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**CASH WALE'S
CARNIVAL KILL**

by **PETER PAIGE**

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RACE WILLIAMS THRILLER

by **CARROLL JOHN DALY**



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Vol. 60

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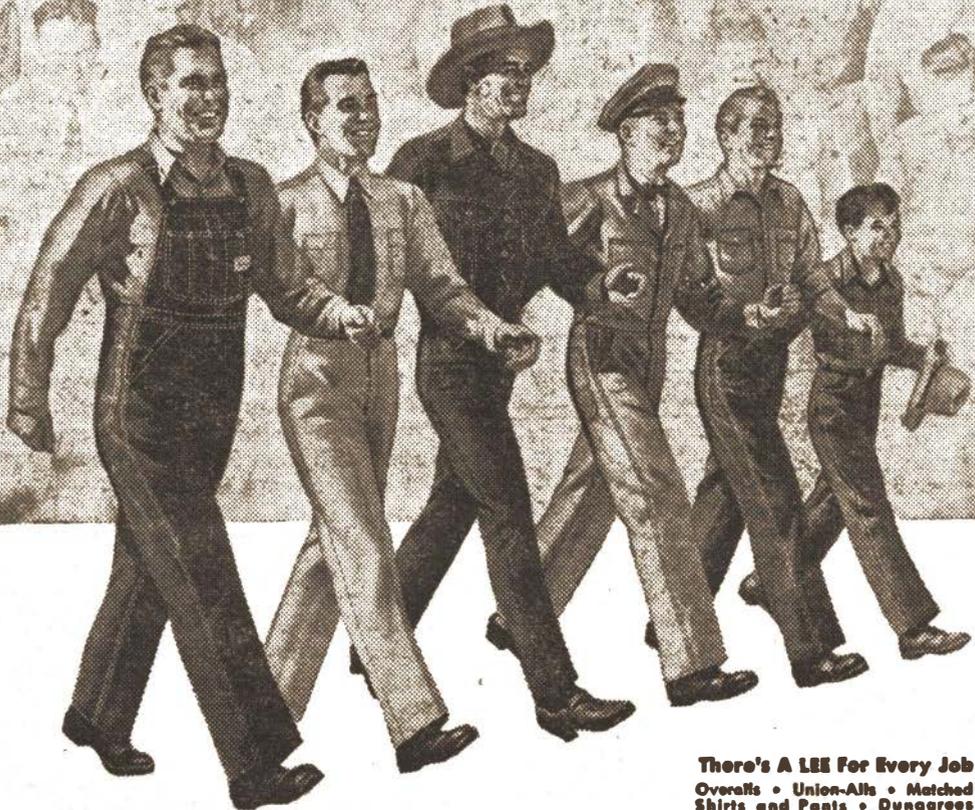
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Ready for the Rackets

A Department

Dear Detective Fans,

As long as some people want to get something for nothing, they'll be on hand to try and give you nothing for something. Yes, racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to cheat or rob you.

It's smart to keep ahead of the game, just as it's better to lock your door before the thief enters the house—than after. But what protection have you?

Well, there is a safeguard, a way to thwart the slick, dishonest characters. That's by knowing your business better than the crook knows his—by keeping up with the rackets, reading this column every month to learn of the racketeers' schemes and methods of operation. Remember—the proof of the sucker is in the paying.

We want to help you hold onto your hard-earned cash. Moreover, we can help you earn some more. Write in, telling us of your own personal experience with chiselers and con men of various sorts. We'll publicize the information you pass on to us—and pay \$5.00 for every letter used. And of course, we'll withhold your name if you wish. However, no letters will be returned, unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. You'll easily understand that because of the press of mail in the office, we can't enter into correspondence regarding your letters.

Be sure to address all letters to The Rackets Editor, care of DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

And now, let's see what we're up against.

Tramp's Pride

Dear Sir:

Unable to resist helping peddlers or beggars who come to my door, I used to keep a little change downstairs for just such a purpose.

One day I had just given a generous handout to a tramp when I chanced to look out the window and saw him talking to another tramp—evidently exchanging notes. Then the second fellow came around to the back door. Giving

(Please continue on page 98)



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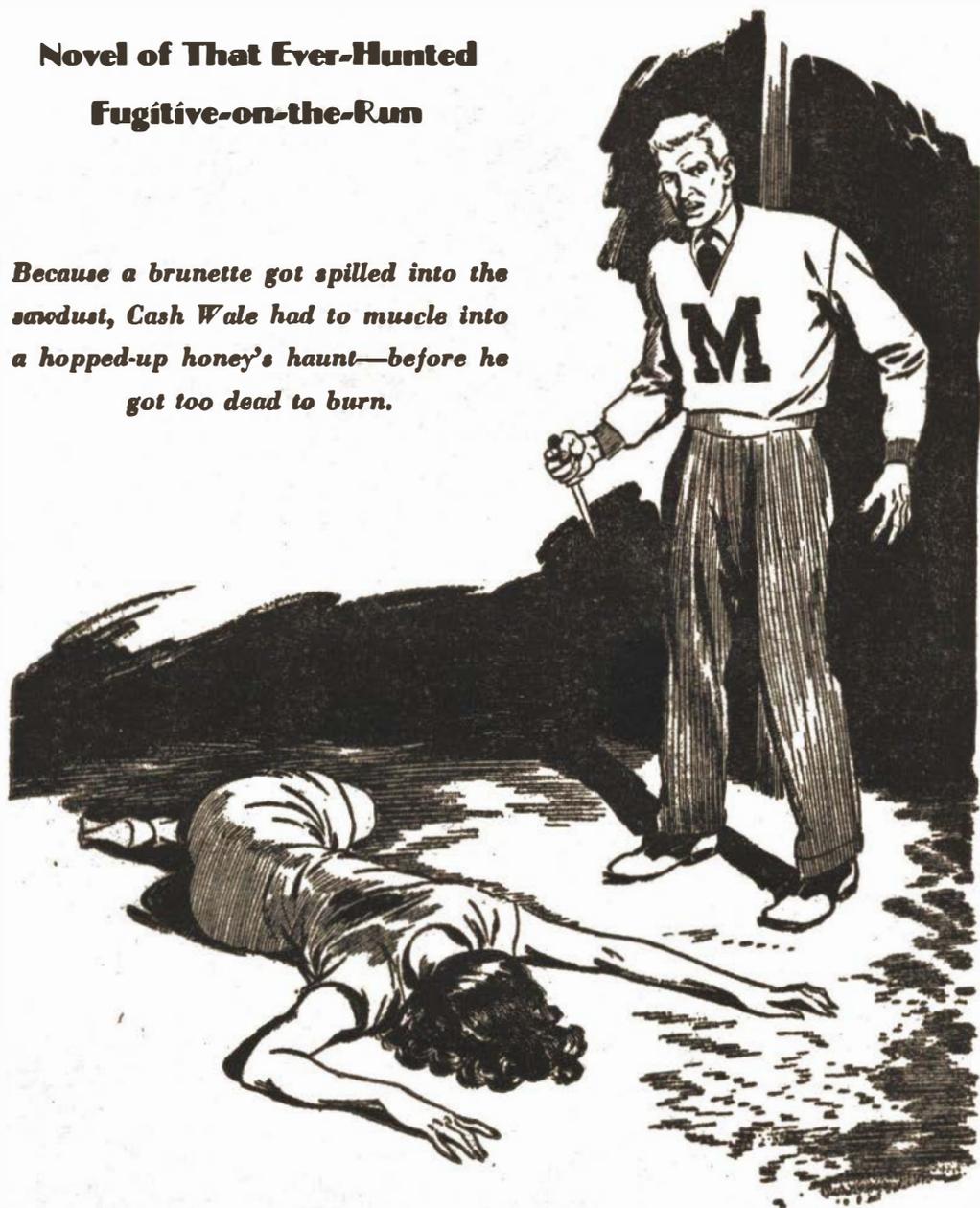
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**Novel of That Ever-Hunted
Fugitive-on-the-Run**

*Because a brunette got spilled into the
sawdust, Cash Wale had to muscle into
a hopped-up honey's haunt—before he
got too dead to burn.*



CASH WALE'S CARNIVAL KILL

"Wipe that hilt and drop it!"



CHAPTER ONE

Circus Fling

By
PETER PAIGE

DEAR PETE, You probably never heard of Milton Harris, but he probably never heard of you—which makes you even. On the Sunday morning whereof I speak, Milton Harris

awoke to the ringing of his phone and blinked his eyes painfully against the sunlight glaring in his dormitory window.

It was not one of his happier awakenings. A kettle-drum was booming inside his head. His stomach seemed to be in his throat and his tongue tasted like a hobo's sock. To top this off, he awoke with the memory of a painful secret he had carefully nursed for all his twenty-two years, a secret that was in periodic danger of exposure—and he awoke to the realization that one of the dangerous periods had arrived.

He reached for the receiver and his face broke into a wide grin as a woman's husky accents crooned into his ear: "Darling, are you still alive? I've been ringing for ages and ages."

"Now I'm alive," he beamed.

"Hangover?"

"Ouch! You?"

Her soft laughter lilted through the receiver. "It's always gooeey the first time, darling; but it grows on you. Miss me?"

"How could I miss you when you've been in my dreams all night?" he rapturized gallantly.

"Let's pick up where your dreams left off."

His grin practically widened to his ears—then snapped back to a closed, sober mouth as his secret wriggled to the surface of his mind and made frantic signals. He spoke the next words carefully: "I was thinking of taking in that carnival that came to town last night, Claire."

"So was I!"

He'd been about to add that he would see her after that, but he couldn't suggest it now—the lady was voltage to any normal hormone.

"I'll pick you up at one, Claire. I'll be the guy wearing a chin full of drool." He pronged the receiver and scowled at the broad grin on the face of his roommate, who lay on his back on the room's other bed. "What's with you, Kelly?"

Kelly, who fingered a hand-rolled cigarette, wafted a bluish cloud ceilingward and dream-talked: "That Claire! Some romp she chucked us last night. Huh, Milt?"

"What I remember of it," Milton Harris winced.

"I had to carry you up from the cab."

"Thanks."

"About Claire, Milt, any time you sour on her, kind of nudge her my way, willya, pal?"

"What would Patsy say?"

"Patsy," Kelly grinned wolfishly, "has a pop who has a bank. Claire has my tongue hanging out."

YOU may have heard of Claire Kent, Pete. You did if you happened across a Midville Gazette published the following morning. Milton Harris first knew her as the sultry brunette whose long, cool fingers rested lightly on his when they reached for the same book in the Midville public library.

After showing it back and forth at each other, they compromised and shared a few chapters of it, *tête a tête*, over a library table.

One thing led to another, until she knew he was majoring in English literature in Midville U, wanting to be a writer, and he knew she was a recent divorcée with time and alimony on her hands. Other things led to still other things, until now—to get this back in focus—they walked arm in arm toward the brassy, jingling rhythm from the carnival behind the high, curved archway that bore the modest legend:

Biggest Little Carnival in the World

Had you seen them then, you would have noted that Claire Kent was a long-stemmed brunette whose outstanding features were neatly outlined by a tight silk, canary-colored dress. Her eyes were glazed blue under carefully spaced lashes as black as her hair which swept up into a neatly braided coil that gave the effect of a black crown. Her lips were a scarlet gash against the delicate pallor of her face. Every inch of her drew eyes, which was why a faint flush clung to the face of Milton Harris.

His was a neatly featured face under straw-blond hair. His shoulders were knots under a white sweater that pictured a large orange-colored M. Another reason for his flush was his realization that his life-long secret was in jeopardy.

What he didn't know was that Claire Kent also nursed a secret—a more recent, but much deeper secret—and that

her secret also involved this particular carnival.

But at twenty-two, you can't be expected to know everything. . . .

You've been to carnivals and jostled with the crowds, drifted past talkers shilling the dart games, the shooting galleries, the mechanical horse races, penny pitching, and baseball tossing.

You've gorged on cotton candy and pink popcorn, spent a dime to mallet the ball up to the loud bell and gotten your three-for-a-nickel cigar. You've had your weight guessed, your fortune told, turned the crank to peek at Marie swinging her personality for ten seconds. You've smelled the animals, felt your stomach twist at the freaks and held your breath as the man dove a hundred feet into a bucket of water.

You've guzzled pop and munched hot dogs and watched mamas chase the runny-nosed kids while the pops staggered behind with their collars open and ties awry. Over it all, over the "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!" of the barkers and gab of the public, came jingling rhythm from the whirlaway, the merry-go-round, the midget autos, tunnel of love, ferris wheel, loop-the-loop and the loud blare of brass from the big top.

All of it geared to quicken your pace and pulse and fill you with a sense of impending adventure—as if around the next booth you'd find a lovely damsel who'd grip your biceps as she pleaded for you to save her from a muscular villain crawling out from under a tent with a knife in his teeth—instead of the gold-toothed sharpy chanting: "Spinnum! Spinnum! *Everybody* wins!" while he twirls the crude wheel and gestures with his cane at the shelves of assorted gimcracks.

The sharpy with the gold tooth had it. His Spinnum booth counter was jammed with eager victims who, in turn, were backed by other layers of citizens eager for a turn to be fleeced.

In the front rank were jammed Milton Harris and Claire Kent. "Bet on seventy-seven, darling," she urged excitedly. "It's my lucky number!"

"No seventy-seven, lady," Gold Tooth be-bopped from the corner of his mouth. "Use your gorgeous eyes. It's a fifty-

number wheel. One to fifty—period. Hurry, hurry, hurry. *Everybody* wins!"

"Then take fourteen, darling," Claire Kent urged. "That's two sevens."

A dime found its way to the fourteen spot on the counter.

"And a dime makes fifty," chanted Gold Tooth. "Who'll win? *You'll* win! Stick around and watch the wheel." His cane sent the fifty number wheel spinning in a rolling series of clicks as its knobs rubbed past nailheads. The wheel slowed; the clicks spaced out, until they came at increasing intervals, until there were no more clicks.

"Fourteen!" cried the barker. "A beautiful prize for the beautiful lady! Down your dimes and watch the wheel." He reached behind him and pulled a huge doll from a shelf of dolls and tossed it on the counter, never ceasing his irritating, exciting chant: "Hurry, hurry, hurry! Bet your dime! *Now's* your time! *Everybody* wins!"

Milton Harris and Claire Kent squeezed out of the pack and were instantly swept along with the stream of citizens pouring along the midway. The whirlaway whirled, the merry-go-round jingled, balloons popped, kids squealed, the big top brass blared—and a passing farm hand jostled the big doll from under Claire Kent's arm.

The doll's head split a bit on the pavement, causing some of its dark straw stuffing to spill out. Claire giggled and raised the doll before Milton could get to it.

"Let's go back to the apartment while we're still ahead," she suggested breathlessly.

"Not yet, Claire," Milton said awkwardly. "I'd like to see that Zingo fellow. They say his sharpshooting act is terrific."

"Then we'll go home?"

"Sure."

"All right, you big, masterful brute."

THE enormous, bald-headed barker before the large Zingo tent waved a Stetson to emphasize his raucous points;

"See the Great Zingo, the rootingest, shootingest pistoleer who ever held a smoking gun in either hand simultaneously! At each and every performance he shoots the frills and spangles from the"

—here he paused to spread a gargantuan wink over the crowd—“the Great Zingo actually shoots the spangles from the short, shimmering bit of fluff bedecking *Evelyn*, the gorgeous vest-pocket Venus, the curvaceous queen of Lilliput, the pocket-sized edition of any red-blooded man’s dreams, who risks her *sen-say-shun-ul*”—another broad wink—“life each and every performance! And all for the fourth part of a dollar, two thin dimes and a nickel; two little bits to see the Great Zingo, Zingo, Zingo!”

Four bits poorer, Milt and Claire—with doll—were swept into the canvas arena to be met by a mob of several hundred citizens waiting on the sawdust, listening to an off-stage recording of Ravel’s *Bolero*. More people crowded in after our couple. Claire squeezed Milton’s hand. He squeezed her hand. Everybody stared at the drawn green drapes over the stage at the far end of the arena.

The immense barker appeared through the drapes, Stetson in hand.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he spoke quietly, in contrast to his roar outside, “I could stand here all week describing the spectacle you are about to witness—but I couldn’t even begin to tell you what the Great Zingo’s pistols can say for themselves.” He waved the Stetson toward the center of the green drapes as the *Bolero* reached its fierce climax and ended, leaving silence.

“Ladies and gentlemen—the Great Zingo!”

The drapes parted, revealing a short, wiry man completely dressed in white, even to a white hood with slits for his eyes. He wore green holsters crossed over his chest. In his white gloved fists he gripped two black revolvers.

He bowed once to the silent audience, turned clockwise, dropping to a semi-crouch. The revolvers began roaring alternately in his fists, ringing a bell hanging by a cord at the stage’s left, snuffing the light of a candle dangling to the right of the bell, smashing a watch spinning on a cord to the right of that, splintering a clay pipe bouncing up and down on a rubber string, showering sparks from an electric bulb swinging back and forth the width of the stage, sending a dangling knife spinning wildly, dousing another

candle flame, ruining another watch, striking flame to the tip of a wooden match—and bringing him to the right of the stage. He completed the circle and bowed to the sudden roar of applause.

“Milt, darling,” Claire put her hand on the lad’s arm. “Let’s go away from here. I’m fright—”

But Milton Harris was staring at the stage with the intensity of a man who had to see what was going to happen, and the expression of a man who half dreaded what was going to happen.

Vaguely, he heard Claire’s plea, but over it he heard the huge barker’s voice, above the roar of the crowd now:

“Ladies and gentlemen, the next demonstration requires absolute silence! If the Great Zingo’s aim falters by so much as an eyelash, the result will be death!”

He paused as the chatter melted into utter silence. A muscled giant, whose powerful torso was stained nut brown, who wore a loin cloth and turban, but whose impassive features seemed more reminiscent of prize rings than harems, appeared—bearing a white pillow on which lay two gleaming silver pistols.

He held the pillow while Zingo deposited the black revolvers and raised the silver pistols, then the giant backed a step and stood at attention. Zingo cocked the silver pistols and held them raised before his face.

The barker’s voice rang out sternly: “Any unnecessary noise could mean death—to the lovely EVELYN!”

From the opposite side of the stage appeared a creature who wrung a sibilant “*oooh*” from the crowd. She walked slowly, juggling six red glass balls as large as oranges. She was forty inches from her silver slippers to her platinum blonde updo, encased in a spangled, gossamer veil over skin-tight silvery satin that undulated breathtakingly up the pert perfection of her tiny features.

She calmly juggled the six red balls as the silver revolvers began to blast. The balls exploded as they rose, in turn, over her impeccable coiffure. The last ball was in the air when a woman in the audience made a noise like the howl of a dog being crushed by a truck, like the screech of subway wheels against curving tracks—all rolled into one brief scream.

The remaining red ball came down past the lovely midget's hands and crashed on the floor.

The silvery revolver that had been poised to puncture that red ball fell from my suddenly shaky hand and also hit the floor.

CHAPTER TWO

On the Spot

YOU got it the first time, Pete—from my hand to the floor! The turbaned giant at my elbow grunted: "Huly gee, Cash! What's happenin'?" The mob stampeding was one thing happening. That arena became a bedlam of shouting, screaming, shoving, running citizens eager for out. They got out.

And then it boiled down to a silent tableau. The Big Guy and Evelyn and myself gaped down from the stage at the only remaining couple in that arena. Even Max Aaron, my huge announcer and, incidentally, boss, had vanished.

Just three of us on the stage and the pale blond youth kneeling alongside the figure of a brunette woman, who lay prostrate on the trampled sawdust.

He was dragging the short blade out of the canary-yellow dress that covered her back. He stared dumbly at the scarlet dripping from its point. His stare tore away from the blade and passed unseeing over the Big Guy and myself and came to rest on Evelyn, who stood with both tiny fists pressed to her mouth.

They stared at each other across thirty feet of space for a minute that dragged and dragged and dragged. . . .

Then the lad whispered: "Mama, I don't—I didn't. She—Claire screamed. Now—this—"

Evelyn crumpled to the stage. . . .

Relax and take a breath, Pete. Secrets? The place crawled with them. My being the Great Zingo was one I'd kept from the whole world, except the Big Guy. Evelyn's sudden acquisition of a son, and a normal-sized one at that, was one she'd kept from the whole carnival. And the lad's secret, if it isn't apparent by now, was a midget mother. As for Claire Kent's secret—it lay motionless and hidden under the blot of scarlet that stained the canary-yellow fabric of her dress.

But I didn't know she had a secret; all I knew was the sudden blade in her back would bring cops as sure as, if you'll pardon the expression, death and taxes. And the cops would fasten on the blond lad, which would turn their attention to his midget mother, which would turn their attention to her quick-triggered partner—me—which would. . . .

"Wipe that hilt and drop it!" I croaked at the lad, adding: "Fast!"

He wasn't accustomed to acting fast. He wasn't used to the idea of wet scarlet dripping from a knife in his fist.

"Wh-what?" he croaked back at me.

The smart thing for him would have been to plant the knife right back where he'd found it, handkerchief the hilt and run like crazy. He just hung onto it and croaked: "Wh-what?"

"That knife! Wipe—"

I stopped talking because Evelyn had emerged from her trance and was leaping off the stage, racing to him, screaming: "Milton, do what Charley says! Your fingerprints, darling. Give me—"

She grabbed for the knife, but he drew it beyond her reach as comprehension finally shoved some of the daze from his eyes. "No, mama! I'll—"

But he didn't. He didn't even have the knife any more. He didn't have it because the Big Lamebrain who should have been standing at my elbow with the white pillow had first dropped the pillow to race over and help Evelyn to her feet, then pounded after her off the stage—on account ever since we'd become the Great Zingo he'd come to the conclusion that the planets revolved around little Evelyn Harris.

So when Milton Harris drew the knife away from his diminutive mama's grab, he drew it in the vicinity of the Big Guy's paws—which promptly snagged it.

"Evelyn says give her the shiv," the Big Guy rumbled. "Ya give her the shiv—see?"

The lad lunged for it. I yelled at the Big Guy: "Chuck it, Sailor! Chuck it!"

The Big Guy flicked his joined fingers against Milton Harris' chest, sending the lad teetering back ten feet across the sawdust. The Big Guy turned his blank, punch-battered face toward me. "Chuck it, Cash? Where, hagh?"

I didn't tell him where. I didn't tell him anything. I stood there and dropped dead without losing consciousness.

They were pouring through the tent flaps, a cluster of police uniforms spear-headed by a gaunt man wearing a gray suit and gray fedora. His arm was aimed at the Big Guy. He was yelling: "You with the knife—freeze!"

The Big Guy froze.

Behind the uniforms swarmed carny people; Max Aaron, my announcer-boss, Finelli, the Human Fly, Olga, the Fat Lady, Madame Celeste, the palmistologist, grips, talkers, shills. All of them, gathering in the edges of my vision, which concentrated on the gaunt, gray man who was now aiming a bony finger at me. "You with the gun—put it down!" He added: "Carefully!"

I didn't want to put it down. I wanted to give a free performance on live targets. But how much of a performance could I give with only one slug left in the silver revolver, with police weapons coming to view all over the place?

I laid the revolver carefully alongside its mate at my feet. The gaunt, gray man ordered the mob held back: "Except you four who were already here. I want you to remain exactly where you were when we arrived."

Evelyn didn't want to remain where she was. She wanted to run to her son. She ran to her son.

A UNIFORM reached out to stop her. Maybe all he wanted was to hold her still as Captain Black, who the gaunt, gray man turned out to be; Captain of Midville detectives, had ordered. But you could hardly touch that forty inches of concentrated pulchritude without capsizing her.

He capsized her.

Which was too bad, because how could that uniform know the sun rose and set on little Evelyn Harris? He found out.

The blood-smearred knife tumbled to the sawdust. Then that uniform tumbled to the sawdust—from too much of Sailor Duffy's left hook applied to his eye.

A second uniform got in the way of a jab that staggered him almost through the canvas wall of the arena. A third uniform waved a black automatic—which the

Big Guy took away from him and tossed aside. Why should he bother with such trifles as guns when his fists had swapped fifteen rounds of mayhem with the world's heavyweight champion?

But Captain Black's gun barrel alongside the Big Guy's ear did what the heavy-weight champ couldn't.

Then it stopped my hand one inch from the one-slug revolver at my feet.

"Get down here," he spoke softly, gesturing with it.

I got down there.

"Take off that dingus."

I removed my hood. He looked at my bare face. Then he looked elsewhere and I spent the breath I'd been saving. He asked the uniform whose swipe at Evelyn had started the chain reaction, "What got into you, Murph?"

"I didn't mean to knock her down, Cap'n," Murph mumbled, red-faced, rising slowly and painfully from the sawdust. "You said they should freeze."

"I said you should freeze," Captain Black quietly told Evelyn, who was now standing alongside Milton Harris, her hand lost in his.

"Leave her alone," the lad said evenly. "She's my mother."

It got a silence. It rated a silence. You hear about midgets having normal-sized offspring. Running across it creates a reaction. Running across it under these circumstances, the reaction was a painful silence.

"I see," Captain Black finally muttered gently. He pointed his revolver downward. "And her?"

"Claire Kent," the lad choked. "After we won the big doll at the Spinnum, she wanted me to take her home, but I wanted to see mom. I didn't see who stabbed Claire—although just before she screamed she said something about being frightened. I didn't pay much attention because I was frightened about mom near all those bullets. And then—" The lad swallowed painfully.

"And then?"

"Claire screamed. Everyone started running. People got between us. Next time I saw her it was—like—that. The knife was—" The lad's eyes darted around like trapped birds trying to get loose.

"You tell us about the knife," Captain

Black urged the Big Guy, who had stirred to consciousness and was now regarding me with the tiny chips of ice he used for eyes. They had his wrists cuffed behind him. Two uniforms guarded him with exposed revolvers. He wore his usual expression; practically his only expression, the sort of expression you'd expect from a guy whose face had been a punching bag up and down the heavyweight division.

"You put the knife in the lady's back?" Captain Black prodded him.

"No!" Milton Harris broke in, shaking his head violently. "He was on the stage when—"

"Is that where you were?" Captain Black asked the Big Guy.

"That's where he was," I cut in. "Right at my elbow."

"I was asking him."

"He's listening to noises we can't hear—from too many left hooks. I speak for both of us. Ask me."

"That's a big responsibility, speaking for another man."

"It's my responsibility."

"Then explain how come the knife was in his hand."

"He picked it out of the sawdust to show me."

Captain Black treated me to all his attention. "Zingo what?"

"The Zingo was Max Aaron's brain-storm. My name's Charles Wilson. The Big Guy's Sam Dugan."

"Did you know this Kent woman, Charles?"

"No."

"Did Sam?"

I put my face close to the Big Guy's face, close enough to pass him a personal wink, and asked: "Sam, you know the dead woman?"

He shook his head slowly, keeping his orbs glued to mine.

"If he was on the stage when it happened," Captain Black asked me, "how'd he happen to be alongside the body when we arrived?"

"He ran over to look. Is that against the law?"

"Interfering with homicide evidence is against the law, Charles." Captain Black shifted his attention to Milton Harris. "How about that knife, son? Where'd you first see it?"

The lad exhibited his first glimmer of intelligence. "In his hand," he pointed at the Big Guy, "when he picked it off the ground."

"You touch it?"

The lad shook his head.

"Is that correct; all you've heard?" Captain Black asked Evelyn. When she nodded that it was correct, he turned back to the boy: "What big doll, son?"

"Why, the—"

The lad's eyes prowled the sawdust around his defunct romance. All our eyes prowled the sawdust—and saw sawdust.

Murph bent to grip one of the dead woman's shoulders. "Okay, Cap'n?"

"Homicide will be irritated, Murph, but just enough for a look."

Murphy raised the shoulder, peered under it, then let it drop and raised a crimson face. "Just her pocketbook, Cap'n."

"No big doll, son," Captain Black said gently, and as gently added: "If you didn't touch the knife, how'd that blood get on your palm?"

Smooth? I tell you, Pete, this cop put another butterfly in my stomach every time he opened his mouth. He had Milton Harris gaping like a fish out of water at his blood-stained palm. Not much of a stain—just a dab of dried purple—but enough to send the lad's Adam's apple into a little jig while his lips twisted and re-twisted in a painful and vain effort to find words.

"Don't answer him, Milton!" Evelyn cried suddenly, trembling from whatever emotion nature stirs in mothers when their young face danger. "Just that your lawyer will speak for you, darling. I'll get the lawyer. Milton, please."

"All right, mama," the lad whispered hoarsely.

"Charles," Captain Black addressed me softly, adding to the flutter in my midriff, "you can chip in for the same lawyer—for Sam. It'll be the same charge: suspicion of murder. And while you're arranging matters, you might plan to promote bonds for the little lady and yourself."

"Why should we need bonds?" came out of me in a still, small voice.

"In this state a material witness to a homicide must post bond or suffer technical arrest until the trial. That's better

than being un-technically arrested for reaching for a gun to assist Sam's felonious assault on uniformed officers—the second charge on which Sam will be booked—isn't it, Charles?"

I didn't answer him. How could I answer him when the butterflies fluttered up from my stomach to flap their wings in my throat? But then I didn't have to answer him because the technicians of the homicide detail arrived and everything settled down to Claire Kent.

Now she was officially dead.

CHAPTER THREE

The Human Fly

"SIT there, Charles." Captain Black nodded when the patrolman led me into his office in Midville's city hall. I took the chair facing the paper-littered desk behind which the gaunt cop sat. His gray jacket hung on the back of his swivel, exposing the armpit holster strapped across his white shirt. His gauntness showed in deep cheek hollows and the boniness of his hands. His hair was gray, combed straight back and thinning out in the middle. He had sharp features, but mainly you noted the almost white gray of his eyes and the quizzical twist to his thin-lipped mouth.

Captain Black told the patrolman to leave us alone, then told me: "This Aaron fellow posted bond for the little lady and you, Charles. Your act must rate."

"We manage," I said.

"Sam isn't vital to your act, so you'll be able to go on. You his manager when all that happened to his face?"

"No," I said.

"Funny thing. I've been going over the record books and there's no mention of a pug named Sam Dugan."

"How I got it," I said carefully, "Sam was never more than a club fighter. They used him to build up fighters who were going places. They gave Sam different names each time to keep the coincidence of his perpetual losses out of the books."

"That sounds reasonable," Captain Black nodded. "I can't tell from his face. He resembles a hundred pugs I've seen—but his prints, when they get back from Washington, will show if the Sam Dugan is an alias."

I didn't say anything, but if what had fluttered in my innards before had been butterflies, clammy bats had taken their place in my digestive system now. I knew damn well what this smooth-talking cop would learn when Washington matched the Big Guy's prints. And I knew what he'd learn when the F.B.I. matched my prints, which were enroute along with the Big Guy's. It would break out into national headlines:

CASH WALE AND SAILOR DUFFY CAPTURED!

There would be front-page photos showing the Sailor swapping mayhem with all the heavyweight greats of the twenties. There would be feature articles reviving the cheap gossip about me dating back to the time I came out of Hell's Kitchen to peddle my gun to assorted Prohibition Bigs who are now mainly in cemeteries, cement blocks or cells.

They might even go back to the time when Repeal dropped me from a penthouse to a breadline, when too many left hooks dropped Sailor Duffy from Madison Square Garden to the same breadline—and how we met when he muscled a slob who was trying to muscle ahead of me in the line.

They might trace the result of that meeting; the Cash Wale Investigation Service, when my quick gun and the Sailor's muscles saw us through a series of headline cases all the way back up to the top, until the last case erupted into what the papers called:

THE CASH WALE MASSACRE

—a deal we didn't commit. But with all the witnesses to our innocence dead, what could we do but run?

From:

WALE AND DUFFY CAPTURED!

to:

WALE AND DUFFY EXECUTED!

would become a matter of legal routine, dating from the moment Washington checked the prints Captain Black's men had collected from us.

And all I could do now was sit motionless and keep my eyes fixed to his steady gray stare as he sweet-talked the conver-

sation into a dangerous, new channel:

"That Evelyn, Charles. You read of midgets having large children. It's the first time I ran across it personally. You know them long?"

"Just Evelyn," I said.

"But she must have spoken about the boy. Mothers—"

"No," I cut in.

"That's unusual, Charles. But then," he mused, scratching his gray temple, "being the midget mother of a full-grown son isn't usual. I wonder if Milton Harris knew Mrs. Kent before she appeared in Midville? She doesn't seem to have been here very long."

"I didn't know either of them until her scream stopped the show," I said. I added: "And the Big Guy was up on the stage along with me when she screamed. There were at least four hundred witnesses in the arena when it happened—"

"So it would seem, Charles," he nodded in agreement. "I've interrogated eight of them whom we managed to round up since the case broke. I don't think Sam has anything to worry about on the homicide charge. And we may overlook the 'interfering with evidence' charge, considering his punch-drunk condition and the circumstances.

"But manhandling my men was bad, Charles. Their morale would drop to zero if I didn't at least hold him for trial. He'll probably get off with a thirty-day sentence. Don't worry about Sam, Charles. A month in the poky won't hurt him."

It would kill him, I screamed at the cop without opening my mouth.

"What I really wanted to discuss," he went on, "was Evelyn. You carnival folk are close-mouthed to outsiders, to the police in particular. As things stand, our case against her boy is solid enough for a conviction. Unless he can give us information leading to a more likely suspect, his only prospect is life imprisonment or electrocution. You can see that, can't you, Charles? He can't possibly get in deeper than he already is by talking."

"That's a point," I said carefully.

"Think you could persuade Evelyn to see it?"

"I might."

Captain Black juggled two cigarettes from a pack, handed me one, struck a

match, held it across his desk for me to get a light. Then he lit his own cigarette, whipped out the match flare and asked, "Charles, would you become more enthusiastic if I offered you a proposition?"

