

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



OCTOBER

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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MADE WHILE
YOU WAIT**



HACKER'S HOLIDAY

A STEVE MIDNIGHT NOVELETTE
by JOHN K. BUTLER

GALLOW'S 9

A MARQUIS OF
BROADWAY STORY
by JOHN LAWRENCE

AN INSPECTOR ALLHOFF NOVELETTE
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I Jumped My Pay from \$18 to \$50 a Week!

Here's how I did it
 by S. J. E.
 (NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)



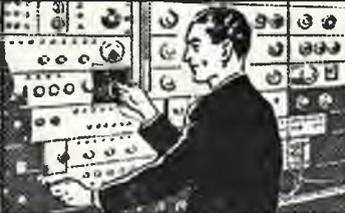
"I had an \$18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them."



"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make \$5 to \$10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."



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 President
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 Est. 25 Years

NOW to investigate Radio. Trained Radio Technicians make good money, and you don't have to give up your present job or leave home to learn Radio. I train you at home nights in your spare time.

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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make \$5 to \$10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, Police, Aviation, Commercial Radio; Loud-speaker Systems, Electronic Devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N.R.I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open many good jobs soon.

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Act Today! Mail the coupon for my 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, and those coming in Television; tells about my Course in Radio and Television; shows more than 100 letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postcard—NOW!
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10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 34 CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER, 1940 No. 3

3—SMASHING COMPLETE SERIES NOVELETTES—3

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Hacker's Holiday—A Steve Midnight Story.....John K. Butler 6
With the Red Owl Cab Company's hardest-luck driver as he acquires a black eye, loses his job and gets the cops on his neck for murder all at one fell swoop.

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AND—

We want to know if you are

Ready for the Rackets.....A Department 4
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Now's the time to catch a preview of

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Some of the sure-fire hits scheduled for production in the next DIME DETECTIVE.

Cover—"Get These Bracelets Off Me While I Wait".....
From *Death Laughs at Locksmiths*.

Black-and-White Illustrations by John Fleming Gould

Watch for the November issue

On the Newsstands October 4th

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THE NOVEMBER THRILL DOCKET

BLOOD on the Blue Grass is the title of the new T. T. FLYNN story in the next issue—and blood on the blue-grass is exactly what Mr. Maddox found when he raced from Times Square to Latonia in the heart of the mint-julep belt with his side-kick, Oscar, to clamp down on the slickest race-track swindle set-up he'd run across in years. The bland Buddha of the bangtail circuit knew there was something rotten in the State of Kentucky when a horse that couldn't help but win was doped to make him cross the finish line even faster than he would have normally. The hanky-panky may have had its wind-up in Old Kentuck' but it damn well wasn't bred there as Maddox soon learned when murder crimsoned the landscape to bring this smashing novel-length thriller to a Garrison finish.

We are pleased to introduce another new name to the long roster of distinguished crime-fictioners who have been making these contents pages noteworthy. WALTER RIPPERGER takes his place in the DIME DETECTIVE firmament in the next issue with *I Leave You Fear*, a gripping long novelette about the most unusual character we've met in a long time. Stone Face Fallon is the gentleman's name and if you don't agree that this amazing man is a none-such we miss our guess. When Jacob Mulbower died and left his fortune to his brothers, Hugo and Harold, so long as they should remain alive—with the proviso that on their death it should revert to Stone Face the ghastly joke became apparent. It was an invitation to murder for Fallon was a known killer, completely without conscience and actually all Jake had willed his brothers was fear, for they knew Fallon would set about killing them the minute the lawyer finished reading the will.

Then there's *Double the Body*, another gripping Acme Indemnity Op yarn by JAN DANA.

A story by CORNELL WOOLRICH to illustrate the cover and other good shorts and features.

This great NOVEMBER issue will be on sale OCTOBER 8th.

Ready for the Rackets

A Department

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

HERE'S a new one—to us, at least—that's been going the rounds lately. We've had several reports of it, mostly from the Middle West so far, but it's the kind that's easy to work, and we predict it'll move eastward as folks get onto it. Be prepared for the plausible man who drives up to your gas station with the following proposition. Ride right along with him and take a good heavy spanner along with you to administer the proper chastisement if you see a rooking in the offing!

Charleston, Mo.

Am writing you in regard to a fancy little racket which has sprung up along the highway which goes through our little city. As I am a small filling station operator at the edge of town, I was one of the first to be invigled. The take is only for gasoline and oil, but as the profit is small in the filling station business this racket really hurts the small man. Here's how it works.

I'm sitting in my station one afternoon this winter when a big sedan with out-of-state license tags drives in the drive.

"Say Bud do you have a machine around," says the driver.

"No" says I, "why?" "A big truck is out of gas up the road," says he, naming a well known trucking firm which runs trucks thru our town. "And," he continues, "he told me (the driver) to stop at the first filling station and have some gas sent out." "I don't have a car or gas can either so I don't see how I can send it out," says I, hating to miss the sale. I had been trying to get their (the Trucking Co.) business for some time.

"Well," says the tourist, "the driver gave me two five gallon cans to have filled, and as it is not very far out I will take the gas out for you as an accommodation."

You can guess the rest, Mr. Tourist didn't come back and I was out ten gal. of gas. So the rest of you filling station attendants check up before you send gas out without collecting first. Incidentally I checked up and found seven other nearby stations which had been victimized by this method.

Yours truly, D. Mayer.

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME?

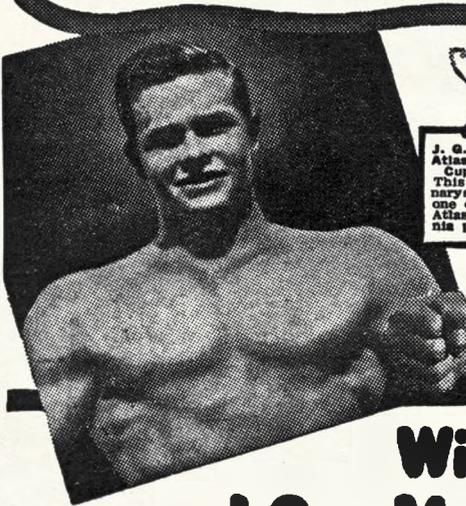


ABSOLUTELY NOT! THE ATLAS DYNAMIC TENSION SYSTEM MAKES MUSCLES GROW FAST!

Here's the Kind of MEN I Build!

Charles Atlas

An actual, un-touched photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"—who offers you this 7-DAY TRIAL OFFER.



J. G. O'BRIEN
Atlas Champion Cup Winner
This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' California pupils.



Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

MEN—Meet J. G. O'Brien, of California, one of my Silver Cup Winners! Look at that strong neck—those broad, handsome, perfectly proportioned shoulders—that muscled chest and stomach. Read what he says: "Look at me NOW! Dynamic Tension WORKS! I'm proud of the natural, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!"—*J. G. O'Brien.*

I myself, was once a skinny weakling of 97 lbs. I didn't know what real health and strength were. I was afraid to fight, ashamed to be seen in a swimming suit.

Then I discovered the secret that changed me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man," the title I won *twice* and have held *ever since*, against all comers. My secret is *Dynamic Tension*. It is a *natural* method. Its purpose is not only to give you the powerful, rippling muscles you'd like to see in your own mirror, but also—for those whose systems are sluggish from lack of proper exercise—to help them tone up their entire body, inside and out.

Accept My 7-Day Trial Offer

Do you want a better build? Are you dissatisfied with your present physical development? All I ask is a 7-DAY

TRIAL. Just one week! In even that short time you will notice your chest hardening and filling out with solid muscle—or the 7-Day Trial will cost you nothing. Surely this is proof enough that by continuing with my Dynamic Tension method I will make you a New Man—give you bodily power and drive, and put you in magnificent physical condition which wins you the envy and respect of everyone.

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Let me show you the results produced for other men! I'll send you FREE my famous book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It shows actual photos. Write your name and address carefully on coupon. Mail to me personally today. I'll rush your free copy to you AT ONCE! Charles Atlas, Dept. 8310, 115 East 23rd St. New York, N. Y.



CHARLES ATLAS

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I want the proof that your system of Dynamic Tension will help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength" and full details about your 7-DAY trial offer.

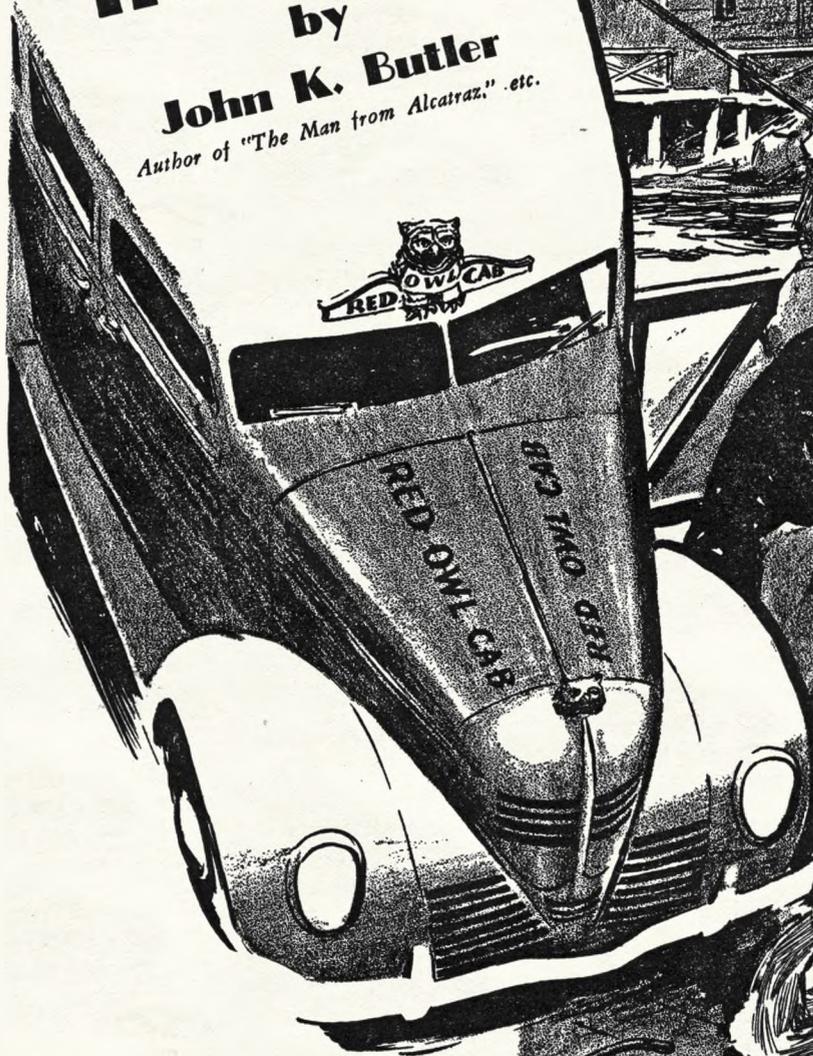
Name.....
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HACKER'S HOLIDAY

by

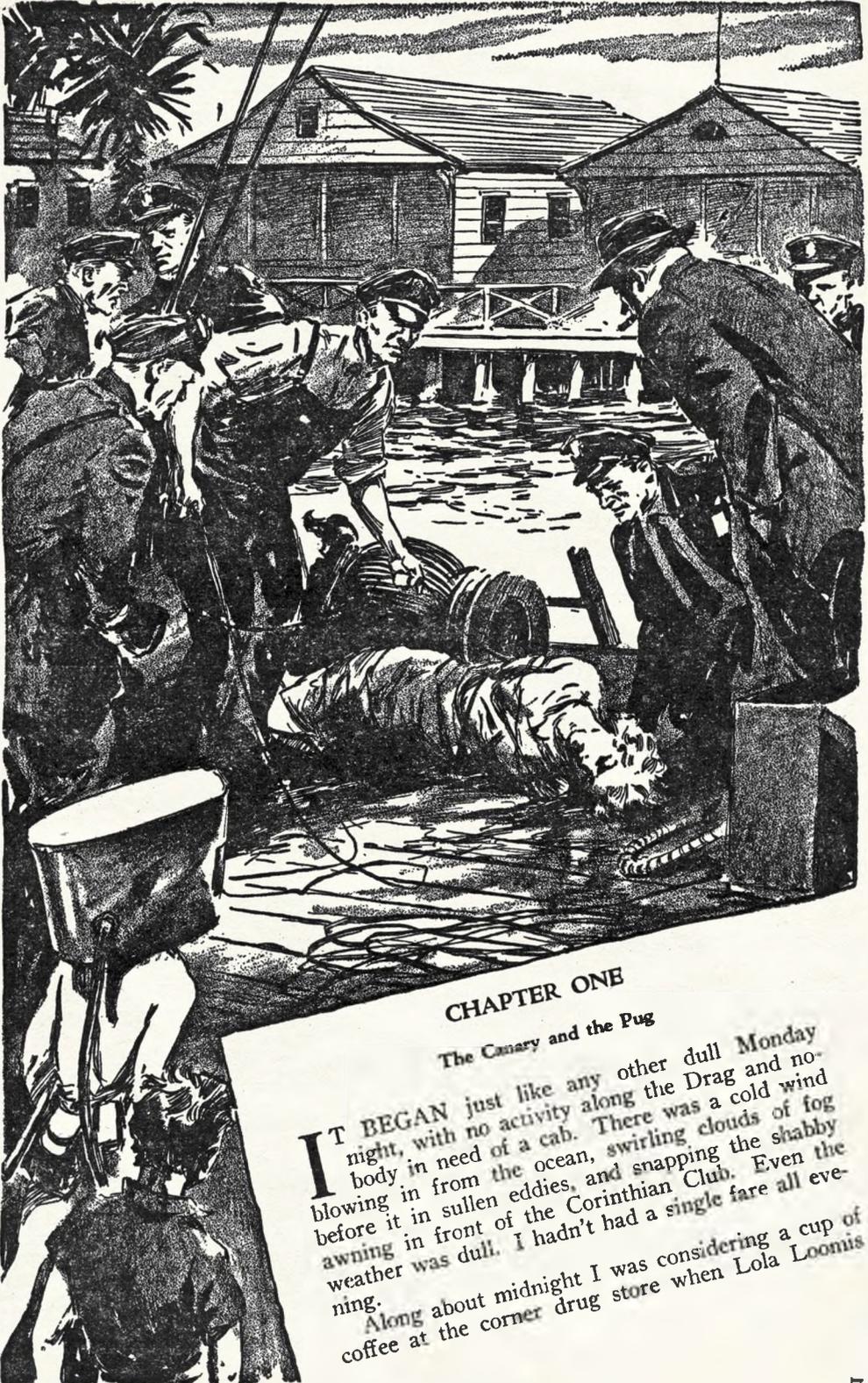
John K. Butler

Author of "The Man from Alcatraz," etc.



A Steve Midnight Novelette

She had been bound with lengths of clothesline to an old-fashioned iron stove and there wasn't any need for the pulmotor squad.



CHAPTER ONE
The Canary and the Pug

IT BEGAN just like any other dull Monday night, with no activity along the Drag and nobody in need of a cab. There was a cold wind blowing in from the ocean, swirling clouds of fog before it in sullen eddies, and snapping the shabby awning in front of the Corinthian Club. Even the weather was dull. I hadn't had a single fare all evening.

Along about midnight I was considering a cup of coffee at the corner drug store when Lola Loomis

came briskly through the steamy glass doors of the Corinthian and headed straight for my cab.

She said gayly: "Hello, Ben Hur. Gas up the chariot for a two-bit ride."

She was a small, sad-eyed blonde with a veneer of glamor. She always dressed to the hilt and wore the latest screwy hats and affected the glib sophistication of a telephone operator out on Saturday's date. The veneer was an attempt to cover the disappointment in the tough life she had to lead—singing in cheap clubs like the Corinthian, mailing money to her folks in Kansas, and at the same time supporting a stumble-bum prize fighter named Poke Haley who divided his time between being counted out on the ring canvas and taking alcoholic cures in all the local sanitariums.

"No, it's Poke. He's on another binge. You'll probably get a sock in the eye when you take me home, Steve. I hope you won't mind."

"I'll try to be pleasant about it," I said.

LOLA lived in a Los Angeles suburb known as Venice, and her cottage was on one of the canals. The shortest way to get there from Pacific Park was over a street called the Speedway. It was really an alley rather than a street—no sidewalks, dark as the inside of a derby, and you passed the back doors of restaurants, with their platoons of battered garbage pails.

We hadn't gone more than a mile when I became sure we were being tailed. A small closed car, which had been parked

It began just like any other dull Monday night with fares few and far between, but come 12:00 A.M.—as though to prove his nickname really meant something—the Red Owl Cab Company's hard-luck hacker starts in to demonstrate just what it means to be back of the 8-ball. Before 1:00 he acquires a black eye, loses his job and gets the cops on his neck for murder—all in one fell swoop.

I swung open the door, dropped the *For Hire* sign, switched the meter. "You're through early tonight," I said.

"I wasn't working tonight, Steve. Just barged around to see a couple of guys that claimed they could put me in radio. Played my records for them." She had half a dozen recordings of her voice in a flat leather case which she now placed on the seat beside her.

"Get a job out of it, Lola?"

She sighed and shook her head wearily. "The radio guys wanted me to come up to their apartment—for a personal audition. I've heard that one before. It's a great life, Steve."

I tramped on the starter, rolled the cab away from the curb. "Where do you want to go, Lola?"

"Home," she said. "You can escort me inside, and then wait while I lock the doors and bolt the windows."

I grinned back at her. "The radio guys?"

across from the Corinthian Club, had pulled away at the same time we did, had made a U-turn, and was now cruising along behind us. I slowed to ten an hour, and the headlights in my rear-vision mirror got no closer. I throttled up to thirty-five, and those headlights didn't get left behind.

I said over my shoulder: "Poke Haley's got us tagged already."

"Poke?"

