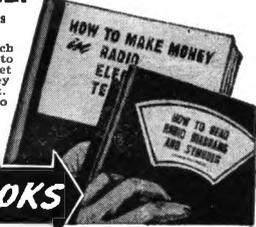


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