"For instance?"

"Suppose I drop all charges against Sam Dugan the moment your efforts cause the Harris boy to sign a full and free confession?"

"You're tempting me, Captain."

"I think it was Oscar Wilde who said," Captain Black said, narrowing his eyes at the haze floating up before his face, "that the best way to overcome temptation is to yield to it. Think it over, Charles."

I LEFT Midville's city hall thinking it over. It was nearing midnight when I returned to the Biggest Little Carnival In The World. The merry-go-round was jingling its final ride for a handful of die-hards. Grips were already sweeping the midway. Booth boards and canvas rain shields were going up. Overhead lights were blinking out, allowing the night to reach down into the area.

I made my way into the back of our truck behind the Zingo arena and joined the press around Evelyn, who was regarding nothing out of swollen, reddish eyes and saying, in a dull monotone:

"... Ever since he was young and showed signs of growing big, Milton got razzed about me. It became so bad, he wouldn't even go out of the house to play. So I sent him to boarding schools as soon as he was old enough. He used to tell his friends his folks were dead..."

"That ain't right!" Olga, the Fat Lady, who occupied a full quarter of the truck's interior, scowled darkly.

"Oh, I didn't blame him," Evelyn went on dully. "It wasn't Milton's fault. It had nothing to do with how he felt toward me. When he got older he always made shows I was in if they happened near his schools. He'd come back to my dressing room after. I'd live all year for the week I'd hit a town near his school. All year I'd dream of the week he'd be coming to see me with flowers and candy and call me *mama*."

"Don't worry, honey," Max Aaron growled, patting her shoulder awkwardly

with his immense paw. "We'll get the best shyster in Chicago to come down and get him off."

"We'll pass the hat for it, kiddo," Finelli, the Human Fly, put in. There was a general murmur of assent to which I found myself contributing.

I caught Max Aaron's eye and jerked my head. He followed me outside the truck. We picked our way carefully over guy ropes to a spot of deep shadow between two closed booths. We spent a few moments lighting cigarettes and absorbing the carny's night noises; the whinnying of a horse, rustle of canvas, muffled voices from the backs of trucks.

"Think they got a case against the kid, Charley?" Max finally rumbled softly.

"All they've got is that the kid was the only person in the arena who knew the Kent woman—period."

Max considered this, squinting at me over the cherry glow of his cigarette. "They took some time turning you loose," he finally said.

"Cop psychology. They figure I'm soft enough on Sam to persuade Evelyn to persuade her boy to confess. For that they'll turn Sam loose."

"You're pretty soft on Sam," Max said thoughtfully.

"Not in the head. Up to here they have no case against the kid, but they'll be working on it. Which means it's just as important to get a picture of what they'll learn—right now—as sending to Chi for a shyster."

"How can we do that, Charley? Evelyn never heard of her—this Kent woman—before."

"She'd at least know Milton's local address and maybe the names of some of his buddies. That would give us part of the picture. I'd need a little help to get the other part."

"What other part?"

"Milton's story; alpha to zed."

"You'll have to wait for the shyster for that, Charley."

"Sure," I sneered. "Give the cops a chance to arrange the picture to fit a conviction. By the time your shyster got in from Chi and began questioning the citizens in the picture, they'd all be cop dummies."

"But, Charley, the kid's in the coop.

He won't talk; you heard Evelyn tell him not to talk. And they won't allow him visitors for a couple of days at least."

"What Evelyn told him, she can untell him."

"But *how*?"

"You'll have to go out on a limb, Max."

Max considered this. I couldn't fathom his expression in the darkness—but expression was in his next words: "If it sounds reasonable, Charley, and if it'll help Evelyn, I'll go out on a limb. What's your idea?"

I told him my idea.

TWO hours later Evelyn spoke to her son, who told her exactly what I've written in the beginning of this letter; from the phone awakening him this Sunday morning until Claire Kent took the Big Count.

Of course cops don't allow prisoners to have visitors two hours after midnight, freshly booked homicide suspects at that. And the turnkey of the Midville County prison will probably swear to this day that Milton Harris had no visitor at that time. The turnkey was not inside the cell block, but he was in the only corridor leading to the cell block, peering out the door at its end, and there was simply no other way to reach Milton Harris' cell except through that door and that corridor.

Sure, there was a window, but it was heavily barred and steel screened. It was three floors up, with no ladder or fire-escape anywhere near it. Only a bird or a fly could have reached that window.

Well, a fly did, Pete; a *human* fly—Finelli—with forty-eight pounds of concentrated eye appeal strapped to his back.

It was an easier wall, he told me, than the one he used in his act. The city hall wall had deep indentations between foot-high blocks of granite. For Finelli's educated fingers and toes, it was like climbing a steep ladder.

He clung to the outside bars of Milton Harris' cell while Evelyn Harris spoke over his shoulder, through the screen, to the boy, who answered the questions I'd instructed her to ask. Then Finelli slung a length of stout cord through the bars and they slid down easily, tugging one end of the cord after they were down to

bring the rope snaking down after them.

They knew the turnkey would be in the corridor at that time because before Finelli began the ascent, Olga had waddled all four hundred and sixteen of her pounds into the city hall, up the stairs and into that corridor.

By the time she reached the corridor three patrolmen were hanging onto various parts of her. So she sat down on the floor of the corridor and bellowed at the top of her enormous voice that if that was how Midville police treated a lady in search of a rest room, she would just sit there and teach them the rudiments of chivalry. She sat there and taught them in a voice loud and indignant enough to drown out their protests that the only public rest rooms were in another part of city hall and they weren't open at that hour of the morning anyhow.

They tried moving her by force, but you get two of your friends and try budging four hundred and sixteen pounds of outraged female sometime when you have a spare moment.

And do you think the turnkey could resist such a spectacle just outside his door? He didn't, and half an hour later Evelyn Harris told me what Milton Harris had whispered through the screened window.

Half an hour after that, at three in the morning, Evelyn Harris slept. The Biggest Little Carnival In The World lay shrouded in canvas and darkness. Midville was a maze of deserted streets and night-blackened windows—and I was lowering myself carefully by Finelli's stout cord from the roof of an apartment house to one of its night-blackened windows.

CHAPTER FOUR

Riding a Reefer Route

I REACHED and and tested the lower frame. It slid up a few inches. I kicked the sill, swung away from the building, then swung close enough to jab my hand through the gap and grip the window's bottom. I raised it and crawled in, landing on a rug that blotted my shoes like a sponge. I left the window open, left the cord dangling. That had been Finelli's advice.

I lowered a black roller shade, hand-

kerchiefed the lens of my pocket flash and sent the muted beam around the contours of a living room that seemed, from what I saw of it, to be designed for community comfort. Three walls held divans, the spongy rug featured hassocks, the fourth wall was mainly occupied by a large television set. Two doorways were visible; the open doorway to my left showing a small foyer and the apartment's front door.

The door to my right was closed. I opened it carefully and stepped off the spongy rug to a hardwood floor that creaked.

"Claire?" a woman's voice sleepily husked from the darkness. "Is that you, Claire?"

I pocketed my flash, ran my palm along the inside wall until it struck a switch, flicked the switch.

Buttery glare splashed through the room, splashed over the buxom redhead coming to her elbow on a wide pink chenille couch.

She was a very feminine redhead, wearing a green taffeta dress that concealed plenty leg. Her green pumps had been kicked to the floor. Some of her lipstick and mascara were on the chenille, some of the mascara was on her high cheekbones.

She blinked lazy green eyes at me and giggled: "Thought you were Claire. Gee, how many agents she got? Thought I had the only other key." Her eyes grew more personal as she swung to a sitting posture, not bothering to adjust the skirt of her dress. "You must be Milton!" Then her eyes grew more than personal as they narrowed suspiciously. "You don't look like a college boy, Shorty."

"That's two things up to here," I encouraged her. "I'm not Claire and I don't look like a college boy."

"You're just careful," she giggled, switching moods again. "What's the diff, Shorty? We're all in the tea party. Got a smoke? I've been dyin' a slow death waiting to pick up from the last. Claire promised she'd have new stock today."

"She did?" I encouraged, sliding a cigarette between her full lips and reaching match flare to it.

She inhaled deeply, throwing her head back and half-lidding her eyes.

Her eyes snapped wide. She coughed out a cloud of smoke.

She gaped at the cigarette, holding it before her as if it was a spider she'd found in her purse. She snapped it across the room and said, crankily, "Stop teasing me, Shorty! You heard me. I said a *smoke!*"

The human mind is the fastest thing in the world, Pete; faster than jets, faster than light. There I'd been, drifting along with the conversation, expecting nothing but to needle some data re the late Claire Kent out of this answer to my lonesome dreams—and then my mind was hopping through space and time. She said a "smoke"! She said Claire had promised "new stock" today. She didn't know Claire had more than one "agent", but took it for granted I was Milton Harris with "another key."

And while my mind was reviewing this it was connecting it with the data Evelyn had relayed to me from Milton Harris' lips; how he'd awakened Sunday morning with his tongue tasting like a hobo's sock—after, he told his diminutive mom, an evening in which he could recall nothing past the fact that he'd been visiting Claire with Dave Kelly, his roommate, and another girl, and they'd been drinking, talking, smoking. The next thing he recalled were a pack of wild dreams. After that the phone awakened him to the taste of the hobo's sock.

But I started to mention the speed of mind. This all ticked through mine in a brief flash, so I barely skipped a beat between Red's: "— I said a *smoke!*" and my:

"Heard what you said. But I'm up here looking for some stock myself—in case Claire brought it here before she got herself punctured to death."

"Well, then why'd you— What?"

It was her mind's turn to cover territory.

I asked easily, "You think she may have stashed it around the apartment?" I asked it as I went to the vanity, stepping on the smouldering cigarette enroute. In the vanity's mirror I watched Red leap to her feet and gape at my back, all the sleep out of her eyes now.

"Shorty. You said—*dead?*"

"That's what I said," I agreed, open-

ing the vanity's drawers and running my fingers through the stuff exposed. I wasn't looking for anything in particular. I wasn't finding anything in particular; just bottles and jars and tubes of the usual man-bait a female is wont to keep in her vanity. When I glanced in the mirror again, Red was almost on top of me.

"Competition?" she breathed on my nape.

"That's what I think it was," I nodded.

"*You?*" she breathed, pressing against the small of my back something hard.

Her eyes, in the mirror, were unnaturally large, the pupils unnaturally dilated. A tic had developed in the corner of her mouth. "*You, Shorty?*" she breathed again, jabbing that *something* harder into my spine.

"Don't be silly," I murmured, stooping to open the vanity's bottom drawer. I stiffened. I drew a letter from the drawer. I breathed, "Well, whaddya know! Claire *did* stash her stock here."

Red's face came over my shoulder. "She did? Where?"

"In this drawer," I said, stepping aside to let her look.

She had to look.

Then she straightened, frowning at me. She didn't seem to notice that her small, pearl-handled revolver had been transferred from her hand to mine. "Not there, Shorty," she whined. "You said she had stock in the drawer. Why do you keep teasin' me? You said—"

She noticed the transfer then. She noticed it with an expression that twisted her features into a quivering mask of fury. I ducked her left hand clawing at my face, blocked her right claw with my elbow and leaped back, holding her own revolver on her.

I may as well have been pointing my bare finger at her. She dove at me swinging, gibbering broken words. Her swipes could have torn my head from my shoulders. She topped me by five inches and by about twenty pounds. I backed to the couch. I backed onto the couch. I backed off the other side.

She slid to her knees on the original side of the couch and clawed the chenille to her face in large folds. "*Please, Shorty,*" she sobbed as if someone was chewing her heart with crooked teeth.

"I've been two whole days without. If I don't get a smoke soon I'll go crazy. I don't care if you killed Claire to move in. I'll work for you, Shorty, but just let me have one lift."

Her words choked into sobs. She buried the sobs into the chenille folds.

I backed out of the room. Someone was fussing with the apartment's front door. I could hear a key trying the lock. I could hear a man behind the door saying:

"One of these has to fit Mrs. Kent's door, Officer. Such a nice refined lady. She had nothing but college people up here. What did you say?"

I didn't linger to hear what the officer said.

I used the cord still dangling outside the window. I pulled it up to the roof after me, detached it and looped it around my waist as I sped across the roof to a narrow alley separating it from the next apartment house roof. It was a five foot jump. I jumped.

The driver of the police sedan nosed before the sidewalk of Claire Kent's apartment house, was too busy cupping match flare to the cigarette in his lips to notice me emerge from the next house.

By the time he glanced up, I was across the street and walking in shadows . . .

IN AN all-night coffee shop I went through two stacks of buckwheat, scrambled eggs with bacon and home fries, a cut of apple pie and two cups of black coffee—on the theory that food is a partial substitute for sleep. Time, as it will, was passing, each moment bringing closer the instant when a fast wire from Washington would erupt into national headlines.

I had to stay awake and keep functioning. I had to fill in outlines of the Claire Kent pictures, fill them in and search the details for a pattern that would be convincing enough to Captain Black for him to release Sailor Duffy in exchange—so we could start running again.

The letter I'd snagged from Claire's vanity had been shuffled through three "Not here's" at the different addresses before reaching her. It had been sent two weeks earlier from a Mr. Edward I. Kent at a Bucktown street address. Bucktown was a small community fifteen miles south

of Midville. The contents filled in some of the lady's picture:

Dearest Claire,

For the children's sake I am willing to overlook all that happened. I am prepared to take you back. The neighbors think you have been caring for your mother. Bobby and Lucille need you, Claire. So do I. Please come home.

Love,

Ed

I spent all morning and part of the afternoon in Bucktown, which turned out to be little more than a farmers' supply depot. I learned Ed Kent ran a modest feed store, that his wife, Claire, had spent the last two months in Chicago tending her ailing mother—and folks were beginning to whisper. There were no whispers linking her to any Bucktown male other than Ed Kent—and Ed Kent, at two p.m., Sunday, when Claire's heart-stopping screech launched me on this quest, had been seen by dozens of fellow citizens in his usual pew in the local church.

I bought a pack of cigarettes at his feed store and found Ed Kent to be an aging, tight-lipped, bald-headed beanpole with a small pot under his belt buckle where his appetite was commencing to get the better of him. He answered my questions about the best hotel in town, the nearest good restaurant, the distance from Midville and the right time with a series of noncommittal grunts. I decided getting answers out of him anent his wife's extra-marital excursions would take a good deal more time and effort than I could afford to invest.

So I returned to Midville, but by then Monday was mostly gone. And by then the moment when Captain Black would get the Washington story on our fingerprints was close enough to keep my hackles erect and fill my stomach with chipped ice. . . .

Night was beginning to soften the outlines of the towers and turrets of Midville University when I finally found Milton Harris' rooming house, a red brick structure that faced the sprawling campus. In the row of name plates I found: *Kelly—Harris—3A.*

I touched the button under it, changed my mind and tried the door, which opened. A faded carpet runner wound up two flights of wooden steps to a landing on

which the furthest door wore a brass 3A. The door was locked, but a knife-edge of light showed under it. I knuckled a panel.

Nothing happened. I knuckled it again.

A woman giggled.

Another voice said: "Shhh!"

I rapped a third time—and this brought footsteps padding softly toward me. A hoarse voice whispered, "Whosit?"

"Milt," I whispered in reply.

A bolt slid back. Tumblers tumbled in the lock. The door swayed back a few inches, started to slam shut again, got as far as my shoe wedged in the doorway—then opened slowly as the silver revolver slanting up from my fist registered in the dull blue eyes of the man in the doorway.

"Back up," I whispered.

He backed. I followed my revolver after him, closed the door behind me and flicked home the bolt.

The girl inside giggled happily. "Hooray for Kelly! He got a customer!"

If she was a day over sixteen I couldn't tell. She wore tousled brown hair over a face so young it looked raw. Her nose was a budding stub, her mouth too formless and large. Only her eyes seemed older than sixteen. I couldn't tell their color; they swam in pink.

In her fingers burned a clumsily made butt that gave off a sickly sweet odor, adding to the sickly sweet aroma that permeated the room. She was a string bean in a black dress. "Well, *sell* him some, Dave!" she urged in a voice one notch below a squeal.

"Shaddup, Patsy," he thick-tongued, keeping his dull stare on me. "It's a hold-up."

CHAPTER FIVE

Living Dangerously

THE small room held two beds with a telephone-bearing night table between them. Venetian blinds were drawn on two windows. A bureau, two straight-backed chairs and a writing table completed the room's furnishings. On the walls hung college pennants, magazine cartoons and a girlie calender. The bureau was stacked high with text books. The writing table held a high pile of greenish-brown straw. Alongside this pile were about three-dozen crudely fashioned ciga-

rettes of the greenish-brown straw. The bare floor held half-a-dozen butts from such cigarettes.

The lad wore unpressed army trousers, a faded T shirt and moccasins on his bare feet. His face featured sharp angles and flat planes, with only the sullen curve to his lips to relieve the monotony. His stubby black hair, clipped flat on top, added to his sullen appearance.

"Go ahead, wisenheimer," he muttered thickly. "Help yourself."

"Holdup?" the girl squealed.

"Don't be silly," I said, letting my revolver drop under my lapel and watching some life stir in the dull blue eyes as my hand emerged empty. "All I wanted was to come in."

His eyes flicked up from my hand to my face and acquired a wolfish glint. "So you're in," he breathed. "Now you'll go out!"

His fist became a blur under my jaw.

Then it became a fist frozen in space.

He didn't believe it. His other fist zoomed to the other side of my jaw. It ceased zooming an inch short of my jaw. His head snapped east. It snapped west. He backed away, bringing his arms up to ward off the muzzle of my revolver flicking agony into his hands, his face, his arms. He kept backing away until he realized I was no longer following, then he let his arms drop to his sides as he goggled at my gun hand—empty once more.

"I'm still in," I told him gently. "Irritate me much more, *you'll* be out—all the way out." I fingered the pile of greenish-brown straw. "Play around with this, Junior, and you move into fast company. You're in fast company. I want to know where you got it. From Claire?"

"Claire is Milty's sweetie," the girl squealed, inhaling luxuriously from the butt she held. She cocked her head to eye me in a way that would have been arch had not her eyes been so large and bloodshot.

"Don't trifle with my Kelly, Obnoxious. The Kelly's eight feet tall and he's got muscles of steel. He's lousy in English Lit, but for the piddling sum of two dollars he will sell you the wherewithal to attain Minerva—or your dream girl. I've had a blond Neanderthal man twice and I'm just starting."

"Patsy, shaddup!" Dave Kelly said

hoarsely and tried to turn back to me.

"Don't talk to *me* like that, you big fourflusher!" the girl cried, getting off the bed unsteadily and swaying on her bare feet. "Two weeks you've been rushing me—and all you ever gave me was one second-hand doll. Not even a frat pin; the terrible-tempered Kelly couldn't even make a frat! Well, I don't think you're so terrible, Mister Shaddup! I'm *nine* feet tall! I've got steel claws on the ends of my fingers—see?"

She approached him with a slow, grotesque, high-kneed walk, extending her fingers toward his raging face. She walked into his looping fist that catapulted her across the room to a huddle at my feet where she lay motionless.

Kelly had followed the hook with another that fanned air. He lurched toward her—coming to a sudden halt as my drawn revolver registered again in his mind.

It drained the fury from his face, leaving it sullen again.

"I asked you a question, Kelly," I said gently, feeling gentle enough to pluck out his eyeballs with my teeth. "You get the

load of stock from who? Claire Kent?"

He said, "I'm gonna be sick."

I followed him to the small bathroom that went with the room, where he became very, very sick. . . .

QUARTER of an hour later the mood had undergone a transformation. Sweet Sixteen lay with a quilt over her, with a growing bulge of purple over her left eye and with gentle snores issuing from her lips. I sat on a chair facing Kelly, who sprawled on his back on the other bed, all the fight out of him.

"Not from Claire," he told the ceiling. "You her boss?"

"We'll get to who I am later. Now we're learning where you got the stuff."

"You wouldn't believe it."

"Try me. I'm naive."

"I found it."

I said, "That's about five thousand dollar's worth right here on the table—and you just reached down and picked it up?"

"That's right. Out of a broken doll. I gave the doll to Patsy. Patsy's a bank



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president's daughter. She wants to live dangerously."

"She's living dangerously. Let's get back to the doll. Where?"

"Out at the carnival. All those people were running out of a tent as if a lion had broken loose and was after them. This guy ran into me and the doll dropped from his hands and the mob swept him twenty feet away before he could break loose. He started back until he saw me pick it up. Then he turned and ran like hell and that's when I noticed the stuffing coming out of the doll."

"And you recognized it was marijuana?"

"Why not? I'd been riding a reefer that morning—yesterday morning. Sunday."

"I know yesterday was Sunday all day. What about this scared guy?"

"What about him?"

"Describe him."

Dave Kelly licked his lips. "I dunno. It's hard. He wore a brown suit. About five-ten. Brown fedora. He wore horn-rimmed glasses. That's about all I could make out. The place was crawling with people and I wanted to get away with the doll before somebody else noticed what it was stuffed with. Wait a sec!" Kelly frowned as he recalled something. "That guy, he had a gold tooth in front of his mouth."

"How about that reefer you were riding Sunday morning?"

"I got that the night before at Claire's party. She threw a tea party. Milt and Patsy were along, only Milt passed out early." Kelly snickered and rose on one elbow. "You know what he thought—Milt?"

"What?"

"He thought he'd passed out from bourbon! All the weed was to him were hand-rolled cigarettes made of foreign tobacco! Can you imagine a guy that simple?"

"It's pretty hard to imagine," I said. "How'd you happen to be at the carnival yesterday?"

"Aw, Milt had a date with Claire there and after he'd gone I got to feeling bad. Stuff's kind of piling up on me at the U."

"What stuff?"

"Well, I thought I'd ride the G.I. Bill along and latch onto a writing deal. I al-

ways wanted to be a writer; they live so easy. So I took a lit course and got bored the first week. Then I'm too old for these punks, so I'm squeezed out of most of the fun. And the G.I. Bill wasn't geared for these prices, so I've had to borrow and now I'm commencing to run out of credit. You know how it gets."

"It got you to the midway Sunday."

"That's right. I figured I might bump into Claire and Milt and tag along with them. But just as I reached the carnival this mob stampeded out of the Zingo tent and that guy dropped the doll."

"And you decided to go into business."

"Listen," he urged, sitting up to face me squarely, some life entering his eyes. "You thing Patsy's different? I know hundreds of punks in this brain factory eager to sow their oats and no way to do it. And, aside from the guys riding the G.I. Bill, most of the punks have so much dough it gets too heavy to carry around. Farmers' kids; they're riding on top of the inflation. I tell you Midville U's a goldmine." Kelly took a mental double-take and grinned: "But I'm telling *you*?"

"You're asking me," I said quietly.

"That's right!" he egered. "Claire's out. You need some one to handle the deal around here. Claire was working Milt to be on the inside of the deal. Me, I'm in!"

"How'd you know Claire was out?"

"Radio. You think I'd have Patsy up here if I didn't know Milt was in the can?"

"Doesn't your buddy in the can on a murder rap touch you?"

"Listen, mister. After two years digging Nips out of caves, *nothing* touches me. How about it?"

I hesitated. "Well, as you said, Claire was grooming Harris for the inside track, and if Harris' mother gets him off the spot—"

"What mother?" Kelly cut in. "Milt's an orphan."

"He created that impression because his mother happens to be a midget."

Kelly's dull eyes gaped incredulously. "That Evelyn? That little blonde juggler? *Milt's* mother?"

"She's bringing legal talent all the way from Chi." I frowned. I rested the frown on Kelly's confusion and said, "But I guess even if she manages to get him off

he's become too public to be useful."

Kelly's confusion melted into a broad grin. "There's nothing too public about little old me, mister. How about it?"

"You'll be moving in fast company." I still hesitated. "Hold out a buck and you'd never get a chance to spend it."

"Tell me something!" He fingered the welts under his jaw.

"All you'd get is ten percent off the top."

"I'm no hog. Three hundred a week satisfies my ambitions."

"You want to come along now and learn how to pick up a shipment?"

"Just give me a chance to dress."

"How about Patsy?"

Kelly grinned wolfishly down at the gently snoring girl. "She'll keep. I got her trained to keep. I always wanted to marry a bank."

THE midway this Monday evening was almost deserted; possibly from the drizzle oozing down from the overhead black; possibly because the local farmers confined their hoopla to weekends. The barkers barked listlessly at the handful of stragglers. The ride music jingled lonesomely through the vast empty spaces. Some of the concessionaires had given up and shuttered their booths.

"Got it straight?" I asked Dave Kelly as we approached our objective.

"Sure. But why should I give the guy such a special look?"

"He won't be wearing horn-rims," I said, "but everything else you said fits him. If he qualifies, he comes under the head of urgent business." I tapped the gun-bulge on the left side of my jacket and, from the corner of my eye, watched Kelly's eyes widen, then narrow speculatively.

We trod the soggy turf past the deserted merry-go-round, past the whirlaway, which seemed to have a customer, past Finelli's tent, Olga's booth, and the shuttered shooting gallery. I hung back while Kelly drifted to the deserted counter behind which the gold-toothed operator was chanting: "Spinum! Spinum! Spinum! Risk a dime, you're just in time! *Everybody wins!*"

Kelly hefted a dime and asked: "How about just me?"

"Anybody—everybody—pick a number, Bud."

"Seventy-seven," Dave Kelly said.

"No seventy-seven," Gold Tooth bopped. "Use your eyes, Bud. It's a one-to-fifty wheel—"

"Then make it fourteen; that's two sevens," Dave Kelly followed my script, from the memories Milton Harris had whispered to Evelyn through the screen of his cell window.

"Fourteen, he says!" Gold Tooth chanted to the handful of rubbernecks who had paused in their midway amble to witness a citizen spend a dime. "You ante in—and watch 'er spin! And will he win? *Everybody wins!*"

The wheel spun. Ratchets ticked a blur of sound, that spaced into individual clicks, that occurred at growing intervals, until there were no more clicks.

"Fourteen!" Gold Tooth chanted. "Spinum! Spinum! Spinum! Take a chance and—" Gold Tooth had been reaching for a large doll on a shelf of large dolls, but he happened to glance down at the back of Dave Kelly's close-cropped head.

Kelly's flat features were wreathed in a wolfish grin at me as he bobbed his head significantly.

Gold Tooth's hand slid from the doll to an alarm clock on a different shelf. But it didn't pull out the alarm clock either. His small, dark eyes popped at my fedora settling over my hand on the counter.

His eyes seemed to be trying to X-ray through the felt to the silver revolver they'd seen in my hand before the hat covered it.

"What's the play, Zingo?" he tight-lipped warily.

"That's the guy!" Dave Kelly was gurgling into my ear. "He's not wearing them horn-rims; but I'll swear it's the guy who dropped the doll when—" Kelly's words died and I side-glanced at his suddenly lax jaw. "*Zingo?*" he breathed.

CHAPTER SIX

Start the Wheel Rolling

"DON'T let it throw you, kid," I breathed back at him. "There are wheels within wheels." To Gold Tooth, whose name I didn't know, I

said, "Easy does it, Talker. A—grab the doll you touched in the first place. B—carry it out the side of the booth. C—I'm set to drop you the first step, word or breath you take out of line. That's the play. Believe me?"

He *had* to believe me. The "seventy-seven" Kelly had mentioned, my mention of the doll, the revolver under my fedora and my well-advertised ability with same were strands of a net that strained everything but utter belief from his mind. He took painfully careful steps to not step out of line. He pulled the doll from the shelf, moved trance-like to the door at the side of his booth.

"Let's go, kid," I told Kelly. We met Gold Tooth emerging with the doll. "We go around the back way," I told him, donning my hat and allowing the revolver to sink back into its leather nest. I prodded them behind the booth and along the shadowy area, made even more shadowy by the wet drifting down from the black.

"Zingo," Gold Tooth quavered over his shoulder. "I ain't steppin' outta line. Just, I don't see—"

"*He* saw," I murmured, waving them on toward the back of the whirlaway lot. "He saw you come out of my tent with a sister of the doll you're carrying—right after it was taken from Claire Kent by way of a fast shiv."

"No!" Gold Tooth said hoarsely, stumbling over a guy rope in the dark. "Not me, Zingo. He makes it wrong. I—"

"He says you make it wrong," I told Kelly, urging them toward the rear gate in the picket fence around the whirlaway.

Kelly uncoiled on Gold Tooth with right and left hooks that were practically simultaneous. Gold Tooth crashed down over another guy rope. Kelly, still flailing, crashed down over him.

Kelly turned his rage-twisted face up at me—from the cool hardness of my revolver muzzle against his nape.

"I *liked* Claire, Zingo."

"Me, I was crazy about her," I said. "Get up."

He got up. He helped Gold Tooth up. We moved through the gate into the spotlight glare of the whirlaway area, three lost souls a step ahead of doom.

Kelly's face mirrored confusion and suspicion as he showed it over his shrouder.

"Zingo, why in all this light?"

"Cut it!" I clipped as I spotted a familiar hulk waddling across the midway toward us. "Cop's coming, laddies. Dive in that car and duck low while I stall him."

They didn't pause to compare notes. When you walked along with five thousand dollars worth of illegal narcotic the bad word was "cop". They dove into the car; a streamlined, six-passenger car fastened to the end of a steel girder reaching down from a drum axle twenty feet off the ground. Another steel girder held another car twenty feet higher than the drum axle.

I slammed the door on them, wheeled and walked fast toward the whirlaway operator, who was plowing toward me from his admission booth, and Max Aaron, who was waddling off the midway behind him, both wearing expressions of determination.

"No free rides, you!" the operator yelled.

"Where'n hell've you been?" Max growled.

"Run the dingus!" I scowled at the operator. I snapped at Max: "Make him run it—*fast!*"

Max lost his ire at my urgency. He glanced past me to the whirlaway car which seemed empty. The laddies were well ducked. He side-mouthed to the operator: "Hold it, Clancy." To me: "Something, Charley?"

"Spin the dingus and it'll be everything!" I snapped at him.

"Spin it, Clancy," Max said.

Clancy's face showed he didn't like it—but Clancy's actions showed he knew who signed his checks. He spun it, an operation calling for a button to be pressed, a switch to be pulled, a brake released.

The steel girders began turning on the drum axle. As the cars moved they began to slowly roll. The steel arms moved faster, spreading out, raising the down car, lowering the up car, bringing both cars into a see-saw whirl. As the cars began to chase each other faster and faster up and down a wavy line around the forty-foot circle they began rolling faster also; a quarter's worth of thrill in any man's amusement park.

"Mr. Aaron!" Clancy spoke agitatedly.

"Them fellers are bouncin' around in the car! They ain't strapped in! You told me to run it: I ain't responsible for lawsuits!"

"No lawsuits." I grinned at the sudden agony on Max Aaron's broad face.

"This could ruin me!" he breathed.

"Since when could busting a reefer mob and nabbing a killer ruin you?" I grinned at him. "How long's that gold-toothed Spinnum guy been with the show, Max?"

"Him, Charley?" Max croaked. "He in the car? Mickey Rourke; there ain't a less troublesome guy on the lot, Charley! He don't drink. In all the months he's been with me he never even got in trouble off the lot; he sleeps in his booth."

"With about a hundred grand worth of marijuana stashed in his booth, do you blame him?"

"Mr. Aaron," Clancy pleaded. "Half a minute's the longest ride I run. Them fellers'll be hospital cases if I don't stop it soon. When should I stop it?"

"In a couple of hours," I said

"*You're crazy!*" Clancy raged.

"Charley, you're sure about his booth?" Max asked desperately.

"All it takes is a look," I told him.

"Have Clancy keep 'em spinning at least until you look."

IN THE Spinnum booth, sealed now from the public eye, Max raised haggard eyes from the coarse marijuana

weed I'd knocked out of a large doll. He breathed:

"This is bad, Charley!"

"Worse than that," I told him. "They get college kids on the stuff. Kelly, the other slob in the car, has a sixteen-year-old girl up in his room—Milton Harris' room—loaded with it. How much of a bond you got on me?"

Max squinted in confusion. "You keep hopping around. Five hundred dollars. Why?"

"You lose it," I told him quietly. "You lose this particular Zingo. You get Evelyn's son clear and probably coast-to-coast publicity—but the five hundred and me you'll lose."

Max studied my face thoughtfully. Then he nodded slowly. "I didn't ask you questions when you came to me in the first place. I ain't asking you questions now. I'm a live-and-let-live guy."

"That's why I'm breaking it now, instead of letting it hit you the hard way, Max," I said.

"Okay, Charley. I made enough out of Zingo to cover the five C's and then some. What else?"

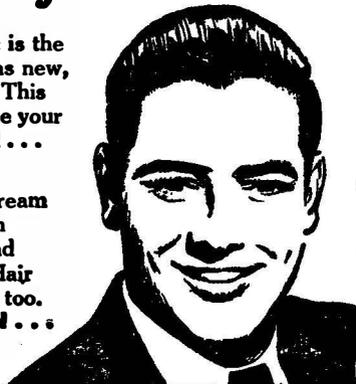
"First I want to talk to Evelyn. Then I'll go collect Captain Black. In the meantime, keep 'em spinning!"

Max's big hand closed over the coarse greenish-brown weed. "Take all the time you want, Charley. They'll spin all night if it's necessary. Murderers, thieves, chisellers, panhandlers, drunks I can

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stomach. But dope peddlers on my lot!"
I saw Evelyn.

* * *

Captain Black, sitting behind his desk in Midville's city hall, wore the expression of the cat who suddenly found himself in leaping range of the canary—me. "I was on the verge of issuing a call for you, Charles," he said softly.

"On account of the redhead reefer addict you picked up in Claire Kent's apartment," I said harshly.