"Yeah, there's a car tailing us."

"Oh," she said. "But that's not Poke."

"The radio guys?"

She giggled. "Uh-uh. It's somebody else."

"You don't sound worried, Lola."

"Of course not. This goes on and on. Six months now. I have to pull my shades at night. You probably haven't noticed it before, but this same car has followed us every time I've been in your hack. Or anybody else's."

I said: "If it's a masher I can nab him

for the cops, Lola, if you say the word."

"It's not a masher, Steve."

"You mean you know who it is?"

"Well, I know his name. One time I sneaked out the side door of the Corinthian and he wasn't in the car. It's a Ford '36 coupé. I looked at the registration. Belongs to a man named Charles West."

I said: "All you have to do is give that information to the cops and they'll find out about West."

Her voice was tired. "I already know about him."

"And you don't want the guy taken out of your hair?"

"No, Steve."

"But if you're in some kind of a jam, Lola. . . ."

"Forget it, Steve. I know why West tags me around, and if anything ever happens, I've got a little friend." In my mirror I saw her open her handbag. She took something out and reached it over to show me—a Colt .32 automatic. "I can use it too," she said. "Don't think I can't."

"You want to be careful with a gun like that, Lola."

"Sure. But it's a handy little friend, and it saves me a lot of worry. In fact, the only worry I've got right now is that Poke Haley might bounce knuckles off your eye when you take me home." She leaned toward me, sitting on the edge of the rear seat. "Steve?"

"Yes."

"Forget what I said about West. Keep it under your pink bonnet."

"Sure," I agreed. "We hackers are like the Chinese—see all, hear all, say nothing."

WE TURNED up the main street of Venice, where garish lights flamed from garish buildings, and I swung the cab over the trolley tracks and into the district of the canals. It was quite a district—not beautiful, but at least unusual. All the streets running east and west were salt-water canals filled by seepage from the ocean. The canals were about forty feet wide, ten deep, and the shacks and cottages faced them in rows. When you saw it at night, it wasn't so bad—you couldn't see the empty beer bottles and refuse floating in the sluggish water.

Our road bisected the district and we

crossed the canals on narrow concrete bridges which rose steeply and dropped steeply, like the arched bridges of Japanese gardens.

I flipped on my spotlight after we crossed the fourth bridge and hunted for the street sign. It read: Napoli Canal. I put the cab in low gear and bumped over an empty lot, grown thick with weeds, driving behind the cottages that fronted on the canal.

Lola said: "You'd better stop here, Steve. It gets muddy further on. You might get stuck."

The meter read forty-five cents when I parked. I gave Lola a nickel change from a fifty-cent piece, and she didn't tip me, of course—since cab drivers don't take tips from their friends.

I got my flash and guided her along the muddy trail, through thick weeds, to a dark cottage. Glancing back, I could see the headlights of a car bumping across the lots near my cab. Then the headlights went out. That would be Mr. Charles West in a '36 Ford coupé.

Fog rolled thick and damp over the marshes, with the chill of the sea in it. We groped our way to Lola's cottage and I helped her with the key in the lock. We lit lights in a small living-room with bare rustic furnishings and an old-fashioned pot-bellied iron stove in one corner. We lit lights in the kitchenette, and in the bath and the bedroom. We even looked in the closet.

"I'm safe," Lola said at last. "I guess Poke hasn't found me yet."

I said: "You told me Poke was taking the cure again."

"He was, but he got away this afternoon. Thinks he's fighting Joe Louis tomorrow night, and he beat up a fellow downtown, and beat up a cop. The police want him for resisting an officer. He phoned me an hour ago at the Corinthian—stinko drunk—and he thinks I've got secret boy-friends. That's why I said you might get a sock in the eye for bringing me home."

"Well," I suggested kiddingly, "maybe I better shove along now—while I can still see out of both eyes."

Lola laughed and put the phonograph records down and took my hand in a brief friendly clasp. "Thanks a lot, Steve."

"Got the windows all locked?"

"Sure. Everything's fine now, Steve. Guess Poke is blotto in some bar. See you tomorrow night. I'll be wanting a ride home from the Corinthian at two A.M."

"I'll be there," I promised, and as I stepped out the front door Poke Haley bumped me back against the jamb, clipped an awkward blow to my jaw, jolted a fast left into my belt-line.

"You'll be where?" His speech was thick with liquor. "So *you're* the guy, huh?"

"Listen. . . ." I said.

He slapped my face with a meaty palm. He was a big hulking guy who looked like Frankenstein's monster when he loomed out of the fog. "Listen to *what?* You listen to me, louse! You monkey around Lola, huh?" His bleary eyes took in the whipcord uniform which I wore for the Red Owl Cab Company. He glared blearily at my cap. "Who the hell you think you are? A Nazi soldier? You think I'm scared of the Germans? Nuts to *you*, pal!"

He started to swing at me, and then Lola had him by the arm. She shook him like a mother reprimanding a child.

"Poke Haley, you're drunk! This is just a taxi driver that brought me home. . . ."

Haley shoved her away as easily as he'd brush a bug off his sleeve. He brought up his fists in fighting position and danced toward me on the balls of his feet.

"Lousy Nazi soldier—that's what he is—monkey around my woman—damn louse—"

Haley led with a left. I slipped it easily over my shoulder but his right snapped up like a whip and smashed me in the eye. I fell backwards into the weeds, and while I scrambled to my feet Lola had both arms about Haley.

She cried to me: "Beat it, Steve! Let's not have any trouble! I'm sorry if he gave you a black eye. He doesn't know what he's doing. . . ."

I picked up my cap and dusted it against my pants. "I'm staying right here, Lola. Just as long as this lug gives you trouble—"

Poke Haley wrestled drunkenly in Lola's grip. "So I'm a lug, huh? Well, no lousy Nazi can call me a lug—"

"Please go away, Steve," Lola insisted.

My left eye felt as if somebody had swung at it with a twenty-pound sledge. The swelling got bigger and sore as a boil. Poke Haley kept trying to get at me again, swinging his arms, crouching.

Lola said firmly: "Please *go*, Steve!"

So I told her good-night, while she hung onto Haley, and walked back to my cab and drove away from the district, passing again over the arched bridges of the canals.

And that's the last I ever saw Lola Loomis—alive, I mean.

CHAPTER TWO

The Fire and Hire System

I GOT back to my cab-stand before one, and sat there for the rest of the night without another fare. The fog settled thicker and colder, like chill smoke in the street, and it was nearly five A.M. when my phone rang. The call-box at my stand hangs on the wall outside the Corinthian Club, and when the bell rang I climbed out of the cab, crossed the sidewalk and unlocked the phone from the box.

The voice of Pat Regan, the chief dispatcher, barked belligerently into my ear. "What the hell you been doing? You drunk again, Steve?"

"Drunk? I haven't been drunk in a year."

"The hell you haven't! How did you get the black eye?"

I stared at the phone in amazement, wondering vaguely if it had some television attachment on it. I couldn't think of any other method by which Pat Regan would know I had a shiner.

"Well?" he snarled.

"Well, what?"

"Have you got a black eye, Steve?"

I was still in a kind of daze. "Yeah, Pat—just a little mix-up when I was taking a lady home. It's nothing serious. . . ."

"The hell it ain't! When one of our drivers gets a black eye, it's a black eye to the whole Red Owl Cab Company! You think nice people want to ride our cabs when our drivers got shiners? It makes us look like a bunch of gangsters. How'd you like to ride a cab when the driver has his face in a sling? By golly, you bring

that hack back to the garage, Steve! You're fired!"

"Now wait a minute. . . ." I protested.

"Wait for what? I'm damn tired of you getting in these jams!"

"I'm not in any jam, Pat."

"No? The hell you ain't! Two different guys been phoning this office and asking which of our drivers has a shiner. The last one even got your license number."

"Who are they?" I asked.

He snorted in disgust. "You think I'd ask 'em questions? Hell, man, the Red Owl Cab Company don't mess in these jams. As far as Red Owl is concerned, we just want that hack! And don't forget the meter receipts!"

He banged up the phone, hard, and I stood there for nearly a minute, staring blankly at the call-box. It's not pleasant to lose your job, particularly at the dreary hour of five A.M.

Finally I locked the box and turned back to the cab, and a man was standing there at the curb, smiling at me.

"Hello," he said.

He was tall and lean, in a military raincoat and crusher hat. He wore a white ascot scarf in a loose knot about his neck, under the raincoat, and his face was thin and hard and boney. His lipless mouth held an unlit cigarette that moved sideways with the smile. I didn't know him from Adam.

"You have some hard luck?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

Both his hands were sunk deep in the side pockets of the raincoat and he didn't remove them to point. He just shrugged one shoulder expressively. It pointed toward my eye. "That shiner," he said. And again he shrugged, this time toward the call-box. "You didn't sound so happy on the phone. Lose your job?"

"What if I did?"

"Nothing. Except I might be able to give you another. Want it?"

"That depends," I said.

"It's honest. How about coming downtown to L.A. and talking it over with me?"

"What's the risk?"

"No risk. Just a simple way of making some money. I've got a car here, and I can trail you into the Red Owl Garage while you turn in the hack. Then I can

ride you downtown. You're safe all the way—like in church. Want to take the gamble?"

"O. K.," I said, and returned my cab to Red Owl and paid in my meter receipts.

HE FOLLOWED me in a green Chrysler sedan with muddy wheels, and picked me up at the garage. Then we rode downtown in the dreary morning. On the way he was silent, smiling liplessly, always intent on his driving. I couldn't get a word out of him all the way. Finally we swung down a concrete ramp into the basement parking of the Wheelan Building.

That was a new building, and not for pikers. An attendant in white overalls took the sedan, and a blonde elevator operator dressed like a drum majorette rode us to the eleventh floor in a cage that was deeply carpeted, paneled in walnut, with indirect lighting glowing from frosted glass.

We walked along a marble corridor past the swank offices of important law firms, large-scale business enterprises, the offices of well-known physicians and surgeons, and came at last to a door marked simply—*SANDERS & WALLACE, Investigations*.

I knew what that name meant, and was impressed. I was more than impressed when we entered the reception-room. It was about twenty feet square, as comfortable as a living-room in a Beverly Hills mansion, with thick rugs, dark oak walls, deep chairs and divans. There were new magazines to read, and cigarettes available on the end-tables, and a tall brunette receptionist behind a desk in the corner. A discreet brass plate on the desk read: *Miss Barker*. She wore a gray tailored suit over a figure good enough for the Follies, and her hair was cut short and mannish, combed back over her ears. Her fingernails were long on slim hands, the nails tinted the same crimson as her lips.

She smiled at us aloofly and said: "Good-morning, Mr. Millan."

Her eyes had a tired look, as if she'd been working all night, and Millan patted her shoulder affectionately as he passed the desk. "We don't want to be disturbed, Flo." He gave me a nod. "This way."

We entered a small private office decorated as extravagantly as the reception-room, and he closed the sound-proof door and motioned me to a chair. He sat behind a broad shiny desk, not bothering to remove the raincoat or the crusher hat. He pulled out a drawer and put his muddy feet up on it, rocking back in the chair, and leisurely lit the cigarette which had been a dry smoke since I'd met him.

"Want a drink?"

"It's too early."

"Smoke?"

"O. K.," I said, and took one of the foil-wrapped cigars he shoved across the desk.

"Well, I guess you wonder why I brought you here." He stared sleepily at the cigarette in his lean fingers. "Just for a talk. And the job. I know cab drivers are a pretty square bunch, and I thought you'd trust me better if you saw the company that's back of me." He waved a hand around the office. "You ever hear of Sanders and Wallace?"

I'd heard of them, of course. Sanders used to be an ace G-man working under Hoover in Washington. Wallace used to be district attorney in Chicago and was an equally famous crime buster. The two of them had formed a partnership in California now, with a reputation as sound as a federal bank. Private detectives, you could call them, but private detectives of a very high standard. They rejected such drab work as divorce cases, domestic probes, blackmail, and things of that class. They worked with corporation lawyers on big-time investigations, collected evidence on insurance swindles, and even worked for the State Senate in probing isolated cases of public graft. Their reputation was unimpeachable.

"I've heard of them," I told Millan.

He nodded solemnly and squinted at the burning end of his cigarette. "I'm Rush Millan, one of the investigators for this firm."

HE REACHED across the desk to tap his cigarette against a bronze ashtray, but I noticed that his little finger flipped the switch on the interoffice dictograph.

"Let's talk about you," he said. "Your full name is Steven Middleton Knight. They call you Steve Midnight as a sort of

pun, and because you used to be a midnight playboy on a nation-wide scale. Right?"

"Your father was a financier who shot himself after Wall Street losses. You have a mother and a sister, and you've sent them to a ranch in Arizona, because your sister has lung trouble. The Knight money is gone. You now work as a cab driver to support your family. That's very commendable, Steve. You've made a man out of a playboy." He sighed sleepily. "It's unfortunate that you just lost your job with Red Owl, but it's no reflection on your character. Cab drivers have a way of seeing life in the raw, and you happen to be a man who always manages to land in some sort of jam."

I said: "Wow! Where'd you promote all that?"

"Sanders and Wallace never sleep," he said. "I can tell you more. You know a girl named Lola Loomis, a torch-singer at the Corinthian Club. You took her home to Venice at about midnight, and a drunken friend of hers called Poke Haley socked you in the eye."

I said: "So you're one of the men who tried to trace me through Red Owl's chief dispatcher."

His eyes lost some of their sleepy look. "One of them? Were there two of us?"

"That's what the dispatcher told me."

He put out his cigarette thoughtfully. "I don't know about any other one. I checked your license number, and I figured there was a good chance you'd have a stand somewhere near the Corinthian Club, since you took Lola Loomis home from there." He dug into his pants pocket and found a roll of currency big enough to plug a leaking dike in Holland. From this roll he peeled off two crisp fifty-dollar bills and dropped them carelessly on the desk.

"That's yours," he said. "And maybe there's more."

I said: "We hackers don't go in much for murder."

Again the sleepy smile twitched at his lips. "You don't have to kill anybody, Steve. Sanders and Wallace merely want some information, and we want it kept confidential. You might work yourself into a nice job with us here."

"I'm not much of a detective," I said.

"I question your modesty, Steve. So let's begin with the information. How well do you know Lola Loomis?"

"Only casually. A regular fare of mine. Nice square girl who wants to get in radio, and who supports a stumble-bum named Poke Haley." I touched my black eye. "That's about all I know."

"Is Lola Loomis her real name?"

I hadn't thought of that till now. "It does sound a little phoney," I admitted. "Probably a professional name."

"Ever hear her mention her real name?"

"No. Why?"

"Because we've had her under surveillance for a couple of months and we have confidential reasons for wanting to check on her. I hope you won't ask the reasons."

"I won't," I said. "The reputation of Sanders and Wallace is good enough for me."

"Thanks. What other friends does Lola have?"

"I don't know."

"Where've you been taking her in your cab?"

"Just home nights from the Corinthian. She used to live in a Santa Monica hotel. Lately in a shack at Venice. Guess she's hiding from Haley."

"Did she ever mention any names to you—friends, enemies, ex-employers? Anything like that?"

I THOUGHT about Charles West tagging Lola in a dark '36 Ford coupé, but ethics prevented me from telling him that. Lola had been a fare, and a driver keeps confidences when requested to do so.

"No," I said.

He removed his feet from the desk and produced a bottle of brandy from a cabinet behind him. He poured himself a small drink.

"Ever hear of the Rightman Plan, Steve?"

I'd heard of it, of course. Another Utopian pension scheme aimed at the old people of California. A man named Silas Rightman developed the scheme about a year ago, and it was supposed to be better than the Townsend Plan, or the "Thirty Dollars Every Thursday Plan," or half a dozen other plans aimed at protecting Old Age. Rightman was now trying to lobby the plan through the State Legislature—backed by the support of thousands of oldsters who sent their nickels and dimes to campaign headquarters.

I nodded to Rush Millan. "It's in all the papers," I said. "It's on the radio."

"You ever hear Lola Loomis mention anything about the Plan?"

"No," I said.

He studied me shrewdly for a moment. "One other question, Steve. Suppose Lola Loomis gave up her job at the Corinthian and suddenly went away. Would you have any idea where she'd go? Or why?"

"She might be dodging that drunken pest—Poke Haley. But I don't know where she'd go. New York, maybe, to get into radio. Or maybe back to her folks. She said something about her family in Kansas. She might go there. It's just a guess, of course. Why? Did she go away?"

Millan smiled blandly, like a good poker player who might be sitting pat on anything from a pair of deuces to a royal flush. "This is all under your hat, Steve,



and I can't tell you any more—not now. But if you want the job, you're working for Sanders and Wallace beginning this minute. You report directly to me, and I'll try to line you up driving for another cab company. You work entirely under cover, and we find out all we can about Lola Loomis. As a cab driver, you can get a line on her friends without arousing suspicion. This is a big case, Steve. It's so big, we're on a secret investigation for the government of California. That's all I can tell you right now. But I know you're reliable, and if you want the job, you can take it. What say, Steve?"

I'd lost my hack job less than two hours ago, and wondered how I could support my mother and sister down in Arizona, and now I had another job already. It was a grand feeling.

"Sold," I said to Millan. "What's the salary?"

"Fifty a week, Steve. Two weeks in advance." He flipped the twin fifties further along the desk. "And when I line you up with another cab company, you keep the driver's salary. We're glad to have you in the firm, Steve."

We shook hands, and I said: "When do I start?"

"Right now. Go home and get some sleep. Call me back tonight. You can reach me at this office, or at Barney's Bar in Pacific Park."

I left his office walking on air—even that early in the morning. I flashed a smile at Miss Florence Barker, the receptionist, and I felt so fine about life in general that I almost invited her out to breakfast.

CHAPTER THREE

One West—One East

ON MY way home from L.A. on the suburban trolley I stopped in at the Élite Café for coffee and sinkers. Alex McDougal, the counterman, when he passed me the steaming cup of coffee, said: "You hear the news, Steve?"