This pushed him off balance, as I intended it to push him off balance. A dab of indecision entered his expression.

"You anticipate me, Charles. Do you wish to develop the subject?"

"Sure. You learned Claire Kent was a marijuana ring organizer. You made like a detective and deduced her upstairs contact might be in the vicinity of her murder—at the carnival. After listening to Red probably describe me as a lad moving in on the pitch, you deduced me for Claire's upstairs contact. I was on the stage in front of four hundred witnesses when she got stabbed; but you deduced I used an assistant for the dirty work—Milton Harris."

"You're practically reading my mind, Charles," Captain Black breathed.

"Let's get back to the deal you offered me," I said. "It makes more sense. I'm ready to swap the full picture—a hundred grand worth of marijuana and a full murder confession—for Sam Dugan. Bring him with us out to the lot and you'll get it all in your lap."

"Why should I go to that trouble?" Captain Black smiled, recovering his cat and canary expression. "Strip him, Murph."

Murph's hands were digging under my armpits before I could think. They slapped across my chest, down my sides, around my waistline, explored my sleeves and trouser legs—and finally retired.

"He ain't loaded, Cap'n," Murph said from behind me.

"Just mentally," I told Captain Black. "If you think Red's *opinion*—which is all you've got—that I had anything to do with Claire Kent or marijuana distribution will pack one ounce of weight in any court of law, you're not the cop I think

you are. You can get the whole deal in your lap—my way—or sit back and see how far Red's opinion will get you. What's the answer?"

He scratched a gray temple thoughtfully. Then he grinned: "You're tempting me, Charles; you know that?"

"I think it was Oscar Wilde who said," I forced myself to grin back at him, "that the best way to overcome temptation was to yield to it. What do you think?"

"I think we'll have Sam Dugan up here," he said.

DESOLATE was the word for the Biggest Little Carnival In The World as our little procession wended up the midway. The persistent drizzle had chased even the handful of stragglers off the lot. The barkers had given up. The booths were boarded. The strings of bulbs over the midway, wearing pallid haloes in the murk, illuminated desolation. The only sound above the slop, slop of our feet was the mechanical jingle from the whirlaway ride, tinkling mournfully through the empty spaces.

Here was the last bit of movement as the two cars continued to chase each other in their endless rat race. And here was the only sign of life—about a dozen of the carnival folk inside the picket fence, watching the spinning cars in silence.

I spotted Olga, the Fat Lady, standing behind a baby carriage alongside Clancy, who gripped the brake lever as if he feared it would fly away from him. His eyes bulged at Max Aaron, who stood away from the others, oblivious to the wet streaming down his huge face, scowling bitterly at the whirling cars.

His bitter scowl flicked briefly over Captain Black bringing up the rear of our procession, briefly on the two detectives ahead of Captain Black, thoughtfully on the Big Guy plowing along before one of the detectives and more thoughtfully on me, plowing along before the other.

"Bring them down, Max," I called, when I was in range. I had to call twice.

"If they're still alive," he croaked. He gestured at Clancy: "Cut it."

Clancy went to work like a madman. The whirling rat-race began to slow. Clancy leaned on the brake lever. The

cars slowed to a crawl, lost their see-saw lops, turned one complete vertical circle and settled into their original position.

Captain Black brushed past me to open the door. He tried to turn away from the spectacle, but the carny people were pressing close for a look. They pressed the detectives against the Big Guy and me, who pressed Captain Black in the car's doorway. I felt the carriage Olga was tending separate the detectives and lean against my back.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw the baby in the carriage fast asleep. Looking into the open whirlaway car door—

Never mind the details, Pete. If you can imagine legs, arms, torsos entangled like two pretzels, if you could imagine torn clothing and green faces, two faces that looked as seasick, airsick, fearsick and sick-period as faces can get, that would begin to describe it.

Dave Kelly's eyes would never be duller as they fastened blankly to mine.

I said, "You asked me if Milt's mother was a little blonde juggler when I told you she was a midget."

He opened and closed his mouth twice before managing to croak: "I—I—she—"

"Before that," I went on, "you told me you'd just arrived on the midway when the guy with the doll came out of my tent with the mob. You said you grabbed the doll and scrambled. You never had a chance to see the show. It's unlikely you ever heard particulars about it. The advance posters happened to show Evelyn with black hair—the color it was before we hit Midville—and the posters didn't mention her juggling. That was a new wrinkle we worked for the first time Sunday. How'd you know about the hair and juggling, Dave?"

He didn't want to answer, this would-be writer who helped a sixteen-year-old girl live dangerously by filling her with dope and bouncing her off the walls.

"Give 'em another ride, Max," I said.

"Okay, Charley," Max croaked.

"No! No!" Dave Kelly moaned. "I—I—saw her."

"Sunday?"

He nodded.

"After you'd followed Claire and Milton inside?"

He nodded.

"After Claire dropped the doll and you spotted the marijuana from its broken head?"

He nodded.

"When you tried to pull the doll from under Claire's arm? And, when she wouldn't let it go, when your temper exploded into a knife in her back to make her let it go?"

He started to nod, caught it, started to shake his head, became finally unable to keep his eyes matched to mine, dropped his gaze and whispered: "Yeah."

HE WHISPERED something else, but it was lost in the violent tremors that seized him; violent tremors that wrung hoarse sobs from his throat. He lay entangled with Gold Tooth like that, all the starch out of him.

"He blows his top for practically nothing," I told Captain Black, whose face contained an expression I would like to frame and keep among my memoirs. "I watched him blow it three times this evening. He stabbed Claire Kent for five grand worth of marijuana stuffed in a prize doll."

"Charles, you amaze me," Captain Black breathed. "About this other—"

There was no point in questioning Gold Tooth then. His eyes were closed in the green of his face. He was breathing, but that was about all.

"Mickey Rourke," I said. "He distributes the loaded dolls. Runs a fifty number wheel on the lot. Passes the dolls to agents who identify themselves by offering to bet on number seventy-seven then betting on fourteen. Who'd expect to find marijuana distributed in a carny doll gotten in a seeming gamble? And, traveling with the show, he'd cover the marijuana distribution to practically every town of size in the Midwest. Neat?"

"Beautiful," Captain Black breathed.

"Then turn Sam Dugan loose and we'll call it a day," I said.

"I'm sorry, Charles," Captain Black said, actually looking sorry. "Sam was indicted this morning and it's beyond my power now to—"

He looked even sorrier then, this soft-talking cop. He looked more than sorry; he looked flabbergasted.

(Please continue on page 97)

DEAD MAN BLUES



I placed him in the water, his face down in the mud.

Fighter Danny was going strong with that lonesome gal — until he got swamped . . . by a blind man's bluff.

By **LARRY
J. MARCUS**

IF I could only see . . . But darkness wraps itself around my throat like thick coils of rope. Out of the black, Big Man Marshall's voice comes softly, over the guitar music, "You're safe as long as I'm playing, Danny, as long as my hands are on the guitar. When I stop playing, Danny, I'm going to kill you."

Darkness so thick it forces its way down into my chest. Guitar notes scratch inside me like jagged edges of glass.

I know he locked the door behind me. The windows are barred. There's no way out—and the big hands on the guitar will

snap my neck quickly . . . or they'll linger, they'll slowly press the life-breath out of my throat.

Those hands . . . Yet it's the most beautiful guitar I ever heard—on Fifty-second Street, in New Orleans, or anyplace.

That's how it all started. With the guitar music. . . .

* * *

I'd tanked a fight in a little burg called Melissa. I had to throw it. I was barred from the ring under my own name. And they don't want the neighborhood pride knocked kicking by an unknown—which is what I was under a phony name. Somehow, the citizens of this Melissa cracker-ranch found out I'd taken the dive, which did not give them pleasure. They figured to have their fun some other way.

While they were melting the tar and plucking the chickens for their little party, I managed to boff the two guys that were guarding me. Still wearing the purple trunks, and with my last suit in my left hand, I made it out to my little car, the foreign model I'd bought with the proceeds of the fight I'd thrown in New York. It outran Melissa's fastest with plenty to spare.

So, next evening, I found myself across the state line, driving along the Gulf. I decided to eat at the next joint, which turned out to be a low white building, set on piles at the edge of a bayou. The old-fashioned blinker electric sign said, "Marshall's."

Five or six boys stood around the side door, just listening. When my motor stopped, I heard why. It was a guitar and it was wandering, the notes sad and shiny, over the intro to "Body and Soul." Out of this world—and there were only two things I liked better than myself in this world, money and music . . . *that* kind of music.

Then a girl's voice, low and hungry, slid in over the guitar. "My heart is sad and lonely . . ." Suddenly I'd found a third thing to love in the world.

I went in and stood by the door. It looked like any other juke joint in the state, except the tablecloths were cleaner and there was no juke-box. There was just this man, two hundred and fifty

pounds of him, playing the guitar and staring straight ahead. And, off to one side, a girl, well-dressed but wearing a waitress's apron, singing—singing sweet and lowdown, like you don't hear any more.

She was a redhead, not very big and wearing moccasins, but her young figure stabbed at the light cotton dress and her hips rounded it. The shape belonged with the hungry throbbing voice. In the dim light she looked pale, until I realized she wore no make-up, not even lipstick.

Her eyes swept the room, dug into mine—drilled into me until I felt more uneasy than if I were still wearing those purple trunks. Without taking her eyes off me, she sang, "I'm all for you, dear, body and soul." She meant me. I shivered.

The song ended the way it started, with the tinkling magic of the guitar; and I looked around the room. There were only about fifteen tables, with what looked like local couples on dates at two of them, while the rest were full of construction workers from the pipeline that was going through. Big guys in shiny helmets, like sandhogs, and pale young guys with slide-rule faces. One of the big ones, a rigger, got up with a drunken growl.

"The singer wants it and I'm the guy can give it to her."

He lurched toward the singer. Men at the tables grabbed at him, but he broke away. My hands came up and my weight went up on my toes. I'd be spotting the guy twenty-five pounds, but she looked worth it.

Before I got started, the guitar player was on his feet, gliding swiftly toward the drunken rigger, while he seemed to be looking the other way. As he got near the lush, his left hand made a tentative motion. The rigger reached for it.

The musician's other hand seemed to follow the drunk's arm like a thick snake until the long guitar-playing fingers were at his throat. Then the left hand stopped being tentative, whipped the drunk's arm behind him till you could hear things snapping in it.

Bent over and gasping for life, the drunk was walked past me to the door. The guitar player held him there almost a minute, and I could see little balls of muscle move in the back of the hand on

the other man's throat. The drunk's eyeballs hung from their sockets. The musician wasn't even breathing hard, just standing there looking as if he were thinking a sad thought.

I butted in, "About thirty seconds more and this guy's wife will be a widow, friend."

He gently let go of his victim and said, "Thank you, sir. You can't tell when you're blind, you know."

He was blind!

A RAW oyster nestled at the base of my spine, but I just said, "I guess not," and tried to think of how to change the subject. There were gray hairs in his light brown crop and, while I figured I knew how to take him, I was respectful.

"You play a real gone guitar, sir. And the young lady—she has everything. She your daughter?"

It was a bull, but he took it all right. "Well, no. You see, she's sort of my sweetheart. We're going to get married some day."

Bitterness warped my mouth as I said, "Congratulations. She's quite a girl."

"Thank you. Have a drink?"

Over a beer, I learned his guitar had taken him everywhere. He'd known Pine-top and Mead Lux and all the real jazz-men. He'd saved and bought this place and made out pretty well.

The singer was local talent, an orphan he'd given a job as a waitress when she was pretty hard up. He found out she had a voice and, with what he knew, he'd brought her along until now he thought she was as good as the best. I bought that.

But she wouldn't marry him. Said she couldn't make her mind up. She just went on working there and lived in, as did the other employee, Jim, the cook and dishwasher. Now that they were building the pipeline, the place was doing fine, just fine. In fact, he really needed some one to help him run it.

As he told me this, his blank eyes seemed to turn to me. I wondered how he knew I needed a job. I wondered if he could tell how much I wanted to stay there, near his "sweetheart".

They say blind men see things other people don't. I wonder how much Big

Man Marshall was able to see like that.

I said, "If you mean me, Mr. Marshall, it'd suit me fine. I slung hash before I began to fight professional."

"Oh! you're a fighter, Danny. We can't pay the kind of money you fellows get."

"Was a fighter. I'll stay a while anyway, for what you think I'm worth."

"That's good, Danny, very good." He was suddenly suspicious. "What do you expect to get out of it, boy?"

"I dunno. It's nice here and I need to eat good for a change. And I like music. Maybe you'll play me some of the stuff you don't hear any more, 'Strange Fruit,' and numbers like that."

It was partly true, but it sounded foolish to me—especially when what I was thinking of was the redheaded singer, the way her eyes ate me.

That first night and the following day, I just helped wait tables and ate a lot. Jim, the cook, took a shine to me. He'd had ambitions to get into the fight game when he was younger and still thought he knew something about it. I felt very foolish, though, when he took his big white cap off and showed his gray skull, saying, "Show me how you pros use the one-two, Mr. Danny."

I showed him, feinting him once, then tapping him with a straight left before I brought the right uppercut just short of his chin. He said, admiringly, "Mighty quick. Some other day you got to show me that again."

But the redhead—her name was Grace DeLange—was all business, and I got nothing from her but dirty looks when she caught me staring. It didn't bother me any, because I *knew*, in a way that scared me, it was so sure, that she was thinking about me all the time.

That evening, after the dinner rush, Big Man announced he was going to town to bank some money in the night depository. I said, "Let me take you in my car."

"No. Jim'll drive me in. We stay down there an hour or two. Jim gets to see his family that way. Thanks, though."

"O.K. I guess I can handle any short orders, with Miss DeLange to show me around."

They banged off in the old jalopy. Their dust was still in the air when soft fingers

brushed chills along my bare arm. The husky throbbing voice warmed my stomach like good brandy. "I sure will, Danny, honey."

It was Grace DeLange—a new Grace, her full mouth outlined in blood red lipstick and her cheeks hot with rouge. She took my arm, her hand hard high under my armpit. My knees were dirty dishwasher. She led me inside, poured us each a drink, and sat me on the sofa alongside her.

She didn't bother to talk—just twisted toward me until her cotton blouse and my shirt were a single burning fabric between us. She leaned hard and put soft lips against mine. It was greedy, and it took a long time. When it ended, she just about owned me. She sighed and her lips twisted as she said, "It's good to kiss a man, instead of a blind mole."

I reached for her again, but she held me away, almost coldly. "We got to talk. We only have an hour."

"Talk, honey, at a time like this!" Her lips began to warp again and I hurried, "What gives?"

"You got to take me away from here."

"Take you away? I just got here."

"I can't stand it any more." It sounded like the beginning of a scream.

"But I haven't got anything but the car, Grace. Besides, Marshall's a good guy."

"Good guy." The husky voice was bitter as poison. "What are you . . . afraid of him?"

I thought before I answered. "No, I can take him."

She didn't seem to hear me. "He teaches me to sing, so he thinks he owns me. No

make-up, no going places, nothing at all."

I found myself saying, "That sure isn't right."

Again she didn't hear me. "I could make good in New York, couldn't I, Danny?"

"Any place, honey, any place. But you need backing. What would you use for money?"

"Listen! Big Man used to be more of a mole than he is now, even. You know, he had all the money he'd saved down a hole in his bedroom floor. Yeh, he had it in a box down there in the muck, hanging on a rope from the trap door."

"So?"

"So he had ten thousand dollars down there. But I got him to put it in a bank in town. What we got to do is get him to sign a check in the right amount and we're set."

"With him blind, that should be easy." I found myself saying it the way I had found myself setting up the fixed fight—the one that had cost me my license—feeling doomed yet smart.

"Not too easy. He's not so dumb, and we have to do it so he won't guess and call the bank to stop payment before we cash in."

"Let me think. I'll come up with something."

Her eyes were wild and hot. "But you'll take me? You promise?" I promised.

THAT night, her singing was greater than the first time. There was more hunger and yearning in her voice. I guess I half thought it was for me. The breaks were sharp enough to take your breath away. Deep notes made way down inside

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me tremble. And the blind man was with her all the way.

Only one thing had gone wrong. When he'd first come back and said "Hello!" he sniffed the air carefully and said to Grace, "Come here!"

Stiff with hate, she went. His big hand came up to her face gently, touched what I'd left of the lipstick. He wiped it off with a napkin from one of the tables, touching it with his finger to make sure he got it all. Then he said softly, "Don't do that again, Grace."

Next morning, while Marshall was in the bathroom—he even shaved himself—and Jim was working on the breakfast dishes, she came to me in the dining room. "You see that with the lipstick, last night? I can't stand it any more. Not another night!"

"But, honey, let's not be hasty."

Her hand smoothed the light blouse tight against her and she sneered, "And I thought you were big time. With me waiting for you, you—you don't want to be hasty."

What could I do?

We went through a heavy oak door into his room. Venetian blinds on the barred windows made the room gray as a cell, even though the sun was shining outside. She pointed to the bars as we went in. "To protect his lousy money." I felt a little clammy when she waved at the ceiling and said, "See! No lights—like a god-damn mole."

But it didn't feaze her, and she had a good idea where his checkbook was. I tore a middle check from one of the back pages. Then I copied the number of the last one he'd written and we got out of there. Outside I pared away the perforated edges of the check with a sharp knife. When the blind man came from his shower, we were ready.

It was matter of fact. "Mr. Marshall, the bottled gas man was here while you were inside." My mouth was dry and I felt my lower lip jell. But he didn't seem to notice and I went on, "They're changing the system, and he wants you to sign this re-order blank right away. I'll mail it back to them. Otherwise, the service might be interrupted."

"We don't want that, do we, Danny?" He took a fountain pen from his shirt

pocket. "Here, put the pen on the dotted line for me, boy."

I did. His left hand came up from under the table where he was sitting and felt the outline of the paper. His voice was suddenly loud—still gentle, but loud. "Jim, come in here a minute, will you?"

When the cook came in, the blind man handed him the blank check without saying a word. Jim looked at it, opened his mouth and, for ten seconds, we all froze—Grace over by the door, her eyes blank with hopelessness; me with porcupines of fear pricking my spine; and Jim with his eyes wide and motionless as his mouth.

The blind man felt it all, said urgently, "Well, Jim? It's all right, isn't it?"

"Yessir, yessir. It's just the light ain't so good. I couldn't see at first. Sign right here, sir."

But, as he spoke, he turned the check over and placed the penpoint on the blank side. When it was signed, he said, "Here you are, Mr. Danny," but, instead of handing it to me, he took it out to the kitchen. When I got there, he was tearing it up.

He looked sad and said, "Stealing from a blind man, Mr. Danny. That's like buying a fight."

It shook me. Besides, I could feel myself getting into a deep game—and I didn't know whether I was the con guy or the sucker.

So, that night, when Jim drove Big Man Marshall into town, I stayed in my room, figuring Grace wouldn't be able to leave the dining room.

She did, though. She came up and sat beside me. She didn't bother with lipstick or rouge this time. But she looked like a red danger signal to me. There was no preliminary kiss either—just words like hot needles in my brain, "You see how Jim spoiled everything. We got to get rid of him. *You* got to get rid of him."

I argued. But with Grace—I lost. Yeh, I lost, but good. So I worked out one more fix—a little more elaborate and a little more deadly, but just another fix.

Next morning, Big Man was teaching Grace a new routine, patiently, practically singing the number for her on that guitar. Jim and I were polishing off some dishes and, as we finished, I said, "I feel sharp this a. m., Jimmy-boy. How about a little

sparring? Sharpen up that old one-two."

Eyes soft and worried, he kind of hesitated, but all he said was, "Sure enough, Mr. Danny."

"Let's go outside where we won't break up the routine."

So we removed our aprons and squared off on the coarse grass at the back of the tavern. I said, "Now, the one-two, Jimmy-boy."

I jolted the left sharply into his solar plexus. His eyes looked wild and his chin slopped forward. I got my left leg between his and swung a right hand uppercut from the floor. It splatted wickedly on the loose chin and he went down, out cold. Picking him up wasn't much trouble but, out in the swamp behind the house, he started to squirm. I had to lay him down on some cypress roots and clip him again.

When we got to where the water was getting deep, I placed him in it, his face down in the mud. Then I thought how the cool water might revive him. I put my foot on the back of his head while he floated there. And I stood like that and listened to the breeze off the Gulf swish the willow trees and the Spanish moss until the last bubbles fluttered in the dead water near my foot. . . .

Then I went back to Grace and Big Man Marshall.

He said, "Where's Jim? I don't hear him around."

"I dunno. I just came out of the bathroom."

Grace murmured, "He's been getting mighty lonely for his family lately."

The blind man said, "He wouldn't go off without saying anything."

I said, "Maybe he got a hitch on a passing car. Maybe he didn't want to interrupt your rehearsing."

"Maybe . . . maybe." The big man's voice was sad and slow.

EARLY that afternoon, Grace announced she had torn her dress and would have to have a new one for the evening show. Marshall just went over to the register and took out some bills. They were from the left-hand slot—five tens and a twenty.

He held them out. Grace took them. "That's more than I need, Big Man."

"Get yourself something real fine, some-

thing for a special occasion." He paused, then mumbled, "You might stop over at Jim's and see if—"

She went. And she came back wearing the new dress, a shiny jersey that turned her body to swamp fire and clung to her like the clothes on a drowned body. But she didn't bring Jim back. Nobody could.

Instead, she brought back the rigger, the one I'd saved the first night I was there. He came, driving his own car behind Grace in the jalopy.

Somehow she had got him on our side. Maybe it was hate for the blind man and maybe it was the same thing that had me on Grace DeLange's side—especially in that jersey dress. Anyhow, he knew what he was supposed to do and headed right into the main room of the tavern.

When they arrived, I switched off the blinking electric sign and put the trestle with the "Tavern Closed" sign across the driveway and followed the rigger into the dining room.

Big Man Marshall sat, alone and silent, at one of the tables. The rigger went over to him, spoke cautiously, "Mr. Marshall, I'm the new bakery man. I just put your order out in the kitchen, but the cook doesn't seem to be around to sign for it."

The blind man sniffed the air like a big dog. "Seems like everybody's new around. Danny, are those pies and things in the back?"

My jaw was tight as I told him yes.

But all he did was turn to the man and say, "Put the penpoint on the line."

So the new check was put in front of him, and he signed it, just like that. I reached over and snatched the paper from the table, put it into my pocket. The rigger wasn't waiting for any rewards—not that night anyhow. He just sprinted out to his car and spurted away.

Grace and I weren't going to wait either. We were on our way to my car—and to the bright lights on Fifty Second Street.

I cut the telephone wire. All I had to do was get in the little car with that green jersey dress and we were all set.

Suddenly the blind man's voice filled the room, somehow filled my mind. But the words were just reminiscing. "Was one song you wanted to hear me play—one I couldn't do in the show."

"Yeh, 'Strange Fruit'. Let's skip it, tonight."

His voice was soft, yet it pulled at me like a magnet. "Let's don't skip it. This is the night for it." He smiled at something he was thinking. "No suckers in the trap, as they say on the Street."

What could I do? There was no use making the guy suspicious. Besides, I'd always wanted to hear him on "Strange Fruit," him and that guitar. And I knew I could take him in a show-down fight—not that I wanted to have to.

That's how I remember thinking, but I guess it was more like hypnotism—that voice of his pulling at me—because I could see Grace in the green dress out of the corner of my eye. She was shaking her head wildly, but it didn't seem very important what she did. I just said, "Yeh, yeh."

He lumbered to his feet. "We'll go in my room. That way, we won't bother anybody that comes in and we'll be near if Grace gets busy." He called over his shoulder, "Mind the place, Grace. We'll only be a couple of minutes."

He headed for his room, fumbled with the knob on the oak door. I got in front and opened it for him.

The shove he gave me wasn't rough. It was like a big wave riding me into the room. And the door was shut before I got used to the half-light from the doorway, before I realized that this was the room with no lights—Marshall's room, where he knew his way.

Where I was blind!

* * *

The door is shut and the key turned, snapped off in the lock by the blind man's big hand. The Venetian blinds seal out the light, and behind them the windows are barred. The dazed fighter is in a room full of shapeless darkness, with a big blind man whose hands lightly pluck a death-dance on the guitar, the beginning of "Strange Fruit."

Big Man Marshall speaks, soft and tired, out of the blackness. "When I stop, I'm going to kill you, Danny."

The fighter starts toward him, but the darkness stops him, holds him like a heavy leather noose.

And the voice goes wearily on, "If only you hadn't killed Jim, you could have gone away with her, Danny. But now . . . I knew. I knew when you brought that man in tonight. He smelled of oil and machines, not bread and cake. Don't you think I heard the ticking stop when you turned off the electric sign?"

The song ends. Danny thinks, "Now he'll come after me. Well let him come. I'll take him. I *have* to take him."

Suddenly he hears his own voice, high and tinny. "Well, damn you, why don't you come?"

The only answer is the guitar, tinkling the first notes of the song again. The fighter shakes with new fear: "What's he doing? Trying to torture me. I'll show him. I'll go get him."

It feels good moving. Fast. On his toes, like in the ring. He remembers how the room is now. Nothing between him and Big Man Marshall. Nothing.

He's almost on the motionless blind man now—ready to slug him, smash him. Big Man must hear the fighter's steps. Why doesn't he stop playing? Danny laughs strangely, his teeth chattering. "I'll stop you. Here I come."

There's nothing under his feet as he lunges forward. Straight down, like in a dream . . . straight down, seven feet, with his face and hands slopping against mud, strange clean-smelling muck. He struggles in the slime at the bottom, tries to get a grip on the greasy walls.

And he hears Big Man's voice, gentle as ever. "I'm closing the trapdoor now, Danny. What you smell down there is quicklime."

Above his own screams, Danny hears the door thud down. Two heavy feet stamp on the hollow wood. His hands are dry flame where they tried to grasp the walls. His face is blistering torture. He tries to cool them, tries to bury his face in the muck at the bottom of the hole. . . .

In the dining room upstairs, a girl in a waitress's apron turns the switch that starts the old-fashioned electric sign. She is wearing no make-up, and a bright green jersey dress lies in the corner where she has flung it. From the bedroom, she hears the last chords of a song—"A strange and bitter crop."

BAD TO THE LAST DROP

*Now she'd landed in the gravy,
the torchy two-timer wanted to help Evans
to his grave.*



*"Don't jump to conclusions," I said.
"I wasn't making a pass at your wife."*

By R. M. F. JOSES

THERE was a new moon that night, lighting the garden with a pale, frosty glow, and the house loomed at the end of the drive a great dark mass. One window on the third floor was lit where the servants' quarters were but the rest was shadowed and quiet.

I circled around the corner of it, keeping on the grass and walking on the balls of my feet.

Beyond the terraces at the rear, the fairways of the adjoining country club rolled like silver ground swells on the ocean. On the other side of an expanse

of turf the clubhouse was marked by a blaze of light, and the beat of dance music drifted through the open windows. I could see the miniature figures of people moving against them.

A clock chimed twelve in measured strokes as I reached the back of the house. I moved into the shadows and waited, hoping that Madeline would step through the open French windows of the library a few feet away. I didn't want to go into the house to find her.

Midnight, she had said and it was exactly that, but I'd never known her to be on time. Even now she probably wouldn't be. The same urge that had nagged ever since I left my car at the highway and started for the house grew more insistent. It still wasn't too late to turn around and leave.

That would be the smart thing to do. But I couldn't forget the fear that had been in her voice when she called me. And I couldn't forget a lot of other things about her.

When the telephone rang the night before, I must have been thinking about her. I was certain her voice would be at the other end. And it was, breathless, hurried.

"Chuck, don't hang up on me. Please."

"Why shouldn't I?"

The same catch was in her voice that used to turn me to jelly in the old days. "I know how you must feel, Chuck, but please listen."

"What difference does it make, Madeline?" I said. "It's all over. We were finished three years ago. Why kick it around any more?"

"You can't say that. It won't ever be over for us."

"All right!" I snarled in the mouth-piece. "Maybe it won't. But I'm trying to forget it. You've got your own life and I'm trying to find mine."

"It isn't mine. Don't you see? He doesn't love me. I'm something like . . . like his paintings or his crystal collection."

I closed my eyes tightly and tried to think clearly. But I could only think of the beautiful face and warm body. "What do you want, Madeline? What is it this time?"

Her voice grew suddenly hushed. "I can't talk much longer, Chuck. I'm on an extension upstairs, but he might come in.

He's been like a maniac. Raging drunk and storming through the house." A quaver crept into her tone.

"I'm afraid. Last night he tried to choke me. He would have done it if I hadn't gotten away from him and locked myself in my room. Nobody here will help me. They wouldn't raise a hand if he—"

"Gentry tried to kill you?" I couldn't believe it.

"I swear he did. Then today I tried to get away. The butler sent the taxi away as soon as it came. He said Conrad had ordered him to."

"All right, Madeline," I said wearily. "What do you want me to do?"

Her voice was still hushed and urgent. I was to help her get away the next night, come out to their place on Long Island at twelve. I was the only one she could turn to now and old times must still mean something to me.

She sounded as if she were crying when the connection broke.

FOR three years I had tried to forget them, but the old days still did mean something to me. Enough to pull me out to Long Island to help a woman run away from her husband. And now that I was here, they meant enough to keep me from backing out.

I edged along the wall in the shadows and the brick wall at my back pulled at my coat like tiny fingers. I pushed one French window farther open. The room was dark inside and the steady beat of the clock stroked the seconds.

I leaned in the window. "Madeline." Softly.

No answer. I swore under my breath. Now of all times she could have been prompt. Or— The hair rose stiffly on the back of my neck. Gentry could have gone off the deep end and killed her. She might be lying in one of the rooms upstairs, the lovely face cold.

I stepped inside. "Madeline!" Louder this time and with less regard for who might hear it. A chair hit against my knees and I stumbled forward, catching at the back.

Someone to the left and behind moved in the pocket of darkness beside the window. A foot scraped against the floor

and clothing rustled. Then something snapped through the air, struck against the back of my head and consciousness exploded.

I pitched forward, a groan forcing itself out of my lungs, and the swishing sound came again, ending in a chopping blow that drove me to the floor. I wasn't completely out, but I couldn't move or speak. Only part of my mind was still functioning and it was pain-fogged.

Hands locked themselves under my arm pits and dragged me across the carpet. The whisper of quick breathing rose to strained grunts of effort. Hands hauled upward and dumped me into a chair, moving quickly, holding me erect. I tried to focus on the figure before me. The paralysis was fading but the room was dark and the faint light from the windows whirled erratically.

Hands steadied me, then a tongue of thundering flame leaped through the darkness. A heated chunk of lead stabbed through my left shoulder and the pain of it shocked me into complete consciousness for a moment. I yelled and arched halfway out of the chair in a lunge for the form. It jumped sideways and reached the open window in a couple of running steps.

The outline of a man's bare head was sharp against the window and I caught a glimpse of a dark coat and white shirt front. I took two steps after him before the floor came up to meet me in a smothering black wave.

I don't know how long I was out. The clock was ticking somewhere near but the room was still dark. I tried to get off the floor and fell back. My shoulder felt as if a railroad spike had been driven into it and a sticky warmth was spreading down my arm.

Rolling over on my right side, the good one, I worked a hand up under my chest. I told myself I was six feet tall, weighed a hundred and eighty and could give a semi-pro a good workout any time. It didn't mean a thing. I lay there and sweated and swore without getting any closer to a sitting position. The pain spread from my left shoulder down to the fingertips like a thousand small, sharp teeth tearing at the flesh and chewing each nerve.

Nothing could be important enough to force me off the soft, comfortable carpeting. Nothing except the fact that the part of my mind that was still working told me I'd better move, and fast.

The distance to the light switch was the longest known to man. It took two or three light years to make it, then I leaned against the wall and listened to someone sobbing for breath—me.

My fingers found the switch and light flooded over the shelves of leather-bound books, a low, yellow couch at one side of the fireplace and across the back of the man before it.

He was lying quite still, the top of his head a pulp of gray hair and blood. A darkening puddle spread from it across the nap of the carpet and thin red rivulets ran from the corners of his eyes across his face. Half-closed eyes stared glassily across the floor, fixed on the poker from the fireplace set a few feet from him.

More than just his stare was fixed on it. The end of the shaft was stained with blood. Fragments of skin and hair clung to it. Near one hand a .25 calibre automatic with pearl grips lay where it might have fallen from his fingers.

His name was Conrad Gentry.

Overhead footsteps sounded and a man's voice echoed through the house. "Mr. Gentry! What's the matter, sir?"

I picked up the automatic and snapped out the light, pressing back against the wall behind the door. It wouldn't matter if the pistol had my fingerprints on it; it wouldn't matter if they were all over the room.

Take an ex-convict and put him in a room with a bullet hole in his shoulder and a crease in the skull of a man he had reason to kill. The answer was the same, prints or not.

He was closer now, down to the first floor and moving from one room to the next, calling with a queasiness in his voice. I flattened against the wall, holding the automatic in my left hand. The fingers still worked but a dead numbness was creeping down from the shoulder.

He called Gentry's name once before he came in the room. Then the lights went on and he gave a kind of stifled groan from the doorway. I was on his back before he was halfway to Gentry, my fore-

arm locked under his chin and pulled back against his throat, the automatic rammed into him.

"This is a gun in your back," I told him. "I won't use it unless you make me. Understand?"

He made a choked sound and jerked his chin down against my arm. I let him go and he bent forward, gasping for breath. Wearing a faded bathrobe and slippers, he didn't look nearly as much a butler as the last time I had seen him.

"Where is she?"

He massaged his throat with shaky fingers and his voice came out a thin squeak. "Mrs. Gentry is at the country club. She is entertaining there tonight."

"How charming," I said. I shifted the pistol to my right hand and let my left arm sag. The butler stared hypnotically at the blood running onto the back of my hand.

"Remember me?" I asked.

His face was the gray of wet ashes and his glance kept straying to what was left of Gentry. "Yes, sir. You are Mr. Evans. A friend of Mrs. Gentry."

"A very good friend," I said. "What time did she leave?"

"Six o'clock. She went early to attend to the details."

I jerked my head at Gentry. "Who attended to the details on him?"

His expression said plainly that I had, but he looked at the gun in my hand. "I . . . I don't know, sir. He returned about eleven."

"Why?"

"I don't know. He seemed quite upset. He said he didn't wish to be disturbed and I stayed in my rooms until I heard the shot."

I moved a step closer to the man and his jaw slackened. He held his hands out towards me, palms outward, and I pulled him around by one arm, marching him ahead of me. In the lavatory next to the library I found some towels and ripped them into strips to tie his arms and legs. The house was isolated but this was no time to take any chances. I stuffed part of a towel in his mouth and left him on the tiled floor.

My coat came off like a layer of skin. I used a pocket knife to cut the shirt-sleeve at the shoulder and peel the sodden

cloth down. The bullet had passed through the muscle at the point of my left shoulder, leaving a puckered dimple of torn flesh where it had gone in and a raw hole on the other side.

I wobbled over to the wash basin, swabbing at the wound with a wet cloth, and improvised a clumsy bandage over it with some of the strips of toweling. The coat and shirtsleeve stayed in the lavatory, and I borrowed one of Gentry's topcoats from the closet in the foyer.

ON THE front steps the shakes hit like an attack of malaria. Chills ran up and down my back like fingers on a keyboard and the sweat on my face was as cold as death. I started for the car in a stumbling run.

Halfway there, I stopped and looked back. No sound was coming from the house. Beyond, the music was still drifting from the country club. I wondered if Madeline was enjoying herself. There was no reason why she shouldn't be. Gentry had come home at eleven and I had shown up at twelve, all according to schedule. In the interval, the man in the shadows had wrapped the poker around Gentry's head and had been waiting for me.

I wondered how she had persuaded Gentry to return home at eleven, but I didn't wonder how she had found someone to take care of him and me. She had always been able to find a man for the job. I had spent three years in prison for her. It shouldn't have been too hard to find one to kill for her.

After Colorado Springs I never thought I'd see her again, least of all in the surroundings of the Gentry estate. It was one of those places with enough grounds around it to make cutting the lawns a full-time job. I had business there, but I didn't think it was the kind that required the use of the tradesman's entrance. The English butler didn't seem to be in complete agreement on the point.

He marched me in a frosty silence along two or three miles of hallway before we reached a sunroom at the back of the house. Ringling Brothers could have pitched the main tent in it and still had room left for the sideshows.

She was stretched on the crimson

cushions of a chaise longue, a slim exclamation point of pale legs, a skimpy sunsuit and bare shoulders. Her eyes were just as flawless. I recognized her at once, but she was still studying my card. Then she looked up and it fluttered to the floor,

"Chuck! I can't believe it!"

"Hello, Madeline," I said. The words sounded flat and lifeless after three years of carrying her memory around.

She was standing now, close to me, much too close. "Chuck, darling. How long has it been?"

"Three years this August tenth," I said quickly. Maybe too quickly.

She laughed, her head tilted back, looking down under her eyelashes. I remembered the mannerism well; it seemed as if the gap in time had closed up. "You always did remember dates."

"I've got a reason to remember that one. I started my sentence then."

"Oh." Small white teeth closed on her lip and she laughed again. A quick, brittle laugh. "How did you ever find me, Chuck? I didn't think you knew my married name."

"You still don't pay your bills, Madeline. I'm working for Bonwhit and Maple. They thought it would be nice if I came out and talked to you about your account."

"Still hounding people for money. Chuck Evans, the invincible credit man."

"It's my trade," I said. "The only thing I know to make a living."

Her glance strayed towards my clothes. The suit had cost forty dollars two years before. "Not too much of a living," I admitted. "An ex-con can't be too particular and I'm paying off the company back in

Colorado Springs. So much a month and it doesn't leave much over."

"But why. You served a prison sentence. Isn't that enough?"

"Maybe, but I like it better this way."

She looked away briefly, staring thoughtfully over the rear of the property. Four or five acres of formal terraced gardens and ponds ran to a high hedge and beyond that lay the rolling green of the golf course. It was a warm sunny day even at four-thirty and a foursome in white hats was playing the hole nearest the hedge.

"I suppose you hate me," she said.

"No. I don't. At first I expected you to visit me and it hurt when you didn't. Then I heard you had left town and I made up my mind to forget you. If I hadn't, I would have gone crazy."

I didn't tell her I almost had. "There wasn't much I could do about the rest of it. You couldn't be expected to hang around the gate waiting for me to get out."

Her eyes were very bright on my face, but she had always been able to turn on emotion like a faucet—while underneath she remained very sure and certain about what she wanted. Quite a few people said she was completely calculating. They were probably right.

"That's all there is to it?"

"That's all," I said. "You were expensive to maintain. Out of my class really. So I borrowed some money from my company and forgot to tell them about it. I got caught and that's all."

"Everyone said you only took it because of me and they all blamed me for ruining your life."

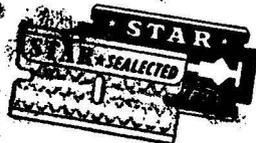
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"Forget it, Madeline," I said. "I have."

I stayed for dinner. Her husband wasn't there, but I couldn't see any harm in it. After all, I had known her before he did. Madeline had traded the sun-suit for a white strapless linen number that looked as if hope alone were holding it up. Three years hadn't hurt her. If anything they had worked an improvement.

The butler served breather glasses of brandy in the sunroom and disappeared as if he didn't expect to be called again. I had a feeling that he was accustomed to intimate dinners for two when Gentry was away. I was watching his stiff back leave when I noticed her green eyes were thoughtfully watching me.

"Impressed?" she asked.

I lit a cigarette. "Why not? Who hasn't heard of the Gentrys? Your husband's family has had money since the Indians sold Manhattan. Old time, solid citizens in these parts."

"Very respectable. Very prominent."

I had another sip of brandy. "Very," I agreed. I hadn't mentioned the bill I was supposed to collect all evening. It was for over four thousand dollars. Furs, lingerie, perfume, and that sort of stuff, but the people with the most money usually were the slowest to pay. Having plenty of the filthy themselves, they seemed to think it must be equally unimportant to everyone else.

"He's in Chicago," she said. "Chicago this week and Boston the next. After that, Philadelphia. Then around the end of the month, he may come home for a few days. Maybe." She rocked the crystal glass and let the amber brandy run up the sides. "He's very rich. It takes a great deal of his time managing his affairs. Almost all of it."

"And you get what's left?"

Madeline nodded slowly. "There are always the garden clubs, the settlement work and the fascinating afternoon teas. I shouldn't be bored. Besides, his sister lives near here. I can always run over for a visit. She has a house just as big and just as much like a tomb as this one.

"She has just as much money and worries just as much about it. Her wardrobe consists of six dresses and the newest one was bought four years ago. She saves

string. Sometimes she makes almost twenty-five cents selling it."

I didn't say anything. I watched her drink the last of the brandy in her glass and hold it out in one slender hand. The green eyes were cold and hard when she turned them on me.

"We don't waste money. We conserve it—for heaven knows what. Furs and jewelry and clothing come under the heading of waste. When we buy anything, we buy the very best and make it last. Like this glass. It cost twelve dollars, but we'll take very good care of it and we'll make it last."

She turned the crystal in her fingers and let the light reflect from the polished surface. Then her fingers opened and it slipped to the red tile floor, shattering with a thin clarion crash.

"I hate him," she said with cold rage in her voice.

I WASN'T going to see Madeline again, but the credit manager at Bon-whit and Maple changed my mind. He wanted action on the account and I went out there twice to settle it. Madeline and I had a lot to talk about but the conversation never seemed to get around to her account. At least I couldn't keep it there.

Finally, I told her I had to have an answer or go to her husband. That was when she promised to talk to him. He hadn't been in town for two weeks and she swore she'd have an answer on Thursday if I'd come out then. I was foolish enough to believe her.

She was in the sunroom when I got there. It seemed to be the place where she spent most of her time, staring out across the golf course, smoking one cigarette after the other. The ashtray beside her was full of lipstick-stained cigarettes, each one smoked for only a puff or two, then snuffed out.

She was different that day, subdued, withdrawn. "I talked to him," she said. "He told me to take everything back."

"Feeling big-hearted, eh?"

Her eyes were a little red and swollen. She could have been crying—or just have rubbed them. "Oh Chuck. I'm miserable."

We were sitting on the chaise-louge, facing each other and she caught my hand.

"It's all so wrong. I wish we could turn the clock back."

Her eyes were shadowed by her lashes and the red lips were only inches from mine. The perfume she wore was suggestive and her breath was warm against my cheek.

I shook my head. "Even if I crippled myself trying, I couldn't feel sorry for you."

I had expected her to slap my face when I said it and I was ready for it. But she didn't move except to lean a little closer.

I didn't hear the footsteps; I didn't know anyone was there until a soft cough told me.

A small, sparse man with a gray moustache and pince-nez glasses stood in the entrance to the room. He was wearing a plain tweed suit that needed pressing and carrying a briefcase in one hand. His face was very pale and stiff.

"I beg your pardon," he said, but he didn't move.

I looked at Madeline. Her expression was a completely indifferent blank. "Hello, Conrad."

He placed his briefcase on a chair as carefully as if it were filled with eggs. When he straightened, his small body seemed to have shrunk into itself. "I don't believe I have met this gentleman, Madeline." His voice was a flat monotone.

"Let's not be too civilized," I said. "The name is Evans, if that matters."

It obviously didn't. I thought Madeline might have mentioned me, though, if only in passing.

"Don't jump to conclusions," I said. "I wasn't making a pass at your wife. I knew her a long time ago. You might call me an old friend."

"Suppose you let me be the judge of that," he said thickly.

I thought he was going to lose his self-control. His hands shook and he tightened them into fists at his sides.

"You might entertain your old friends, Madeline, at a time when I'm not expected home. I'd rather not witness it."

I glanced at her. She was very careful to keep her eyes averted. She had told me the only thing she and Gentry had in common was a name. It didn't look that way now.

"I don't know what your wife is trying to prove," I said. "But you won't see me around again."

"I shall expect not. And if I do, I shall shoot you on sight. You may count on it."

I believed him. The pale eyes behind the glasses had an insane look.

"Don't bother to oil up your gun," I said. "It would be a waste of time."

The butler was in the hall outside, taking it all in. He beat me to the door without seeming to hurry and held it open.

"Your hat, sir," he said coolly. Without saying it in so many words, he got the impression over that he wouldn't be opening the door for me again. He was good at that sort of thing.

NOW, turning into the driveway of the country club, I wondered how good he was at untying knots. At best, I had only an hour or so. Maybe less. Someone would happen into the Gentry place before long even if the butler didn't manage to get to a telephone. Madeline would see to that.

It was one of those places where they comb your family tree back to the third generation before you get an invitation to be considered for membership. Low and long on the scale of the White House, with a columned entrance.

They let me get as far as the foyer before a hand dropped on my arm. The owner was a small character with a white dinner coat and a harassed frown. His mustache matched his size.

"Pardon me, sir. Are you a guest of a member?"

I chewed the enamel off my teeth and waited for him to loosen the grip on my arm. With the bullet hole in it, even the weight of my shirt felt like a hot iron.

"No. I'm looking for Mrs. Gentry." The words came out between my teeth like cold cuts out of a slicing machine.

A burned-out bulb couldn't have snapped off faster than his smile. "Sorry, sir. Mrs. Gentry is entertaining a party of guests. I'm sure she doesn't wish to be disturbed."

His hand urged me firmly towards the door. "Just a minute," I growled. "This is a police matter."

The hand dropped about a minute be-

fore I would have buried my nose in the carpeting. "A police matter! Are you from the police?"

I would have laughed in his face except that there wasn't a snicker left in me. "Lieutenant Evans," I said and gave him my best gimlet-eyed look. By this time, half of the law on Long Island could be looking for me.

He dry-washed his hands and gnawed at the edge of the fuzz on his lip. "What is the trouble, Officer?"

"Later," I said. No cop had ever let me in on what was happening. It seemed to be a policy of the trade. "Is there a spot around here where I can look in on Mrs. Gentry?"

The look he gave me was the same one you see at the Thursday afternoon bridge club when word gets out that one of the girls' husbands has been keeping a blonde.

"Well," he snipped. "These June and January marriages. I overheard Mrs. Gentry saying something to her husband earlier this evening about a man who was annoying her. A person named Chuck, I believe, who had insisted on seeing her tonight. Mr. Gentry was quite irritated. He left shortly afterwards. I couldn't help but overhear them, you understand."

"Sure," I said, and believed him. That answered the question of how Madeline got Gentry home.

"Mrs. Gentry is in the game room upstairs. There are some back stairs."

They were almost straight up. I wasn't sure I could make them. The arm felt as if it were being jabbed with dull pins. Underneath the topcoat my sleeve was stiff with blood and the arm was swelling against the towel bandage. When I wasn't thinking of how much it hurt, I was listening for the howl of a siren outside.

The door at the top gave on a draped opening. The manager fiddled with the hangings and licked the edge of his mustache. He seemed to like the taste of it.

"You realize, Lieutenant, all the proceeds got to worthy causes. We . . . ah . . . have an understanding with the authorities."

I edged him out of the way and opened the curtains a slit. In the room beyond was a setup that made the biggest club in Las Vegas look like a crap game in a back

alley. Roulette, faro, a blackjack table, half-a-dozen poker tables, and fifty or more people in evening clothes clustered around the games.

She was standing by the roulette setup, only a few feet away, her smooth black hair framing the sculptured features, the splash of red mouth. The slim body was sheathed in gold lamé, glowing like a candle against the dimness of the room.

The moths were there, too. The short, fat man at her elbow in a wrinkled dinner coat, squirming for her attention, his beefy face red. A tall, gangling boy with a crewcut who couldn't take his eyes off her. And the sleepy-eyed man with coal-heaver's shoulders and a narrow, watchful face.

One of them was the man I wanted. With the announcement of Gentry's murder yet to come, the urge to meet it together would be undeniable. Or maybe it would be only common distrust that would bind them. But which guy was it?

"Mrs. Gentry been here all evening?"

The manager nodded firmly. "I'm positive she was."

I had expected that. "What about the boy friends?"

"I couldn't say." He was looking at me with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. "You aren't one of the local men, are you?"

"No." I tried to think of a place where I might be from and drew a blank. "New York," I finally said.

"New York," he repeated thoughtfully. "That's strange. Why would you be making an investigation here?"

I didn't have the slightest idea myself, but I had to get him off the subject. "Because Gentry was murdered tonight."

It wasn't an answer but it worked as well as one. His mouth sucked inward and his skin yellowed.

"Murdered! How terrible. But who?"

"Give me a chance to work on it. I want a man up here in street clothes. Anyone, just so long as Mrs. Gentry and the men who are with her don't know him."

His mouth was still tight against his teeth when he started down the stairs. At the bottom he stopped and slowly turned a pale face back at me. I made a pushing motion with my hand and he disappeared.

They were still there when I looked back, the three of them circled around her. *Take your pick, Evans, I thought, one out of three, better odds than they are getting at the roulette table. Only make it good because the first time will be the last. This is the payoff, the spot Madeline has had in mind for you for a long time.*

The manager was taking a long time to get back; long enough to make half-a-dozen calls to check on me. I was beginning to get the shakes again. The landing where I was standing was about the size of a cell and it was looking more like one every minute. The nights in stir when some poor devil burned were very vivid by the time steps sounded on the stairs behind me.

"Here he is, Lieutenant. The best I can do. One of the dishwashers."

He was a small man, baldheaded and paunchy, with faded cold eyes and an impassive face. I pointed out Madeline and the men with her.

"Here's what I want you to do. What's your name?"

"They call me Fred," he said to me quietly.

"All right, Fred. Get in there and watch them. The four of them by the roulette table. Let them notice you, but keep on staring at them. If they move away, follow them. Got it?"

He listened to me, unblinking, rocking slowly on his heels. He looked like a cop, but so much the better for what I wanted.

"Yeah," he said. "I got it." He looked at the manager. "Okay with you, Mr. Driscoll?"

Driscoll spread his hands. "Whatever the lieutenant wants."

I SAW Fred's hands as he opened the drapes. For a dishwasher they didn't look as if they had ever been near water. Then he was moving slowly across the room to take up a stance a few feet from Madeline. She met his stare with a frown of annoyance then turned back to the game.

"Who are they?" I asked the manager, Driscoll.

He peered over my shoulder through the slit in the curtains. I noticed his hand was shaking when he pulled the drape farther aside, but I didn't pay much attention to it.

"The tall gentleman, the husky one, is Mr. Sykes. He's our tennis champion. One of the best in the state." Sykes had noticed the squat figure standing near him. He glanced away, then his eyes strayed back momentarily.

The manager's voice droned in my ear. "The stout man on the left of Mrs. Gentry is Mr. Phelps, a real estate broker." He was the red-face, beefy man. At the moment he was trying to hold Madeline's hand and breathe down her neck.

"Does he belong here?"

"Oh, certainly. He lives in the club. All the gentlemen with Mrs. Gentry are members. The young man next to Mr. Phelps comes from a family who are charter members. The Bainbridges."

He looked like the college type with the crewcut and pink face. Impressionable enough for Madeline to put through the hoops without half trying. Judging by the way he was watching Phelps, he might be willing to murder just to hear her thank him.

The tennis player was watching my man



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again. He said something to the others and all four of them looked up at the squat figure. Madeline's lips moved. The hum and clatter in the room drowned out her words, but the baldheaded man smiled blandly at her and didn't move.

She swung away from the table and the metallic cloth of her gown clung to her thighs with the abruptness of her motion. The three men followed her to another table and behind trailed the squat man, waddling patiently.

I let the curtains drop. "I want to see your books, Driscoll."

His jaw slackened. "But—"

"Never mind! I'll explain later."

He shrugged and took me to his office, opening the vault where the ledgers were kept. I went to work, asking him a question from time to time until I had the information I wanted. It took over a half-hour and by the time I was finished I could hardly stand. My arm felt as if it had been gone over with a jack hammer, a stiff swollen hunk of flesh that hurt from the shoulder to my nails.

But I had enough to take a stab at which one of the three was my man. As much as I ever would, and there wouldn't be any second guesses. A lot depended on whether he had seen my face clearly in Gentry's library. I didn't think he had, but I wasn't certain.

I told Driscoll which one I wanted and he told me I was crazy—irregardless of whatever might be involved.

"Maybe I am," I said. "But tell him there is a call for him on the telephone in the foyer. Before you do, though, get that dishwasher there. I'll be waiting."

The foyer was empty. Not even the man on the door was still around. I moved to a spot across from the bank of telephone booths and let the wall hold me up. Someone moved outside against the glass panes of the door, then faded into the darkness.

I looked the other way, back towards the checkroom. A man in a brown suit was leaning against the checkstand, staring at the ceiling. He looked even less like a guest than I did, but I forgot about him as Driscoll and the dishwasher came into the hall.

"You're doing fine, Fred," I said. "Just keep it up."

"Sure. What now?"

"Wait until he comes down here and keep staring at him. I'll take care of the rest of it."

He didn't come for a few minutes. They passed like a hand through the wringer. At any second I expected a flying squad to burst through the door and blow up everything. Driscoll had disappeared and the little man was watching me out of the corner of his eye.

I was going to tell him he could drop the icy-stare routine when a tall figure rounded the corner and walked towards us. His head jerked in my direction and his eyes weren't sleepy any longer. His stride hesitated briefly, then he passed into the center booth, turning to close the door behind him and looking once at me.

When he came out, he was trying to appear puzzled that the phone had been hung up, but his face was gray. He closed the door carefully, then his head lifted as if it had been pulled on strings and he looked directly at us.

I jerked away from the wall and stuck a forefinger at him. "That's the man, Officer! He's the one I saw coming out of the house!"

Sykes backed against the door of the booth. The tip of his tongue came out and crept around blanched lips. His head switched back up the hallway at the man standing by the checkroom, and around to the unguarded entrance. Then he dodged and started running for the door.

The rest of it happened too fast for me. The paunchy man beside me started after Sykes, sweeping back his coat and pulling out a pistol as he ran. Brown-suit at the checkstand brought his eyes down from the ceiling and began running too. The front door slammed open and another man dove against Sykes' legs, bringing him down in a heap as my dishwasher landed on the pile with brown-suit following.

I don't think anyone in the club heard it. The orchestra covered up the brief scuffling and not another sound was made. Two of the men pulled Sykes to his feet and the door closed behind them. The whole thing had lasted three minutes.

The paunchy man walked back to me, holstering his gun. "You did all right Evans," he said grudgingly. "I didn't

(Please continue on page 96)



POPULAR FILMS

A Guide to Good Movie-Going for Fiction Fans

Ted Palmer Picks:

For Intrigue: "The Bribe" with Robert Taylor, Ava Gardner, Charles Laughton, Vincent Price, John Hodiak (MGM).



Government-agent Rigby (Robert Taylor), on an island off the coast of Central America, is in search of a gang which falsely condemns surplus airplane motors, reassembles and sells them at exorbitant prices in South America. In cracking the case, Rigby tangles with a beautiful cabaret singer (Ava Gardner), her drunken husband (John Hodiak) and several assorted villains. Pay-off comes when Rigby orders a raid on the plant which he has discovered, and shoots it out with the leader of the gang (Vincent Price). *Good villainy, ominous action*—and Ava Gardner.

* * *

For Drama: "Knock On Any Door" with Humphrey Bogart and John Derek (Columbia).



Ex-Skid Row lawyer, Andrew Morton (Humphrey Bogart), unintentionally causes Nick Romano (John Derek) to become one of the more undesirable citizens on the wrong side of the tracks. Although marriage temporarily halts Nick's career of gambling and small-time thieving, he returns to his bad ways when he can't make the grade on an honest job. Nick is picked up for cop-killing. Morton defends Nick whom he thinks is innocent. With a not-guilty verdict almost won, Nick gets jittery when the prosecutor insinuates that Nick's wife committed suicide because of his bad ways. *A grim but powerful picture.*

* * *

For Mystery: "Homicide" with Robert Douglas, Helen Westcott, Robert Alda (Warner Brothers).



A transient worker, looking for a job, finds murder and murderers on a citrus ranch in California. After being threatened, he testifies that the ranch owner's death was accidental. His isn't, a few hours later, and Lieutenant Landers (Robert Douglas) has a hunch and some clues that lead him to an out-of-town hotel. Questioning the bartender (Robert Alda) the hat-check girl (Helen Westcott), he gets a lead and returns to the citrus ranch where he finds a piece of telephone cable wound up on the plow of the tractor. This is the tip-off on an illegal racing wire service. *The sleuthing is better than average.*

* * *

For Adventure: "Down to the Sea In Ships" with Richard Widmark, Lionel Barrymore, Dean Stockwell (20th Century-Fox).



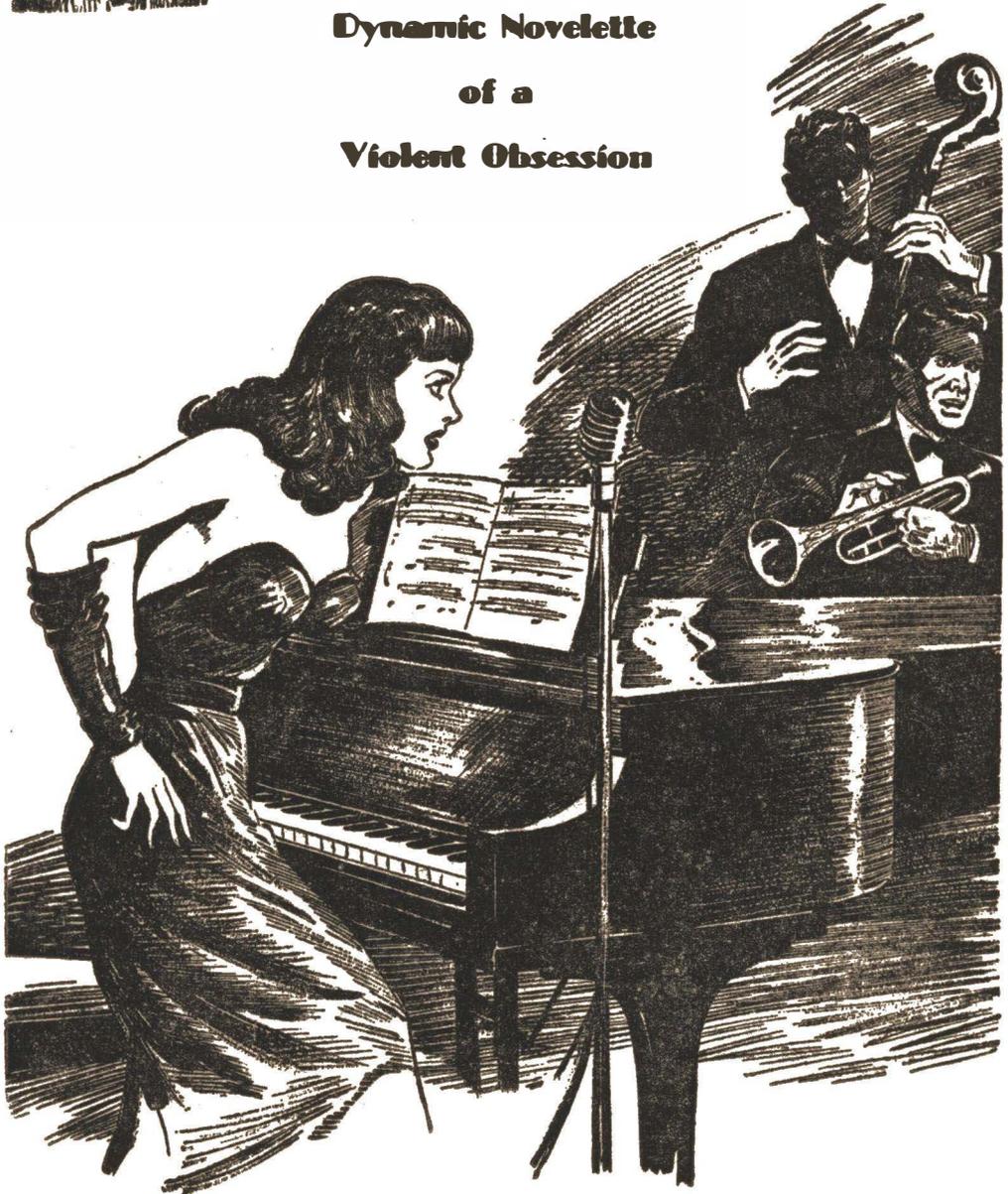
Although they finally lower the boom on Bering Joy (Lionel Barrymore), the old whaling master, he still has time to indoctrinate his young grandson (Dean Stockwell) into the ways of the sea and whaling. Amid storms and icebergs, the old man tussles with his first mate (Richard Widmark), an 1887 ninety-day wonder. *For those that like some salt—in their pictures and their eyes.*

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Popular Films.

DIE, MAESTRO, DIE!



**Dynamic Novelette
of a
Violent Obsession**



By THEODORE STURGEON

*That Lutch Crawford
didn't have a ghost of a chance.
Fluke had killed him twice—
and he was going to kill him again.*



He caught me by the front of the coat . . . I heard Fawn scream, "Doa!"

CHAPTER ONE

Dahoo, Dabay

LUTCH CRAWFORD died easy. You wouldn't think it would be so easy, after the eight years of hating, and what happened with the gun, and the river that failed too. All I did was wait in the parking lot back of the club,

holding a tire iron in my gloved hands, and when the right shadow showed coming around the corner, I hit it. I hit and hit until there could be no mistake about it. I'm not a very big guy. I wanted to be sure. I hit plenty of times. Not one for every minute I'd hated Lutch, though. That would have worn out the tire iron.

And that finished Lutch—all of him, all

his music, his jump, his public and his pride. I stopped for breath and looked at the huddled, messy thing lying there, and knew that Lutch was dead. He was. He is. Of course, the dead man, this dead man, wasn't Lutch Crawford. . . . I walked off whistling Lutch's theme, "*Daboo, Dabay,*" and for the first time in eight years, I like it.

Whistling it now, I can hear the whole band. The brass background: "Hoo ha, hoo ha." How he used to stage that on the stand, the skunk—Lutch, I mean—with the slyphorns and trumpets turning in their chairs, blowing the "hoo" to the right with cap-mutes, swinging around, blowing the "ha" at the left, open, and then Lutch's clarinet a third above Skid Portly's gimmicked-up guitar: "Daboo, dabay, dabay, daboo . . ."

You know. Spotlights on Lutch, a bright overflow of light on Skid and his guitar, light bronzing and scything from the swinging bells of the trombones here and the trumpets over there. The customers ate it up, they loved it, they loved him, the bubbleheaded bunch of bastiches.

Fawn at the piano, white glow from the spot running to her, gold flashes lighting up her face when the brasses swung, lighting up the way she cocked her head to one side, half smiling, smiling at Lutch, stroking the keyboard as if it was his face, loving him more than anybody there.

And up in back, in the dark, out of sight but altogether needed, like a heart—there was always Crispin, crouching over the skins, his bass a thing you felt with your belly rather than heard. But the real beat coming through his hands, pushing out one crushed ruff for each beat, shifting from center to edge, not much, matching the "hoo ha" of the brass. You couldn't see Crispin, but you could feel what he made. They loved it. He made love with the skins. He was loving Fawn with the pedal, with the sticks, there in the dark.

And I'd be out front, off to one side, seeing it all—and I can see it now—just whistling the theme. It was all there Lutch, everything about Lutch, everything that Lutch was. There was the swinging brass, and Crispin loving Fawn, and Fawn loving Lutch, and Lutch giving the theme solo to Skid's guitar, taking the foolish obbligato for himself. And there

was Fluke, and that's me. Sure, in the dark. Always keep Fluke in the dark; don't show them Fluke's face. Fluke has a face that kept him out of the United States Army, didn't you know? Fluke has a mouth only as big as your two thumbnails, and all his teeth are pointed.

I was as much a part of it as any of them. I didn't play anything. I was the guy who waited for ten bars of theme, and then came in with the beat, holding the microphone just off my cheek like a whisper-singer, saying, "Lutch is here, Lutch is gone, man, gone."

Lutch used to say old Fluke had a voice like an alto-horn with a split reed. He called it a dirty voice. It was a compliment. "Gone man, gone," I'd moan, and then talk up:

"Top o' the morn from the top o' the heap, kidz. This is the Fluke, the fin of the fish, the tail of the whale, bringin' you much of Lutch and such. Lutch Crawford and his Gone Geese, ladies and gentlemen, from the Ruby Room of the Hotel Halpern in—or the Rainbow, or the Angel, or wherever."

That was me, Fluke. All that buildup, the "fin of the fish," I never wanted that. That was Lutch's idea. That was Lutch, like giving his theme solo to Skid's guitar instead of taking it himself. He even hauled me into his recording dates, you know that. That was the thing about that band—it was a machine; and some will drive a machine, and some will ride it, and Lutch, he rode.

I *had* to kill him. First I tried it smart, and then I tried it sneaky, and now I've done it.

I'll tell you about the time I tried it smart.

FIVE years ago, it was. Fawn Armory had been with us for more than one of them. Fawn, you know. Cute-fat, not brilliant at the piano, just terrific. Long black hair, eyes as big as a dish and almost too far apart, and pink lips like your kid sister.

She had this wide-eyed liking for Lutch when she joined us, and it was there for anyone to see. But clean, dig me? Lutch, he treated her like the rest of the sides. He kept it just like it was, and we went places. I don't think I was the only one

who lost sleep. As long as no one made a move, everything stayed the same and the band as a whole jatoed. We rose, Jack.

This kid was from fresh air. She made the band worth staying with. Turnover just stopped, except for a couple of times when a side-man would carry too much altitude and make a pass. That never happened more than once per man. Then one or the other of us would happily pull the wolf's teeth.

Once Skid busted a four-hundred-dollar guitar over a guy's head for that. A good thing in the long run; he went into electrics seriously after that; but the electric guitar comes later. And once I gave a spare lip to a trumpet man, pushing three teeth out under his nose, when his right hand forgot what his left was hired for.

It was Fawn who made the break. Looking back, I guess it could have been expected. We were all pretty wise; we did what we did because we thought it out. But she was just a kid. She'd been eating her heart out for too long, I guess, and she had no muscles for a pitch like that. We were in Boulder City that night, taking fifteen about two in the morning at a roadhouse.

There was all kinds of moon. I was in a wild hassle with myself. Fawn was under my skin clear down to the marrow by then. I went into the bar and slurped up a boiler-maker. They always make me sick, and I wanted a small trouble to concentrate on.

I left the rest of the sides jaw-jamming around a table and walked outside. There was a gravel path, the kind that gives a dry belch under your feet. I stayed off it.

I walked on the grass and looked at the moon, which was bad for me, and felt the boilermaker seething under my low ribs, and felt but rugged. You know.