"What?"

"Guy knocked off last night. Right here in Pacific Park. Joe Gault, the milkman for Green Valley Dairy—he found the guy. Joe was just in here a few minutes

ago. He told me about it. . . . Try one of these chocolate-coated doughnuts, Steve."

A platter was shoved across the counter to me, and McDougal sampled one of the doughnuts himself. He went on: "Anyway, Joe is driving his milk route like usual and he sees a car jammed against a fence down on Ocean Avenue. Just about an hour ago. Joe gets out to look at the car, and there's a guy sitting in it. The guy's dead as a post, covered with blood. Maybe the guy's been sitting there all night—dead like that. Joe calls the cops, and they can see the guy stopped some slugs, but they don't know how, or why. According to the registration on the car, the guy's name is West. . . . What's-a matter, Steve? That coffee too hot?"

I put the cup down. "It's fine, Alex. What did you say the guy's name was?"

"Charles West, I think."

"What kind of car was it?"

"Ford coupé. With red wire wheels. And it was jammed against this fence. The cops let Joe Gault finish his milk route, but Joe's gotta go to headquarters this noon."

"Where'd you say he found the guy?"

"Ocean Avenue. Just down off the street in that gully that used to be the city dump. You want some more coffee, Steve?"

I got away from the Élite Café as soon as possible. The fog had turned to a thin misty drizzle, and I had to hike six blocks through it to the place where the milkman had discovered the body.

There were a couple of dozen cars parked along the avenue, including three official police vehicles. A small knot of excitement-seekers stood in the morning rain and peered over the embankment. Down the weedy slope, below street level, there was a gully, and beyond the gully a white rail fence which blocked off the former city dumping ground. A black Ford coupé, with red wire wheels, was jammed against this fence, and several cops and detectives had gathered around it, smoking cigarettes in the rain. Among them I spotted Hollister, of Homicide, so I heel-skidded down the weedy embankment.

A uniformed cop blew his whistle at me and waved a hand. "All right, buddy! Get back up on the road!"

"I want to see the captain," I said. "Friend of his."

HOLLISTER turned. He was a big man in a shaggy tweed overcoat which he'd owned for the past twenty years. His battered porkpie hat was on the way to becoming almost as historic. His face was full and broad-jawed, and his steely eyes had a reputation for being better than 200-watt incandescents when it came to grilling a suspect. The stubby cigar in his teeth shifted from one side of his mouth to the other, with a vigorous jaw movement, and he waved one hand in friendly greeting.

"Hi, Steve. You implicated in this?"

"Any grounds for suspicion, Captain?"

"Nothing concrete, Stevie. But whenever anything happens in this town, you're usually implicated in some way or other. You don't happen to remember shooting a fellow last night, do you?"

"Not particularly."

I went over to the car and peered in. The dead man was slumped across the seat, as if he'd fallen asleep while driving. There was dried blood on his raincoat, more of it on his clenched thin hands, and a lot of it matted in his hair. His cap had fallen off and was lying upside down on the floor boards, with caked blood on it. His mouth was partly open, with rusty stains on his chin and lips. I noticed that his coat was covered with mud, as if he'd fallen out of the car and been put back again.

Hollister said: "About the mud on him, I don't know. Funny, isn't it? There wasn't any marks around the car, except those made by the milkman who found him. The city doc just had a look, and he found five holes that might be from an Army Colt. The first slug hit him in the side, but there's a handkerchief wadded against it. That means the guy was shot somewhere else and tried to get away in his car. But somebody tailed him along Ocean Avenue in another car and threw four more slugs at him. The last four hit him while he was driving. We can see where they went through the car door. Those last four knocked him off the Avenue and down here against the fence. But that first slug had to be fired somewhere else—before he got in the car."

"You know who he is?"

Hollister nodded. "The car's registered to a Charles West. Stuff in the guy's wallet makes him the owner of the car. I don't know what his business was, but we found bundles of pamphlets in the rumble. It's the kind of literature they circulate to the old people about this Rightman Plan. Sixty Dollars Every Tuesday, or Seventy Dollars Every Wednesday—something like that. If the guy's been working for this old-age-pension outfit his murder is gonna be a helluva sock in the puss to the Rightman Plan. They've got a Holier-Than-Thou reputation to hold up, and it'll shoot their lobby all to hell if it turns out their workers are getting knocked off."

"Or maybe it's good advertising," I suggested. "You sure this fellow was working on the Rightman Plan?"

"I don't know. All I've got to go by is the bundles of pamphlets. But I phoned Rightman. He's got campaign headquarters in L.A., and he's been in town for the last week. He ought to be able to explain about the pamphlets." The captain glanced up the embankment at the parked cars. "He ought to be along any time. . . ."

SILAS H. RIGHTMAN arrived in a stately black limousine with a uniformed chauffeur. Mr. Rightman himself had long gray hair, a benevolent face, and wore the dark clothes and high reversed collar of a preacher.

Rightman's chauffeur didn't appear so benevolent. He was a burly red-headed man, with fists like a ring-fighter, and he looked tough enough to rob a metropolitan bank single-handed.

The chauffeur assisted Rightman down the muddy embankment and led him by the arm over to the circle of police officers. Rightman, with a sad expression on his lean, wrinkled face, inquired: "Did a Captain Hollister wish to interview me?"

"Yes," Hollister said. "I'm sorry to get you over here this early in the morning, Mr. Rightman, but the fact is, we've had some trouble. Fellow was shot last night. And the reason I called you is, this fellow had a batch of propaganda stuff in the car. Pamphlets on the Rightman Plan."

The lean face of Mr. Rightman took on

a somber flush. "Over half a million Californians support my pension plan, Mr. Hollister. Half a million elderly citizens demand the care of the government in their declining years. I can vouch for the fine character of my flock, Mr. Hollister, and if there is a black sheep in our midst, I'm unable to understand how he was led astray."

The red-headed chauffeur added smugly: "What Mr. Rightman means is he don't know who knocked this bum off, and he don't even know who this bum is, and furthermore, if you want any more dope, you gotta see our lawyer."

Silas H. Rightman shot a shocked glance at his chauffeur. "Please, Brick! Your language!"

"Ever hear of a Charles West?" Captain Hollister asked.

Rightman's benevolent eyes looked gravely into the eyes of the police captain. "Yes, that name is quite familiar. Is that the man who met his death here?"

"Yeah, that's him."

Rightman stared sadly at the ground. "About all I can say to you, Captain, is that a Charles West has been my chauffeur—in the past. Until I got Brick."

"What the boss means," Brick added, "is that this bum Charley West used to work for him, but the guy turned out a load of mashed potatoes, so we give him the air. We ain't responsible if the guy got chilled, and furthermore you got no right to chin us like this. If you want any more dope, then you gotta see our lawyer, or else you gotta soup-eeenie us into court. A fine man like Mr. Rightman ain't got no time to mess in these here knock-offs."

"Your language, Brick!" said Silas Rightman again, indignantly.

"The hell with the language, boss. We're talking to cops now, and when you talk to these babies you gotta speak their language."

Captain Hollister said quietly: "You'd better put a halter on some of that language, tough guy. Somebody might kick it down your throat, and you might choke to death on it. What's your name?"

The chauffeur's grin was smug. "Ben Shultz is the name, Cap. My friends call me Brick."

"What I call you," Hollister said, "is a mouthy punk."

"Brick," Silas Rightman intervened apologetically, "is a product of an unfortunate early environment. I hope, Captain, you won't take offense at his language. I hope someday to elevate him to the level of his soul."

"That'll take a tractor," Hollister grumbled. "And get this, Mr. Rightman. I'm conducting a murder investigation here, and I demand some respect along with cooperation."

"Certainly, Captain, certainly. I quite understand your position, but I can't tell you more than that Mr. Charles West formerly worked for me as a chauffeur. I dismissed him several months ago, and if he had pamphlets in the car pertaining to my Plan for old age pensions, then I can only say that he was a true follower of my ideals. I can't give you any information on Mr. West's personal life. I can only say that this whole affair is—er—unfortunate."

By this time, of course, I was fed up with the pious Mr. Silas H. Rightman, and fed up with his new chauffeur. I didn't think either of them would contribute any further information on the death of Charles West—except through their lawyer, or in court—and I turned away and started climbing the muddy bank to Ocean Avenue.

Captain Hollister waded through the wet weeds after me. "You leaving, Steve?"

"Why not?"

He took the cigar stub out of his mouth and studied it. "Ever hear of this Charles West?"

I shook my head.

"Your black eye doesn't look so bad," he told me. "Did you see the drunk yet?"

"What drunk?"

"The guy that gave it to you."

"He probably doesn't remember me," I said.

"You mean you didn't see the morning papers?"

"Sure, I saw 'em."

"Then maybe you don't bother to look at the classified ads. Cops do. It's part of our business."

He produced a rolled newspaper from his pocket and folded it back to the ad section. His finger ran down the personal column and pointed out a single item.

SORRY about the shiner. Will the cab driver in Pacific Park who got a black eye last night please get in touch with the intoxicated fellow who gave it to him? You can see me at the Surf Hotel. I would like to make amends.

Signed: SORRY.

Captain Hollister smiled knowingly at my shiner while I read the item. He said: "As soon as I saw this I told Lieutenant Ross, it'll be Steve Midnight, that driver for Red Owl. Because if ever any black eyes run loose around town, Steve'll get 'em." He reached out a forefinger and stabbed at the swelling. "It's a beaut, too! A work of art, Steve!"

He was calling suggestions for cures—applying raw steak, frog spit, or a gold wedding ring—when I climbed up through the wet weeds to the avenue.

THE clerk at the Surf Hotel watched me cross the shabby, sunless lobby. He took in the whipcord uniform, the Red Owl cap, the black eye, and before I reached the desk he knew what I wanted.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I guess you're the gentleman to see Mr. Hailford. Room 318. He's expecting you."

There was no elevator at the Surf so I climbed two flights of musty stairs to the third floor and rapped.

Poke Haley opened the door immediately. He must've had a hell of a hangover, because a stubble of black whiskers stood out aggressively on his jaw, and his eyes were bloodshot, with deep fleshy bags under them. He glanced at my shiner, said: "Yay, man, I really slipped you one, huh? Come in, guy, and meet my friend Kathy Walsh. I don't know your name. They wouldn't give it to me when I phoned the cab company."

"The name's Steve Midnight," I said. "Come right in, Steve."

I stepped past him and he closed the door.

An attractive dark-haired girl sat in the room's one comfortable chair. She wore a camel's hair swagger coat over a plaid dress, galoshes over high-heeled shoes, and a small smart hat that was speckled from the rain. She didn't look at all like the type of girl who would be a friend of Poke Haley.

She nodded politely toward me, after

Haley's casual introduction, and then her face got a frightened look, and she cried: "Don't, Poke! Don't hit him!"

Haley's swing hit me just over the ear with a hard-knuckled contact that made flashes in my brain and knocked me to the floor. He jumped down on top of me and got my throat in his big meaty hands.

"All right," he demanded, "where's Lola? I didn't bring you around here to say no apologies for that shiner. You thought maybe I'd slip you a few bucks, huh? Well, that's all baloney. I just got you here so I could find out about Lola."

The funny part of it was that I'd come to see Haley for the same reason. I wanted to find out about Lola too. But I didn't tell him I was working for Sanders and Wallace.

I said: "Take your hands off me, monkey. I happen to know you socked a cop in L.A. last night, and there's a wanted tag out on you. All I have to do is create a little noise, and there'll be so many cops around here, it'll look like the Germans in Holland."

"I'm not scared a bit," he said. "Where's Lola?"

He had me flat on my back, his knees on my biceps, pressing down his full weight. He felt like a ten ton truck. Now he took his hands from my throat and boxed me briskly, like a cat playing with a mouse.

"Where's Lola?"

Kathy Walsh had come from the chair and was standing over us. "Leave him alone!" she snapped. "Don't be such a drunken fool!"

"This lug is gonna talk," Poke said. And to me, "Listen, lug. Lola went away last night. Maybe she went in your cab. Where'd you take her?"

"I didn't take her anywhere."

"Don't try to kid me. She had to take a cab, or something. She always went around in your cab, I guess. So I guess you're the man that knows." His fist smacked me painfully on the swollen eye, but his swing was so hard it threw him off balance, and I rolled out from under him, spilling him sideways.

I got to my feet quickly, and his next movements were all too slow. He had too much of a hangover.

I slugged him three times in the face

while he was still getting up, kicked him on the knee-cap, and he sat down stupidly and began to weep. He was a wreck of a man, an alcoholic, nerves and emotions shattered to hell, and he began to sob, sitting there on the floor, while big tears trickled down his whiskered cheeks. He sobbed so much he couldn't talk, and then he crawled along the floor to a table and took from it a pint bottle of rye, still half full.

"Don't be a fool!" Kathy Walsh snapped at him. "You want to get sent back to the sanatorium?"

She tried to snatch the bottle, but he nudged her away and drank greedily. "Where's Lola?" he barked. He threw the empty bottle at me. Then he put his head in his big meaty hands and cried like an hysterical woman.

I picked up my cap, saying to the Walsh girl: "If this is an example of what the hooch habit can do to a man, then I'm even swearing off coffee and tea. How long's he been like this?"

"Four years," she told me. "Lola's had him take all the best cures. He just can't help it. He drinks till he goes crazy."

I'd started to go out the door when she touched my arm. "I'd like to talk to you," she said. "Not here. We'll leave Poke here. He'll be all right."

THE rain fell in a hard spring down-pour as Kathy Walsh and I left the musty lobby of the Surf Hotel.

She owned a small DeSoto roadster which was parked against the curb, and we sat in it, Kathy under the driver's wheel, while the rain pattered on the top and trickled down the windshield. She held out an imitation silver case, but I shook my head. She selected a cigarette herself, tapped it against the wheel, lit it from a dashboard lighter.

She said: "You don't really know what happened to Lola, do you?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Well, I thought you might. Poke says you took her home last evening."

"Around midnight," I said.

"Didn't you see her after that?"

I shook my head.

"You didn't go back to the cottage and drive her to a train or anything?"

"Nope."

"And she didn't say anything to you about leaving town, or anything?" When I shook my head to that too, she flipped the cigarette out into the rain and turned her face toward me, worried. "You'd tell me the truth, wouldn't you?"

"I have no reason for lying."

"I'll tell you," she said, "how important it is for you to help me. Something terrible might've happened to Lola."

"Such as what?"

She hesitated only a moment. "Well, I guess there's no reason not to tell you all of it. I'll probably be going to the police—or maybe I won't. I don't know. Lola's been mixed up with something for a long time. I've known her for the last two years—met her when we were both working in a burlesque show in Dallas. We've been pretty good friends ever since. She never told me exactly what it was all about, but one night in San Francisco, less than a year ago, she said a funny thing."

"What?"

"Well, we were sitting in the apartment we shared, and she was reading the newspaper while I did some sewing on a dress. She put down the paper and said to me, 'You know, Kathy, if I wanted to do some talking, I could make it awful hot for a certain man that once did me dirt.' So I asked her what she meant, and she said her name was really Loretta Burdick, and that Lola Loomis was just a stage name. She once married a man in Denver, but he turned out to be a confidence-man. When Loretta, or Lola, found that out, she left him."

"Was it Poke Haley?"

"I don't know. But Lola said this man had changed his name now, and was in another business. She said she might even make some blackmail money if she wanted to stoop to that sort of thing. That's all Lola said about it—until about a month ago."

"Then what?"

"Well, we were both working here in Pacific Park, singing in the clubs, and Lola told me one night that I shouldn't ever repeat what she'd mentioned in San Francisco that time. Not unless something happened to her. She said she had to keep her mouth shut, and she showed

me a pistol she'd bought to protect herself. She said she wasn't interfering with this man who used to be her husband, but she didn't entirely trust him, and he didn't trust her, either. So Lola gave me a letter that night, and told me to keep it hidden, and if anything ever happened to her, I was to take it to the police."

"What was in the letter?"

THE Walsh girl flushed, and then looked annoyed. "I didn't read it, of course. And anyway it was sealed."

"You've got the letter now?"

She shook her head worriedly. "That's the terrible thing. It was stolen from me."

"When?"

"Just this morning—early. Lola called me on the phone, at my apartment in Santa Monica, about three o'clock. She sounded nervous and said she was leaving the city suddenly and made me promise never to tell anybody she was in any kind of trouble. She told me to put the sealed letter in another envelope, and not to read it, and to mail it right away to her folks in Kansas. She insisted I put it in the mail-box right then. I asked her to come see me, but she said she was boarding the train right away."

"Then what?"

"So I did as she asked, and went out to put the letter in the corner mail-box, and a man stepped out of an alley and knocked me down and took the letter."

"You tell the police about that?"

She shook her head nervously. "No. On the phone, Lola made me promise not to say anything to the police—no matter *what* happened." The Walsh girl rested gloved hands on the steering wheel. They were trembling a little. "So I don't know what to do. I don't know whether to go to the police—or what."

I said: "Did you tell Poke Haley?"

"Yes, but his brain is just about pickled in alcohol. You can't talk sense to him. He thinks Lola ran away with some man. She called him on the phone this morning, at three, about the same time she called me. She told him she was going East and never wanted to see him again. So he tried to get in touch with you, calling the cab company, putting that ad in the paper. He thinks you must've driven her to the station with some man."

I began to get an idea. I said: "Are you sure it was Lola herself that you spoke to on the phone? After all, Poke Haley wouldn't be able to tell one voice from another, but *you* would."

"Yes, I think it was Lola. She has a funny kind of accent, part Kansas, part Brooklyn. It's that accent and voice that makes her go over so well when she sings in the clubs. So I'd know it. Or I think I would. And naturally, she sounded nervous. And she wouldn't give me any reason why she was leaving town, bag and baggage. I just talked to Pete Sondergaard—he's the manager of the Corinthian where she's been working—and Pete said Lola got him out of bed by ringing his home phone at about five this morning and saying she was taking a train."