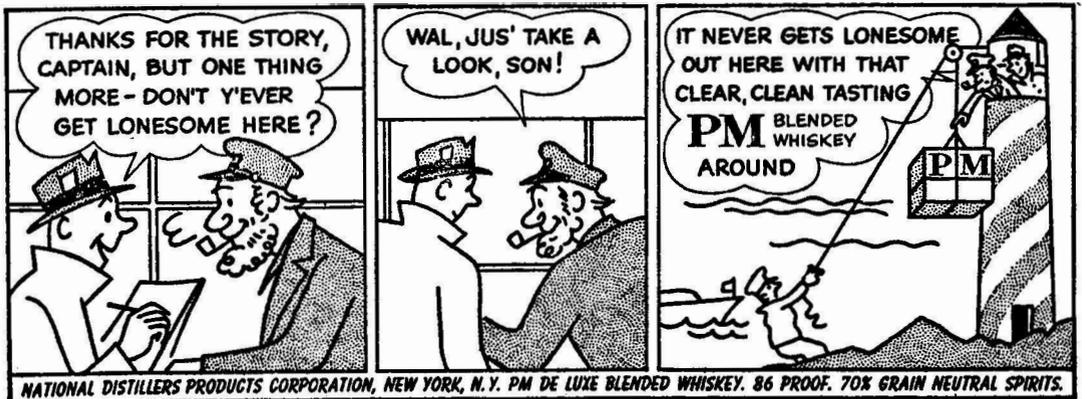
It wasn't only Fawn. I realized that. It was something to do with Lutch. He was so—sure of himself. Hell. I never could be that. Never until now, when I've got what was coming to me. Now I'm damn sure where I'm going, and I did it with my own hands. Not everybody can say that.

But Lutch, he could. He had talent, see—big talent. He was a real musician. But he didn't use it, only to guide with his fingertips. Another man soloed his theme. He was like that. He was so sure of himself that he didn't have to hog anything. He didn't even have to reach out and pick up anything that he knew he could have.

Now me, I never could know till I tried. There shouldn't be guys like Lutch Crawford, guys that never have to wonder or worry. Them as has gits, they say. There can't be any honest competition with a guy like that. He'll win out, or you will. If he does, he'll do it easy as breathing. If you do, it's only because he let you. Guys like that shouldn't be born. If they are, they ought to be killed. Things are tough enough with an even break.

Lutch, he had a pet-name for the band. He called it the unit. That doesn't sound like a pet-name but it was. Fluke was his barker, and part of the unit. It didn't matter that the band would be just as good without me. Any one of us could be dropped or replaced, and it would still be Lutch Crawford's Gone Geese.

But Fluke was in, and Skid, and Crispin and the rest, and that's the way he



wanted it to stay. I was in the bucks, with a future—thanks to him. Thank you very much to him for every damn thing.

So I was standing on the grass looking at the moon and feeling all this, when I heard Fawn sob. Just once. I went that way, walking on the grass, sliding my feet so that left shoe wouldn't squeak.

She was standing at the corner of the building with Lutch. She was facing the moon. She was crying without making any more noise and without covering her face. It was wet and sort of pulled down and sideways as if I saw it through a wavy glass.

Fawn said, "I can't help it, Lutch, I love you."

And he said, "I love you too. I love everybody. It's nothing to get sick over."

"It isn't . . ." The way she said that, it was a question and a whole flood of detail about how sick you can get. "Let me kiss you, Lutch," she whispered. "I won't ever ask you again. Let me this once. Once. I got to, Lutch, I got to, I can't go on much longer like this."

Now, I hated him, and I think I hated her a little, for a second, but you know, I'd of kicked him clear to Pensacola if he hadn't done what she said. I never had a feeling like that before. Never. I don't want it again.

Well, he did. Then he went back inside and got his clarinet and hit a blue lick or two to call us back in, the same as always. He left her out there, and me too, though he didn't know I was there. Difference was, he left me alone. . . .

CRISPIN was a big blond who was a graduate electrical engineer. He earned his way through school playing drums, and after he graduated went right on playing. He was forever rehashing our p.a. system, and Skid's git-box was like peanuts to him; he kept coming back for more.

Skid was amplified when he started with us—a guitar's pretty nowhere without a pickup in a band nowadays—but all he had was a simple magnetic pickup clamped on to a regular concert guitar. He had a few gimmicks too, a pedal volume control and a tone-switch on the box that gave him a snarl when he wanted it.

Trouble was, at high volumes that pick-

up picked up everything—the note and the scratch of the plectrum and the peculiar squeak of Skid's calloused left fingers when he slid them on the wound strings, so that a guitar solo always had a background of pops and crackles and a bunch of guys whistling for taxicabs.

Crispin, he fixed that. He was a big, good-natured cat that everybody liked on sight, and sometimes when we went into a new town Crispin would go down to Radio Row and talk some repairman into the use of his shop for a couple days. Crispin would drag in Skid's guitar amplifier and haul its guts out and attach tone generators and oscilloscopes and all like that, and after that would spend good sleeping time telling Skid how to run the thing.

After a couple of years, Skid had an instrument that would sit up and type-write. He had a warble-vibrato on it, and a trick tailpiece that he operated with his elbow that would raise a six-string chord a half-tone while he held it, and some jazz called an attenuator that let him hit a note that wouldn't fade, just like it was blown out of an organ. Skid had a panel beside him with more buttons, switches, and controls on it than a custom-built accordion has stops. He used to say that the instrument was earning his keep—any three-chord man from a hillbilly band could take his spot if he got that instrument. I thought he was right. For years I thought he was right when he said that. . . .

It was before rehearsal the next day, that time in Boulder City, that Crispin came to me and talked like with my mouth. I was in the sunporch thinking about that moon last night and all that went with it, about Lutch and the way everything came so easy to him, he never had to make up his mind.

Crispin lounged up next to me and said, "Fluke, did you ever see the time when Lutch couldn't make up his mind?"

I said, "Brother," and he knew I meant no.

He looked at his thumb, threw it out of joint. "Cat gets everything he wants without asking for it. Never has to think of asking for it."

"You're so right," I said. I didn't feel like talking.

He said, "He rates it, I'm glad." He was, too.

I said, "I'm glad too." I wasn't. "What brings up all this jive, Crispin?"

He waited a long time. "Well, he just asked me something. He was all—all—he was like a square at the Savoy, shuffling his feet and blushing."

"Lutch?" I demanded. Lutch usually came on like coke, all steam, no smoke. "What was it?"

"It was about Fawn," he said.

I felt something the size and weight of a cueball drop into my stomach. "What's with Fawn?"

"He wanted to know what the sides would think if he and Fawn got married."

"What'd you tell him?"

"What could I tell him? I said it would be fine. I said it didn't have to make any difference. It might even be better."

"Better," I said. "Sure." Much better. Even if it was out of your reach, at least you could dream. You could hope for some break, some way. Lutch and Fawn . . . they wouldn't fool around with this marriage kick, now. They'd do it up right.

"I knew you'd think the same way," he said. He sounded as if there was a load off his mind. He slapped my back—I hate that—and walked off whistling *Daboo, dabay*.

That was when I made up my mind to kill Lutch. Not for Fawn. She was just part of it. The biggest part, yes; but I couldn't stand this one more trip his way of the silver platter . . . people like that shouldn't live. Every minute they live, a guy like me gets his nose rubbed in it.

For a second there I thought I'd quit, walk off, get clear. Then I remembered the radio, the juke, people humming in front of elevator doors—and I knew I'd never get away from him. If he was dead it would be different; I could be glad when I heard that jive. No, I had to kill him.

But I'd play it smart.

CHAPTER TWO

Breaking the Ties

FOR a couple of days I thought about it. I didn't think about much else. I thought of all the ways I'd ever heard about, and all the tricks they use to

catch up on all the ways. I had about decided on an auto accident—he was all the time driving, either with the band or on quick trips for mail or spare reeds or music and all like that, and the law of averages was in my favor; he never had accidents.

I was actually out casing the roads around there in Lutch's car when I had one of those fantastically unexpected pieces of luck that you dream about if you've got a good imagination.

I'd just turned into the highway from the Shinnebago side road, when I heard sirens. I pulled over right away. A maroon Town-and-Country came roaring around the bend of the highway at about eighty. There were bullet-holes in the windshield and the driver was hunched down low.

There were two cats in the back blasting away with automatics. Behind them came a State Police car, gaining. I didn't wait and watch; I was out and under before I knew what I was doing. Peering around the rear end of my machine, I looked up just as one of the men in the Town-and-Country straightened up, holding his right forearms. Just then the driver hauled the car into the road I'd just left.

It couldn't be done at that speed but he did it, the tires screaming. The man who was hit went sling-shooting out of the car. First he bounced and then he slid. I thought he'd never stop sliding. About the time he hit the road, the police car flashed by me, with the right front tire flat. It was crabbing left and crabbing right.

The important thing is that that cat's gun flew straight up in the air when he was hit and landed in the weeds not twenty feet from me. I had it before those cops got their car stopped. They never saw me. They were busy, then with the car, afterward with the stiff. I walked down there and talked to them. Seems these characters had been robbing gas stations and motorists. They'd already killed two.

One of the cops growled about these war-souvenir guns, and he'd be glad when all that foreign ammo was used up. They said they'd get the guys who'd gotten away soon enough; just a matter of time.

I said sure. Then I got back in Lutch's machine and drove away, real thoughtful. I knew I'd never have another chance like this.

The next afternoon I told Lutch I'd go into town with him. He was picking up the mail and I said I had to go to the drug store. He didn't think anything about it. I went and got the gun and stuck it into the sleeve of my jacket, under my armpit. It stayed there fine. It was a big Belgian automatic. It had four shots left in it.

I felt all right. I thought I was doing okay until Lutch looked over at me—he was driving—and asked me if I felt all right. Then I realized I had sweat on my upper lip. I looked in the rear-view mirror. I could see maybe two miles, we were out on the flats, and there wasn't a car in sight. I looked ahead. There was a truck. It passed. Then the road was clear.

I said, "Pull over to the side, Lutch. I want to talk to you."

He looked at me, surprised. "I can listen and drive, Fluke. Shoot."

Shoot, he said. I almost laughed. "Pull over, Lutch." I meant to sound normal but it came out as a hoarse whisper.

"Don't be silly," he said. He had that big easy open-handed way about him, Lutch had. "Go on, Fluke, get it off your chest."

I took out the gun and kicked off the safeties and poked it into his ribs. "Pull over to the side, Lutch."

He pulled up his arm and looked down under it at the gun. "Why, sure," he said, and pulled over and stopped. He switched off, leaned back into the angle of the seat and the door so he half faced me, and said,

"Lay it on me, Fluke. You fixing to kill me with that?" He didn't sound scared, and that was because he wasn't. He really wasn't. Nothing like this had ever happened to him, so nothing ever could. He wasn't prodding me, either. He was talking to me like a rehearsal. Lutch was a very relaxed cat.

"Yes, I am," I told him.

He looked at it curiously. "Where'd you get it?"

I told him that too. If he'd only started to sweat and cry, I'd of shot him then. I hated him too much to just shoot him

easy. I told him all about it. "They haven't caught those jokers yet," I said. "The cops'll dig one of these slugs out of you and it'll be the same as the ones in those other killings. They'll think those hoods did it."

"They will? What about you?"

"I'll have one of the slugs too. In the arm. It'll be worth it. Anything else you want to know?"

"Yes. Why? Fluke, *why?* Is it Fawn?"

"That's right."

He sort of shook his head. He looked straight at my face. "I hate to say this, Fluke, but I don't think killing me will help your chances any. I mean, even if she never finds out."

I said, "I know that, Lutch. But I'll have an even break; that's all I ever want. I can't get it with you around."

His face was sorry for me, and that's absolutely all. "Go on, then," he told me.

I pulled the trigger. The gun bucked in my hand. I felt him spin, and then everything went black, like I was under a baby-spot and the fuse blew.

WHEN I came to, my eyes wouldn't straighten out. The whole wide world was full of black speckles and something globular was growing out of the back of my head.

I was still in the front seat of the car. Something was scratching and chafing at my wrist. I pulled it away and put my head in my hands and groaned.

"How are you doing?" Lutch said. He bent forward, peering anxiously into my face.

I got my handkerchief out and put it behind my head and looked at it. There was blood, just a speck.

"What happened, Lutch?"

He grinned. It was a little puckered, but still a grin. You'll never make a gunman, Fluke. I've seen you twice with the gang in shooting galleries. You're afraid of guns."

"How did you know that?"

"You always close your eyes real tight, screw them down, before you pull a trigger. I was half-turned toward you as it was, and it was easy to twist aside. Turning made the gun ride around and slip back under my arm. Then I hit you with

my shoulder and ran your head back against the door-post. Does it hurt much?"

"I didn't shoot you!"

"You tore hell out of my shirt."

"Damn you, Lutch," I said quietly.

He sat back with his arms folded, watching me for a long time, until I asked,

"What are we waiting for?"

"For you to feel well enough to drive."

"Then what?"

"Back to the club."

"Come on, Lutch; lay it on me. What are you going to do?"

"Think," said Lutch. He opened the door and got out and walked around the car. "Shove over," he said. He was carrying the gun. He wasn't pointing it, but he was holding it ready to use. I shoved over.

I drove slowly. Lutch wouldn't talk. I didn't dig him at all. He was doing just what he said, thinking. Once I took a hand off the wheel. His eyes were on me immediately. I just felt the lump of my head and put the hand back. For the time being I was hogtied.

When we stopped in front of the club he said, "Go on up to my room." We had quarters over the hall. "I'll be right behind you with the gun in my side pocket. If anyone stops you, don't stall. Shake them naturally and go on up. I'm not afraid of guns and I'll shoot you if you don't do what I say. Do I mean it?"

I looked at his face. He meant it.

"Well, all right," I said, and got out.

No one stopped us. When we were in his room, he said, "Get in that closet."

I opened my mouth to say something but decided not to. I got in the closet and he closed and locked the door. It was dark.

"Can you hear me?" he said.

"Yup."

In a much softer voice he said, "Can you hear me now?"

"I can hear you."

"Then get this. I want you to listen to every word that is said out here until I open the door again. If you make a noise, I'll kill you. Understand?"

"You're in, Jack," I said. My head hurt.

A long time, maybe two or three minutes, passed. From far away I heard him calling, but couldn't make out what he

was saying. I think he was on the stair landing. I heard him come in and shut the door. He was whistling between his teeth. *Daboo, dabay*. Then there was a light knock on the door.

"Come in!"

It was Fawn. "What's cookin' good-lookin'?" she sang.

"Sit down, chicken."

The chair was wicker. I could hear it plain.

Lutch Crawford always talked straight to the point. That's how he got so much work done. "Fawn, about the other night, with all that moon. How do you feel now?"

"I feel the same way," she said tightly.

Lutch had a little habit of catching his lower lip with his teeth and letting it go when he was thinking hard. There was a pause about long enough to do this. Then he said, "You been hearing rumors around about you and me?"

"Well, I—" She caught her breath. "Oh, Lutch—" I heard the wicker, sharp and crisp, as she came up out of it.

"Hold on!" Lutch snapped. "There's nothing to it, Fawn. Forget it."

I heard the wicker again, slow, the front part, the back part. She didn't say anything.

"There's some things too big for one or two people to fool with, honey," he said gently. "This band's one of them. For whatever it's worth, it's bigger than you and me. It's going good and it'll go better. It's about as perfect as a group can get. It's a unit. Tight. So tight that one wrong move'll blow out all its seams. You and me, now—that'd be a wrong move."

"Call it a hunch. Mostly, I know that things have been swell up to now, and I know that if you—if we—anyway, we can't risk a change in the good old status quo."

"But what about me?" she wailed.

"Tough on you?" I'd known Lutch a long time, and this was the first time his voice didn't come full and easy. "Fawn, there're fourteen cats in this aggregation and they all feel the same way about you as you do about me. You have no monopoly. Things are tough all over. Think of that next time you feel spring fever coming on." I think he bit at his lower lip

again. In a voice soft like Skid's guitar with the bass stop, he said "I'm sorry, kid."

"Don't call me *kid!*" she blazed.

"You better go practice your scales," he said thickly.

The door slammed.

After a bit he let me out. He went and sat by the window, looking out.

"Now what did you do that for?" I wanted to know.

"For the unit," he said, still looking out the window.

"You're crazy. Don't you want to marry her?"

What I could see of his face answered that question. I don't think I'd realized before how much he loved her. I don't think I'd thought about it.

He said, "I don't love her so badly I'd commit murder for an even chance at her. You do. If anyone loves her worse than I do, I don't love her enough. That's the way I see it. He made as if he was watching something outside.

I could of told him then that it wasn't only him and Fawn that bothered me; that that was just part of it. Somehow it didn't seem to make no never-mind just then. If he wanted to play the square, he was welcome to it. "I'll go pack," I said.

He jumped up. "You'll do no such a damn thing!" he roared. "Listen, hipster; you've seen how far I'll go to keep this unit the way it is. You taught me something today, the hard way, and by the Lord you're not going to kick over this group just when you've taught it to me!" He walked over and stood close. I had to crease the back of my neck to see his face. Then Lutch Crawford jabbed his finger at my nose.

"If you walk out on the unit now, so help me, I'll track you down and hound you to death. Now get out of here."

"All right," I told him. "But listen. I'll take a raincheck on that last. You're riding a high riff right now. Think it over quiet, and tell me tonight if you want me to stay. I'll do what you say."

He grinned the old grin again. "Good, Fluke. See ya."

It's hard to hate a joe like that. But if you can make it, you can do a job.

I made it.

SO THAT was the time that I tried it smart. Next time I tried it sneaky. We played the coast up and back. And every dollar that fell into our laps, and every roar of applause, and every line of print in the colyums that drooled over us, I hated, and there was plenty to hate. The Geese played so many different kinds of music there was no getting away from it anywhere. I once saw a juke-box with seven Crawford plates in it at once!

There was Lutch with the world throwing itself at his head because he was a nice guy. And here I was in the gravy because he was good to me. And the whole world was full of the skunk and his music, and there'd never be any rest from it anywhere.

Did you hear the Hot Club of France's recording of *Daboo, dabay?* A great big silk-lined prison for old Fluke; a padded cell. Lutch Crawford built a padded cell and was keeping old Fluke in it.

Fawn got a little haggard, after that time in Boulder City, but she gradually pulled up out of it. She was learning, the way the rest of us had learned, to feel one way and act another. Well, isn't that the rock-bottom starting point for anyone in show business? She was the better for it.

We started west again, and south, and the time I tried it sneaky was in Baton Rouge.

It was a road club again, real razzle, with curved glass, acoustic ceilings and all that jazz. I can't say that anything particular keyed me off. It was just that I'd made up my mind a long time ago how I was going to do it and I needed a spot near running water. Baton Rouge has a fair-sized creek running past its front door, and Old Man River, he don't say nothin'.

It was very simple. It's surprising how simple some things can be, even things you've been eating your heart out over for years, when they get fixed up at last. Lutch got a letter. The hat-check girl at the club turned away to hang up a coat and when she turned back the letter was there by the tip-plate. There were plenty of people in and out through the lobby. I was, myself.

The powder-room was downstairs! I was sick that night. Everyone knew about

it; they were laughing at old Fluke. I am allergic to shrimps, and here I had to go and gulp up a pound or more of New Orleans fried shrimp and rice. I had hives that grease-paint would barely cover, and could just about navigate, and I had to take a trip down below every twenty minutes or so. Sometimes I stayed a long while.

Lutch got the letter. It was sealed, addressed with a typewriter. No return address. The hatcheck girl gave it to the headwaiter who gave it to Lutch. Lutch read it, told Crispin and Fawn he'd be back, he didn't know when, put on his hat and left. I don't know what he thought about on the way. The letter, I guess. It said:

Dear Lutch,

First, don't show this to anyone or tell anyone about it yet. Make sure no one is looking over your shoulder or anything like that.

Lutch, I'm half out of my mind over something I've heard. I think a serious danger threatens my daughter Fawn, and I must talk to you. I am in Baton Rouge. I don't want Fawn to know it yet.

Maybe there is nothing in this business but it is best to play it safe. I am waiting for you near a warehouse above Morrero, that is just downriver from Baton Rouge. The warehouse has LE CLERC ET FILS painted on the street side. I am in the office out near the end of the wharf. I think you might be followed. Take a cab to the depot at Morrero and walk to the river. You can't miss it. But watch for a shadow, you can't be too careful. I hope all this turns out to be for nothing.

Bring this with you. If what I fear is true, it would not be safe even to burn it at the club. Please hurry.

*Anxiously,
John Amory.*

I'm proud of that letter. Fawn's pop and Lutch were real buddy-buddy, and the old man would never ask a favor unless it was important. The letter was the only evidence there was, and Lutch brought it with him. A nice job, if I do say so myself.

No one saw Lutch. The cab driver didn't know who he was, or if he did he never mentioned it later. Lutch came as soon as he could, knocked at the door of the office. There was a dim light inside. No one answered. He came in and closed the door behind him. He called out, softly:

"Mr. Amory?"

I whispered, from inside the warehouse, "In here."

Lutch went to the inner door, stepped into the warehouse, and stopped, with the light from the office showing up the strip of skin between his collar and his hair just fine. I hit him there with a piece of pipe. He never made a sound. This time I wasn't going to talk it over with him.

I caught him before he hit the floor and carried him over to the long table beside the sink. The sink was already full of water, and I had seen to it that it was river water, just in case. I put the pipe where I could reach it in case I had to hit him again, and spread him out on the table with his head over the sink.

Then I dunked it, held it under. After five minutes or so for good measure, I got the small-boat anchor chain—an old rusty one it was—and wound it around him secure but careless-like; it could be by accident. I got the letter out of his pocket and burned it, grinding all the



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ashes down on a small piece of roofing tin which I dropped into the river.

I rolled Lutch in after it. There was quite a current running. He started downstream almost before he was under the surface. I said, "So long, superbey," straightened myself up, locked up the warehouse after turning the light out, emptying the sink and all like that.

Picking up the car I'd parked two blocks away, I drove back to the club. It was easy to climb in the basement window into the stall of the men's room I'd left locked, and to come back upstairs without being noticed. The whole thing had taken just forty-three minutes.

I was happy about the whole thing. The chain would hold him under, that and the mud, and the catfish would make quick work of him. But if, by some chance, the body should be found, well, the chain could be an accident, and he certainly died of drowning. In river water. The bump on the back of his neck—that was nothing.

But Lutch Crawford was hard to kill.

CHAPTER THREE

He Wasn't Dead!

I DON'T have to tell you about the next month or so, with the headlines and all that jive that went on. The band went right ahead. Lutch's hand was always so light on it that his absence made almost no difference. The sides worried some about him, but it took them three days to get really panicked. By that time my mind was easy. No amount of police work and private detective shenanigans could do a thing about it. The whole band alibied me, and the hat-check girl too, with my hives. Matter of fact, no one even thought to ask me any questions, specially. No one remembered exactly what time Lutch left the club. There had been nothing to call it to anyone's attention. A clean job.

The next thing I wanted to do was to get clear of the whole aggregation and go live by myself. I was careful, though, and made no move until someone else did it first.

It came to a head six weeks after Lutch disappeared. We'd moved on to Fort Worth, Texas. Fawn and Crispin hadn't

wanted to leave Baton Rouge, but finally decided that Lutch, wherever he was, knew our schedule as well as we did and would come back when he was ready to.

We had a big powwow in Fort Worth. I just sat quiet while they wrangled it out—should they break up until Lutch showed again, or should they start a new tour? It wasn't hard to decide, after Fawn said, "What would Lutch want us to do?" And that was it. Don Crispin would take over the band, but it would be the Lutch Crawford Orchestra, and they would work so that Lutch could take the wand in midbeat any time. That was the keynote—for arrangements, for business deals, for routing—"What would Lutch want us to do?"

And sure enough, one or two of the sides wanted out. They had offers, and if Lutch wasn't going to be around for a while, well—And one of these guys was Fluke. They took that hard.

Crispin said, "There can't be any 'Gone Geese' stuff without you, Fluke." I just shook my head. Fawn got real understanding. She whispered something to Crispin about me feeling too bad about Lutch's disappearance. Lutch was always so good to old Fluke. They let me go. What could they do?

We broke up at Santa Monica after the date there. I thought I'd take it easy for a year or so and look around, but what should drop into my lap but a gold-plated offer from a radio station in Seattle, for a night record-jockey stand. That was made to order. My voice and delivery and savvy of the sharps and the flats were perfect for it.

Best of all, I could work where people didn't have to look at my face. Sometimes I think if I had been in radio from the start, I wouldn't of—I might not have become the kind of cat who—Ah, that's useless chatter now.

I got twenty-six weeks with options and could have upped the ante if I'd wanted to argue, which I didn't. Crispin and the rest of Lutch's sidemen went all out for me, sending me telegrams during my show, giving me personal appearances, and plugging me in their clubs. Seemed like, dead or alive, Lutch kept on being kind.

I didn't let it get me. I'd lived long

enough to know you can't break clean from any close contact with a human being. Quit a job, get a divorce, leave a home town, it drags on in shreds and tatters that haunt you. I held tight to laughing. Lutch was dead.

Then one night I got that advance shipment of records. Six sides of Crispin Crawford.

I gave it a big hello in the old Fluke style: "Aha, lil kidz—a clump of jump for bacon to crisp-in; Crispin and Crawford, and six new plates for gates. Just like old times for Fluke the Juke. This spinner's a winner: old *Deep Purple* in the Crispin crunchy style."

Then I played it off. I hadn't heard any of these plates yet, though they were cleared for broadcast. They'd been delivered just before air time. *Deep Purple* was the old bandstand arrangement that Lutch had done himself. Moff was playing Lutch's clarinet, and there wasn't enough difference to matter.

In the double-time ride in the third chorus, Skid slipped in a lick on guitar that I hadn't heard before, but it was well inside the Crawford tradition. The other platters showed up the same way. Crispin took a long drum solo in *Lady be Good* that was new, but strictly Crawford. I held out the two new ones until last.

AND I mean new. There was a blow-top novelty called *One Foot in the Groove* that I had never heard. The by-line was Moff and Skid Portly. The other one was an arrangement of *Tuxedo Junction*. We'd always used a stock arrangement for that one—this was something totally new. In the first place it let in some bop sequences, and in the second place it really exploited an echo chamber—the first time that had been done on a Crawford record. I listened to it bug-eyed.

It was good. It was very good. But the thing that tore me all apart was that it was Lutch Crawford, through and through. Lutch had never used an echo before. But he would—he would, because it was a new trend. Just like the be-bop continuities. I could imagine the powwow before the recording session, and Fawn saying, "What would Lutch want?"

Listening to it, I saw Lutch, wide shoul-

ders, long hands, pushing the brass this way, that way, reaching up and over to haul the sound of the drums up and then crush them down, down to a whispering cymbal. I could see him hold it down there with his right hand flat in the air in front of him as if he had it on a table, long enough for him to catch his lower lip between his teeth and pull it loose, and suddenly, then, like a flash-bulb going off, dazzle the people with an explosion of scream-trumpet and high-volume guitar.

The turntable beside me went quietly about its work, with the sound-head pulsing a little like a blood-pressure gauge. It hypnotized me, I guess. Next thing I knew my engineer was waving frantically at me through the plate-glass, giving me a 'dead-air' sign, and I realized that the record had been finished for seconds.

I drew a thick rattling breath and said the only thing in the world that there was—a thing bigger than me, clearer than my script-sheets or the mike in front of me or anything else. I said stupidly, "That was Lutch. That was Lutch Crawford. He isn't dead. *He isn't dead . . .*"

Something in front of my eyes began bobbing up and down. It was the engineer again, signaling. I had been staring straight at him without seeing him. I was seeing Lutch.

The engineer pointed downward, wagged his finger round and round. That meant play a record. I nodded and put on a Crosby plate, and sat back as if I'd been lanced with a vaulting pole.

My phone light flashed. I took calls on the show; the phones were equipped with lights instead of bells so they wouldn't crowd the mike. I picked up the receiver, saying automatically, "Fluke the Juke."

"One moment please." An operator.

Then, "Fluke? Oh, Fluke." Fawn. It was Fawn Amory.

"Fluke," she said, her words tumbling over each other the way notes did on her keyboard, "Oh Fluke, darling, we heard you, we all heard you. We're in Denver. We cut a date to catch your show. Fluke, honey, you said it. Fluke, you said it!"

"Fawn—"

"You said he isn't dead. We know that, Fluke. We all do. But the way you said it; you don't know how much that means to us! We did it, you see? *Tuxedo Junc-*

tion. We worked and worked—something that would be new and would be Lutch too. Lutch can't die as long as we can do that, don't you see?"

"But I—"

"We're going to do more, Fluke. More Lutch, more real Lutch Crawford. Will you come back, Fluke? We want to do more 'Gone Geese' records and we can't without you. Won't you please, Fluke? We *need* you!" There was a murmuring in the background. Then,

"Fluke? This is Crispin. I want to double that, boy. Come on back."

"Not me, Crispin. I'm done," I managed to say.

"I know how you feel," said Crispin quickly. He knew I was about to hang up on him. "I won't push you, hipster. But think it over, will you? We're going to keep on whatever happens, and wherever Lutch is, alive or—wherever he is, he'll have a band, and as long as he has a band, he's here."

"You're doing fine," I croaked.

"Just think it over. We can do twice as well if you'll come back. Keep in touch, Here's Fawn again."

I hung up.

I'll never know how I got through that show. I know why I did. I did because I was going to make my own way. That was why I had wanted to kill Lutch. Come sick, come ça, as the man said, this was my kick—making my own way without Lutch Crawford. *But Lutch wasn't dead!* I fought my fight then, and about ten o'clock next morning, after a hell of my own, I walked into a telegraph office and wired Crispin.

CHAPTER FOUR

Back at the Old Stand

THEY started by giving me something I didn't want—but wasn't that the whole trouble? This time it was a sort of surprise party and testimonial dinner. I guess I was a little sour. They didn't understand.

Crispin, he tried to make me feel better by guaranteeing that he'd see to it I was paid twice over for breaking my radio contract. Fawn— Well, Fawn shouldn't have been so sweet to me.

Anyway, there was a dinner and some drinks and Crispin and Skid and Moff and the others got up one by one and said what a fine cat I was. Then they all sat around playing "remember when" and passing side remarks to the empty chair at the head of the table where Lutch's clarinet was. It was a fine party.

After that I went to work. What they saw me doing was "Is coming up a sizzle-swizzle for *Rum and Coca Cola*, featuring the Id-kid, Skid, and his super-charged git-fiddle, so look out!" And "We got a dream-scheme, kidz, all soft and lofty, smooth, forsooth, but full of nerve-nerve. Hey Moff, stroke these quiet cats with *Velvet Paws*." So, I helped them.

What I was doing was trying to find Lutch so's I could kill him. You should have been a fly on the wall to hear those slave-sessions. Take a tune, find old Lutch, mix 'em up, make 'em be something new that's styled like something they wouldn't let be dead. So, then they helped me.

I could have killed Lutch by killing the lot of them. I never did discard that idea. But maybe I'm lazy. Somewhere in that aggregation was the essence of what was Lutch. If I could smoke that out and kill it, he'd be dead. I knew that. It was just a matter of finding out what it was.

But it wasn't easy.

That outfit was like a machine made for a very special purpose—but made all out of standard parts you could buy on the open market. That isn't to say that some of the parts weren't strictly upper-bracket; all of them were machined to a millionth. But I couldn't believe that what Lutch called "unit" was the thing that made that group an individual, great one.

If Lutch had been around, you could've said that Lutch made the difference between a good machine and something alive. But Lutch wasn't around, and the thing still lived. Lutch had put the life in it, by choosing the right pieces and giving them the right push. After that the thing ran under its own power, the power of life, and Lutch Crawford wouldn't be dead until that life was gone. It was going to be him or me.

So I helped them. We had club and hotel dates, and we made records, and in keeping Lutch alive, I helped them.

And they helped me. Every time a new tune started climbing the top ten, every time someone came up with a number that looked like a winner, we'd arrange it for the band. In those sessions the band and the workings of every least part were torn down and inspected and argued over. I never missed a word of this, so, they helped me.

It was hell for me. If you've got guts enough to kill a man, you've got to finish the job. Lutch was alive. It was bad away from the band, with every radio and juke-box in the whole world blasting out Crawford creations. It was bad with the band—sometimes you could see him!

Theme-time at a club, and the lights the way they always were, and the band the same, except that now Crispin's luggage was front and center. The swinging bells of the brass and their "hoo, ha," and then Skid's solo "Daboo, dabay" with Moff taking the obbligato on the clarinet. Moff never stood out front to play, though. He was out of sight like Crispin used to be.

Crispin, crushing the beat, whisper-drumming, stared up and out the way he used to when he was in the blackness, and Skid was no different, watching his fingers. All the books say a good guitarist never watches his fingers but I guess Skid never read them. But you could see he was following *someone* from under his pulled-down eyebrows—and it wasn't Crispin.

But Lutch was there most of all for Fawn. Fawn with the flickering golden light touching and leaving her face, and her head tilted to one side so the heavy hair swung forward past her round bare

shoulder; and on her face that look, that half-smiling, half hungry look—hungry like Lutch was there looking at her, not like he was away.

Daboo, dabay . . . it hypnotized those cats. We always opened with it, and sometimes we had as many as three half-hour network spots, and that meant theme opening and closing. It was always the same. I often wondered if the customers who faithfully spattered out their applause at the drop of a *hoo, ha* had any idea that this was a—a resurrection, maybe eight times a night.

FIRST I was sure it was the brass, the low brass, where that peculiar vitality came from. You see, that was my protection. Lutch was strong in everything we did, but you couldn't see him in anything but the theme.

When we did the theme I concentrated on what I heard, not on what it meant. Anyway, night after night I waited for the theme, and cut out everything but that low brass as I listened. It wasn't notes I was listening for, but tone, style, *Lutch*. After a week or so I pinned it down to the second trumpet and a trombone. I was sure I was right; the Crawford quality was somewhere down there where the tone was low and full.

I got a break on it. So did Karpis and Heintz, the sliphorn and trumpet men I'd singled out. See, they roomed together in a hotel we used during Convention Week in Spokane. So one night they didn't get to the club in time to open. The hotel was an old firetrap—no escapes. The only way out of their room was through the door. No phone. Small transom, and



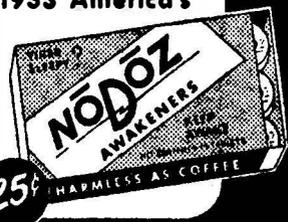
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that jammed and painted over. Locking the door from outside, putting a twist of coat-hanger wire in the key so it couldn't turn, that was easy. It was forty minutes before a bellhop let them out.