I said suddenly: "Oh-oh. Are you sure she called Sondergaard at five?"

"That's what he told me."

"And she called you and Poke Haley, respectively, about three?"

"Yes. Why?"

"There's a discrepancy in the time," I said. "At three A.M. Lola was just boarding a train. But two hours later, at five, she still had time to call Sondergaard. Are you sure she really left town?"

"I hadn't thought of that. But Lola's gone all right. Poke Haley came to my apartment early this morning to see if I knew where she'd gone. We drove down to Venice. The cottage is practically empty. Even the furniture gone."

"Furniture?"

"Yes, some chairs and the sofa, and a few other things."

I said: "She wouldn't take furniture on a train. Maybe we can trace it through the local moving companies. Did she own the furniture in that cottage?"

Kathy Walsh gave me a startled glance. "Why, no! I just remembered—that place was rented furnished!"

"We'd better take a drive down there," I said.

CHAPTER FOUR

She Vanished in Venice

THE rain that morning had been just another California shower and it let up as suddenly as it had started. By the

time we reached Venice there were people headed for the beach in swim-suits, and in one of the canals some kids were playing deep-sea diver with a home-made diving apparatus constructed cleverly of an old wash-boiler, a length of garden hose and a bicycle pump.

Kathy Walsh drove the roadster smoothly over the arched bridges and turned into the marshy lots along Napoli Canal. It was muddier than ever after the rain, and we left the roadster and walked the rest of the way to the cottage.

The door had been smashed open and was leaning crazily on a broken hinge.

Kathy said: "Poke Haley did that when we came down here this morning. He thought Lola might be inside with some man. He's as screwy as a mouse in a cage, you know."

"I know," I said.

We stepped into the cottage, and it was vacant, all right. Rugs gone, pictures removed from the walls, the furniture itself gone. But the thing that struck me immediately was that even the old pot-belly stove was missing. I couldn't think of any reason why Lola Loomis, a nightclub canary, would want to steal a wood-stove.

Kathy said: "Strange, isn't it?"

I'd found something else that was strange. The floor had been swept, a thoughtful gesture on the part of a tenant who's stealing the landlord's furniture, and a spot in the center of the room had been scrubbed clean. A rug had once been in this spot. You could tell by the darker, unfaded tone of the pine planks.

I thought about that, and then began looking around the place. In the bedroom part of the furnishings had been left—the heavier pieces. In the kitchen, the tiny gas range was still there, and most of the dishes. In the bathroom there was a musical powder box on a shelf, and a couple of costly little bottles of French perfume.

I didn't think Lola Loomis was the kind of girl who would steal an old stove and leave behind that imported perfume, so I returned to the living-room again and gave it a more thorough check.

In the ceiling, the last place you'd think to look, a sheet of tin had been tacked to the plaster, as if to cover a leak. The tin

was rusty, but the heads of the tacks looked as if they'd been hammered recently. And the most interesting feature of all was that this ceiling leak was directly over the spot where the floor had been scrubbed.

I got a straight chair from the kitchen and stood on it to pry the tin loose with my pocket-knife. There was a sharp round puncture in the plaster.

Kathy said: "Good Lord! You don't think a bullet did that?"

"I certainly do," I said, and stepping down from the chair, examined the room once again. This time I found a sprinkle of soot near the glass doors to the porch.

The porch was on the canal side, its planks joining the planks of a small boat wharf that extended over the water.

I walked out on the wharf and the planks were still wet from the rain. I stooped down and ran my finger between loose boards and when I looked at the finger it had wet soot on it.

Kathy Walsh was beside me now, watching me curiously, her eyes round and frightened.

I stood up suddenly, and by accident—or not quite accident—I bumped against her and knocked the leather handbag from under her arm. It fell into the water with a splash, sank.

"I'm clumsy," I apologized.

She accepted the accident with a good-natured smile, bending over the edge of the wharf, peering down. "Gosh," she said, "the water's so dirty you can't even see where it went."

"We'll get it," I promised, "even if we have to hire a deep-sea diver." Then I snapped my fingers as if I'd just thought of something. "Those kids . . . I'll get them. Wait right here, Kathy."

I HIKED up the edge of Napoli Canal and crossed the bridge and went over to the next canal.

The kids were still there, with their home-made diving apparatus. They took me for a truant officer and started to run. I lured them back by jingling a pocketful of change.

"Listen," I explained, "a lady just dropped her purse off a wharf on Napoli Canal. I'll pay a reward of a dollar to anybody that can get it for me. How about

it, fellas? Is Napoli too deep for your diving equipment?"

A tow-headed kid glowered at me scornfully. He looked like a ten-year-old edition of James Cagney. "Listen, mister," he said, "for a buck I'd dive off the Santa Monica breakwater." Then he got shrewd and winked at his partners surreptitiously. "But it's muddy down there. How about a buck and a quarter to cover the whole five of us?"

"It's a deal," I agreed, and when I returned along Napoli Canal I had the five-man diving crew with me. They ranged in ages from the Cagney urchin, ten, to a kid about six who peddled a tricycle. The tricycle towed along a toy wagon for a trailer, and on the trailer was the diving equipment.

Kathy Walsh was waiting for us on the wharf, and the miniature Cagney instantly took charge of operations. "All right, you guys," he barked, "get that stuff ready. Don't worry, lady, we can get your purse."

The wash-boiler, inverted, was a diving helmet. This settled down over young Cagney's head, and stretched rubber drawn tight about his scrawny neck. He wore nothing but swim-trunks, otherwise he was naked. You could see his glowering face behind the glass window which had been fixed into the front of the helmet.

His crew worked efficiently. They thrust the bicycle pump up and down, hissing air into the helmet, and air escaped through a makeshift valve in the top. They tied a rope around the diver's waist, and attached a belt which carried cumbersome pieces of scrap iron.

"We're ready," they said.

The youthful diver waded into the water at the side of the wharf, his bare feet oozing mud. He waded deeper and deeper, until the water closed over his head, and bubbles rose rapidly to the surface from the valve. Then he was down out of sight, while we followed his progress only by the movement of the rope attached to his middle, the path of the bubbles.

None of us spoke. The crew took turns on the bicycle pump, and suddenly there came a yank on the rope.

"He's got it!" one of the kids said.

But I knew the diver didn't have it—not the purse, because I'd started him in

the water on the other side of the wharf from where the purse had fallen in.

We dragged him back up the bank by the rope, and the crew removed the helmet. He was shivering—not just from the cold water. His skin had goose-prickles. His thin freckled-face was scared.

"Gee!" he cried. "There's a lady down there!"

I pretended I hadn't sent him down there to hunt for anything like that. "A what?"

"A lady! She's drowned! Honest, mister! I ain't fooling—it's a real lady!"

Kathy Walsh said: "Good God, maybe it's Lola!"

"Honest," the boy diver went on excitedly, "she's down there, and she's tied to something that looks like an iron stove—like you heat a room with!"

I wiped the fingers of my right hand against my pants, removing the stove soot I'd found in the planks of the wharf. "It couldn't be a stove," I said. "How could it be? You boys go call the cops."

A POLICE radio car arrived fast. Following that, by a few seconds, came the pulmotor squad from the fire department. Then more sirens announcing the life-guard crew from the beach, a traffic cop on a motorcycle, and Captain Hollister, of Homicide, in a small white official sedan that bogged down in the mud outside the Loomis cottage.

The life guards had worked speedily, bringing up the body from the bottom of the canal. It was Lola Loomis, blonde hair plastered like wet straw to the shape of her head, her dress hugging her wetly, her chin battered with an ugly wound. She'd been bound with lengths of clothesline to the old-fashioned iron stove, and there wasn't any need for the pulmotor squad.

Captain Hollister came striding out on the little wharf, the tails of his tweed overcoat stained with mud and the antiquated porkpie hat jammed down over his ears. When he saw me he said glumly: "You sure get around places where things happen. Huh, Stevie?"

I said: "This one happened before I got here, Captain."

"You always arrive a little late. What's her name?"

"Lola Loomis. Torch-singer at Pete Sondergaard's Corinthian Club—until now. I brought her home last night in my cab. A boy-friend of hers gave me a shiner. He was drunk. That's the last I saw of her, until now."

"How'd you happen to find her in the canal, Steve? Diving for pearls?"

I introduced Kathy Walsh. "Kathy," I said, "was a friend of Lola's. She was worried about Lola leaving town all of a sudden. Lola called her early this morning and said she was going away. I met Kathy through Lola's boy-friend. Just met her a little while ago."

"The guy that socked you?"

"Yes," I said. "Ex-fighter named Poke Haley."

Captain Hollister had a marvelous memory. That's part of what made him a good cop. He remembered the ad in the personal column of the morning papers, and remembered the name of Poke Haley. He turned to one of the radio cops and said: "Go around to the Surf Hotel and pick up Haley. He might be there under a phoney name, on account of he socked a cop in L. A. yesterday, and there's a wanted tag on him. Pick him up, Dave." Hollister's eyes came back to me. "How'd you happen to find the body in the canal?"

"We were looking for Lola, that's all. Happened to walk out here on the wharf, and Kathy's purse fell in the water. I got these kids to dive for it. They found the body."

"You wouldn't hold out on me, Steve?"

"Why should I?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, Steve. I think you're a straight guy, but it's damned funny how you get mixed up in these jams. Who do you think killed this Lola Loomis?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You think it has any connection with that Charley West case?"

"I don't suppose so."

"Awful funny that two of them happen on the same night. This Lola looks like she's been shot."

HE SENT for the medical examiner, and a hasty investigation there on the wharf was enough to indicate death by shooting.

"A single bullet," the M. E. told us, "fired upward under her chin, pierced the brain, lanced out the top of the skull. Contact wound. Might be a .38."

"Or a Colt .32," one of the life guards offered. "An automatic. Here it is."

He had found it inside the stove which had been brought up from the bottom of the canal with Lola's body. He passed the gun to Hollister. It was Lola's own gun, the one she'd showed me in the cab last night. But I didn't mention that.

"I'll be damned!" Hollister said. "Take that rod, doc, and send it to ballistics. I'll try to locate the slug. Also we want to give her hands the paraffin test—see if she shot herself." Hollister's eyes came back to me. "As for you Steve—you seem awful hot stuff around here. Got any ideas?"

"Two," I said.

"Give, fella."

"First—about the furniture in the cottage. It was moved away. I don't think a moving company is responsible, since the furnishings belonged to the landlord, and Lola Loomis was too dead to steal it. Whoever took that stuff away had to bring a car in here to get it. I suggest you take plaster casts of the tire tracks around the front of the cottage. The rain makes it a cinch for you to get good ones, and I only saw one set of tire tracks when I came up here this morning. Of course with all these sirens blowing, and the police cars—"

"Nuts to that," Hollister said. "None of our cars came within twenty yards of the shack. What's the other idea?"

"The other's about Lola Loomis. Some years ago she married under the name of Loretta Burdick. That was in Denver, Colorado. So I suggest you contact Denver and find out the name of the man she married."

Hollister said: "You seem to know a hell of a lot about this killing, Steve."

"I only know what I pick up driving a cab, Captain."

He turned on Kathy Walsh. "Do you have any information, Miss Walsh?"

"Well—just what you heard. Lola was worried about something, and she told me once about her real name being Loretta Burdick, and about a man who used to be her husband."

"You'd better come up to headquarters with us, Miss Walsh."

"How about me?" I asked.

"I'll want to talk to you, Stevie, after I question Miss Walsh. Don't be hard to find."

CHAPTER FIVE

Ride Without Meter

AS SOON as I got away from the canal district I strolled into a drug store on the main street of Venice, and used the pay-phone to call the office of Sanders and Wallace.

"I want to speak to Rush Millan." I said, trying to sound casual.

"Who's calling, please?" It was the sultry voice of Flo Barker, the sophisticated receptionist.

"Steve Midnight," I said.

"Oh, yes. You're the taxi driver. He's not in the office right now. You might reach him at Barney's Bar, in Pacific Park."

So I called Barney's, but Millan wasn't

there. I was pretty anxious to get in touch with him about what had happened to Lola Loomis, so I called back to the office and asked to speak to either Mr. Sanders or Mr. Wallace.

The receptionist put the veto on that. "They're not here at the moment," she said, "and anyway you're supposed to work with Mr. Millan personally on this case. You'd better wait for him at Barney's."

I strolled out of the drug store and there was a Red Owl cab parked at the curb. Olie Greenberg, one of our drivers, grinned up at me from his newspaper. "Hi-yuh, Steve. I heard about Pat Regan yanking your hack from under you. How's the eye?"

I was getting damn tired of people's concern over my eye. "It's fine," I said.

"Did that guy get in touch with you?"

"What guy?"

"The fella that was going around asking all us drivers which one of us had a shiner and where was he?"

"Yeah, I saw him several hours ago."

"Several hours? He must be looking

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for you again. He only asked me ten minutes ago."

"A big guy with a black beard and a hangover?"

"No, a red-headed guy dressed like a chauffeur."

So it wasn't Poke Haley—not this time. It was Ben Schultz, whose friends all called him Brick.

Toward noon, big dark clouds rolled in again from the ocean and fought a thunderous battle in the skies. I rode a suburban trolley from Venice to Pacific Park, and got off at my station and wondered which way to go. I could stroll up the drag to my hotel and maybe find Brick Schultz, or I could stroll up Fourth Street to Barney's Bar and wait for Rush Millan. While I was debating that, somebody else made a decision for me.

I'd seen this dark sedan move up the street past the trolley station. I didn't pay any attention to it. Then the clouds clapped heavy thunder overhead, the rain came down in driving sheets, and the same dark sedan came back again and braked to a stop. A man stepped out of it briskly.

"Hell," he said, "I been looking all over town for you." It was Brick Schultz, and he held his right hand tight inside his pocket. "This is a rod," he said. "If you think I'm scared to blast you in broad daylight, then you can stay where you are. You want to get in the car, pussface?"

The cloth of his pocket bulged ominously with the shape of the gun inside it and the barrel seemed to be tilted at just the right angle to send bullets crashing upward between my good eye and my shiner.

So I climbed into the rear seat of the sedan, and he joined me there instantly. He slammed the door, took the gun from his pocket and held it across his lap.

"O.K., Harry," he said, "roll it."

There was another man in the front beside the driver. He was slumped down in the seat, his whiskered chin resting on his shoulder, his head tipped a little to one side. He hadn't moved since I got into the car, and his only movement now was the slight rock of his head as the car turned the corner.

I said: "What did you do with Haley? Kill him?"

Schultz gave a scoffing laugh. "Him?"

Say, if hooch don't kill that big bum, nothing will. I never seen such a souse in my life. Harry and me go up to his hotel, and the big gorilla is sitting on the floor and he's bawling like a baby. Somebody stole his woman, he says. So we get him out in the car and drive him around, but he won't talk. We even took his shoes off and gave him the old hot-foot, with matches. You know what he did? He fell asleep!" Schultz wagged his head in amazement. "Can you imagine a souse like that?"

The sedan had crossed the business district of Pacific Park and was now in a forlorn section of bare, rolling hills and abandoned oil derricks.

"Where'm I going?" I asked.

"Just a little ride, hacker. And don't let the meter worry you. We ain't got one."

HEAD of us there was only a dirt road now, muddy in the rain, and the sedan continued along this with no traffic in sight in any direction. We parked in a by-way off the road, and Harry killed the motor and twisted around in the seat to look back at us.

"This all right, Brick?"

"This is swell," Schultz said. He swung up the heavy revolver and slapped me hard on the jaw with it. Instinctively I put my hands up to guard my face, and he slugged the top of my head with the gun, and then jabbed the muzzle into my ribs with the force of a railroad section-hand driving the last spike into the last tie, at the close of a day's work.

He said: "Maybe you want to talk now, huh?"

"About what?"

Again the muzzle of the gun stabbed my ribs. "Don't try to kid me, hacker. I'm playin' cop now, and I'm ten times tougher than coppers. Charley West was my buddy, see? And furthermore I'm married to his sister, see?"

I said: "You didn't act like such a friend of West's when you talked to the cops up on Ocean Avenue this morning."

"Never mind how I acted in front of the cops. You're gonna tell me who bumped Charley, see?"

"What makes you think I know?"

"Listen, don't try to kid me. You took

that Loomis dame home in your hack last night. So you was down there, and this bum Poke Haley was down there, so one of you has got to know what happened to Charley."

"Oh," I said, "I see what you mean. Charley West got knocked off while he was tailing Lola Loomis."

That stopped Shultz. He stared at me for a moment with profound amazement. "How the hell you know *that*?"

"I know lots of things. Maybe *I'm* the one that ought to ask the questions. West was working for Silas Rightman, wasn't he? All this about West being canned as Rightman's chauffeur is a lot of baloney. West was doing the tail-job for Rightman."

Shultz made an effort to recover from his surprise. He said: "Mr. Rightman ain't got a thing to do with what happened to Charley. Charley was just tailing that dame around on account of he had a crush on her. And Charley's my brother-in-law. So I gotta find out who rubbed him. That's all it is, see?"

"Baloney," I said. "The way it stands now you might've bumped off Charley West yourself. Or this guy Harry did. Or Rightman himself. You picked up Poke Haley because you knew he was down there at the Loomis cottage about the time Charley stopped the first bullet. You thought Haley might've seen something. You had to be sure he didn't. And now you've picked *me* up for the same reason. I was down there at about the same time, and you have to be sure my eyes didn't get too big."

SHULTZ exchanged swift glances with Harry, the driver. Neither of them said a word to each other, and their quick exchange of glances carried a world of bewilderment.

"Listen," Shultz told me, "that's a lot of guessing and it's wrong. You're taking an awful chance saying I killed Charley, because if I had, I'd shut you up forever, right now, with a mouthful of slugs."