I heard the theme twice without those two sides. Crispin put it in a nutshell when I asked him about it later. "Thin," he said, "But it's still Lutch." That was what I thought.

No one found out who had locked those boys in, of course. I don't operate so I can be found out. No one knew who was responsible when two trumpets and a reed man got left miles behind us when we went to St. Louis. We'd hired a bus and a couple of cars—our chartered plane was grounded. And one of the cars just quit back there in the fog. Who watered the gasoline? Some schmo at a gas station, and let's forget it.

The theme wasn't the theme on that date. I hadn't knocked out the thing that was Lutch—I'd knocked out the orchestra by pulling those men; we were just nothing. That was no answer. I had to find the heart of Lutch, and stop it. Stop it so it could never beat again.

Somebody slugged Stormy, the bass, while he was asleep the second afternoon in St. Louis. He went to the hospital and they got another man quick. He wasn't Stormy, but he was good. You could hear that the bass was different—but the orchestra was still Lutch.

How long can you keep it up? Sometimes I thought I'd go crazy. Sometimes I wanted to run out into the tables and smash the customers around, because I thought maybe they knew what I was looking for. I was so close to it. That thing that was Lutch could cut in and cut out during a number, and I'd never notice it, being so busy listening to one instrument or combo. Someone out there could know, right in the same room with me, and I wouldn't. Sometimes I thought I was going out of my mind.

I even got us a new piano player for a night. I had to come out in the open for that, but it was safe. I hung around the Conservatory until I latched on to a kid who was all starry-eyed about Lutch Crawford. I made like a talent scout. I told Fawn about the boy, and said he was pining away. I laid it on. Fawn

not only agreed to let the kid in, but persuaded Crispin to let him take a one-night stand!

He did. He was good. He read like crazy, and he played every note that was on the paper and played 'em right; and he played a lot more he dreamed up, and they were right too. But he wasn't for the Geese.

Now, here's a funny thing. It's aside from the business of killing Lutch. This kid was wrong for us, but so good Crispin spoke to Forway, the tour manager. Today that kid's making records that sell three quarters of a million each. All because of the break I got him by way of getting Fawn off the ivory for a night. Now what do you think of that?

I found out that night, though, that Fawn wasn't the "Lutch" thing I was hunting. The band sounded like Lutch Crawford with the wrong piano, that'll all. It wasn't wrong enough to keep Lutch from being there, somewhere in the sharps and flats.

I was glad it wasn't Fawn. I'd have stopped her, if it was, but I wouldn't have liked doing it much. . . .

AND I found him. I found him! He had been right there all the time, looking at him, and I hadn't wits enough to see him.

Virus X and I found him. Virus X is something like flu, and something like dysentery, and it's no fun. It swept through us like a strong wind. I got it first, and it only lasted a couple of days. Moff, now, he was out two weeks. We only had to close for two nights, though. We made it the rest of the time, sometimes with something like a full band, sometimes with a skeleton. One of the short-timers was the guy who played guitar, Skid Portly.

Skid always said that any hillbilly could do what he did, given his guitar. I believed him. Why not? I'd diddled around with the instrument myself. Put your finger behind a fret, pluck the string. With a pedal you could make it louder or softer. With push-buttons you could make it warble or snarl or *whuff!* out with a velvet sound.

With a switch you could make it sound exactly like a harpsichord or an organ.

With a lever under your arm you could make all six strings rise in pitch like six fire sirens rising together, to almost a full tone. You didn't play it. You operated it.

Skid came down with Virus X, and we called in a character called Sylviro Giondonato, a glossy-haired, olive-skinned cat from East St. Louis. He was bug-eyed at the chance, like the pianist I'd found. He played a whole mess of guitar, and when he got his hands on Skid's instrument I thought he was going to cry.

He spent ten hours in Skid's hotel room learning the gimmicks on that box with Skid, who was feeling rotten, coaching him every step of the way. I know he did things on that guitar that Skid wouldn't dare to do. Giondonato had one of those crazy ears like Rheinhardt or Eddie South, not that Eddie plays guitar.

The band played that night without Lutch.

Gionni—Johnny, we called him—was a star. The customers all but clawed down the ceiling-beams. A big hit. But it wasn't Lutch.

Crispin ripped off a momma-daddy on the tom after a while, our signal to take fifteen. I don't think I heard it. I was crouching at the corner of the stand thinking over and over, *No Lutch! No Lutch!* and trying not to laugh.

When Crispin touched my shoulder I almost jumped out from behind my teeth. "No Lutch!" I said. I couldn't help it.

"Hey," said Crispin. "Level off, Fluke. So you noticed it too?"

"Brother."

"You wouldn't think one man's work would make that much difference, would you?"

"I don't get it," I said. I meant that. "Johnny's a hell of a guitar player. Man, I think he's better than Skid."

"He is," Crispin said. "But I think I know why Lutch doesn't show when he plays. Johnny plays terrific guitar. Skid plays terrific electric guitar. Dig me? The two are played pretty much the same, and so are a cello and a viola. But the attack is way different. Johnny exploits guitar as good as I've heard it anywhere so far. But Skid plays that instrument out there."

"What's that to do with Lutch?"

"Think back, Fluke. When Skid first came with us, he was amplified, period.

Look what he's got now—and look where we are now. You know how much we've depended on him."

"I thought we were depending on his guitar."

Crispin shook his big, straight-nosed head. "It's Skid. I don't think I realized it myself until now."

"Thanks," I told him.

He looked at me curiously. "For what?"

I threw up my hands. "For—Well, I feel better now, that's all."

"You're a large charge of strange change, Fluke," he said.

I said, "Everybody knows that."

CHAPTER FIVE

Smart Guy

LUTCH CRAWFORD died easy. You wouldn't think it would be so easy, after the eight years of hating, and what happened with the gun, and the river that failed too. All I did was wait in the parking lot in back of the club, holding a tire iron in my gloved hands, and when the right shadow showed coming around the corner, I hit it. I hit and hit until there could be no mistake about it. I'm not a very big guy. I wanted to be sure. I hit plenty of times. Not once for every minute I'd hated Lutch, though. That would've worn out the tire iron.

And that finished Lutch—all his music, his jump, his public and his pride. I stopped for breath and looked at the huddled messy thing lying there, and knew that Lutch was dead. I walked off whistling *Daboo-Dabay*, and for the first time in eight years, I liked it. . . .

Rehearsal next day was pretty dismal.

Crispin had everything set up. When we were all there, sort of milling around, he got up on the lower tier of the stand. Everyone shut up, except me. But then, I wasn't laughing out loud.

Crispin's mouth was tight. "I asked Fawn what to do," he said abruptly, just like Lutch used to. "She said, 'What would Lutch do?' I think Lutch would first see if we could make it the way we are—find out how bad we're hurt. Right?"

Everybody uh-huhed, that's what Lutch

would do. So we got set to start again.

They took their places. Fawn looked like the first week after Baton Rouge. Giondonato started for the guitar. Crispin waved him back. "Stand by, Johnny." He glanced at the guitar. It was ready to go, resting neck upward on the seat of Skid's chair. Crispin touched it, straightened it up a bit, lovingly. He bent and shifted the speaker outward a little. Then he went to his luggage.

"Theme," he said. He looked over at me. I picked up my mike, puffed into it, adjusted the gain.

Crispin gave a silent one-two. Fawn stroked a chord. The brasses swung right: *Hoo*

And left: *Ha*

Fawn crowded the beat with her chord. I looked at her. For the very first time she wasn't looking at that spot on the floor in front of the band. She was looking at Crispin.

Hoo Ha

Moff raised his clarinet, tongued it, laid his lips around the mouthpiece, filliped the stops nervously, and then blew.

And with the first note of the clarinet, shockingly, came the full, vibrato voice of Skid's guitar: *Daboo, Dabay, Dabay, Daboo . . .*

And right on top of it there was a thunderous, animal coughing gasp, and a great voice screaming, screaming, sobbing like peals of laughter. The sound was huge, and crazy, and it dwindled to an echoing, "He isn't dead, he isn't dead . . ."

And then I had to breathe, and I realized that the sounds had come from me, that I was standing frozen, staring at Skid's glittering guitar, with the mike pressed close to my cheek. I began to cry. I couldn't help it.

Crispin made a noise almost like the first one I had blown into the mike. Then he rushed me. He caught me by the front of the coat and the belt and lifted me high in the air. I heard Fawn scream, "*Don!*" and then he threw me on the floor. I screamed louder than Fawn did.

I must have blacked out for a moment. When I opened my eyes I was lying on the floor. My left arm had two elbows. I couldn't feel it yet. Crispin was standing over me, one foot on each side. He was shoving the rest of them back. They

were growling like dogs. Crispin looked a mile high.

"**W**HY did you do that to Skid?" Crispin asked. His voice was quiet; his eyes were not.

I said, "I did it—no prints, no evidence. Do me something," and Crispin kicked me.

"Don! Don, let me." People began to jostle and push, and Fawn broke through. She went to her knees beside me. "Hello, Fluke," she said, surprisingly.

I began to cry again.

"The poor thing's out of his mind," she said.

"The poor thing?" roared Stormy. "Why, he—"

"Fluke, why did you do it?"

"He wouldn't die," I said.

"Who wouldn't, Fluke? Skid?"

They made me sore. They were so dumb. "Lutch," I said. "He wouldn't be dead."

"What do you know about Lutch?" gritted Crispin.

"Leave him alone," she blazed. "Go on, Fluke."

"Lutch was living in Skid's guitar," I said patiently, "and I had to let him out."

Crispin swore. I really didn't know he ever did that. My arm began to hurt then. Fawn got up slowly. "Don . . ."

Crispin grunted. Fawn said, "Don, Lutch used to worry all the time about Fluke. He always wanted Fluke to know he was wanted for himself. Fluke had something that no one else had, but he wouldn't believe it. He always thought Lutch and the rest of us were sorry for him."

The guitar was still playing. It rose in crescendo. I twitched. "Skid," I yelled.

"Moff, turn that thing off," said Crispin. A second later the guitar stopped. "I knew it would trap somebody," he said to me, "but I never thought it would be you. That's a recording played through the guitar amplifier. I made hundreds of them when I was running tests on Skid's guitar."

"I've been worried for a long time about the luck we've been having. A choir missing this night, a side missing that night, a combo out the next night. The more I thought of it, the more it took on a pat-

tern. When that happened to Skid, I had an idea that whoever it was would give himself away, if only for a second, when that guitar began to play. I never expected *this!*"

"Leave him alone," said Fawn tiredly.

Crispin turned on her. "What do you want to do with him? Kiss and make up?"

"I want to kill him!" she shrieked back. She held out her polished nails, crooked, like claws. "With these! Don't you know that?"

Crispin stepped back, stunned.

"But that doesn't matter," she went on in a low voice. "We can't stop saying it now of all times. What would Lutch want?"

It got very quiet in there.

"Do you know why Fluke was rejected from the army during the war?" she asked.

Nobody said anything.

Fawn said, "Extreme ugliness of face. That was a ground for deferment. Look it up if you don't believe me." She shook her head slowly and looked at me.

"Lutch was always so careful of his feelings, and so were we all. Lutch wanted him to have his face made over, but he didn't know how to suggest it to Fluke. Fluke was psychopathically sensitive about it. Well, he waited too long, and I waited too long, and now look. I say, let's have it done now, and save what little is left of the—creature."

Stormy said, "This good-for-evil kick can go just so far." The rest of them growled.

"I killed Lutch," I said.

"Shut up, you," said Crispin. "All

right, Fawn. But listen. After he gets out of the hospital, I don't care if he looks like Venus—he stays out of my way or I'll strap him down and take him apart with a blunt nailfile."

At last I blacked out.

* * *

There was a time of lying still and watching the white, curve-edged ceilings stream past, and a time of peeping through holes in the bandages. I never said another word, and very little was said to me.

They took the bandages off this morning and gave me a mirror. I didn't say anything. They went away. I looked myself over.

I'm no bargain. But, by the Lord, I can cite you hundreds of people now who are uglier than I am. That's a change from not knowing a single one.

So I killed Lutch Crawford?

Who was the downy-clown, the wise-eyes, the smarty-party, the gook with a book and his jaws full of saws, who said, "The evil that men do lives after them?" He didn't know Lutch Crawford. Lutch did good.

Look at the guy in the mirror. Lutch did that.

Lutch isn't dead. I never killed anybody.

I told you and told you and told you that I want to make my own damn way! I don't want this face! And now that I have this all written down, I'm going out. You couldn't make me a big guy too, could you, Lutch? I'm going out through the top sash. I can get through. And then six floors, face first.

Fawn. . . .

THE END

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Just Remember:
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SEALED WITH A KISS

I shot at him as his
bullet wiped fire across
my arm.



By

ROBERT CARLTON

Miho Brent signed, sealed and delivered the golden gal to the killers—all for the price of a wooden overcoat.
66

I SLID the elevator door back on six and poked my head into the corridor. Everything was quiet, as it should be at one a.m. on Tuesday. The night lights burned dimly and the apartment doors were closed. I frowned. It had sounded like a shot but it could have been a car backfiring down the street.

I shrugged and let the door ease shut. Just then Palmer's apartment opened and a girl stepped into the corridor. I watched through the elevator window. She glanced furtively over her shoulder, and drew her coat's fur collar high around her dimpled

chin. She was bareheaded and her hair shone with the reddish gold of a California sunset. I only glimpsed her face in the shadows, but I saw she was tops in looks even for Hollywood.

She closed Palmer's door, and hurried to the far end of the corridor. We keep bottled spring water in each hall for the benefit of those tenants with ulcers. Opposite the fountain, she paused and dug into the oversize purse slung from her arm. She dropped a brown package into the receptacle for waste cups, then she headed down the service stair.

Maybe it was queer, maybe it wasn't—but she'd come out of James Palmer's apartment, which made it intriguing. Palmer was our busiest playboy and often had late guests. His visitors were oddly assorted. Sometimes women, sometimes well-dressed, prosperous-looking men; but occasionally a seedy character who might have come straight from Skid Row wandered in. We never asked questions. In Palmer's case we just sent them up.

I debated dropping to the lobby and intercepting the girl. But in a high-class apartment house like the Sunrise Towers, you're careful about stopping the tenant's guests. You might have a lawsuit, and after all, I'm only the combination night clerk-elevator operator.

I hooked the elevator door back and walked down to the fountain. The package was flat, three inches wide, about six inches long, and three inches thick. It bore no markings. I tore a corner of the brown paper and looked at a crisp green numeral fifty. Underneath the fifty were more fifties—three inches of them, which adds up to a lot of money.

I tucked the package into my hip pocket, and rang the bell beside Palmer's door. I had no reason to love the big blond playboy, not since the tongue lashing he'd given me earlier in the evening, but something was damned queer all right.

I rang five minutes, but no one answered the bell. I used my master key. The door opened silently and I stepped into the foyer. A copper planter lamp burned in the living room, and beyond the wide floor-to-ceiling windows the Hollywood lights glowed like a multi-colored rug in front of the dark Mulholland Hills. James Palmer lay on the mauve thick-pile car-

pet, his blond hair stained red. Brother, he was very dead.

I BENT over him, saw the bullet had gone into the back of his head. There was no exit wound on his handsome face, so I surmised the slug was still buried inside his brain. The gun, a stub-nosed automatic lay near the body. My stomach rolled and the air in the apartment suddenly smelled fetid. It had been ten, maybe fifteen minutes since I first heard the shot. By now, the golden gal was probably out of the house.

I started for the door, with the hazy idea I might still catch her—and stopped in my tracks.

Mrs. Jennie Troutwine stood in the foyer, her horsey face ashen, her pale gray eyes wide with horror as she stared at Palmer's body. Her big mouth opened and I saw a scream in the making.

How hens like Jennie Troutwine get in fast apartment houses such as the Sunrise Towers, I'll never know. She belonged in an old ladies' seminary, where she could jaw and knit to her heart's content. You know the type—the sharp-beaked, lantern-chinned witch who has her nose in everybody's business and calls six times on Saturday night to complain about the party next door.

The scream was a dilly. High-pitched, thin, wailing, it must have wakened the desk sergeant at the Hollywood police station a mile away. Jennie gave, then clapped her hand over her mouth, but only for stage effect. Right away she pointed her bony finger at me.

"You did it!" she shrieked. "You killed him."

"Me?" I said, mildly astonished. "Don't be a square, Mrs. Troutwine, I—"

"You murdered him." Her finger shook with passion. "I heard you quarreling with Mr. Palmer in the lobby this evening. I heard him tell you that you were a dumb-headed simpering fool. I heard him say you ought to be fired. I—"

"Now wait a minute, Mrs. Troutwine," I cut in hastily. "I wasn't quarreling with him. I just stood there and took it. I didn't get the elevator downstairs fast enough to suit Mr. Palmer, and he was probably in a bad mood. But I wasn't quarreling and I certainly didn't shoot

him." She was crazy, talking like that. "Murderer," she spat at me. "Killer. I saw your face get red. You doubled up your fists as if you were going to strike him. You can't fool me."

Maybe my face was getting red again, Anyway it felt hot. I glared at the old hen. "All right, so I wanted to smack the jerk. He had a poke in the nose coming. Always playing the Hollywood big shot, and bawling the help out in public. So I was sore, but I didn't—"

She ran out in the corridor, began screaming again. It was weird, like a police siren gone haywire. I heard doors opening, heard excited voices. I glanced down at Palmer's body, had the odd detached sensation I was somebody else in another place. The transition from the quiet lobby and the morning paper I'd been reading was too abrupt. I was standing in the middle of a bad jam and my mind persisted in rejecting the obvious, accepting the subtler nuances.

I knew from my daytime law classes I could easily be accused of murder. With a dizzy witness like Jennie Troutwine, anything could happen. What she had seen would grow enlarged and magnified as her active imagination worked it over. By the time she got to the witness stand, her love of the spotlight would have me standing over the dead man with a smoking gun in hand. She'd have it so pat, she'd believe it herself.

Then I thought how I could explain the bundle of fifties in my hip pocket. Sweat dampened my hands and the skin tightened across my forehead. Cops like obvious solutions, and that money looked bad. Maybe I got panicky as people crowded in the doorway. I acted instinctively.

I dived like a charging tackle through the foyer. Hands clutched at me, but I shook them off. I heard Jennie Troutwine's shrieky voice.

"Get him—he's the murderer."

A burly male tenant rushed me as I ducked into the elevator. I unhooked the door and slammed it in his face.

HOME is where the heart is, Byron said—so by the time I reached Cap Randall's modernistic apartment on Wilcox, I was living in my throat. Cap was a

pal of mine, a law student at Phillips College, too, although not under the G.I. Bill of Rights. He always seemed to have plenty of dough, lived in style, and drove a yellow convertible.

He was still dressed, although he wore a fancy Georgian smoking jacket over his wide shoulders. His gray-green eyes narrowed slightly at the sight of me in the door, and he dragged deep on his cigarette.

"Mike Brent," he said. "What brings you around at one-thirty with a wild look on your face?"

I pushed past him to the chrome-and-glass bar, helped myself to a double shot of bourbon. I took the smoke he offered with shaky fingers.

"I'm a fugitive from justice," I told him, "a man wanted for murder. I need a place to hide."

"Come down," Cap said slowly. "You shouldn't drink so much on your night off."

"It's not my night off." I took the bundle of fifties from my pocket and tossed it on the table. "I haven't counted it yet, but there's more money in that package than I care to think about. James Palmer, the playboy I told you about, is dead, and—"

Cap's square face hardened as I gave him the details. "Why did you come here?" he asked.

"You're the first guy I thought of, Cap. I had to run somewhere. By this time the cops probably have me on the air."

I paced up and down the room. "What I can't understand is why the girl tossed the money in that waste cup receptacle. If she murdered Palmer for the dough, it looks like she would have kept it. I don't get it, Cap."

He eyed the money thoughtfully. "There could be reasons. Take it easy, Mike. You'd better go to the cops and give them the whole story. They'll only hold you a few days while they check. You shouldn't have run in the first place. It's a confession of guilt."

"They'll hold me while they build a case, Cap. With the money on me, and Jennie's help, they'll charge me quick—and the next stop will be the gas chamber. I've got to find that girl."

"Describe her to me," Cap said. "I know a lot of women around Hollywood."

I described her as best I could while Cap poured himself a drink. When I'd finished, he picked up the phone, carried it at the end of its long cord toward the kitchen.

"I'll call a lawyer and have him meet you at the police station. Sit tight."

He closed the kitchen door, and I heard him mumbling into the phone. In a few minutes he came out, his handsome face grim. "It's all fixed. He'll meet you at the station. Just tell them the straight truth, kid."

He was right, of course. I'd have a tough time explaining my behavior to the cops, but it was my only out. I retrieved the money and left Cap's apartment. But crossing the deserted lobby, I wasn't so sure. The reason why the girl had cached the money kept nagging at my mind. I acted on impulse. I lifted a cushion on a divan and tucked the package under it. The dough would be safe enough until morning, until I explained to the cops.

Wilcox was quiet, dark shadows pooled under the gnarled peppers bordering the sidewalks. I heard an owl Red Car rumbling down the boulevard two blocks away. The night was misty and the street lights wore yellow halos. Maybe my mood was gloomy. It was a nice night for death, I thought.

I unlocked the door of my jalopy and started to climb in. Two figures stepped from the tree shadows and crowded up to the car. Both of them wore their hat brims low, and their trench coat collars high. One of them had a cannister, and he did the talking.

"All right, Shorty," he said. "We'll take it from here. Mac, get the wheel and drive."

His pardner nodded, walked around the car. At times in the Marines, I faced guns big and little. This guy handled his rod like an expert. He kept it close against his side, not stuck out in the ozone two feet. There wasn't a chance of grabbing his arm, no opening for a judo play. He prodded me with his free hand.

"Inside, Shorty. Time's wasting."

I obeyed and the mugg slid in beside me. He transferred the gun to his left arm. so that the muzzle nudged my ribs

hard. Mac gunned the motor and we spun toward the Mulholland Hills. The big guy flipped a match with his thumbnail, lit a smoke. He had a swarty, pockmarked face.

"Damp night," he said. "We may have some rain before morning, but you won't get wet, Shorty."

IT WAS an eagle's nest, clinging to the steep mountainside. Dark, bleak windows overlooked the mist-shrouded coastal plain, and luminous moonlight filtered through the thin fog, gave the white stucco walls a ghostly radiance. My mood again, perhaps. I was seeing things through dark glasses. Mac parked my car in the motor court and we climbed a winding walk through dew-wet shrubbery.

The house smelled stuffy, as if it hadn't been used awhile. I wondered if it had any connection with my companions, or if they'd just borrowed it for the occasion. Mac flipped a light on and we descended two steps into a living-room den. The venetian blinds were drawn, and the fireplace was cold. White sheets covered the furniture. Definitely, it wasn't a cheerful place. Big Guy shoved me down on a divan.

"Let's have the dough," he said.

I tried to look blank. "What dough? I don't have any money except two dollars and seventeen cents."

"Don't get cute." His thin mouth twisted grimly. "We know you picked up a bundle of cash at Palmer's apartment. Hand it over, Shorty."

"You're nuts," I said. "You've got the wrong—"

He grabbed my coat lapels and jerked me to my feet. He patted my pockets, frisked me fast. His jaw hardened. He threw me back on the divan, shoved his face close to mine.

"Talk," he ordered. "Where did you hide it, Shorty?"

"You've been eating onions," I said.

Big Guy stepped back two paces and said: "Mac."

Mac walked over to the divan, his pendulous lower lip thrust out poutingly. The light glistened on his blue jowls, on the bald spot on top his flat head. He poised his two-hundred-pound squat body before me. His close-set black eyes lidded.

"Some guys never learn," he growled angrily.

It was a short choppy blow, but it had his weight behind it. Savage pain leaped in my mouth, and the shrouded furniture danced crazy jigs. The divan banged into my shoulders, and Mac's leering face blurred. My lips felt welded to my teeth. I put my hand to my mouth and my fingers came away smeared red.

"That was a love tap," Big Guy said. "Now where is the dough, Shorty."

My words sounded thick. "I don't know."

"Mac."

The dumpy mugg slammed his fist into the side of my chin and I reeled down on the cushions. This time the light blinked out and deep grayness settled over the room. Fancy lights shot through the gloom, flashed through my temples, and exploded in my brain. For a moment, I wanted to be unconscious. Then I got my eyes open, saw Mac's thick legs, knees bent—poised.

I sat up, swivelled my head groggily. Big Guy's words lashed me whiplike, beat my stunned mind.

"Better talk," he said. "Mac loves his work."

"Go to hell," I said.

Mac swung again, but the fog had cleared. I blocked the overhand right, grabbed his wrist. I hauled back on his arm and jammed my feet into his paunchy gut. He sailed over the divan, crashed into a table. Big Guy's gun spanged viciously, as I dived for the floor, and the bullet ripped into the cushions. I hooked my feet around his ankles, gave them a quick jerk. He sat down so hard it must have jarred the mountain.

They didn't teach us Marquis of Queensbury rules in the Marines. I scrambled up as Big Guy lifted the gun. I kicked him in the teeth and it was a real pleasure. Behind the divan Mac was on his knees, reaching for his hip. It would take time to pry the gun out of Big Guy's fingers. I made the hall as Mac's shot splintered the doorjamb. I got out there, gunning my motor down the drive.

SLOWING down, I neared the paved road cresting the Mulholland Hills. I needed a moment to think, to figure the

two muggs' place in the night's events. What hole had they crawled out of? And how had they known the money was in my possession? It was a puzzle my beat-up brain refused to consider.

I turned away from Hollywood, parked under a clump of oaks two hundred yards from the dead-end drive leading to the house. They had to come down the road sometime, and my only chance was to tail them, find out their interest in the money.

I smoked moodily, listening to the wind rustle the oaks. The girl was still the key to Palmer's murder. To hell with thinking—it hurt my head. My wrist watch read four a.m. It seemed longer than three hours since I'd been a quiet night clerk.

Headlights swept a curve below as a car climbed from Cahuenga Pass. It slowed at the side road, turned in, and the mountain crest was black again.

I decided tailing it was unwise. It was a half-mile to the eagle-nest house and I'd have to go on foot. They still had to come out, and I could still follow them.

My battered lips throbbed painfully. I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, greenish-white radiance bathed the pavement, and bright headlights loomed in the night. The car passed the dead-end road, bore down on my jalopy, and I began living in my throat again. A red light glowed over the car's windshield, and it had two radio aerials, front and rear.

Police car. Brakes screeched opposite me and a lean blue-clad cop climbed out. He walked over, leaned his elbows in the window, and threw a flashlight on me.

"What are you doing up here, fellow?" he asked. "Let's see your driver's license."

I started to dig my wallet out, halted my hand. I couldn't show the cop my identification. Not with a broadcast on me as Palmer's killer.

"I don't have my license with me," I lied. "I left it in another suit, at home."

"No license." His voice was flat, dry. "Who beat you up?"

My hands got damp and cold. "I was in a beef at a cocktail bar in Hollywood. That's why I came up here, to cool off."

He looked at me closely, suspicion heavy on his brown face. He threw the light around the car's interior, down to

the registration slip on the steering column. He squinted at the slip, but the glassine envelope was dusty, and he couldn't read the name. I wondered if he could hear my heart pounding.

"You don't look good to me," he said thinly. "We have a lot of holdups along here. Guys sticking up petting parties. Put your keys in your pocket and get out. We'll take you down to the station and look you over."

I remembered Cap's advice about telling them the truth. But now my explanations would be more involved, and it was a hundred to one they wouldn't investigate the eagle-nest house before taking me to the station for questioning. By that time the birds would be flown—and my only clue to the identity of Palmer's midnight visitor gone. But they had me cold. I reached for the ignition key, and saw a car's headlights coming down the dead-end drive.

"Look," I said desperately. "I'm no heist guy. I don't have a gun. You can search me."

"Means nothing," he clipped. "You could have tossed a gun down the mountain when you saw us coming. Get out."

The car's lights turned onto the pavement, swung toward Hollywood. The cop stepped back, reached for the door handle. I switched the ignition on, romped the starter. As the motor roared, I shoved the door hard. It banged the cop in the face and he staggered back, his cap tumbling to the road. I slammed the car in gear, screamed away in second. It was a long gamble, but it would take them two or three minutes to turn on the narrow mountain road. I bent low over the wheel as a sharp report sounded behind. Something clipped the car, whined away.

The sedan ahead was sailing. Five minutes later we barged into high-speed Cahuenga Pass. I heard a siren wailing in the Mulholland Hills.

THEY drove north over the Pass, cut to Burbank and Pasadena, then turned east into the orange grove country. Traffic was thin, and I kept well behind, driving at times without lights. Dawn pinked the snow-capped Sierra Madre and lay rose tints over the San Bernardino Valley as we pulled into the little foothill town

of Ramona. They stopped in front of a small store on Main Street, and I parked a block away and watched.

Big Guy got out and inspected the store front. He nodded and the other two men climbed from the car. I recognized Mac's dumpy figure, but couldn't distinguish the third man clearly, although there was something vaguely familiar about his walk.

They disappeared into an alley beside the store, and I waited five minutes by the bank corner clock. Then I got a wrench from my tool kit and walked up to the store. It was a baby shop. Dolls, layettes, dresses, rubber pants, and other infant's necessities lined the window. I frowned, wondered what the hell a baby shop had to do with murder.

I explored the alley cautiously. It was like any small town alley—gravelled, the usual collection of trash cans, piles of empty cardboard containers and broken wood crates. Directly behind the baby shop, dimity curtains covered the windows. That meant the owners had living quarters in the rear. I heard voices, a man's deep tone—but the woman's contralto sounded quivery, scared.

Keeping close to the wall, I approached a window. It was open at the bottom, for night ventilation I suppose. I glanced inside the room. Big Guy and Mac were ranged on either side of a rear door. The third man's back was turned to me, and again I felt the vague sense of familiarity. The girl wore a quilted housecoat over a blue nightgown. Her red-gold hair cascaded around her shoulders, and she looked pretty enough to paint, murderess or not.

The man was talking. "So you were in the apartment and saw Palmer get what was coming to him. I should have searched the place, but I was in a hurry. Stupid of me."

"All murderers are stupid." She faced him defiantly. "I know it's useless to deny it. You'll kill me anyhow. I saw you shoot him, and I should have gone to the police, but I wanted to avoid getting mixed up in murder."

The man's voice was dry, harsh. "So you were working with Palmer. You were the little girl who was running his dough out. I should have known Palmer

was too smart to try to run the money out himself, when he knew we were watching him. If it hadn't been for the elevator operator, I wouldn't have suspected you. Long ago, Palmer told me about you, mentioned a girl friend who owned a baby shop here. Your description fit."

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

"You tossed it in a wastebasket."

Her eyes widened, but her voice was steady. "That package? He gave it to me to keep until he called for it. I didn't know what was inside it."

"Why did you throw it away, then?"

"After I got out in the hall, I remembered it was in my purse. I didn't want anything to connect me with his death."

"No difference." The man's tone had a nasty sarcastic edge. "Palmer got what any double-crosser can expect. He held out on a little drug-smuggling deal."

His nasal laugh sickened me. He half-turned as he reached for his hip and drew a flat, snub-nosed automatic. I saw his face in profile, and recognition slammed me in the eyes. It was Cap Randall.

I STARED numbly a moment, while the little things about the night's events reeled through my mind. It all dovetailed neatly. I recalled telling Cap about Palmer months before, mentioning Palmer looked like a guy who'd do anything for money.

I saw, too, why Cap had wanted a detailed description of the girl, and his taking the phone into the kitchen was explained. He'd called the muggs. He'd been responsible for the beating I'd taken when his muggs hadn't found the money.

Only two people knew I had the bundle of fifties, Cap and myself—only I hadn't seen it until too late. He'd probably used the service stair going to Palmer's apartment, and for his getaway.

Double-crossed and framed by a friend. It was hard to take. It flamed in my mind and knotted my hands as Cap lifted the automatic and aimed it at the girl. A killer and a drug racketeer.

I swung the wrench, crashed it into the window. Glass showered into the room. Cap Randall lowered the automatic, spun

around, surprise on his handsome face. I ran, around the building corner to the rear door.

Big Guy came out first. I slammed the wrench over his head.

Mac erupted right on Big Guy's heels. He pivoted on the steps as he saw his pardner go down. He tried to swing the gun on me, but he teetered off balance. I hit him alongside the jaw, and the wrench jarred my arm. His mouth spouted red. He toppled over and the gun slipped from his hand.

I scooped the gun up, stood beside the open doorway.

"Okay, Cap," I said. "You kill her and I'll kill you. You can't win. Come out with your hands up."

"Sucker." His voice was scornful. "A sucker who goes to school all day and works half the night. Come on, sucker."

He laughed nasally again and his gun cracked. Splinters flew from the door facing, and I remembered he could easily shoot through the flimsy wall. I got down on my belly, hooked my elbows on the steps. I pushed myself forward suddenly, gun ready. His automatic was aimed shoulder high. He wasn't expecting me at floor level.

I blazed the shot in, and he staggered backward. I rolled down the steps as he depressed the automatic's muzzle. The bullet ricocheted off concrete. I got up, went to the opposite side of the door.

There was silence in the room, a deadly oppressive silence. I heard an early morning truck rumble down Ramona's main street, then I dived through the doorway.

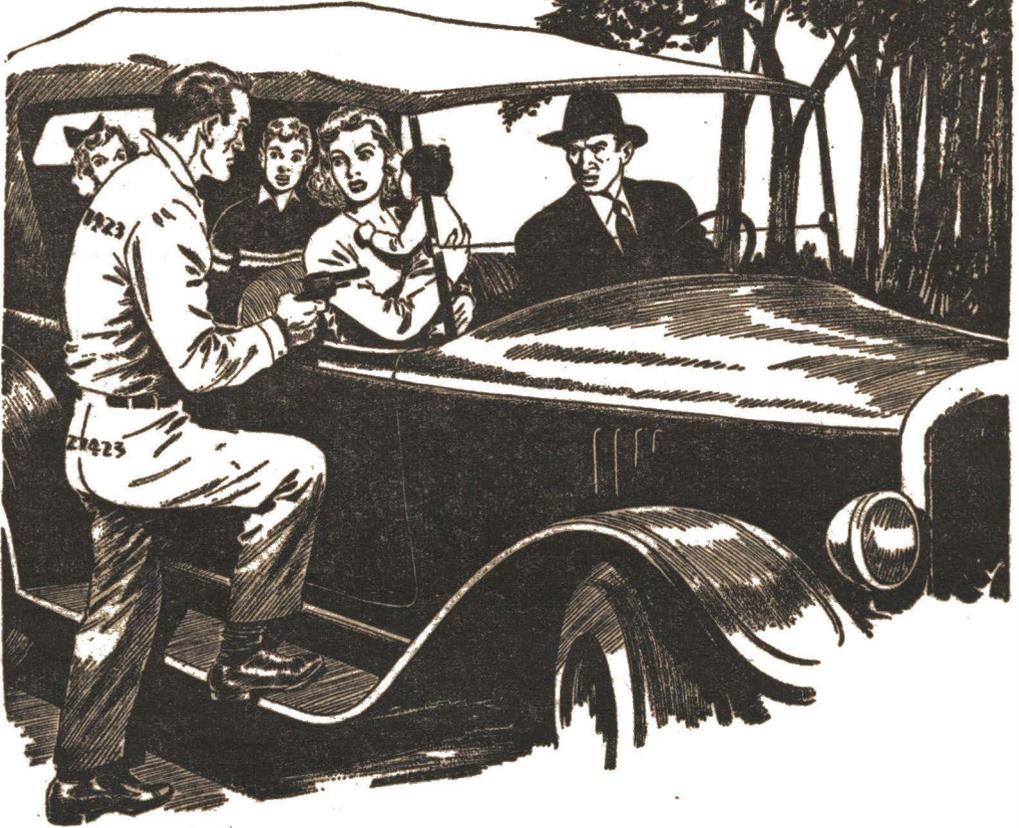
His gun flashed yellow flame as I hit the deck, skidded on the rug. I shot at his handsome face as his bullet wiped fire across my arm. He dropped the automatic, reeled and fell down for good.

The girl was a crumpled heap on the floor. I picked her up, got water from the bathroom. She came out of it and I helped her from the room. Outside the sun was breaking over the Sierra Madre, bathing the orange groves gold. I thought a gal who ran an infant's shop couldn't be too bad, and I said she was tops in looks.

She gave me a warm smile.

"Honey," I said. "How about saying thanks to an ex-G.I.?"

*The escaped gun-mauler beat Robe-
lan's brains out—but he still had to
take his victim's lip.*



*"Do as I say and you won't get
hurt—much."*

**By JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

IN THE first gray of dawn he came awake with the sharp alertness of an animal. He was on his stomach in a sandy notch between two rocks and the revolver was a hard lump against his body.

They might have seen him there and they might be watching. His hand closed around the chill metal, and he thumbed back the hammer. Only then did he move,

**— YOU'LL —
NEVER ESCAPE**

so explosively that nearby birds chattered in alarm and winged off.

He drank from the creek at the foot of the slope and then went back up to the crest. As he neared the crest he dropped to hands and knees, writhed the last few feet on his belly, reaching forward with caution to part the dried grass.

He froze in that position, his pale eyes squinting against the sunrise, staring down toward the distant ribbon of highway. His face held all the cunning of a man who skirts the narrow border of death and means to survive it.

It was a narrow face, with a pulled-down petulance about the oddly thickened lips. His body looked flaccid and too thin, but it had a coiled steel efficiency about it, an animal's economy of motion. A prison number was stenciled across the back of his torn gray cotton shirt. The stubble of beard along the thin line of his jaw was flecked with gray, though he didn't look much over thirty.

At last, when the sun was high enough, it glinted on the white enamel of the trooper cars. The road block was established at the place he had expected to find it. With half a break he would have been out of the area before they could have set up the block. The distant cars stopped to be checked, went on again, seeming from that distance to move with incredible slowness.

But the escape siren had gone off too quickly and he had been cut off, had been forced to make his way through the swamp. The black mud had caked to a sick gray on his pants.

He watched the road block for a time and his eyes suddenly narrowed as he saw movement halfway between his position and the distant highway. The slant of the sun made vision difficult but he finally saw that it was a thin line of men beating their way toward the hill.

Cursing, he slid slowly back, crawled a dozen feet, ran in a crouch for a time, and then began to walk back toward the swamp at a ground-covering pace. Yet there was indecision in his manner. He was a bug in a bottle and they were putting the cork in the bottle.

Then he stopped, thinking that maybe he could ambush the line when they got to the brush, shoot his way through into

the clear. But there were flats in the valley and he had seen the long gleam of rifle barrels. The thought of a rifle slug tearing his flesh made him feel ill. It made him forget the hunger that had gnawed at him for twenty-four hours. No choice. The date set for his execution was but a month and three days away. The state wanted that date kept.

Though he knew it was dangerous, some hunch that he but half understood turned his steps toward the edge of the swamp where the highway cut close to it.

Soon the roar of cars became audible and, after forty more yards, he could see the flash of sun on chrome as they swept by. With a car he might be able to bluff his way past the road block.

But what chance of stopping one of them, when every driver had doubtless been informed that an escaped murderer hid somewhere along that stretch of road?

He wondered if he could make one of the cars stop. If only they didn't go so fast. A hill might slow them down a bit. He began to move more rapidly, on the alert for any sound of crashing brush that would indicate the nearness of the posse.

A half mile further the road cut away from the swamp, went up a long steep hill. He crouched in the brush and listened until he could hear no drone of cars approaching from any direction. He ran across the road, dived into the brush on the other side, rolled to a stop and held his breath while he listened. There was no shout of discovery, no sound of pursuit.

Twice he heard far-away yells and guessed that it was the men of the posse shouting instructions to each other. Working his way up the hill was slow and laborious. The brush was thin and twice he had to run across empty fields. Once, moments after he found cover, the search plane circled lazily overhead. He cursed it in a breathless rasping voice until it was gone—heading back over the swamp.

Fortunately, the steepest part of the hill was a place where the brush grew close to the road. The morning was growing hotter and the sweat made the thin shirt cling to his shoulders and chest. Deer flies began to bother him.

He flattened out on his belly and watched the road. Looking down, the hill

did not seem to be as steep. It did not appear to slow down the cars. A red trailer truck ground up the hill and he tensed, then saw the helper sitting beside the driver. Too much risk. Two girls came up the hill in an ancient convertible and it began to labor. But as he shifted the gun to a more comfortable grip, the girl behind the wheel dropped it into second and began to pick up speed.

He wondered how long it would be until the thin line of men came up the hill. Not until afternoon, probably.

The sun was high when he saw the car. He knew the moment it came in sight that it was *the* car. An ancient touring car. Fifty feet up the hill from where he crouched, a faint unused road cut off at an angle.

The only thing that could ruin his plan would be a car overtaking this one, or coming from the other direction at the wrong time. He tried to listen through the chugging of the old car, tried to hear other motors. There was nothing but silence.

Part way up the hill the driver shifted. As the tense watcher expected, the car continued, but at a very slow rate.

LIFTING himself, he waited on his toes and knuckles like a track star. When the car was opposite him, he bounded forward, ran three steps parallel to it and then jumped onto the running board, leaning in across the woman to hold his revolver on the pasty driver. The driver stared at him.

The convict said, "Do as I say and you won't get hurt—much. . . . Turn in right up here."

The driver did as he was told. The car

swayed and bounced on the uneven track, the grass scraping the underside.

When they were away from the highway, out of sight of any passing car, the driver looked at him again. "Stop here," he said.

The two tow-headed children perched on the luggage in the back seat stared at him with round blue eyes. One was a girl of three or four, and the other was a boy of about nine.

They had their mother's coloring. She sat, slack and bewildered, in the front seat, a baby in her arms. She had the look of acrid poverty about her.

"Sit right there and keep the kids still," he told her, "or you won't see your man again. Come on, you."

He forced the driver ahead of him with the gun, walking him off into the brush. When they were out of sight of the car, he tripped the man so that he fell heavily. The driver was a bigger man than the man with the gun, but he trembled with fear and shock.

"Take off your clothes," he said.

The man's trembling hands fumbled with his shirt buttons. It was a blue work shirt, sodden at the armpits. . . . The clothes were in a heap and the man lay quivering on the pine needles. He had a second to cry out, but he didn't.

Once the heavy barrel of the revolver smashed down against the bridge of his nose, there was no sound except the drone of the insects, the distant roar of traffic and the monotonous thud of the heavy gun on helpless flesh, on splintering bone. . . . The familiar red mist faded away and he looked down at the dead driver of the car.

The clothes fit reasonably well once he

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had tightened the belt to the last notch. The worn blackened wallet contained thirty-three dollars and a union card saying that the bearer was Andrew Robelan, a machinist.

He smeared the blood off the gun barrel onto a handful of leaves and went back to the car. The woman was sitting as he had left her.

He got behind the wheel and started the car.

"Where is he? What did you do to him?"

"I tied him up. He'll be okay."

He reached over, took the baby out of her arms, put it between them, its head toward the gear shift. It was asleep.

The motor was noisy. He shouted at the woman, "One wrong move from you or from those kids in the back and I'll—"

He held his clenched fist over the baby's head on the car seat. She nodded, chewing at her underlip.

Backing the car out onto the highway, he put it into low gear and labored up what remained of the hill. The little girl in the back seat began to sob. The woman turned and reached back, patted the child. At his snarled request, she stopped, but she still kept her face turned, her eyes on the two in the back. When he glanced at her her lips were moving and he wondered if she was praying. Prayer wasn't going to do her much good. Not as far as her husband was concerned.

The road block was in the flats a half mile from the foot of the hill. As he took his foot from the gas pedal, shifted it to the brake, he said, "Not a peep out of you, sister. If they ask questions, I do the talking."

The car wheezed to a stop and the two troopers, their faces grim, stepped up, one on each side.

He gave the answers in a calm, almost bored voice. "I'm Andrew Robelan. I'm a machinist. We're going to Florida." They wanted to see identification. He showed them the card. But he held it with his left hand. The gun was under the front seat, but in position for a quick hand to grasp it. He kept his right hand on his thigh, inches from the head of the sleeping baby.

The troopers waved them on. He want-

ed to laugh with crazy glee. The clatter of the old motor was a song of triumph. He felt bigger than life size, enormous with cleverness. Ahead the road was open and free.

She was praying again.

They were on three lane highway. Suddenly the world exploded around him, smashing into dark flame and bitter lights. He was dimly conscious of sagging toward the wheel, of her hand reaching out to grasp the wheel. He tried to push himself back up, but the second crushing blow drove him back into utter blackness. . . .

It was dusk when he came to. He was on a cot and his hands were up over his head. When he tried to move them he found that he was handcuffed to a steam pipe that ran down the wall.

The clink of chain on metal brought a big trooper into the room. He clicked on the light and looked down with an expression that indicated both satisfaction and disgust.

"You're going to keep a date, Johnny," the trooper said.

He cursed the trooper, infuriated by the way the man grinned. But in the middle of the cursing, he stopped and frowned.

"What happened?" he asked. "What went wrong?"

"You didn't ask enough questions, Johnny. You took too much for granted. You had a hell of a fine plan and you made us look like suckers, but you weren't as smart as that beat-down Mrs. Robelan."

"I don't get it."

"I'll tell you just to watch your face.

Mrs. Robelan gets the reward money, you know. You should have found out more about them, Johnny. If you knew more about them, you'd know how she told the kid to slug you on the head with the wrench that was on the floor in the back.

"She didn't open her yap!" he said.

"Sure she did, Johnny. Sure she did."

And suddenly Johnny knew. He heard the trooper's words of explanation through the roaring in his ears.

"Yeah, the old lady, the baby and the little girl are okay, but the old man and the boy were deaf-mutes. They both could read lips. She told him to hit you without making a sound."

Johnny turned his face to the wall.



It was dawn at wealthy Jay Gerard's home, when a shot awoke detective Jim Bennett and sent him speeding outside—to find a lovely and still-warm corpse sprawling on the beach. A murderer was one of the house guests.



Leaving for the night, Gerard had left Bennett to get rid of pretty Janie Crockett—before his fiancée showed. Deaf-mutes Julius Stockmaster, novelist, and his secretary arrived for the engagement party.



But his fiancée also came that night, embraced Stockmaster warmly. . . . After Bennett found the body, he discovered Gerard's major-domo awake. Cecil said his revolver had been shot recently—at some crows.



Jay Gerard returned, to see Bennett fighting whiskey-wild Stockmaster. . . . The thrilling novel by Robert Martin—"A Shroud In Her Trouser"—will be told in the June issue . . . published May 4th.

*Pour some blonde acid;
mix with strangler's fingers—
to get Race Williams chasing* ♦♦♦♦

HALF

**Thrilling
Race Williams
Detective Novel**



I asked: "Are you on the
kill, Jimmy?"

A CORPSE

CHAPTER ONE

The Munson Pearls



By
CARROLL
JOHN
DALY

NO ONE saw me go in. I was positive of that. It wasn't too hard to get in and out of that apartment house without being seen. If it wasn't exactly built for that purpose, a good many of its tenants rented there because of that very convenience.

The automatic elevator lifted me to the eighth floor. I walked down the hall and around the L to what was called, on the door, Suite D.

I didn't ring the bell and my knock was not too loud but the occupant opened the door almost at once and I slipped in, closing the door.

"Hello, tall and virile if not handsome," the girl said and followed me down to the living room, a flashy but comfortable set-up at the end of a long narrow hall. She was surprised to see me but she didn't show it except for the half-quizzical, not startled look in her eyes.

She wasn't a bad eye-ful and had cut down a bit on her weight since I last saw her. A luscious blonde if you like them that way. A little on the fat side, if you didn't. She had purple-lounging pajamas on under the light drape she was wearing.

She wasn't a woman easy to throw and in a way I was there to throw her. She said simply:

"Park your hat and coat around and sit down. Can I buy you a drink?"

I took off my coat, tossed it over a chair, and threw my hat on top of it. I was willing to give the impression that it might be a little while before I left.

I said, "Thanks, Doris. Anything you mix will suit me. Not surprised to see me, eh?"

"If you mean was I expecting you, Race, no." She stood there, a cigarette between red lips and a match waiting to flare up. Then she burned up the end of the smoke, took a long inhale and waited. After a bit she tried:

"It's almost midnight. Not too late for

a social call, not too late for a business one. I'm not throwing you out anyway, if that's what you mean." She walked to the sideboard in the alcove and poured me out a drink of rye, pushed a glass forward for herself, changed her mind and handed me my drink. "You take rye?"

"Right," I said. "Good guess."

"No." She shook her head. "I don't guess, Race. I know what people like, people who I figure are worth knowing."

"Flattered." I tossed off the drink. "Not having one?"

"No. I don't know how clear your head is after a half dozen or so, but I know about mine. Tell me what's on your chest and I'll figure if six won't matter."

"Half business, half pleasure. Half to your advantage and half to mine."

"Tell me," she said coldly without sitting down, "the half to my advantage—my pleasure."

"Well." I put the empty glass down on the arm of the chair. "Were you waiting for Jimmy Ferris when you let me in?"

"Why?" She never took those blue eyes off me, china blue with the hard coldness of china now. "Did he send you to see me?"

"No one sends me any place." And before she could frame the question, "Nor did he ask me or pay me to come. I'm on my own, Doris. If you could tell me anything about the Munson pearls, I'd do you a favor in return, give you information."

"What," she said, "made you think I'd know anything about the Munson pearls?"

And that was Doris Wheeler for you. There was nothing of surprise in her voice at my question. Nothing to give me the slightest hint that she didn't know all about the Munson pearls.

How did I know she didn't know anything about the Munson pearls? Simple, that. I didn't know anything about them myself. In face, I had just made up both the name and the pearls. I went right on. I wanted to confuse the reason for my visit.

"It's like this, Doris," I told her with an air of great ease. "You used to be soft on Harry Hamilton and he had a liking for such baubles."

"Harry." She laughed. "A rich man's son. Yes, I liked Harry. You know what he thought of me. It's nearly four years

since he copped that string from his aunt and put them around my neck. He was just a kid who wanted to dress up a woman. His first and last and—" She stopped.

"And only woman."

"Perhaps." She smiled. "His old man came around and threatened me with arrest and what not. Finally I sold him back the pearls plus twenty per cent for loss of Harry."

"Plus Ferris, though Harry's old man didn't know you had had Ferris in mind for some time."

"You're uncanny," she told me. "What made you think of Harry Hamilton and what is the lay?"

"No lay." I shook my head and with a smile, "And no full value for the pearls back. Harry Hamilton got them and he forks over—there might be a little something in it for you. But then you would hardly need money. Ferris never was tight-fisted."

"A girl," she said slowly, "can always use money. As for Harry Hamilton—a girl and boy affair. I haven't seen Harry in four years." She was very emphatic. "I'm a one-man woman. I'll stick to Ferris. He don't ever need to worry about that. He won't lose me. Tell him that. He won't ever lose me. Is that clear?"

"Clear enough," I told her. "Did you ever think maybe he might want to lose you?"

"No." She looked straight at me and the china blue came through slits. "He may think he wants to lose me, Race—but he really doesn't."

I got up now and went over and put both my hands on her shoulders. "Doris," I said, "I'll tell you what's on my mind. The Ferris romance is a washout. You're through."

"Thanks." She looked straight at me. "Is that all?"

"YOU know the truth, don't you, Doris? You've heard the gossip. He's owner of a swanky club now. He entertains cafe society. He *is* cafe society. His past is forgotten. He's tossing you over for— He's thinking of getting married, Doris."

"I heard that too." She still stared at me. "What else?"

"You might," I said, "make trouble.

You've known Ferris for a long time. You know what happens to people who make trouble for him."

"He fights back," she said. "Okay, Race, I know that."

"You don't know all of it." I framed the words carefully—not exactly a lie. "Doris, he couldn't stand you buzzing in his ear. In the girl's family ear. She's money; respectable. She's a kid. He'll hop off and marry her. If you can give me any dope on Ferris, I'll see you don't lose him to this girl."

"I see." She hesitated a long time. "No, I won't double-cross Ferris. I don't work that way. And I won't lose him either."

"Doris," I told her. "Give it a thought. He'd wring your neck if you stand in his way."

Not even her long lashes flickered. But back through the slits there was the smallest break in the china, maybe not doubt—let us say, speculation. She walked by me and out of the room. She was back in less than a minute. The china was wide now. She held a bottle up in her hand for me to look at. The plain mark '*Poison*' and also '*Carbolic Acid*' stood out.

"Good lord," I said. "You wouldn't—not kill yourself."

For the first time her face cracked up and she laughed. It was a real laugh, a pleasant laugh. She said:

"This doll, Diana Van Court. Not a blemish on her baby face. You know, Race, I was born in a small town outside of Albany. Had a boy who promised to marry me. I was only eighteen and we kept our love a secret. He tossed me over for another girl." And letting me have it with a bit of venom, "No one suspected me, of course—I was just a kid and he never talked. But someone threw acid in her face. She was a mess. Beautiful she had been, too. She killed herself a year later. Ferris doesn't know that story. Tell it to him."

"I'm not from Ferris," I said after I got my breath back. I'm not easily startled; seldom shocked. But I was shocked now. It never entered my head to tell her she wouldn't dare. I knew she wasn't bluffing. Somehow, with a little shudder, I knew that she'd toss it in the girl's face as quickly as she'd snap her fingers.

I had wanted to make a deal with her. If she would give me information about Ferris that would be worth a prison term for him, I'd threaten him with it and make him lay off the Van Court girl. I told her that now. She said:

"I wouldn't double-cross Ferris. I'll always stick to him."

"And the acid throwing. Is that sticking to him?"

"Oh," she said. "That will be protecting him from himself. No, Race, there is nothing in it for you—through me."

Nice going that. But I never pretended to understand women. I didn't press her. I simply said, as I looked around the room:

"Okay, Doris. I gave you a friendly tip about the neck wringing."

"I have nothing against you." She followed me to the door and just before I opened it: "About Harry Hamilton and the pearls?"

"What about them?"

"Oh nothing. You get around, Race. You hear things. I was wondering. Is Harry—is he in some sort of a jam where he might need money?" And when I looked at her and started to turn the door knob, "I won't tell anyone, Race."

I said nothing.

"Tell me." She gripped my sleeve. "I—I—got to know."

She bit her lip then and caught herself up. It was the first bit of expression or feeling that she had shown. As far as I knew, she had not even looked at Harry Hamilton in—well since she went with Ferris. But I was through now. The shock had turned to disgust and, yes, a little fear and she still had the bottle of acid in her hand.

I went out and closed the door. I slipped out of the apartment as carefully as I went in. No one had seen me come or go.

Nice girl, Doris, eh what?

THAT was that. I had found out one thing. Diana Van Court was in actual danger. I hadn't figured out how to take care of that. If Doris had been a man I might have stuck a finger against her chest and said simply, "The day you lay a finger on that kid, I'll push a gun against your stomach and blow you apart."

That wasn't the point. I was under

wraps. I was paid by Diana Van Court's father to protect her and break up the marriage—the possible marriage of his daughter to Jimmy Ferris.



Race and Diana

It wasn't the free-and-easy job it seemed. I couldn't threaten any one. Diana must not know I was hired. It was a good stipulation at that, for if she knew the truth, she would probably up and marry Jimmy Ferris right away.

I could see her father's point of view, but I had a point of view too. I went over Jimmy Ferris' past. It was not a good past. It was, in fact, a very bad past. He had killed men. You could get that from most any city dick in on the know. But knowledge was not evidence. Now he was a big-time night club operator.

It was late but I found my car parked around the corner and went up and visited Hatton Force, the young attorney. He met me in the hall of his apartment in a classy bathrobe that he liked to call his dressing gown. He was rubbing one hand through his uncombed hair and the knuckles of the other in his sleepy eyes.

He wasn't a bad-looking lad, hardly more than thirty. Inheritance stuck out all over him—breeding and money. He was the junior partner of Lennard, Hayward and Force—no doubt putting plenty of money into the firm. He said:

"My man has gone to bed. It is better this way, I suppose. Now, what could bring you to me at this hour of the morning. Almost one, isn't it?"

"Well," I gave it to him straight.

"Doris Wheeler, the woman Ferris tossed over for Diana Van Court, is getting ready to throw a bottle of acid in Diana's face. I just left her. Should her father know that?"

It threw him all right. He didn't pull any more 'my man' stuff.

"What have you done to prevent it?" he said at length. "The agreement is that her father never appears in this at all. You have had a retainer and the assurance of five thousand dollars when this affair is broken up—permanently. You haven't spoken to Mr. Van Court, of course?"

"I've never seen him in my life," I told Hatton Force. "And I don't like my job. I'm to protect the girl, prevent her marriage to Ferris. At the same time she mustn't know it. Ferris mustn't know it."

"I think," he said, "you are exaggerating. The single stipulation is that no one should know the part I played in it, or her father played in it. I expected you would eliminate this—Ferris entirely."

"Any way at all," I murmured. "You know what those words imply."

"They are rather final," he smiled.

"You mean shoot him to death?"

"Are you serious?" His eyes opened so wide that I thought they'd roll out of their sockets. "If I thought for one moment you were serious, I'd throw you out that door," and with the slightest smile as I stiffened, "or try to throw you out the door. If you could push this Ferris back into the arms of the woman—Doris, what's her name—that would be final."

The speech could have been a phony. If it was, he did it well.

We talked a bit after that, but didn't get any place. I admitted I had no trouble in meeting Diana, even dancing with her.

"I—we foresaw that." Hatton Force took some of the credit. "You see, Mr. Williams, Diana always admired you. She spoke of you often. Read all there was to read about you, at different times in your career. That is the reason I chose you for this mission. Of course," he hastened on, piling it up with a bit of lather, "Your fearlessness, integrity and—"

"And I knew your check would be good," I cut in there. "All right, Mr. Force. We understand each other. I thought her father might want to talk to

her, take her away on some long trip."

"No, no. Her father has a rule never to interfere with what she does. He— and as he saw me watching him closely— "That is, in this instance the situation was drastic and called for drastic measures. I'm sure I can count on you, Mr. Williams."

"You have nothing to lose if I don't pull it off—or have you, Mr. Force? You're not in love with Diana yourself?"

"Good lord," he gasped and reddened. "I'm in a way of being her relative—er—first cousin, so to speak." And when I waited for more: "The Van Courts and Forces do not believe in marriage between cousins, first cousins."

"Fine." I smiled at him for he seemed to be embarrassed. "I'll do the best I can—up to killing him, eh?"

"Yes, yes." He gripped my hand. "Look at that man, that terrible man Ferris—and that fine girl—look at Diana."

"Right. I'll go and look at her now."

I left him. This time I landed on Park Avenue.

CHAPTER TWO

More Threats

I WENT around to The Silver Swallow owned by Jimmy Ferris. He was a smart lad, was Ferris. He had not stuck to his old friends. No flat-nosed, cauliflower-eared, through-the-side-of-the-mouth talkers had been carried along with him on his wagon to success. He didn't want those who knew too much of his past. His staff was high class. Smooth talkers, smooth dressers. Their rough part was on the inside buried deep.

The first lad I spotted, sitting alone in a high-backed booth in the bar, was Harry Hamilton. They said he could make you burst out crying just to look at him. He was still supposed to be carrying the torch for Doris Wheeler.

He had a clear field there now, so far as Jimmy Ferris was concerned. But the old man—now dead—hadn't forgotten that his son had chased Doris, liked to gamble, hadn't been above swiping a string of pearls, even if they did belong to his aunt, and also was known as a rum-hound.

One thing would keep Doris from being

interested in Harry Hamilton. He inherited his father's money. Sure, it was a fortune. But—there was a catch to it. Harry Hamilton still lived in the same big house. The expense and upkeep of it was paid by the trustees of the estate. Food and all was supplied, but no liquor. And get this—the papers had made something of it at the time—he was permitted an allowance of twenty-five dollars a week. Out of this he attended to his own amusement, pleasures, liquor, clothes.

When he arrived at the age of fifty, he would receive the principal of the estate; all of it to do what he pleased with it. Since Harry was now less than thirty, it was doubtful if he would live that long and pretty sure that Doris wouldn't wait that long. But he might know something about Ferris, so I sat down and gave him the merry line.

"Cheer up, Harry," I told him. "It looks like Ferris is thinking of getting married; but I suppose after she tossed you over the way she did, you wouldn't be interested in Doris Wheeler."

"Interested, Mr. Williams?" Harry was always very formal. "I've lived for no reason but Doris. My father was a stern and an unjust man. I wished to make that girl my wife. I mean to now. I thought my aunt would be glad to give her the pearls. My father held it over her head when he broke us up."

"We all sort of thought you'd take it out on Ferris for stealing her away from you." For a moment I thought there was a flash in those alcoholic eyes. "But Doris—" I shook my head. "She would hardly be one to wait over twenty years for money."

"She'd wait a lifetime with me," he said. "I kept my bargain. I have not seen her. Perhaps the trustees would let me rent the mansion. Doris and I could live quietly up in the Main woods. The income from the rent and my paltry allowance—" He straightened. "I have in mind a bit of land with lumber on it that belongs to my estate. I could fell those trees. We could raise a family and by the time the children were ready to go to college . . ."

"About Ferris, you must hate his guts." I cut in on his whiskey dream.

"Ferris." He shook his head. "To

know Doris is to love her. She smiled on him. No man with blood in his veins could have resisted. Now," and with a slobbery grin, "she is ready to cast her smile some place else. Perhaps she is casting that smile backwards to me."

I got up to go. There would be something doing there. "Ferris may think he left her because he wished to leave her, but that is only the greatness of her heart. She saw what it did to me. I never can look at another woman. She spared him. That, Mr. Williams, is Doris. A woman with a heart of gold."

Hard as gold I thought when I left him. Harry had been going on like that for the past four years.

A waiter tapped me on the shoulder. Miss Diana Van Court wanted to see me. I wanted to see her too. She was alone at a table in the distant corner of the dining room. I went over and sat down beside her.

"Dance?" I asked her.

"No, Race." She shook her head. "You've been rushing me lately. Being at places I'm at. Jimmy doesn't like it."

"Jealous?"

"No." She laughed. "But I want to know why?"

"Have you looked at yourself in a mirror lately? After all, you are not engaged to Jimmy, at least formally. Don't you like it?"

She hesitated, and then: "Yes." And then, "You're not afraid of Jimmy?"

"No," I told her. "I'm not afraid of Jimmy. Is he afraid of me?"

"Not in the way you think." She seemed puzzled. I looked her over while she put together the words she was going to use. Very young, yes, but plenty of poise, plenty of assurance, slim with perfect features—maybe too perfect—and plenty of red hair. Finally she got it out.

"Why did you take me up after Jimmy began—began paying attention to me?"

I laughed at that one. It was a good opening and I took it.

"You always seemed a little too high-class. Not just money; not just position; not just your august father. I felt I might be sort of pulling you down." She looked at me and reddened slightly. I took a big grin. "If you took up with a mugg like Jimmy Ferris, I wouldn't be dragging you

down any." She saw what I meant.

It got her all right. And it should too, for I'm a lad who thinks pretty well of himself and doesn't care who knows it. But five thousand dollars was a lot of money—and besides, I hated to see a nice kid like that hitched up with Jimmy Ferris.

"You sort of felt I was—in the gutter—with you now?"

Maybe I flushed up too. I didn't expect she'd be that direct. But I tried to talk my way out of it.

"Hardly that." I hoped my laugh sounded better to her than to me. "Let us say you were an angel come to earth." I couldn't help adding, "Down into the dirt with Ferris—and me."

"That's not the point," she switched quickly. "Ferris thinks you came on the scene for another reason. He thinks my father hired you to break us up. If that was so he said he'd—he'd—"

"He'd kill me." I filled it in for her. "What did you say?"

"I talked him out of it, I hope. I know my father never hired you." My eyebrows went up at such clairvoyance, and such false clairvoyance. "I know my father. I know he would not in any way interfere with my life. When there is a question in his mind, he says simply, 'Diana, you are a Van Court. I know you will do the right thing.'"

"Has he ever been shocked?"

"No."

"Is he going to be?" I said it lightly, hoping it would go home. A waiter came then. Mr. Jimmy Ferris wished to speak to me up in his private office.

"It is all right to go." The girl leaned over and took me by the arm. "I have made him promise that he won't do anything." I smiled. "I never met a man like Jimmy before. Do you know he—he'd die for me."

"Good." I got up. "You make him keep that promise about not doing anything to me, or he may do just that."

"Do what?"

"Die for you."

JIMMY FERRIS had had his office done over. No bar, no rare wines or hundred-year-old brandy. At least, none showing. Books had taken their place.

The furniture was comfortable but more subdued.

Jimmy sat behind the desk with his dark hair standing out on a background of leather-bound books. His shirt was clean and he didn't wear his tux like a waiter. But his eyes were still hard and black, and his straight nose still had the little bump in it—where someone had sapped him in his younger days. Big and broad and not an ounce of fat on him.

"Sit down, Race," he said, and added before I was in the comfortable leather chair: "So you like my girl?" I simply smiled. "For a time, you know, I thought her father had hired you to bust us up. I wouldn't have liked that." Leaning back, he put those cold black eyes on me. "We never crossed, Race, you and me. That's why we both are still alive. You know when I wanted anything, I wasn't above—anything to get what I wanted. I want to marry Diana more than anything. She's far too good for me."

"Sure," I agreed. "No one will argue that point."

It didn't throw him. "Everything I've gone after has been far above me. I got it just the same. Now I've got a little job for you."

"Yes?"

He counted out five century notes and flung them on the desk. "That is for dropping around and telling Doris Wheeler that if she so much as makes a threat about Miss Van Court, I'll wring her neck for her."

I had just told Doris that very thing. But I already had one client who was paying me to work against Ferris. I couldn't very well work for him. Ferris went right on talking.

"Now," he said, "we can multiply that if you can convince Doris that it will be worth her while to hand me back that diamond necklace I gave her." He hesitated. "It has a clasp on it. Inside the clasp, so small you need a magnifying glass to read it, it says '*to the only girl in the world—Jimmy.*' I want to give it to Diana."

"Getting tight," I said. "You didn't buy her off then."

"Buy her off?" He was sore. "That dame has close to—well, over a hundred thousand dollars worth of cash and bonds,

negotiable bonds, to say nothing of jewelry. Sort of keeping it for me." He smiled and shrugged. "A lad in my position needs stuff sunk away in case of trouble. At least I did. I was willing to let her have twenty-five grand, keep most of the jewelry and all the furs and the beach place. Hell, Race. That woman turned everything I ever gave her into cash—and never spent a nickel of it."

"And you haven't been rough about it?"

"Rough about it?" He came to his feet now. "I nearly knocked all her teeth down her throat. But the safe I gave her was empty. Her bank account is less than a grand. The safe deposit box we shared had a couple of half-smoked butts in it. I don't care much about the money—except I could use some big cash right now. I hate to think of a dame putting it over on me."