"But I'm not taking any chance," I said, "because I know my guessing was wrong. I can tell by the look on your pan, and the way Harry gapes like a fish, that neither of you killed West. And I know that if anybody connected with the Right-

man racket did the job, you'd cover it up. You wouldn't spoil a million-dollar racket by letting West lie dead in a gulley with a bunch of Pension Plan pamphlets in his car."

Shultz said: "Go on talking, guy."

"So when you picked up Haley and me you really did want to know who killed West. You're trying to cover the Rightman racket by keeping a murder from being tied up to it."

"What you mean by 'Rightman Racket'?"

"I mean," I told him, "that this pension plan is nothing but a high-caliber swindle that deludes half a million old folks into believing they can cease to be a burden on their children if they support this phoney pension scheme. You don't have any intention at all of ever putting the scheme into effect. All you do is collect campaign money."

Harry said: "He can't talk like that, Brick," and closed one eye in a crafty wink. "Mr. Rightman could sue him for libel—for talking like that."

I said: "I'll be glad to have Mr. Rightman sue me for libel. I might ask the court to learn his real name, and if he wasn't once a confidence-man in Denver, and if he didn't once marry a girl there named Loretta Burdick. You want to hear some more?"

Brick Shultz nodded sullenly. "Tell us some more, bright guy."

"About the Rightman Pension Plan? There's a nice twist in that. Silas Rightman goes around the state addressing the old people and luring them to his miraculous plan that will pension all of them for a hundred dollars a month in their declining years. He paints a fine picture of happy old age, with nobody dependent on their children or the State. But to lobby this Plan he asks the old people to send him twenty-five cents a month. Nobody thinks he's a sucker when it only costs two-bits a month. A mere two-bits doesn't sound like a swindle. But there's over half a million followers of the Plan, and those quarters add up, pal. They add up! You don't have to be a cab driver to do arithmetic. Those half million old folks are sending a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars a month to Rightman. They're sending over thirty thou

sand dollars a week—over four thousand dollars a day! And four grand a day is an awful big racket, my friend! No wonder the State is making an investigation.”

Harry said: “What makes you think there’s any investigation?”

Brick snapped at him: “Shut up, stupe. Let him talk.”

“There’s nothing more to talk about,” I said, “except that if you two guys didn’t knock off Charley West, and if you didn’t kill Lola Loomis—”

“Geez,” Harry said, “is Lola dead?”

And with the very name of Lola Loomis, Poke Haley came awake. He snorted and looked around. “Lola? For God’s sake, she ain’t dead?”

“In a canal in Venice,” I told Shultz. “And if you and your boy-friend Harry didn’t do either of those jobs you’d better leave Haley and me alone. The Rightman Plan is sunk. The cops will check with Denver and find out the name of the man Lola Loomis married there, when she used the name Loretta Burdick. You’ll sink with Rightman on the pension swindle, but a rap in prison is better than a rap in the death-house. You can’t cover the pension racket by killing either Poke Haley or myself. So you’d better take to the life-boats, boys. The ship is going down.”

I’D MANEUVERED myself, temporarily at least, out of any danger from Brick Shultz and his stooge. They were glad enough to fall with a collapsing swindle rather than become involved in a couple of murders they hadn’t committed.

The only trouble we had at the moment was from Poke Haley. He’d come out of liquor-sodden sleep with the knowledge of only one fact in his mind. Somebody had killed Lola Loomis. It might have been us. He wanted to fight.

Harry produced a leather-covered sap, flipped it expertly in the air, snapped it down and Haley’s big body slumped down in the seat again, with his head canted as before, his bewhiskered chin resting peacefully against his shoulder.

Shultz said: “Thanks, Harry.” And to me, “Say, you don’t think this Haley is the one that bumped Charley? Or Lola?”

I laughed at that. “Poke Haley never killed anything in his life—except bottles

of whiskey. I’m not so sure about your boss.”

“Rightman? Say, that old wind might sell the Golden Gate bridge to tourists, or might mooch the gold fillings out of his grandpa’s teeth, but I can’t imagine him knocking anybody off. Besides, I know he didn’t bump Charley, because I was with him last night.”

“With Charley?”

“No, with Rightman. We was sitting in Rightman’s hotel in L.A. last night and talking about old times—like when we used to sell gilt-edge bonds in Florida, and the time we had another old-age-pension plan that we worked in Kansas. Rightman was there all the time with me, in the hotel, so I know he didn’t go out and kill anybody. Besides, Charley was working for him.”

“Tailing Lola?”

“Yeah. Naturally, we had to keep an eye on her so she wouldn’t squeal on Rightman’s past. Charley phoned us about one o’clock in the morning and said there was a lot doing around the Loomis shack in Venice. He said a cab driver brought Lola home, and that her boy-friend, Poke Haley, socked him in the eye. Then he called again, about two. Somebody had caught him snooping, he said, and socked him over the head and tied him up and tossed him in the mud. But Charley got away, and went to a drug store to phone us. And the last we heard he was heading back to the shack to find out what was going on, and maybe nail the guy that socked him. That’s the last we heard till the cops called us and made us come out to look at the body.”

“And you don’t know who killed Lola Loomis?”

Shultz wagged his head. “It couldn’t be Rightman, because, anyway, he ain’t the kind of guy to get his feet dirty. . . . What’s a matter?”

I guess I must’ve had a funny expression on my face, but a whole line of reasoning had fallen into place with that one statement. I felt like a drowning man seeing his whole life pass before him.

“I know,” I said at last, “exactly who killed Charley West and Lola Loomis. Let’s call the cops.”

Shultz glanced briefly at Harry and his mouth curled into a sneer before I

saw his eyes again. "Listen, mister, do me and Harry look like a couple of suckers? When this Rightman bubble goes bust, me and Harry'll be a hell of a long ways from here."

"So you don't care who killed West, huh?"

"I care about Charley, all right. I'm really married to his sister. But I don't care enough about it to have a bunch of cops send me to stir on the Rightman racket. Harry and me want to travel places, brother, and we're starting right now." Then his homely freckled face got a shrewd look. "Say, if you really know who chilled Charley, you'd better spill it. Harry and me might have time to even up the score before we travel."

"I'm not positive enough to have you even a score," I said. "But if the guy I have in mind is really guilty, I know a way to trap him."

"You do? What?"

"Drive us back to Pacific Park. I'll show you."

Shultz said: "You wouldn't try to slip over a cross, would you, brother?"

I said: "You've got me in the car haven't you? How can I pull a cross?"

"O.K., I guess you can't. But we don't want no cops in this—not till Harry and me shake off the dust of California."

"There won't be any cops," I promised. "Not directly. You'll be with me every minute of the time and you can stop me whenever you think I'm pulling something."

Harry and Shultz exchanged brief nods of agreement. Shultz said: "O.K., brother. Who's the guy?"

CHAPTER SIX

I Pick Up the Marbles

AT ABOUT four o'clock, with rain still falling from lowering skies, we parked on the deserted main drag. "What do we do now?" Shultz asked.

"We phone like I said."

So both of us got out of the car and entered a drug store and crowded into a phone booth at the back. Shultz still didn't trust me and kept his hand sunk deep in his pocket on the gun.

"Phone, brother," he said, "only when you talk to the cops, don't bring 'em here. You might get hurt if you try a cross."

I dropped a nickel into the slot and dialed police headquarters. I said to the desk sergeant: "There's a disturbance on the corner of Main Street and Ocean Avenue in Pacific Park. Please send a radio car."

I rang off immediately, dropped another nickel in the slot, and dialed the same number.

The same desk sergeant answered the phone.

I pitched my voice a little higher and said: "A man in blue overalls, who looks like a Mexican, just snatched a woman's purse in front of Barney's Bar in Pacific Park. He's about six foot tall, with workshoes, and a straw hat. Better send a radio car."

I hung up instantly, dropped another nickel in the slot, and this time dialed the fire department. "There's a fire at the Surf Hotel!" I shouted excitedly.

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Brick Shultz himself broke the phone connection by pressing his left hand on the receiver prongs.

"That ought to be enough," he said. "Now call your other number, like you told me. And no monkey-business."

I put another nickel in the slot and dialed the number of Barney's Bar. I told the man answering the phone that I wanted to speak to Rush Millan, and in a few seconds Rush himself was on the wire.

"Hello, Steve," he said cheerfully. "How's tricks?"

"It's a mess," I told him. "That girl Lola Loomis, the one you wanted me to find out about, she's dead. Somebody shot her and put her body in Napoli Canal. The police have a bunch of clues. I just found out from Captain Hollister they have plaster casts of tire tracks in the mud outside the Loomis cottage. All they have to do is find the tires that made the tracks. So Hollister is covering Pacific Park with a police drag-net. They're stopping all cars and checking the tires. They've got some more clues . . ."

Millan's voice became deeply calm, yet brisk. He said: "Listen, Steve, you're working swell. Go downtown to L. A. and wait for me in the bar at the Biltmore Hotel."

"Can't I see you now?"

Somewhere outside the drug store, sirens were screaming through the streets—probably the fire department heading for the Surf Hotel.

"Listen, Steve," Millan said, "I'm in a hurry. You're doing fine work, Steve. I'll meet you at the Biltmore as soon as I can."

The line went dead as Millan rang off, and I turned to Brick Shultz with a grin. "It's working, pal," I said.

We came out of the drug store, Shultz and I, and piled into the car and Harry cruised us past Barney's Bar. As we went past on the opposite side of the street, we saw Rush Millan stroll out of Barney's, trying hard not to hurry. We saw him try to light a cigarette in the rain, his hands fumbling with the match.

Across town the sirens were still screaming—the fire apparatus on the way to the Surf—and on the drag two radio police cars rolled slowly, one of them

hunting for a six-foot Mexican purse-snatcher in overalls and a straw hat, the other investigating the report of a disturbance at the corner of Main and Ocean.

Rush Millan listened to all this hubbub and tried not to be worried. He watched the two police cars roll by, then he climbed under the driver's wheel of a green sedan and drove away fast.

"All right, Harry," I said, "let's tail him."

WE FOLLOWED the green sedan for three blocks up the drag, two blocks over a narrow side street, and then lost track of him when he swerved through the wide-arched doorway of a garage.

It wasn't the best garage in town—I knew that from my experience as a hacker. It was a cheap repair shop with grimy front windows and a mechanic named Joe Carlyle who specialized in secret repairs on hit-and-run cars, and who was once arrested for altering the motor number on a stolen roadster. The sign over the door read—**JOE'S SUPER AUTOMOTIVE SERVICE—OPEN DAY AND NIGHT**. I happened to know for a fact that he did most of the business at night.

Shultz and I got out at the next corner and walked back. That left Harry with the job of cruising the block while he waited for us, and it also left him with the job of keeping Poke Haley in line. That last would be quite a job, because Haley had gotten the idea we were about to locate somebody who had killed his sweetheart, and Haley was in a mood to break that somebody's neck.

I said to Shultz: "There's apt to be fireworks when we walk into that garage."

"I'm ready for it," Shultz said.

"But how about me? I haven't even got a gun."

"One of us has a rod," he said confidently, "and one's gonna be enough."

The interior of the garage was dark and cold, with bare concrete walls and a slab floor. Murky light filtered through the grimy front windows, revealing a dozen dilapidated vehicles nosed against the walls. The whole place was as silent as a long-abandoned tomb, but in the back, through another wide arch, we saw yellow electric bulbs burning over a work-

bench, and saw the front end of a green sedan hoisted a foot off the floor with a rolling-jack.

Carlyle, the mechanic, was removing the tire on the left front wheel, and Rush Millan, coat and vest removed, lent a nervous kind of assistance. Neither man saw us until we'd walked right into the shop. Then they both glanced up at the same time.

Millan's face paled. He said: "Hello, Steve. Thought I told you to meet me at the Biltmore. . . . How come?" He looked worriedly at Brick Shultz. "Who's your friend, Steve?"

I strolled over to the car and put a hand on the tire they were removing. "Still in good shape, Rush. Plenty of tread on it. Ought to be good for another ten thousand miles."

"I got a flat," Millan said.

"On all four?"

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Four?"

"Yeah, you wouldn't be changing all four tires, would you, Rush?"

"Now, listen here. . . ." but he couldn't finish because Poke Haley had come into the garage and picked up a heavy steel monkey-wrench. I'd had an idea Harry couldn't hold Haley outside in the car, and Harry hadn't. I noticed that the knuckles of Haley's fist were bloody, and I could imagine what had happened to Harry's jaw.

Haley said: "Which one of these heels killed Lola?"

That seemed to be the match that set off the dynamite. Rush Millan yanked an Army Colt from his pants pocket. The blast of it was sharp and heavy, with three banging explosions, and Poke Haley's big rugged body slapped to the floor faster than it had ever slapped canvas in a fight-ring.

In the same instant Joe Carlyle swung at me with an iron tire-tool. I ducked under it, with more instinct than plan, and kicked his knee-cap and slugged him. That staggered him backward. He slipped in some oil, and disappeared abruptly into a five-foot work-pit. He didn't come up again, and I found out afterward that he broke his collar-bone and left wrist in the fall.

While this was happening, Brick

Shultz snaked his gun into action. He matched shot for shot with Rush Millan, as both men stood only spitting distance apart. The crash of gunfire filled the garage with blasting sound, brought drumming echoes from the concrete walls.

Shultz dropped the gun, pressed both hands to his body, and went down slowly, like an old man overcome with stomach-sickness. But Rush Millan, already shot twice, was still in action. He swung the gun on me.

But when Poke Haley dropped, I had snatched up the steel wrench, and now I slammed Millan's gun-hand. It shattered the bones in his hand, and I learned later he'd have been crippled for life—if he'd lived that long.

IT WAS ten minutes before any cops arrived because the neighbors, hearing shots in the garage, had chalked it off as back-firing. But Harry, our driver, called the cops. He called them anonymously from a Venice pay-station, told them to investigate trouble at Joe Carlyle's Super Automotive Service, and then abandoned his car and disappeared into thin air. No doubt he had a lot of traveling to do.

In the ten minutes before the cops came I had a long talk with Rush Millan. There was nobody else to talk to, because Shultz was dead, Poke Haley was dead, and Joe Carlyle was unconscious in the work-pit.

I rolled Millan over gently, placed a car-cushion under his head, propping him up so he could breathe easier. He'd stopped two slugs in the chest, and blood frothed at his lips. Shultz had done some nice shooting before he died.

Millan said: "Water, Steve."

I gave him a drink, holding the cup to his mouth.

"Thanks, Steve. You mind telling me something? How'd you get next to me?"

"Mud," I told him. "I remembered mud on your car and mud on your shoes. I remembered mud around the Loomis cottage. And you told me yourself you've had Lola under surveillance. So I figured you must've been down there at the time she got killed. And if you didn't kill her yourself, you ought to know who did. Or anyway you ought to know she didn't just move away last night."

"That's guessing," Millan said.

"Maybe, but there's a lot more guesses. You knew a cab driver took Lola home last night, and that he got a black eye from Poke Haley. So how did you know that—unless you were down there covering the place?"

A vague smile flickered over his bloody lips. "That all the guesses you had, Steve?"

"It's all I needed to start me. The rest of it fit in swell. I don't have to be a genius to smell the Rightman racket, and I don't have to be smart to realize a State Senate Investigating Committee hired Sanders and Wallace to check on Rightman and his Plan. You work for Sanders and Wallace, but you decided you could make more money blackmailing Rightman than you could make in honest salary. So you hid behind the Sanders and Wallace reputation, and you played both ends against the middle. This secretary down at the Sanders office—she's working for you."

"More guesses, Steve?"

"Lots more," I said. "The first time I saw Flo Barker she looked like she'd been up all night. Sure. Working for *you*—not in the office. And when I tried to get in touch with either Sanders or Wallace this afternoon she steered me off. That makes her your stooge."

"You sure of that?"

"I'm sure of everything. I know how you killed Charley West, and why, and I know how you covered the Lola Loomis killing. The only thing missing is exactly *why* you killed Lola. That has to be a guess."

"Try it," he said.

"All right, here's a try. You investigated Lola's past and found out she once married Silas Rightman in Denver. They married under assumed names. So learning that, you wondered why Lola didn't blackmail Rightman. You cornered her last night at the cottage and tried to proposition her to split blackmail with you. But Lola's a square girl, and told you to go to hell. She yanked a gun on you, and you slapped the gun, and a bullet enters her jaw and kills her. Is that a good guess?"

"It's good enough," Millan admitted, his lips dry and caked with crimson.

I SAID: "The rest of it is easy. You knew Charley West was tailing Lola around and keeping an eye on her for Rightman—so she wouldn't spill the truth on the pension plan. In order to see Lola alone you had to get rid of West. So you slugged him to sleep last night, tied him up, and left him. Then you waited till the cab driver went away—that's me. You waited till Lola's boy-friend went away—that's Poke Haley."

"Nice," Rush Millan said. "Go on."

"You had your talk with Lola, but she wouldn't play ball with you on blackmailing Rightman. She pulled a gun to chase you out, and maybe her getting killed was accidental, and maybe it wasn't. You'd land behind the eight-ball if Sanders and Wallace ever learned you were double-crossing their reputation. So Lola gets shot, and you have to get rid of the body."

"Yes?"

"This part of it *is* nice," I continued. "Her blood is on the rug, so you have to take away the rug. And to cover the mysterious removal of the rug, you take a lot of the furniture out of the shack—all your car can carry. That makes it look like Lola just moved away. You scrub the floor where the stain was. You tack tin over a bullet hole in the ceiling. You sink Lola's body ten feet deep in Napoli Canal. You had to have something heavy to keep her sunk, so you tied her to the wood stove. That was a mistake, Rush, because I knew Lola wouldn't steal a stove, even if she stole the landlord's furniture, and also I found stove-soot out on the wharf."

"You're even smarter than I figured."