I could have laughed in his face. All he ever thought about all his life was money. And now a dame put it over on him. I shoved back the five hundred, shook my head and when he looked ready to bite the desk I said:

"I don't high-pressure dames, Jimmy. Besides, what makes you think Diana's father didn't hire me to break up your marriage, that he wouldn't interfere with his daughter?"

"So she told you." He stuck a cigarette in his face. "She said she would. Family tradition." He smiled. "Anyway if it was true, I'd kill you the first chance I got. You could count on that."

He went on again to my going over and seeing Doris Wheeler. He had some idea that she intended to harm Diana Van Court all right but he never put it exactly. And he did want the necklace—and finally he came out with something about letters.

"Blackmail?" I was a little surprised.

"No, no, nothing like that. Of course not. But they could make me look ridiculous to Diana. Okay. Race, I'd have a go at it myself except that I'm honestly afraid of what I might do. Won't you go see her?"

"No," I told him. "And I am not interested in what you might do." He started pulling out bills of larger denominations, "No, Ferris. Is your engagement announced? Do you want me to lay off your girl and pass the word around?"

"No, no." He came right in with it. "She's a popular girl; she enjoys that popularity. I'm not afraid of losing her. I—I—but no, Doris wouldn't dare harm her with me—alive. I'm giving Harry Hamilton a job here at a hundred or so a week. But I don't know." With a touch of pride, he bemoaned, "Doris can't see any one but me. I don't know why."

"Money," I said. "Glamour, power, big-time stuff. Nothing else."

I left him. So far I had five hundred bucks out of Hatton Force. Ferris seemed bothered about the money Doris Wheeler had. Still, a hundred thousand dollars one way or the other shouldn't mean much to Jimmy Ferris. Maybe, like other lads who had a lot of money, he wanted more. Too, a man who had done everyone else, hates to be done himself. And by a dame like Doris Wheeler, at that.

I called it a night.

CHAPTER THREE

Cupid's Killing

SOMETHING did break when I was shaving the next morning. I opened the door and Inspector Nelson brushed by me and went down the living room like he owned the place. Behind him was Sergeant O'Rouke, the whitest man on the force. It was a lot of homicide even if you took it simply by numbers. If you took it by weight, it was still a lot.

Inspector Nelson turned, in the living room. "Okay, Williams." He took out a notebook and a pencil and held them ready. "You left the Silver Swallow at exactly one-forty-eight this morning. Then where did you go?"

"I left the Silver Swallow at exactly one-forty-one. Then I went home to bed."

"One-forty-one. How do you know the exact time?"

"I looked at my watch, wondering if I'd go to the park and feed the squirrels and—"

"That," Nelson cut in, "will be enough of that. It isn't far to your apartment here. Say ten minutes. Twelve if you stopped to pat a stray cat." That last was considered heavy sarcasm. "Who saw you come in?"

"I don't know." I shook my head and

when he frowned, "I imagine most of the tenants stay up to keep tabs on me."

"Okay, okay." Nelson closed up the book and his manner changed. It was free and easy and pleasant. "Sort of routine, Race, old boy. We'll be checking up on dozens of people who even knew her by sight. You didn't happen to call on Doris Wheeler last night or early this morning?"

It wasn't Nelson's way of putting things. He should have shoved his face forward and growled, "What were you doing at Doris Wheeler's apartment last night?" I stalled a bit.

"Is it important?" I tried.

"Oh, not too important." Nelson looked over toward the window, then he turned back. "She was strangled to death early this morning. Well?"

"I was there," I told him without hesitation. "Got there a little before twelve and left a little after."

"Don't know the exact moment." He twisted his face up close to mine.

"I left," I said, "at twelve twenty-two."

"Don't mind telling me what you were there about? Or will we go down town?"

"I went there in the interest of a client—confidential." Before he could twist his lips up in a sneer, I added, "Mr. Richard Hilton Van Court, President of the Agriculture Trust Company."

"And his interest?"

"Information about Jimmy Ferris that might make his daughter lose interest in him. There is more than a rumor around that she might marry him."

"I read the papers," Nelson said. "What did you learn?"

"Nothing. Doris still liked the lad Ferris and had hopes."

"Like that." Nelson thought that I would lie. He had been trying to get my license for a long time. To O'Rouke, he said, "Like always, we'll be settling up Williams problems for him. That will be all for the present Williams. It's funny when we find a body, you've always been around."

"Always?" And then, "Can I ask you a question, Nelson. Who told you I called on Doris Wheeler?"

"Sure," Nelson turned toward the door. "It's a free country. You can ask all the questions you want. You can even call

spirits from the vastly deep, but will they come?"

With that he went roaring down the hall. Nelson didn't have any sense of humor but the trouble was, he thought he had. . . .

I was sorry I had to divulge my client's name but it was a big enough name for Nelson not to blab it to the newspapers. I finished shaving, swallowed a glass of grapefruit juice, went downstairs, did the grapefruit juice again but this time I added a couple of fried eggs and ham to it and washed it down with coffee.

I was still convinced that no one had seen me go in and out of that apartment last night. But Nelson knew I was there. No one knew—except Hatton Force. But surely the cops had not gotten it out of Hatton Force. Certainly his name couldn't come into it, not this fast.

The case looked open and shut. Jimmy Ferris had told me he would twist Doris' neck for her—and he had.

Things moved fast in homicide. Willis, a plainclothes dick, was waiting for me when I went into my office. He was a tall, lanky lad whose conversation was mostly "huh" and "uh huh". Nelson wanted to see me down town. I didn't argue. I went down town.

There were a desk and half-a-dozen uncomfortable chairs and a spittoon and bare floor to impress you how hard cops work and how little comfort they have. There was also Nelson. He was writing at a desk. He didn't raise his head but said:

"Sit down, Race." After a moment he added, "How long have you known Mr. Van Court?"

"I never met him personally," I said easily.

"Didn't he engage you to protect his daughter from Jimmy Ferris?" Nelson snapped into life. "Isn't that what you told me an hour ago?"

"Yes, through a lawyer."

"What lawyer?"

"Hatton Force, of Lennard, Hayward and Force."

"Damn it! Why didn't you tell me that at first? Willis, show Mr. Van Court in."

NELSON came to his feet as Mr. Richard Hilton Van Court stood in the doorway. He was exactly what you would

expect from the name and the position. I suppose he had the stuff inside but outside he looked just that—a stuffed shirt. Now he was annoyed. He made his little speech as he looked at me.

"I don't recall seeing this man before, though his face is familiar. I believe my daughter kept—er—had some pictures of him."

"Do you know Hatton Force?" Nelson was no respecter of persons. He jammed the question right in.

"Yes, yes, of course. I knew his father. A friend of the family. Lennard, Hayward and Force are my solicitors. For the bank too. A reputable firm, highly reputable, a fine man Mr. Force. Young, a promising career."

"This man here, Race Williams says Hatton Force hired him to break up the romance between one James Ferris and your daughter." Van Court simply stared at him. "Do you believe that?"

Mr. Van Court put cold blue eyes on the inspector. "I do not believe nor disbelieve it until all the facts have been placed before me. What does Mr. Force say?"

"I don't know." The inspector frowned at Van Court but he wasted the effort. "Do you condone such an act, approve of it, if it is true?"

"Well. . ." Van Court stroked his chin. "If it isn't true, an ethical discussion would be quite useless. If it is, I must have facts. I have not been led by emotions in a great many years."

I tried one of my own. "Is Mr. Hatton Force related to you?"

"No, he is no relation."

"Perhaps he would like to be?" I tried.

"Ah, perhaps he would. I'm a busy man, inspector. For matters that concern Hatton Force, I would suggest that you discuss them with Mr. Force."

"Yes, yes." Nelson was thrown for once. "Thank you, Mr. Van Court. I'll let you know what develops to your interest."

"My interests." Van Court permitted himself the semblance of a smile. "I am afraid you will find that Mr. Hatton Force was protecting his own interest rather than mine. Good day."

Nelson had Hatton Force on the phone as soon as Van Court left. I guess he

didn't feel he could go two of them in one day. Force must have admitted that he had engaged me and he must have talked around it a bit, too, for when Nelson hung up, he wiped the perspiration from his forehead and said:

"Okay, Williams, run along. And after this, know who you are working for."

Willis grinned, opened the door and said, "Uh huh" to my "Good afternoon."

I did go up to see Hatton Force. He received me cordially enough.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Williams," he said, "that it caused you so much inconvenience. Certainly I did lead you to believe that you were acting in behalf of Mr. Van Court. Since you have met Mr. Van Court, you must see that you are acting in his interests. I'm in love with the girl and wish to protect her from her own folly."

"And to marry you."

"That is my hope. A slim hope, perhaps, but surely she can do no worse than marry Ferris."

"You'd do anything for her."

"Yes, I think I would."

"Die to protect her?"

"That," he smiled, "always seemed a bit melodramatic to me."

"How about killing for her?"

"Really, Mr. Williams, that is rather worse."

If he had any idea what I was driving at, certainly he didn't show it. But he was shrewd enough to see I was annoyed and clever enough to help clear away that annoyance.

"I hope," he said, "that our understanding will continue and—er—don't you think I should advance you another, say five hundred dollars?"

I thought he should and he did. Then I asked him if I disturbed his sleep last night, or if I worried him about Diana with the threat Doris Wheeler had made. "Maybe like me, you got dressed and took a bit of walk to get some air."

"No." He came in with it rather sharply. "I went to bed and to sleep."

Somehow I thought that he wasn't telling the truth, but I smiled pleasantly at him, said:

"You don't need to worry. That woman won't harm Diana. You read about it in the early edition of the paper."

"What—what exactly?" We had both looked toward the newspaper on his desk.

"The murder of Doris Wheeler?" When his face went a sort of pasty white, I said, "That was the girl who threatened Diana with the acid."

"Oh, yes," he said. "For a moment I didn't connect the names."

I folded up the check he had given me. "Better keep up on the names. Now that your interest in Diana is established, it would be the natural thing for you to do. Not that I care—but the police will."

"The police! But surely the police won't have any interest in me?"

"They might," I told him. "You'd be surprised how they get around." With that I left him. . . .

IT SEEMS like a dumb act for Ferris," O'Rourke later told me, "But you know Nelson. He is pretty sure he can make it stick. And he's been after Jimmy Ferris for years. I'm not so sure."

"Why?" It was all right by me.

"For one thing, Ferris hasn't any alibi for the time of the killing—two and three in the morning. In the old days when we suspected Ferris, he had plenty of alibis. Of course if a lad should lose his head—you know. Nelson will be asking you about that acid tossing the dead woman threatened to do." My eyebrows lifted. "Hatton Force hasn't withheld anything from the police. You told him, and the assumption is you told Ferris."

"But I didn't tell Ferris anything."

"No?" O'Rourke lifted his eyebrows. "But Nelson let Ferris assume you did. And Ferris knows you were hired to bust up his marriage Ferris took it calmly, too calmly. I thought I'd warn you. I don't want him for your murder." He grinned.

"I'll watch out. What else?"

"Well," O'Rourke said, "Doris Wheeler had all her possessions in cash and jewelry and negotiable bonds, yet her bank account only ran a little over two hundred dollars. Ferris was trying to get hold of the bonds and a necklace anyway. Her little wall safe was empty. We can't trace a nickel that belongs to her. Her lawyer said she told him she had it in a safe place."

"Lawyer?"

"MacPherson. Not too well known but

nothing against him. He drew up her will. She left everything to her mother upstate. Funny, eh? One doesn't think of a dame like that having a mother. Never gave her so much as a dime when she was alive. Got anyone else in view for the killing?"

"Have you?"

"There could be Hatton Force," O'Rouke said. "But it's a little far-fetched. Saves Diana Van Court from the acid threat and fixes up Ferris. But the missing money and bonds doesn't fit him. Anyhow how would Force know about it? It might have been a killing for cash.

"Or—there's a lad up-state. Edward Toussey. He tossed her over for another dame. And do you know, Race, it looks like she used acid on that girl. Of course, that's six years back, a long time. But Edward Toussey never married after that. And he was in New York on business at the time of the murder. His alibi? He was in bed and asleep."

"Anyone else?"

"Well, Harry Hamilton, an old flame. He's taking it bad. And—"

"And?"

"And you." O'Rouke grinned. "Now, now, Race. But you did go to see her and if we know you, you did threaten her—to protect your client's interest, Miss Van Court, of course. A struggle and things happened. At least Nelson likes to have you in mind."

"I didn't threaten her," I told O'Rouke with a grin. "Now tell me something. How did Nelson find out I was there at Doris Wheeler's apartment?" O'Rouke didn't answer right away. "He found it out fast and it was before he saw Hatton Force, wasn't it?"

"Yes." O'Rouke hesitated. "Someone telephoned the dead woman's apartment while we were there. Just a muffled voice, probably speaking through a handkerchief. It said, 'Ask Williams, he was there this morning, early'—then hung up. Why did you want to know?"

"Why?" I looked at him. "Because—" and then I stopped.

"Anyone might have done it who saw you go in or go out," O'Rouke said. "An honest tenant who didn't want to get mixed up in a murder investigation. Nelson is trying to trace the caller." O'Rouke

got up then. "Since you might be interested in seeing Ferris put away, Nelson thinks you might have something to add. Serve law and order."

"And myself, eh?" I took a grin as I let O'Rouke out.

Then I sat down and did some thinking.

No one knew I was there but one person besides Doris—Hatton Force. Maybe two persons. The murderer would know I had been there. How? Because Doris Wheeler knew the murderer well enough to let him into her apartment at two or three in the morning, and she might have told him that I had been there. That would be the only way he could find out.

Sure, it looked bad for Jimmy Ferris. Despite the warning I had given Doris, I knew she would see Jimmy Ferris any time day or night. Was it the simple case of Jimmy Ferris saying he would wring her neck—and doing so? But after all, it hadn't anything to do with me.

Or had it? If Jimmy Ferris said he'd wring her neck—he had also said that if I was hired to break up his marriage he would kill me.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Shooting Matter

I WENT downtown to the Lawyers Building to see Hatton Force again. In the downstairs lobby, I met Harry Hamilton. He was surprised to see me, and I thought a little alarmed.

"What are you following me for Mr. Williams?" he demanded. "You've hounded me ever since that—that string of pearls business and—and—"

"Easy does it, Harry," I told him. "I've hardly seen you a dozen times, since then."

"Well," he was bleary eyed and had been drinking, "every time there are any pearls missing, you—you— What do you want to see me about anyway?"

"I don't want to see you." Since he did look a mess and I felt pretty sorry for him, I said, "What pearls did you get hold of, Harry?"

"Pearls—pearls. I—I—"

I had to explain to him it was a joke. But Harry was not in a joking mood. I guess he did take the death of Doris

pretty bad. I took him up to the corner and bought him a drink. He needed it. He always needed a drink.

I got him to talk about Doris then. But it wasn't much good to me. It was all in the past. To hear him go on, you'd think an angel had been taken back to heaven on wings of gold.

"I've been to see my lawyers," he said before I left him. "A little money, just a few hundred, even less for flowers, Mr. Williams. You—you knew her."

It served me right. He touched me for twenty-five bucks. But I kissed it good-bye and went back into the office building and rode up to the seventeenth floor and went into the stuffily correct and conservatively sumptuous offices of Lennard, Hayward and Force.

Hatton Force was glad to see me. Indeed he nailed me in the outer office, dragged me down the hall and into his suite of rooms.

"You've got to act, Mr. Williams." He went right into his act. "Diana was here. She knows. She called me a contemptible cad. She's going to run off and marry this Ferris person. Says he needs her now. Practically accuses me—us—of framing Ferris—is framing the word?"

"That's the word," I told him. "Is she marrying him to get even with you?"

"No, no. Loyalty and that sort of talk. Standing by him. Showing the public—and— And I've had a call from this Ferris person."

"A threat?"

"I don't know. He said to—er—keep my nose clean. I'm not afraid of him. I'd like to meet him man to man."

"Well," I grinned at him, "you'd need a blackjack, a knife, brass knuckles and a gun or two to meet him on even terms. Don't worry too much. The cops are closing in on him. Do you know Harry Hamilton?"

"Hamilton?" He seemed to think a moment. "Why, I think I have met him, yes."

"Think? Was he in to see you a few minutes ago?" Force looked blank: "I met him downstairs. I thought he said he was in here."

"He could—" And then it seemed to dawn on him. "Of course, that peculiar will. Mr. Lennard handles the Hamilton

estate. Harry Hamilton. Good heavens! This Wheeler woman. That was the woman was it?"

"It was," I told him.

Then I saw Mr. Lennard. Mr. Lennard was older and stuffer, but with a little pushing from Hatton Force I got what information I wanted—whether the death of Doris Wheeler would make any difference in Harry Hamilton's wait for the money.

"I'm afraid not," Lennard told me. "The will was a severe shock to a young man who used to have everything. I thought the terms of the will were unnecessarily severe, Mr. Williams, in view of the fact that he did not see this woman any more.

"But the Surrogate pointed out that since no woman was mentioned in the will, we had no right to assume that one was responsible for the drawing of it. We had as much right to assume that his general conduct of living was as much responsible. No, Mr. Williams, this unfortunate woman's tragic end will make no difference in Harry Hamilton's *er*—status quo."

I went out with the words of Hatton Force buzzing in my ears that I must do something to stop the marriage. What, he didn't suggest.

WHEN I got back to my office I had a surprise. I wasn't sure if it was pleasant or not. Diana Van Court was waiting to see me. I hadn't more than closed my door when she put it straight to me

"Did you frame Jimmy Ferris?"

"What do you think?"

She looked at me a long time, nervously. "Race," she came close to me and put a hand up on my shoulder, "I don't want to believe it. I didn't want to believe a lot of things. So your only interest in me was—money?"

"In the beginning," I said. "Then it was nice to try and prevent a girl like you from marrying—" I took a fast warning from her look—"out of her line."

The eyes she put on me were meant to be alluring. Her other hand was on my shoulder now. "Race," she started softly—dropped her hands and turned her head away. Then she said: "All right, I'll give you a chance to convince me. But not

here. Jimmy might come. I'll take you to a little place for tea."

"Fine." I got my hat off the rack again. "It might as well be now as any other time.

"What do you mean by that?"

"To try and convince you. Will you pick the place or will I?"

She would pick it. It was a little place on a side street. You went down a few steps. We arrived in a taxi and not in her flashy car. There were a couple of other people having tea. There was a curtain in the back. A dumpy little man smiled at her, said:

"Quiet, no music, this way, miss."

Four booths were behind that curtain. The light on the table was soft. I slid into a booth. She sat down opposite me. I began to talk. I talked about her; her father; her name. I said,

"Maybe Hatton Force is stuffy on the outside, but he doesn't know you'll marry him. He's out to keep you from being a little idiot. He made me a business offer. He didn't go around with a lovesick cow-like look. Yes, I'm talking about you. Glamor—a lad who came up stabbing his friends in the back and shooting his enemies the same way. A lad who has learned to change his outside shirt every day but whose undershirt—"

"What do you mean, whose undershirt," she came in with.

"Well," I said. "A man who goes through life getting even his girl friend to set traps so—" her eyes went wide—"like Doris Wheeler. Don't you suppose she ever set a trap to kill a man? Maybe he'd tell her something different but. . ."

She suddenly looked at her wrist watch; jarred to her feet.

"I've got to telephone my father," she said, "about my marriage. I'll be right back. I don't believe anything you said and I don't—" and suddenly—"Yes, I'll give you a chance to say more. Wait!"

She swung from the seat out between the curtains and I heard her feet beat across the room beyond. I got a peek too. The two couples had gone. The room was empty. Diana and I were the only ones in the tearoom. In another minute I felt sure I would be the only one, the only customer there.

I was right. The slick dark-haired

figure oozed into the seat across from me. There was a napkin covering his hand. Hard eyes watched me. A mean, grating voice said:

"Okay, Williams. There's a gun under this napkin. Put both your hands on the table. I said I'd kill you." The napkin fell from the automatic in his hand.

Both my hands were on my own knees. I didn't lift them. I looked straight at him, asked:

"Are you on the kill, Jimmy?"

"Yes," he said, and his thin lips were grim. "There is no other way. I'm on the kill now."

Tough that. I believed him. I closed the index finger of my right hand twice, and put two slugs some place in his stomach.

I pitched to one side as I fired. At that he got me, burned me along the left arm with one shot and buried the other one some place in the ceiling. Lead in the stomach is rather unpleasant and not conducive to good shooting. I finally came to my feet and listened. I was alone with the dead man.

Ferris was slumped over the table. His hand clutched the still warm gun. I felt relieved. Ferris was a guy who, if he intended to kill you, would go through with it. That was settled.

Sure, I knew the setup from the beginning. I had that gun in my hand ten seconds after I sat down. The girl had not been a very good actress. She had trapped me for Ferris. But did she know he intended to kill me?

NO ONE came into the room. No one stirred beyond the curtains. There was no cry of alarm in the streets, nor the screech of a police siren. There wasn't meant to be. There was meant to be death there all right. It was simply the wrong corpse.

It was okay with me. I looked toward the phone on the wall behind me. I had noticed it the moment I came into the room. Maybe she thought I hadn't. I could leave the body there and walk out. But why? It was self-defense.

I swung from the phone. My gun jumped into my hand. The words came again.

"Williams, Race—you're not dead?"

It sent chills up and down my spine. It was the corpse talking. I went over, lifted up Ferris's head. His eyes rolled. He was alive, all right.

"Water," he gasped. After I gave it to him: "Am I going to die?"

"I shot you," I told him. "You or me, Ferris. I'm no doctor but you should be dead now."

"What are you going to do?"

"Call the cops."

"No—no," he gasped. "They want me for murder. I didn't do it. I was there, yes. I had a key. I walked in. Doris was dead like that. I—you framed me. The letters—Nelson found them in my room. You framed me."

"Nix," I told him. "I don't frame people, Ferris."

"You just—wanted to prevent the marriage—for what was in it?"

"That's right."

"You, you know I didn't kill Doris. The cops will stick it on me. Those letters. It's open and shut." He mumbled a bit after that and I didn't get it but I went to the phone and called O'Rouke. Luck was with me.

"Jimmy Ferris?" O'Rouke was pleased. "Sure, Nelson wants him dead or alive."

"How about half dead?" I asked, and then, "Okay, O'Rouke, I got him for you. Send an ambulance and a doctor."

"You know, Race," Ferris was talking when I got back to the table "You're a smart dick. Five grand to put me in the chair. I'll make it ten to keep me out, if I'm going to live. You know who killed her?"

"No." I shook my head. "Besides I got one client. Can't work against that client."

"Well . . ." Ferris tried to grin at me. "Make a deal with you then. Won't marry the girl if you clear me. Fair enough." He mumbled on, "What you got against Harry Hamilton? Poor Harry. I gave him a rotten deal. So did Doris. Never resented it. Got to do something for him. Don't want to die without doing something for Harry. He says he never even heard of those pearls. But I know you and I know Harry. Is it an insurance company?"

I thought he was out of his head. I said:

"What are you talking about?"

"Look, I'll square it with cash. In-

surance company should like that. Even Munson should like that."

I hadn't been paying much attention. I swung back now and bent down close to him.

"What Munson?" The name was only vaguely familiar.

"The Munson pearls. That's the name Harry used. But if you don't know—can't find the murderer of Doris, why, come on Race—clear me." He jarred up then as a siren screamed in the street. "Hell, there are other girls. There is only one Jimmy Ferris. Come on, I'll toss her over like a rotten tomato if—if you clear me."

"I can clear you," I told Ferris. "Yes, I know who killed Doris Wheeler. Your word about the girl, not to see her again."

"Never." He had trouble in getting the word out. People were pounding at the door. "Never, I swear it."

He pitched forward again as glass crashed. I tossed back the curtain to let in Nelson and O'Rouke.

Nelson saw me and came forward. He saw Ferris and stopped. Then he went over to the table and lifted up Ferris's head. He swung on me, asked:

"What happened?"

I looked at Ferris. There was intelligence in his eyes. I said: "I guess he thought I was framing him. He fired." I pointed to the hole in my left sleeve, "and I fired. Ask the doc."

The little man with the bag was Doctor Steel, the assistant medical examiner. He said:

"No corpse—that's what a man gets for hanging around gassing with cops. What's the matter with his own doctor? Here, help me lay him out on the floor there. My, my, Williams, no lead in his head."

Ferris shrieked once and was quiet. Nelson wanted to know if Ferris would live.

"Now, now," Doctor Steel said. "You're always wanting to know how and when a corpse died. I've been so used to dead men that I'm not much good on live ones." But Nelson wanted a guess. "Damn it man, I don't know. The holes look clean."

I took O'Rouke out in the front room. He was sort of stern and hard. I fixed that up by asking about his daughter. Then I told O'Rouke, "Ferris isn't your

Half a Corpse

man. He's been framed but nice. Listen." O'Rouke's eyes widened. He made clucking sounds and kept shaking his head while I talked.

"No one will believe it," he said finally. "Least of all Nelson. Yes, Race, we do have to take Nelson along"

One thing about Nelson. When he went into a thing, he went into it the whole way.

"Like that." He looked at me after the ambulance had driven away. "Well, it's like this, O'Rouke. I'd rather have Ferris anyway. So would Race. This way there's nothing in it for any of us."

"Only seeing a murderer punished," I said sarcastically.

We got into the big house in the seventies without trouble. Nelson had his warrant and his men searched it well. In less than an hour he had turned up the missing cash and securities.

"How did you solve it, Race?" There was admiration in O'Rouke's voice.

"Yeah." Nelson had to keep the sarcasm. "Don't tell me you have been using your head."

"What do you care?" I lit a cigarette as the three of us stood looking out the window. "Here comes the killer home now. Pull your stuff, Nelson."

Nelson did. As soon as the man walked in the door, Nelson said in that official voice of his, "Harry Hamilton, I arrest you for the murder of Doris Wheeler."

Before Harry Hamilton could recover, I came in with:

"It will be easier for you, Harry, if you say what you did with those pearls."

"Pearls," Harry gasped at me. "I never saw the Munson pearls. I never even heard of Munson."

"Of course you didn't," I told him. "Only I knew about them—and Doris Wheeler. She told you before you killed her."

HARRY HAMILTON made a full confession. He said it came to him suddenly. The one really fooled was cynical Doris Wheeler—who had never trusted anyone in her life. Here was a man who she kicked around, trampled on, got disinherited—and yet he went mooning around about his everlasting love for her. She believed it as did everyone else.

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She handed bonds, jewels and cash to Harry to keep for her. She felt certain he wouldn't touch a penny of it. He was her slave. He was the only one she could trust.

But Harry was used to money. His father cut him off. He got to thinking what he could do with it. If he had loved Doris, he also feared her—and Ferris. He knew the letters that Doris gave him, she could use to blackmail Ferris.

He planned to kill her and frame Ferris. He planned it for over a year. By now he hated both of them. He knew how he'd do it but he didn't know when. It was even nice for him to think about.

Then I went to see Doris Wheeler. I made up the story of the Munson pearls and Harry Hamilton having an interest in them. It frightened her. Harry wanting money—and having hers.

"Sure, O'Rourke," I told the sergeant. "I remember now how it worried Doris. She got to thinking about it after I left, wondered if Harry would swipe her stuff. She telephoned for him—and he came. Maybe she wanted the stuff back, but she

didn't fear him. Anyway, as Harry said, he strangled her."

"And she told him of your accusation about the Munson pearls."

"Right," I said. "I made up the name at the spur of the moment and forgot it. Harry already had Doris' valuables and the letters hidden in his house. And Ferris was giving him a job to take Doris off his hands. It was easy to plant a few of the letters in Ferris's office, or his home, for that matter—as Harry confessed."

"Yeah." O'Rourke threw down his last slug of liquor and got up. "Do you know, Race, he's still denying he had anything to do with the Munson pearls—but they had a lot to do with him. I hear Ferris leaves the hospital tomorrow as good as ever—or as bad. Diana nursed him. . . ."

She must have been waiting down the hall from my apartment for she rang the bell almost the moment I heard the elevator go down.

"It's the little idiot," she said when I opened the door. "I want to come and talk to you. Jimmy Ferris told me you'd say he swore not to see me again, because

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Half a Corpse

you cleared him of murder. He told me I wasn't to believe you."

"Yes." I looked at her.

"I'd believe you. So tell me." She was starry-eyed.

"I have nothing to tell you, Diana," I said very seriously. "I've quit the case. I'm not going to ruin your life."

"What?" She was surprised. "You think preventing my marriage to Jimmy Ferris would ruin my life?"

"Maybe. There are worse guys than Jimmy Ferris hanging around. Oh, I can't think of any off-hand, but you're the kind of girl who would go out and find one."

She came close to me, stretched up both her hands and put them on my shoulders. Suddenly she pulled my head down and kissed me.

It was really surprising. For a moment I understood Jimmy Ferris. Then she stood back looking at me, while I colored.

"I've found one," she said. "But I don't think he's worse than Jimmy Ferris. I think he's the grandest person in the world.

"If my life must be ruined, then I want him to ruin it. Race, I've been with Jimmy constantly. I don't want any part of him. He would have—have murdered you."

It tossed me. I looked at her in a new light. She was pretty. She was class. She was rich. The name Van Court had stood for something for many generations. Even her worst enemy wouldn't say he wasn't a nice armful. I put an arm out toward her, when she suddenly turned and tossed an official-looking manila envelope on the desk.

"Yes," she said. "I found one. Hatton and I were married this afternoon. I'm glad you shot Ferris and he didn't shoot you.

"Thanks—from an ex-idiot."

She was gone and I was absently tearing open the envelope on the desk. It was a check from Hatton Force. I sat down and lit a butt.

Well, now what about Jimmy Ferris? Would we have to go through that shooting all over again?

THE END



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R. M. F. Jones

(Continued from page 46)

think you'd make it." He held out his hand. "My name's Peters. Lieutenant Frederick Peters."

I was beginning to get the shakes again and my arm still hurt like hell, but neither seemed too bad now. "Why didn't you call my bluff?"

"Didn't have enough to go on," Peters admitted. "Sure, the butler swore you had killed Gentry, but something looked phony about it. When we got here and ran into Driscoll while he was out to get a man for you, I decided to string along for awhile. Hell, if you had killed Gentry, you wouldn't have been fooling around here." He patted his bald head and frowned. "I can see how you guessed your man was here, but I don't get how you figured it was Sykes."

"The only way I could. It had to be somebody who was short of cash. If Madeline had lined up a playmate with money, a quick trip to Reno would have been the answer."

"Yeah. So?"

"I checked the books," I said. "There's a club rule that anyone delinquent five hundred dollars doesn't get any more credit. Sykes had been on the black list for six months."

* * *

The power company made another nickel last month when they threw the switch on Sykes at Ossing. He tried to beat it by talking but it didn't help.

Madeline was luckier; she only got ninety-nine years.

I'm going up to see her next week. I want to tell her how green the trees are this spring and how it feels to walk in the sunshine, going no place in particular and in no hurry to get there. I want to tell her how pleasant life can be when they don't lock a door on you every night, and how long ninety-nine years can be when they do.

I want to tell her these things because I think she's got it coming. You see, I don't believe the divorce she got back in Colorado Springs gave her a hunting license for my scalp.

Cash Wale's Carnival Kill

(Continued from page 29)

Specifically, he looked at the black revolver that had appeared in my fist, that had emerged from the baby carriage behind me as he said the bad words.

He didn't believe it. He yanked the Police Positive from under his lapel—lost it to the slug I blasted up into his wrist. The Positive tumbled to the soggy ground between us, and then he believed it.

The two detectives weren't interested. They lay on the soggy ground from the fists that had swapped mayhem with the world's heavyweight champ.

The carny people had lost interest. They were scattering, even to Olga waddling away with the baby carriage.

"Charles," Captain Black gaped.

"Let's make it formal," I told him. "From now on you can call me Wale; Cash Wale. Now back into the car."

He backed into the car—with an expression I would also like to frame.

Sailor Duffy chucked the two detectives in after him and slammed the door. I operated Clancy's controls until the cars were chasing each other up and down around their wavy rat-race again.

Then we got away from there.

We're still going.

* * *

I got the details in a paper I picked up in St. Louis some time later, a Midville paper. David Kelly drew a total of two hundred and one years for homicide and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Mickey Rourke got away with twenty years. Several other citizens in the marijuana ring, on whom he put the arm, got sentences ranging from twenty years to life. Patsy probably got spanked.

Max Aaron got another Great Zingo, as I noticed from a paid ad, but it's probably some joker with trick props.

But you want to know the touch that gave me my biggest kick out of the whole deal? That was when I dropped my hand into the carriage for the black revolver. Evelyn, the "baby" in the carriage, handed me the revolver, as you gathered—but, before handing it to me, she leaned over and kissed my hand.

Yours truly,
Cash Wale

THE END



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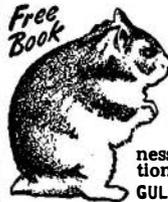
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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

him the benefit of the doubt, I offered him a cup of coffee. He turned me down in no uncertain terms, and said his friend had given him a bum steer.

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Mrs. Charles W. Pitts
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I saw an ad in the newspaper for an electric drill priced at \$7.61. It seemed like a good buy and I bought it. Imagine my surprise when I found the drill would stop—even when it came in contact with paper.

I wrote to the company and told them the drill couldn't even be used as a toy. They wrote and told me to send it back for adjustment. That was the last I heard of them. All subsequent letters were returned marked out of business.

Now I'm out the money and the drill, which was actually only a vibrator.

Frank Petrowski
Norwich, Conn.

That's the racket score for this month, detective fans. Remember—let us know about the slick tricks swindlers try to pull on you. That way, we all can keep ahead of the racketeer's game.

The Editor

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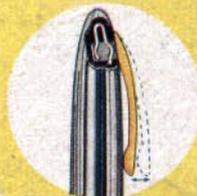
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