I said: "While you were covering the Lola Loomis kill, Charley West came back. He saw what you were doing, and you had to get rid of him before he could report it to Rightman, or anybody else. There was nothing you could do now but kill again. You hit him with one shot, but he escaped. You chased him in your car up Ocean Avenue and fired again and again, and finally he crashed down the gully into the city dump. That worked fine, but you were still in a tough spot on the Loomis kill."

"Tough spot?"

"Yeah, there were a lot of cards still

out against you. You knew from your investigation that Lola had protected herself by giving a sealed letter to her friend Kathy Walsh. All Kathy had to do was turn that letter over to the police and the Rightman racket would go bust. You couldn't afford to have it bust, Millan, because you wouldn't be able to blackmail a racket that didn't exist. And that's where you played smart."

"Smart?"

"It was a good idea, though," I said. "You took the phonograph recordings of Lola's voice—took them to your friend Flo Barker and had her imitate the voice. Flo called Kathy on the phone and pretended to be Lola, and gave Kathy to understand that Lola was leaving town. You worked the trick neat enough to get that sealed letter from Kathy."

"Then Flo Barker called Poke Haley and told him she was Lola and that she was leaving him. And later you thought about the manager of the Corinthian Club, where Lola worked. You called him too, and let him think it was Lola calling. But you called a couple of hours too late for that angle—I figured Lola couldn't be just boarding a train at three A.M. and still boarding it at five."

"Is there more?" Millan asked.

"Just a little," I said. "Your next trick was trying to handle me. You knew I took Lola home last night. But you didn't know how well I knew Lola, or if I knew about her past, or her connection with Rightman. The only thing you could do was get in touch with me and pump me. And that's what you did. You figured the best way to pump me on my knowledge of Lola was to pretend you were

giving me a job with Sanders and Wallace—offer me a nice job, bribe me with money. All you wanted to find out was how much I knew about Lola, and if I maybe had another sealed letter like the one Lola left with Kathy Walsh."

"You're right," he said.

"You weren't just covering a couple of murders. You wanted to blackmail the Rightman racket."

Millan shrugged, and winced at the pain in his lungs. "Pick up the marbles, Steve," he said.

I SPENT the next two days talking to Captain Hollister, and a bunch of cops, and the district attorney. The third day I was chief witness at the inquest.

On the fourth day I had a phone call at my hotel. It was Pat Regan, Chief Dispatcher for the Red Owl Cab Company. He said: "All this hero-stuff looks fine in the papers, Steve. But when do you return to work?"

"What work?"

"Driving a hack, Steve. Or maybe you're too snooty now to remember you're working for Red Owl. Get back on the job, Steve, and get back fast! Who the hell you think you are—Errol Flynn?"

"You fired me," I reminded him.

"Oh, so I'm a liar now, huh? Listen, you got a verbal contract with Red Owl."

"What verbal contract?"

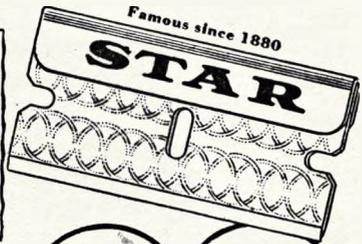
"Listen," he shouted, "I ain't got time to bandy words. Either you're working for Red Owl, or else I'm a liar!"

And I'd learned from experience there was no percentage in calling an Irishman a liar.

"All right," I said. "Grease up the hack."



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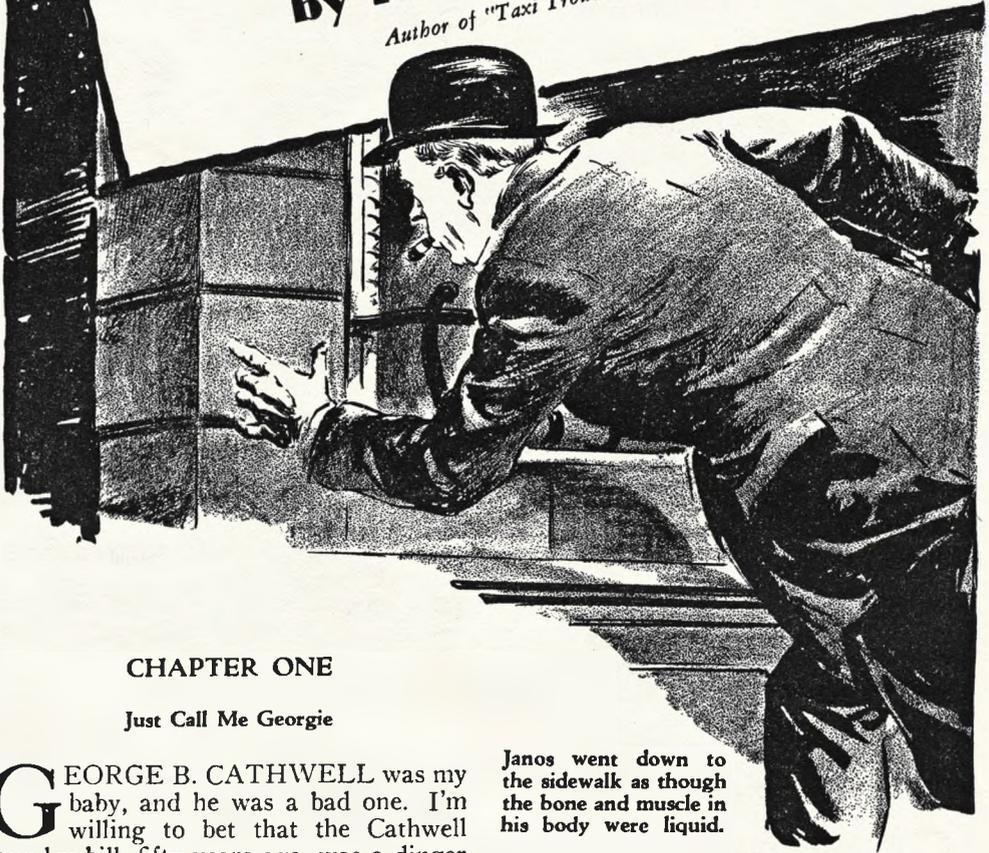
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CHAPTER ONE

Just Call Me Georgie

GEORGE B. CATHWELL was my baby, and he was a bad one. I'm willing to bet that the Cathwell laundry bill, fifty years ago, was a dinger and that the Cathwell home was not a happy one. Because George B. must have started early to have grown up into as big a louse as he was.

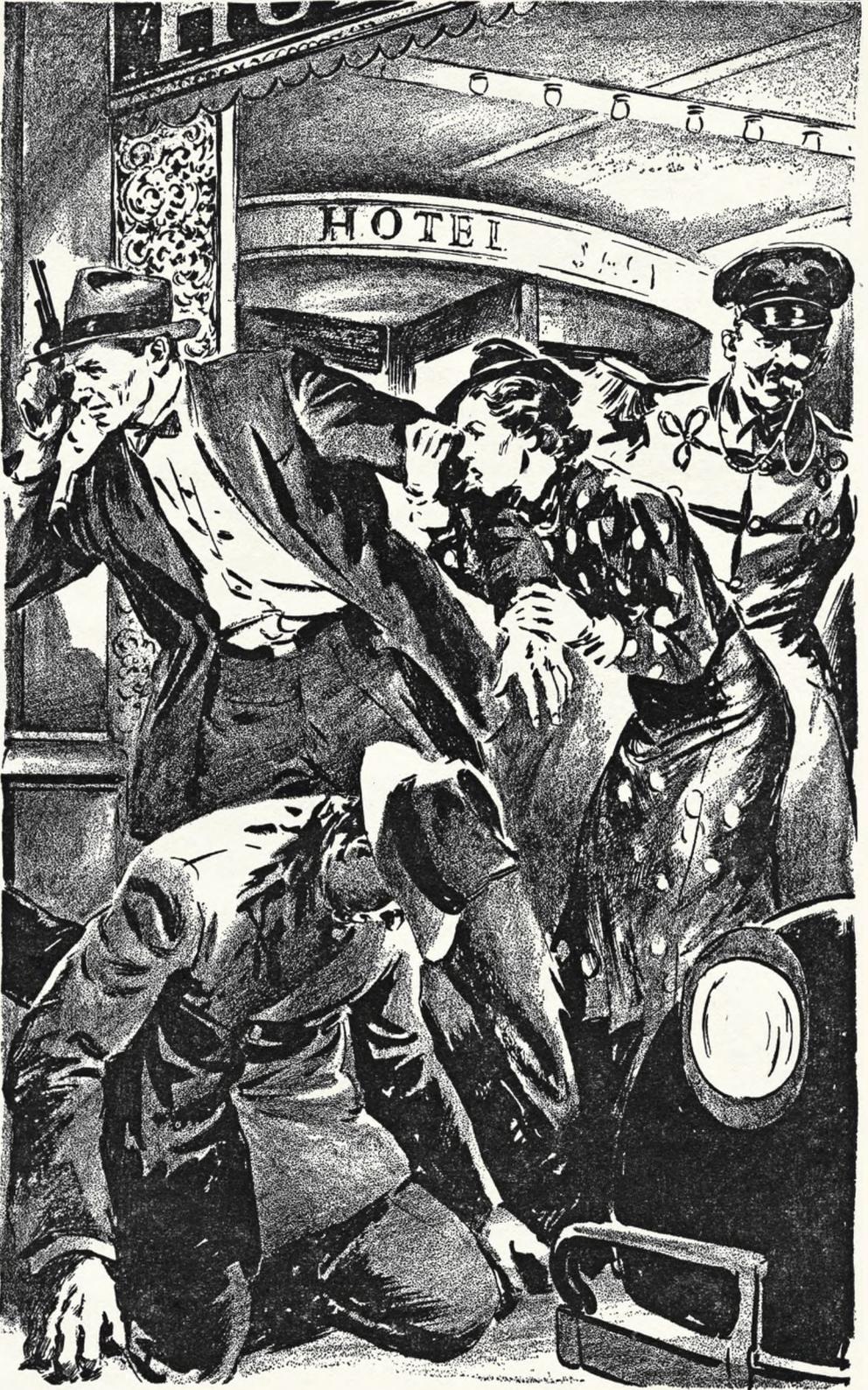
The two girls and I went into the club car and George B. spotted us that second. It was no trick because he'd been waiting for us.

"Hey, Mike!" he bawled out. "Come on over and have a drink. Bring your friends."

That was what I'd picked the girls up for. For George B. I said: "Nonnie, this is George Cathwell. Fay, this is George. George, this is Nonnie and this is Fay."

Janos went down to the sidewalk as though the bone and muscle in his body were liquid.

Meet George B. Cathwell ("just call me Georgie") behind-the-ballots big shot who was the original tenant of the "smoke-filled hotel room" where candidates are made or broken—and sometimes merely bumped off.



He did the rest. He beamed at them and said: "Just call me Georgie!" I was already so damned sick of hearing that crack I could have bashed him in his fat face. He introduced the girls to his two friends—who'd have cut his throat as cheerfully as I would've—and then called the waiter.

On this, he acted as though we were still living before the Civil War and that he was Ol' Massa. With the waiter playing the slave-part.

Nonnie was the tall dark girl and she wanted a Martini. Fay went for straight rye and plain water and I began to like her. She wanted a drink and wasn't fooling about it. Hinder and Dulwick, the two men with Cathwell, stuck to their beer and to trying to make Cathwell show some sign of which way he was going to jump, but he ignored them completely and started hovering over the girls like a hen with a brood of chicks.

As an exhibition it was crude, but he had a blatant good humor in front of his main idea, and so he got away with it.

I just drank straight rye and plain water and listened.

Nonnie, it seemed, was a California girl. This gave George B. a chance to tell his joke about the unusual California weather—and everybody gave it the kind of a laugh it earned. George B. roared at it, though.

Fay had won a beauty prize in some little Montana town and the prize had been a movie test. And that had been all that happened. She'd taken the test and heard nothing more of it. Since then she'd worked in soda fountains, restaurants, beauty parlors, dime-a-dance halls, and a few other places. When George B. came right out with the question, she admitted she was twenty-three—and she wasn't giving herself any of the worst of it. She was pretty and she was quiet and she wasn't trying to four-flush. I was liking her better by the minute.

HINDER and Dulwick left us after the third drink, with Dulwick saying: "See you at the hotel, George! Be good!"

George B. told them he'd certainly try hard not to be good but that he'd certainly try to be careful. He laughed at that one, too.

Then Nonnie came out with: "I'll just bet you're going to the Convention, Mr. Cathwell."

It was far too pat to suit me, but George B. came out automatically with his: "Just call me Georgie, little girl. You guessed it right—right on the nose."

Fay asked me, "Are you traveling with Mr. Cathwell, Mr. Boyle?" And by the time I'd passed it by saying George B. and I were old pals, George B. was giving it to Nonnie hot and heavy.

"Yes, *ma-am*," he was saying. "Oil City is *the* convention town. They go together like ham and eggs. It's a man's town, little girl, and they give a man what he wants there. Now I always stay at the Palace, anyway, but that'll be *the* hotel for the convention. Official, you know. Press headquarters will be there. The Palace will be the real center of things. It's only up the street from Convention Hall."

"Politics are so interesting," Nonnie cooed. "Of course I don't pretend to understand them."

Fay whispered to me: "They seem to be getting along swell, don't they?"

I said they seemed to be, and thought they were getting along *too* well. Fay and I weren't doing too bad for ourselves, but that was a different matter.

We were due in at three, and the girls left us a few minutes before that time. After George B. tried to buy them one last drink and was refused, he brought the heavy artillery to bear on Nonnie.

He beamed at her and said: "Now I don't want you girls to be lonesome, not with Georgie in town. Just as soon as you get settled, you give me a ring and tell me where you are. Oil City is a mighty fine town to have fun in, when you know the ropes like I do."

Nonnie jolted me then.

"Oh we'll be at the Palace too," she told him.

Fay echoed her with: "We'll be seeing you boys again, for sure."

They went down the aisle toward their car with neither of them showing the least wear and tear and both of them with a dozen or more drinks in their little tummies.

My big chump smiled fondly after them and said: "Two fine little ladies, Mike! Just two fine little girls!"

"Two thieving tramps!" I said. "Either of them would take the gold out of your teeth."

I really meant it about the one called Nonnie, but I didn't want to believe it about Fay. In spite of the evidence.

"Why Mike!"

"And the teeth along with the gold, just to make it even," I said, making it plainer. "I never saw them until you pointed them out to me, and five minutes after that I have 'em in here with you throwing drinks into them. They're strictly on the make, Cathwell. They're in your league. They were sitting in there just praying for something like you to happen to them. Ha-ha-ha, and I mean it. You told me ten bucks if I got you acquainted."

"Just put it on the expense account."

I said, "Ha-ha-ha," again. "You'll be billed from the main office. I'd never get the ten."

He gave it to me and looked indignant, which was perfectly all right with me. I was just supposed to be saving him from all harm. Chasing women for him came under the head of extras.

WE got a six-room suite, 917-A, and the first thing George B. did was make the whole thing into a bar. He put a long table in each of the two biggest rooms, fitted each of them with bartenders he got by calling up the Union, and finished with an extra bunch of chairs commandeered from the housekeeper. He ordered up cases of assorted liquor, none of it cheap, got two tubs of ice and an assortment of glasses ready—and then got on the telephone.

It seemed it was open house.

He got the working press for a starter and they did the rest. By the time we'd been in the hotel an hour there were as many people in the suite as downstairs in the main dining-room.

About then George B. took me aside and gave me one of his more devilish winks and said: "This is going smooth, Mike. Now I want you to go down and get a place just for you and me and our company. This is for business. Catch on. The other place is not for business."

I told the old goat I got the idea and asked him if he wanted the hide-away in that hotel or some other one.

"Either on the floor above or the one below," he told me. "And you see the floor clerk here, and on the floor you locate, and see that everything's all right."

"That'll cost money."

"It'll be worth it," he said, giving me another wink and fifty dollars for the hush money. I hired 829-C, which was only a three-room affair, and then went downstairs again, this time planning on having a bite to eat before I went back to Cathwell and the brawl. And I was halfway down the arcade that led away from the desk when I saw Abe Stolz.

He took his elbow off the newsstand counter and waved to me saying, "Yah, Mike! I want to see you, kid."

I said: "Hello, Abe! I heard you were here."

He was that kind of cop, maybe not famous but certainly well known. He had a memory like an elephant is supposed to have and a working knowledge of every hotel racket the boys have yet been able to figure out. And he was never above playing them for himself, if that way showed a profit.

He came over to me and jabbed me with a forefinger and said: "You're with that heel of a Cathwell and don't tell me no."

"I'll tell you yes," I said. "He wanted to hire a boy and the skipper gave me to him. It was either take it or quit."

"A heel, eh?"

"In spades, Abe."

"What's he want a bodyguard for?"

"He don't say."

Stolz is four inches over six feet and acts as though he's ashamed of being up in the air like that. He bends from the waist and carries his head hunched down between his shoulders, but still he's too damned tall. He's very thin and bald along with it and altogether no beauty.

He scratched his nose and asked: "Who's he for?"

"He don't say."

Stolz thought this over while keeping up his nose-scratching. Then he said: "I've got an office down the hall. Let's talk it over."

"Talk what over?"

"How he's going."

I said: "Maybe by and by, Abe."

"There'd be five hundred in it if I

knew which way the —— was going to jump," Abe said thoughtfully. "I mean five hundred for you. I'd take what I could chisel over that figure. That's worth a talk, ain't it, Mike."

"Hell, yes! Who'd pay it?"

"Well, maybe we could talk about that, too."

RIGHT then I saw the two girls from the train, Nonnie and Fay. And with them a wise-looking bird of around thirty-five. The three of them stopped at the desk for a moment and then headed down the corridor toward us, and I said to Abe: "Jiggers! It's a couple of babes I know. After while, eh, Abe?"

He said, "After while," and went back to his newsstand and I waited for the girls and the fellow. Nonnie smiled and nodded but went on past with the man, and five minutes later I was in the bar with Fay. Nonnie had an appointment with the guy. Fay said he was a man named Sloan. And if she hadn't given Fay a go-ahead look when the three of them saw me I never saw one. So it was partly curiosity—my taking Fay in the bar. I wanted to see which way the go-ahead was pointed. And besides I liked the girl and wanted to find out just why she was running around the way she was.

The worst of it was I was a little afraid of what I'd find out.

The girl didn't stall—and I gave her credit for it. I like 'em honest. She looked at me over her glass and smiled and said: "I can talk to you, can't I, Mr. Boyle?"

I asked why not.

"I mean right out. With no beating around the bush?"

I asked why not again.

"I want to know about Mr. Cathwell. Oh, I know you're a private detective and that you're working for him. But Mr. Boyle, I just have to know which side he's on."

"He's on George B. Cathwell's side," I said. "First, last, and all the time."

"Oh, I know that. But who's he for? What candidate is he for? I must know."

I laughed. I said: "Look, sister, as long as you're talking right out, why so will I. George B. does a lot of talking but he don't say anything, if you know what I mean. He's holding tight. This nomi-

nation is going to be close and the guy pulls a lot of weight. He can just about throw his state the way he wants it, and he can maybe take another couple along with his own. If it's close, and it's going to be, he's going to be the key man. And he'll go the way he thinks it pays him. Now if that's an answer, you've got it."

"You haven't told me a thing."

"I didn't intend to."

"I—it would be worth money if I knew."

"How much?"

"Well, I think maybe five hundred dollars. I'm not sure—"

"That's standard price."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm already bid that."

She looked down at her empty glass and I signaled the waiter. When he'd come and gone I said: "You're over your head, kid. This is big stuff. If it works out so they're balanced on a candidate, and George B. can swing it the way he wants it to go, why five hundred won't even be tip money in George B.'s league. His man will be in the saddle and if you don't think the party will pay off for that you don't know George B. He isn't giving anything away. Now you're a nice kid and I can see I'm going to like you a lot and why in hell don't you keep out of this? It's nothing but trouble. You're dealing with a bunch of crooks."

"You don't know who I'm dealing with."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you."

"Well, they're using you to find out inside information, kid, whoever they are. And you're not doing so well at it. Leave politics up to the politicians."

She sighed and finished her second drink and looked sad and said: "Well, there was no harm in trying, anyway. Will I see you again?"

I spent the next half-hour explaining just why she would . . . and she seemed to like the thought.

CHAPTER TWO

Party Pass-Out

GEORGE B. called himself a contractor and he really contracted. He built State roads on sub-contracts, and his bids

usually happened to just shade the next lowest contestant. The bids were always sealed, so naturally the talk about George B. having a spy system installed in the State Highway office was just pure slander.

Or so George B. claimed. He sold rock and gravel to both State and Federal projects—again always just crawling in under the wire. He built State buildings. He owned the agency the State bought their highway equipment from. Or the bulk of it . . . he wasn't crude enough to insist on a hundred percent of anything not George B. . . .

He was back of a couple of building-and-loan companies and he had an in with the commissioner in charge of this department. The State Highway Police rode in cars he sold the State. His brother-in-law's oldest son was the governor's private secretary and the governor was in his third term and solid for the next if he wanted it again. He was in with the labor crowd because he'd been smart enough to establish soup kitchens for both the stevedors and the timber workers, when they'd

gone out together on their last big strike. He owned some papers, and a lot of the others went his way because they didn't want to buck him. He owned the two biggest breweries in the State and the Liquor Commission looked the other way when he put in his own equipment, free of charge, in assorted beer joints. It was strictly a violation of the law, but there's lots of votes swung by saloon-keeper friends.

All in all, he was big stuff in the State. If George B. told anybody they'd get a job they got it. They'd lose it as fast, on order, too, and they knew it. He was smooth about everything. He'd never make demands. But if somebody could do good old Georgie a favor it was usually done, because if it wasn't done there'd be somebody in that spot very shortly who *would* do it.

He had the delegates, just like that. His State men were solid and they weren't committed. He was branching out and he pulled a lot of weight with some of the delegates from neighboring states as well.

Reames, the head of my agency, had

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put it very neatly. He'd waved the retain-er check George B. had left with him in my face and said: "Sure the guy's a heel. But he's just the same as boss, just the same. His dough's good, ain't it? We'd have license trouble if we turned him down on the job, wouldn't we? So you go along with the louse and see he's kept out of trouble and for God's sake be careful with him. He hasn't got a friend in the world—but his money has."

I said I'd do what I could, but that I didn't like George B. or anything about him. And that I'd earn every cent of my salary and what extra I could chisel out of our rat client.

And Reames laughed and said: "It should be heaven for you, Mike. The old goat has got a weakness for women and whiskey, and so have you. Watch it that he isn't framed while in his cups, because he's made to order for it and you might not be able to hold down trouble that far away from home. You just ride along with him."

Things were already starting, with two propositions about finding which candidate George B. was for. And there was more to do as soon as I went upstairs. Because as soon as I went in the party place George B. took me aside and said: "Get me out of here, Mike! I think I've been poisoned."

I said: "Go in the bathroom and stick your finger down your neck. Right now. I'll phone for the doctor and we'll meet him in the rooms downstairs."

THE medico was young, not over twenty-eight, and he wore chin whiskers. To make him look dignified, I suppose. He looked like a young goat but I was polite enough not to mention it.

I said: "Then he'll be all right?"

"Why yes, Mr. Boyle. I'd say it was just too much drinking in too short a time. As you saw, I pumped out his stomach. With a little rest he'll be as well as ever. A man that abuses it like Mr. Cathwell does should never touch it, Mr. Boyle."

"Try and make him believe that," I said, and went back inside to Cathwell, who was on the bed and looking like anybody does after a session with a stomach pump.

"I take it you're going to stay here for a little while," I said.

He grinned, but there was no gaiety in it. "That's right, Mike. For an hour or so. Suppose you go upstairs and see that everything goes along all right."

"Will you be all right?"

"Sure. As a matter of fact, Mike, the reason I wanted somebody along is that I get lonesome. Believe it or not."

I actually felt sorry for him for a minute, I suppose because he was sick. He was so damned crooked that he didn't have any friends except the kind that were out for what they could get. And he was smart enough to know it and thin-skinned enough for it to hurt. It was the first time I knew you can feel sorry for a heel. I told him I'd be back by and by to see how he was getting along, and went out in the hall after making sure the lock was on the door. And when I turned toward the elevators there was Dulwick, standing in the door of a room just two removed from ours and on the same side of the hall.

When I got up to him he said: "Ha, Boyle! I hope George isn't ill."

"What makes you think he is?"

"I saw the doctor leaving your place."

"The guy never could hold his hootch,"

I said. "A little rest and he'll be O.K. I guess."

He said that he was glad of that and ducked back in his room, and I went on to the elevator thinking it was funny that Dulwick happened to be on that floor and wondering if there was anything important about him being there. He was one of Cathwell's best oppositions and if the things they said about each other were true they both should have been lynched.

And most people would have been willing to pull a rope for either of them.

I prowled around the party upstairs for a few minutes and apparently nobody had even noticed their host had left. It's sometimes like that on these free gang affairs. The boys are just there for what they can lush. And then, doing what my boss had advised, I went downstairs and called the Janos agency and got old man Janos himself.

I said: "This is Mike Boyle, from the Reames outfit. My skipper told me to ask you for help if I needed it. Well, I need it. One man that can keep awake. And send him over here to the hotel right away."

It'd be better if he looked smart, not like anybody silly enough to be in this silly business."

"You make jokes, Mr. Boyle?"

From his voice I could imagine what Janos looked like. He'd be short and stocky and he'd have a white mustache, fixed up like Kaiser Wilhelm's. He'd have glary blue eyes and a stiff pompadour. Reames had told me Janos was a good egg, but there's always room for a difference of opinion on a thing like that.

I said: "Yeah, I make jokes. But I need a man and that's no joke. Tell him to ask for me."

The suite George B. was in now was in my name.

Janos said: "I will send a man. Thank you, Mr. Boyle. And when you make your report to Mr. Reames, ask him if he is still such a fool. Tell him Janos asked."

This startled me, because I got it in that drill sergeant voice.

"Tell him, please, that his old friend Stanislaus, would like to know if he still thinks there are as many nines on a pair of dice as there are sevens." Then I got a goofy-sounding chuckle and the phone clicked shut in my ear.

I went upstairs deciding that maybe I'd formed a wrong opinion of our Mr. Janos.

THERE were other people in the elevator and a dignified-looking couple got out on the eighth with me. Both of them were around sixty, and white-headed. The old man had a cane and the old girl had a front on her that Napoleon could have used to good advantage at Waterloo. He could have fought the entire action behind them. We started down the hall together, with me just a little in the lead. Which made me the one to catch Dulwick.

He came down the hall to meet us, weaving a little bit and with no expression on his face at all. Both his arms were up around his chest as though he were hugging himself. He looked me right in the face but didn't speak. I said, "Hi, Dulwick!" and stepped to the side to let him by, but he stepped over to the same side I'd picked. I moved over to the other and so did he . . . and for a minute we went through that senseless performance that sometimes happens on the street when you're in a hurry.

Then he walked ahead, straight into me. I put out my arms to save myself and he fell ahead into them, giving out a gasping sound and a mouthful of blood at the same time. He went entirely limp and I wasn't expecting it and so let him slide to the floor.

The old gal saw the blood coming out of his mouth and screamed. Her old man said: "Well, bless me!"

I said: "I'll be a — — — — —!"

Dulwick blew some bubbles out with the blood, then threw his arms out wide, and I saw the knife. One of the kind Boy Scouts buy with a guard on the handle—and it was in right up to the guard, almost centering him, even with his heart but on the other side. He started to flex his legs and I'll always think he tried to speak, but all he could do was make bubbling sounds. They didn't last long.

The old gal screamed some more, and her old man said in great surprise: "Why the man's dead! Why bless me!"

I said: "You folks had better stay right here. I'll go on and telephone."

The old gal said, "Henry!" and waited until the old guy turned to her. Then she fainted in his arms and he laid her down by Dulwick and I went on to our rooms and phoned the cops.

IT was the first time I'd really had a chance to understand and appreciate the weight a big hotel carries with the law. There was no fuss and no confusion, no uniformed cops cluttering up the hall. We had the commissioner and a couple of captains and more lieutenants, and we had nobody with less than a detective-sergeant's rating except the technical men. And they all ducked in and out the back entrance. They took the body out that way, just as soon as the medical examiner had taken his look and the photographer his pictures.

And they did all their questioning with an apologetic air.

One of them who introduced himself as Detective-captain Armbruster said to me: "Are you a guest of the hotel, Mr. Boyle?"

I said I was. This was downstairs, in the manager's office. The manager gave me a worried look, and said: "Mr. Boyle is with Mr. Cathwell. *The* Mr. Cathwell."

Apparently George B.'s fame had reached Oil City, because Armbruster gave me a lovely smile and asked me to tell my story in my own words. I did.

He said: "Then you knew Mr. Dulwick, I take it?"

"That's right."

"And he and Mr. Cathwell are on opposite sides of the fence, as it were?"

"That's right. Everybody's on the opposite side from George B. But George B.'s in his little room. He took too much of something and we had to get the house doctor for him. He's still too sick to put knives in people." I didn't know whether I was telling the truth or not.

"What's Mr. Cathwell's business down here?"

"His own, I'd say. Look, mister. This is a National Convention, and the boys are here to pick out a good man and true for their national leader. That right?"

"Why yes."

"Then let 'em do it. If they think they need George B. Cathwell's help in the picking, why here he is to help. You get the idea—the less stink there is about this the better. The public might get the idea that the Convention's getting a little rough, what with the boys using knives and all."

"Private cop, aren't you?"

"That's right. Cathwell's bodyguard."

He started to lose his friendly smile and I added: "And George B. and I are just like that. I know enough about him to hang him. He's back of me all the way."

"You're honest about it, anyway."

"Why have secrets?"

Armbruster was no fool. He took it the way it was meant. It was another way of telling him to lay off me and to mind his business where Cathwell was concerned.

The hotel man helped out with: "I understand, Captain, that Mr. Cathwell is a very influential man."

Armbruster said to me: "I guess that's all then, Mr. Boyle. You'll probably have to testify about this. There'll be no publicity if we can prevent it. I'll keep in touch with you, and if there's any way the department can help Mr. Cathwell, feel free to call on us."

I said that was fine and left. He was just starting on the old gal and her husband when I went out the door. It turned

out the old boy was from the Solid South and another delegate, so I didn't think they'd be too rough with them, either.

Politicians pull a lot of weight at election time and their fair share during the rest of it.

CHAPTER THREE

Three Glasses and a Corpse

CATHWELL was up and around and growling at the doctor. As I came in the doctor was saying, in a patient voice: "But you really shouldn't drink so much, Mr. Cathwell. You're liable to have another attack like that if you do."

"I've got business," said Cathwell. "And it's a business that requires a lot of partying around. And besides that I *like* to party around. I appreciate you stopping up to see how I was doing, but I'm still going upstairs and tend to what I came back here to do."

I took the doctor's mind away from Cathwell with: "There's been a little trouble, Doctor. The hotel lost a customer. If it keeps up the hotel can hang up the *VACANCY* sign at any moment."

"What now?" Cathwell asked.

"It's your pal Dulwick," I told him. "He just got knifed, and I met him in the hall. It's the first time I ever ran into a zombie. The guy was dead on his feet and walking around. The cops think it was done in the hall, because there's no sign of blood or confusion in his room."

Cathwell said indignantly, to the doctor: "This is a *hell* of a hotel."

"It's sort of funny," I said. "Dulwick's room is right in order but it doesn't mean a thing. He could have been knifed and yet not have struggled. The two don't have to go together. The knife was all the way in and left that way, so about all the bleeding was internal. What little else there was, was caught by his clothes. But the cops are sticking to the theory of it having happened in the hall, because that way they won't have to embarrass any of the guests by questioning them and they can soft-pedal it in the papers easier, too!"

"But that isn't right," the doctor said. "The murderer possibly will go unpunished."

I said: "And so will the police force."

Just guess what would happen if they put everybody on this floor through the mill. Here'd be Mr. and Mrs. Smith, come all the way from the Old Home State just to pick a leader for the party. And here's Mrs. Smith turning out to be Mr. Smith's secretary. Wowie! What would the Mrs. Smith back home say and do? What would the opposition have to say about the private life of Delegate Smith? Use your head, Doc. This is a National Convention and the leaders of the party must be above suspicion. The local police know their politics and don't think they don't."

"But murder!" he said.

"Oh, Dulwick was a heel," I said. "He don't count high as a victim."

Cathwell said: "Let's not speak ill of the dead, Mike. Now, Doctor, will it be all right if I return to my party upstairs?"

The phone rang as the medico said: "I'd advise against heavy drinking, Mr. Cathwell."

I said, "Hello," into the phone, and heard a frightened voice say: "I'd like to speak to Mr. Boyle."

"This is Boyle."

"This is Fay Jarvis. I—I have to see you."

I said I was busy.

"I *have* to see you, Mike. Oh please! It's important."

Both the doctor and Cathwell were listening to the conversation. I put my hand over the mouthpiece and said to Cathwell: "It's one of those wenches I picked up on the train for you. The one I like. She wants to see me. What about it? Do I see her or do I go with you?"

Cathwell winked at the doctor and said: "You see her. Tell her we'll meet them at nine, and that after dinner we'll see what makes Oil City tick. Tell them we'll take it apart and put it together again. What room have they got?"

I asked and then told Cathwell it was 861—on the same floor. He said: "That's handy. You go see her, Mike."

I said into the phone: "I'll be around, kid. What's the matter?"

"It's Nonnie," she said. "She's dead. Somebody wrapped one of her stockings around her neck and choked her to death."

I said: "Holy Toledo baby!"

It made it nice. Here was Dulwick just killed on the same floor that Cathwell, his

known enemy, was on—with Cathwell having no alibi. And now a girl Cathwell had made passes at on the train was also killed on the same floor. Cathwell still with no alibi. I began to think I was maybe working for a one-man murder ring.

And there was more than a fair chance of Fay being in the thing—and that I didn't want. I hadn't known the girl very long and I didn't know a thing about her, but I was sure I didn't want her in any trouble.

THE Nonnie girl was dead all right and she'd lost her looks along with her life. Her face was greenish in color, almost black, and her lips were drawn back and her tongue was out. There was blood on her teeth from where she'd bitten it. She was in her underwear, what there was of it, and the dress she'd worn while going out of the hotel was draped over a chair. I remembered it—and remembered the man she'd gone out with. She was on the side of the bed, with one arm hanging down so the fingers of that hand touched the floor. There was a bottle of whiskey on the dresser and there were three high-ball glasses by it, all empty except for a little tag end in each that was made up mostly of melted ice.

The bed was rumped, with one of the pillows on the floor by the head of it, so I figured the guy who'd strangled her had held her back on the bed while he did it. That was the only sign of anything having happened, outside of the girl herself, and I wasn't looking at her any more than I had to. I'd taken the medico along with me, and Cathwell had tagged along also. The doctor looked at the girl's eyes, which were discolored from the strangulation, and then at her mouth.

"She's been dead about an hour," he said. "We must call the police."

Cathwell said prudently: "I'll go back to our place, then. Meet me there, Boyle."

"O.K.," I said.

Fay Jarvis told us: "She was just like that when I came in. The door was locked. I didn't know what to do."

"Who was with her?" I asked.

"Nobody, that I know of. I didn't even know she was back in the hotel. She went out with Mr. Sloan, you know."

"Where's Sloan?"

"Why I don't know."

"Who is he?"

She gave me the kind of look that meant she'd tell me things later and I let that angle drop.

The doctor was on the phone, asking for the police, and I got my back to him and dumped what was left in the highball glasses into the ice bowl and wrapped a handkerchief about the glasses and stuck them in my pocket. They made an awkward-looking bundle but I wasn't worrying about neatness right then—I was worrying about whether George B. Cathwell's prints might be on one of those glasses. Fay started to say something, and I shook my head at her and she held quiet. Then the doctor put down the phone and said: "They'll be right up. It's the same men who were sent here about the other, apparently."

I asked Fay: "D'ya remember Dulwick?"

"One of the men I met with Mr. Cathwell, on the train?"

"That's right. There was Dulwick and a guy named Hinder. They were partners."

"Oh yes! Why?"

I said: "Well, Dulwick got killed, too. Maybe an hour or more ago. Just down the hall from here, the police believe."

"He was murdered, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"But what . . . ?" She stopped a second then and figured it out. "You mean that you think maybe Mr. Dulwick's death is mixed up with Nonnie being killed?"

"That's it."

"But she didn't know him. She'd just met him."

"Maybe this man Sloan knew him?"

"Well, maybe," said Fay, biting her lip.

"I—I want to talk to you, Mike."

I said: "Keep your chin up, kid. The police are going to raise hell about this. They've got to soft-pedal the Dulwick thing because of the political angle, so they'll double up on this. And on you."

The doctor had been standing by the door, playing with his chin whiskers and eyeing us doubtfully. We were over at the side, whispering, and those three glasses in my pocket were making me wish I was someplace where I could drop them. And

I was trying to figure out a reason for Fay taking her pal's murder so calmly. She was excited, naturally, but she wasn't showing any signs of grief. Her make-up was standing out a little, where her own color had faded, and her voice had a bit of a shake in it, but she was doing fine. About the only attention she gave the corpse was negative. She just looked in every other direction.

I didn't expect to find out anything, but I took a chance and said: "You're taking it big, kid. I'd have thought it would have knocked you out, walking in and finding her like this."

And Fay said: "I hated her. Just hated her. I'm glad it happened."

She meant it, and that was the bad thing about it. Somebody gave a nice firm knock on the door and the doctor moved to open it.

"Here's the cops! You'd better not tell them what you just told me," I said.

"It's the truth."

"In this case," I told her, "the truth is likely to hurt."

ABE STOLZ stood over at the side of the room, looking sadder than usual and even more like a buzzard than usual. When Detective-captain Armbruster snapped out, "Who found the body?" and Fay admitted being the one, I moved over next to Abe and said: "Nothing dull about this hotel of yours, anyway, Abe."

"Something doing every minute," he agreed, peering over at Fay Jarvis. "Is the gal with your party?"

"Hell, no! This is *her* room . . . you can check the registration."

"That wouldn't mean a thing. I saw you meet her, along with the one that's dead. And I saw her with Ollie Sloan. You and Cathwell checked in alone. The girls checked in alone and Sloan checks in alone. Then Sloan meets 'em. It could add up . . . your man Cathwell's made to order."

"I don't get it."

Abe laughed. "Sloan's a smartie, Mike. He works with a girl. A variaton of the old badger game. Some big shot traveling alone, that's weak with women, is Sloan's dish. It's better for Sloan if the chump's married, but he makes out O.K. even with single men."

"If he'd started work on Cathwell I'd know it."

"Maybe."

I'd picked up an idea and I didn't have time to stop and figure whether it was good or not. I said: "Look, Abe! Suppose you give Armbruster that thought. Or part of it. Just the part about the girls and us all checking in at the same time. Leave Sloan out of it."

"Why?"

"I want to make sure he isn't working on Cathwell. I don't want to break anything, if he already is."

"Why?"

"Maybe he'll take it easier with the girl."

"It's like that, eh?"

"It could be."

Abe gave me the hello-sucker grin and I could feel my face going red. It was funny—me going overboard for a girl I'd just met that same day. It wasn't head-work, but it wasn't anything I could stop.

"About that other," he said, with the grin going away. "That's out for now. I lost my guy. I hear you're the one he walked into in the hall. Now that he's out of it, I'd just as soon tell you that he's the one that wanted to know who Cathwell was backing."

"Dulwick?"

"That's right. He wanted me to tap into Cathwell's line, and put in a dictaphone, and a lot of other hooey. He said Cathwell might talk things over with you or with some other stooge. But he can't pay off now."

HE moved over toward Armbruster and left me to think out the Dulwick angle. There were plenty of ways it would have paid Dulwick if he could have known in advance which way Cathwell was going—and some of them were probably connected with the reason for his killing.

Armbruster listened to Stolz, looking over toward me a couple of times, and I grinned and nodded back at him. He went back to questioning Fay again, but this time making it soft, and after telling her not to leave the hotel without leaving word where she'd be, he said: "Then that's all for now, Miss Jarvis. I'd suggest you get another room. We'll have to close this one. Keep in touch with me."

"Then I can leave now?"

"Sure."

I said: "Thanks, Captain. I'll take Miss Jarvis with me. This has been a shock, as you can imagine."

Fay, I'll always think, tried to look shocked, but she didn't do well with it.

Then I ran into something else that worried me. The hotel doctor followed us out in the hall and said: "Could I speak with you, Mr. Boyle?"

I asked him why not and Fay moved down the hall out of ear shot. The medico grabbed at his little beard and mumbled:

"I—I didn't tell the police captain. After all you're a guest. After all, you're with Mr. Cathwell. I thought that perhaps . . ."

"What's it about?"

"I saw you pick up those glasses, Mr. Boyle. They should have been left for the police. I realize just what's going on. I noticed the officer changed the tone of his questioning immediately after you sent our Mr. Stolz over to him with a message, but I can't stand by and see you suppress evidence and do nothing about it."

I said: "Take it slow, Doc. This will all come out in the wash. It's just that everybody is trying to keep a mess away from the public until after the Convention."

"It's a crime against justice, the way this is being handled."

I said, "Tell that to Armbruster," and started down the hall toward Fay. I said to her: "Now look, kid. It's time to talk. Who asked you to find out which way George B. was going, who he was backing?"

"I promised not to tell."

"It was Dulwick."

"Well, yes. I saw him, just after we checked in, and he said he'd pay me if I found it out. And that he could see you liked me and that you'd tell me. I—I needed the money, Mike."

She acted as though it hurt her to tell me that and it hurt me to hear it. Just admitting she was playing me for a chump. And I was still chump enough to make myself believe she must have had a reason for it all that would take the curse off the thing.

"One thing else," I said. "About this Sloan. Were he and Nonnie working against Cathwell? Was that the idea?"

Fay nodded and said miserably: "Yes. But I had nothing to do with that. Honestly, Mike, not one thing. But Sloan couldn't have killed her. He was on his way to a train, when they left. He's not coming back until tomorrow."

"It could be a stall, that train ride," I said.

She said, "I guess so," and sounded doubtful about it.

I was afraid it was no stall, too. In all probability Sloan would show back with a cast-iron alibi. And Cathwell didn't have one and Fay didn't have one and I only had about half of one. It's hard to place yourself in a big hotel, at just every tick of a clock.

I stopped in front of 829-C and said: "You'd better come in and have a drink and tell me all about it. You're supposed to be our little pal, anyway, you know."

"I don't know what you mean."

I told her, and she got a little red in the face and said: "I don't see how Captain Armbruster ever got an idea like that."

"That's easy, too," I said. "I got the house cop to give him the idea. The house cop already had it for himself, and I figured it might be a good plan to pass it along. It sort of makes you official."

So Fay and I went in 829-C, and to Cathwell, on not very good terms. In fact, she was calling me names, in a refined sort of way. But I finally got a chance to put away the three highball glasses I'd taken from the murder room, and I felt safer with them out of my pocket. I'd have felt a whole lot better if the doctor hadn't noticed me taking them, though.

CHAPTER FOUR

Let's Play Politics

GEORGE B. still didn't know I wasn't fooling with Fay and kept tipping me the wink. I played dumb and didn't see it. By that time she was over her mad at me and she got the idea, because she shook her head at me for a no on the going away. George B. took defeat like a soldier though.

He finally said: "As I recall it, little Georgie's got a party going upstairs. I'd better drop up and see how it's doing."

I said: "I'll go along with."

He gave us a swell leer. "Oh, no, Mike! There's lots of time. I'll be all right, as long as I take it a little slower on the drinking."

And then, wistfully, to Fay, "I don't suppose, little girl, that you—uh—have friends in town. Or have you?"

I said: "I have, so it's party night if you want it that way. How about you, Fay?"

"Oh, I couldn't," said Fay. "Not with what happened to Nonnie, and all. It wouldn't be right."

"It will help you keep your chin up. I'd say it was a good thing," George B. told her. "It will take your mind off your troubles. Mike will help you with the—uh—details, won't you, Mike?"

"Sure."

He left and I said: "Now you'll have to wire her people about this. This supposed tie-up with Cathwell is going to save you a lot of grief from the police, but there's some things you'll have to do."

"Nonnie's mother and father are dead. She's divorced and I'm looking after her little girl."

"She's got a little girl?"

Fay said bitterly: "That's why I'm here. Because of the little girl. She said if I'd come along and help her, she'd step out of the way and let me adopt the baby. She was my cousin, I'm ashamed to say. That man Sloan said it would be better if I was along. That whatever way they managed to frame Mr. Cathwell would stand up better if I was along. It would make it look respectable, according to him. I hated him, but she was crazy about him. I'd do anything for little Florrie. That's why I wanted the money from Mr. Dulwick. I've got the baby in a Sister's school, now, but it's hard to get along the way I've been doing."

I began to feel better. At least I had a reason for Fay doing what she'd done and it sounded like a legitimate one.

Fay asked: "What did you do that for . . . I mean let the police think I was under Mr. Cathwell's wing?"

"So they'd leave you alone."

"But why should you bother?"

"Why should they chase you around, just because you're handy?"

It's the first time anybody's tried to look after me in a long time."

"You'd better start getting used to it."

"You know I wish you meant that."

"How d'ya know I don't?"

She laughed and I let it go. There'd be better times to tell her I was serious. We went back to talking about Nonnie then, and I found out her folks had left Montana and moved to California, and that Nonnie had gotten married there. She'd divorced her husband, after having this child by him. She'd never paid any attention to the kid much, and none at all after she'd met Sloan, according to Fay.

When Fay had gone out for her movie test she'd naturally looked up her cousin Nonnie, and since that time she'd looked after the kid. And she'd caught wise to the angles Sloan and Nonnie were working, picking out a chump like Cathwell and going to work on him was just part of their routine. The bigger the guy was the easier he was to handle . . . and George B. would have been made to order.

I said: "It's a nice mess to be out of, kid."

THEN the phone rang and the clerk said: "Mr. Boyle? There's a Mr. Janos at the desk to see you. Shall I send him up?"

"That'd be fine," I said and told Fay: "It's business, kid. You run along downstairs and tell the clerk to give you another room. I'll give you a ring in a couple of hours and we'll have dinner together. We'll also probably have George B., but we can't expect a perfect evening."

She agreed that life was full of trouble and passed what turned out to be Janos, in the hall. He was a short stocky blond man, not over thirty. He had bright blue eyes and a cheerful grin, but when you stopped and thought about it, neither the eyes or the grin told you a thing.

He shook hands and said: "I'm Janos! You're Boyle, I take it."

I must have looked puzzled, because he added: "It's all right. . . . I work for the old man. He sent me over."

That made it right. . . . I'd picked Janos for an older man, because of him having worked with my skipper. I poured a couple of drinks and said: "Things have changed since I sent for you. I needed you then, just so I'd have a chance to get a little time away from my private worry,

who's named George B. Cathwell. But since then there's been two murders. One of them was a guy that was bucking this guy I'm working for, and the other one was a girl he was making a play for. It turns out the gal was making a play for him. She was a lady blackmailer, it seems."

"Did your boss do it? Knock 'em off. I mean."

"I'm damned if I know. He had every chance. It all happened on this floor, and he was up here alone during the time. He's got no alibi. I don't think he did—he's acting just the same as usual."

"What kind of a guy is he?"

"A heel. But what difference does it make. His money's good. And if he didn't do it there's no reason he should be stuck with it. The cops will lay off him until after the convention, anyway. He pulls his State."

"It's a hell of a set-up," Janos said.

"You don't know the half of it. Look! This convention is going to be a riot. They're about balanced on two candidates. My boss can swing it either way, if the balance holds."

"Can he if he's in jail?"

"Why not? They'll just move the convention down to the jailhouse. He's just dickering now, trying to figure which way to go. Which way that will pay him the most. The gal that was killed was trying to put the bite on him and was just getting ready to go into action. The guy that was killed came from the same place. He did the same kind of contracting, which ties them in together again. Or so the cops will think. My boss is the logical suspect on both killings. And I don't think he's even realized it yet."

Janos sighed: "He will. And the cops are going hush-hush on the thing?"

"Sure. My guy pulls a lot of weight."

"Armbruster in charge?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"He gets all the big stuff," said Janos. "He's crooked too, but he's smart. I've got the idea, I guess. Who do *you* think did it, if your boss didn't?"

"I don't know. The man, Dulwick, was knifed. The girl was strangled with one of her own socks."

"Any chance of Armbruster trying to wish the thing on you?"

"Hell, yes. I was working for Cathwell, wasn't I? And I've got no sort of alibi. I was up and around during the times all this happened. And Cathwell would throw me to the wolves in a second, if he thought it would pay him."

"Nice," said Janos. "What d'ya want me to do?"

"Just stick around. I can't be with Cathwell all the time. And I'm hired to see nothing happens to him. He's too much for one man, anyway."

"Like how?"

"Well, he's been half drunk ever since we left the Coast. It just knocked him out, but the house doctor straightened him out and he's upstairs right now, partying some more. He wanted me to get him this girl that was killed. Only we didn't know it then."

"He could have been stalling."

"He could have."

Janos grinned and said: "If he wants a party we can fix it. I know people here. It's my town."

THERE were plenty of people at the party by the time Janos and I got there, and the bulk of them were higher than a kite.

Armbruster was there, also Stolz. Both of them nodded at us as we went in. Armbruster looked definitely unhappy, but Stolz looked as cheerful as he could with the face he had. I took Janos over to Cathwell and introduced him as a friend of mine and talked to Cathwell long enough to see he wasn't partying as much as he appeared to be. There was a lot of business going on behind that half drunken-way he had of getting around.

He said to me under his breath: "Don't go away. Big doings tonight. Later."

I said: "Janos goes with us."

He raised his eyebrows but he didn't argue it. He was no fool. He knew what Janos was in that second. I drifted away and over to Stolz, and he said: "That offer's open again. Five hundred, right on the line. They're going to pick their man tonight, too. They're getting hot on it. They're not going to have any mix-up at the hall—they're going to decide it now and have it look like a walkaway."

"How d'ya know?"

He shrugged and waved. "I've been

watching. It's coming to a boil, which is why Cathwell threw this party, or I'm no judge. It looks better anyway. The dear public will think the candidate that's picked is the only logical one for the job. That's better than having a cat-and-dog fight over which one of two. That way the public is always convinced they picked the wrong one. So give me action—tell me who it is and collect the five hundred, Mike."

"Who you working for now?"

"It's a secret."

"Then no deal."

"It's no deal anyway, until they make up their minds on which man," he said, grinning. "But they'll figure it out tonight. Cathwell's got to see which side of his bread's got the most butter on it."

"It's no deal unless I know who you're working for."

"We'll talk about it," Stolz agreed.

I COLLARED a drink and had it partly down when Armbruster came over to me. He said gloomily: "You could make this a lot easier for me, Boyle. After all, Dulwick was from your part of the country. You'd know what he wanted money for."

"What's this about money?"

"He managed to get the hotel to get him ten thousand in cash, right after he checked in. And it wasn't on him. And his partner, that man Hinder, claims he don't know a thing about it."

"This is new."

"And look, Boyle. I'll be honest! It looks as if this boss of yours could be in the thing up to his neck. I'm taking it easy with him because you know why. But if I go along like that, you ought to go along with me, too."

"That's right."

"There's something else. That knife we took out of Dulwick had a jagged break in the haft. There was blood on it, or rather in it. There weren't any prints on the knife that meant anything."

"So?"

"So the guy that put the shiv in Dulwick, has got a bad hand. From that knife haft. The guy's hand slipped on it when he shoved it in Dulwick, and it cut him on the palm."

"Then all you've got to do is settle on

the man that's got a bad hand. Or isn't that the right answer?"

"Nobody here has," Armbruster said, waving a hand. "I've been watching. I thought maybe the guy's partner, this man Hinder. He's a natural for a suspect, but his hand's O.K. So is Cathwell's. So are yours . . . I looked. And so are that girl's of yours. . . . I looked there, too."

Armbruster said: "So give, Boyle? Who'd be against Dulwick? Who'd be against Cathwell, this guy you work for. Because it looks to me as if Dulwick was knocked off and the blame is supposed to be taken by Cathwell. That is, if he didn't do it."

I said: "Look, Captain! This is how it is. Hinder and Dulwick were Cathwell's opposition. If they picked the wrong man to campaign for they were out, as far as any graft in that state is concerned. If they picked the right side, they'd get what graft Cathwell didn't want. That would *still* be gravy. Dulwick was trying to dicker with me. He wanted to know which way Cathwell was going, so he could get on the band wagon, too."

"Hinder's still got that angle."

"That's right."

"Then Hinder's my man."

"Then who killed the girl, supposing Hinder *did* knock off Dulwick? And you've got no reason to believe he did, outside of them being partners, with Hinder getting a bigger piece of the business with Dulwick out of the way. And what about the ten grand you didn't find on Dulwick?"

Armbruster said: "It's got me looping. I looked at Hinder's hands—he's right over there—and he didn't even know the girl who was killed."

"He says?"

I'd been watching Cathwell, who'd been going around, dropping a word to this man and that. I thought it was a lovely thing—the nice new candidate getting picked at a drunken party.

Cathwell signaled me, and I left Armbruster and went over.

"Mike, you go back downstairs," he said. "Some of the boys will drop in and wait for me. It will look better if it's done that way, rather than everybody leaving together for a meeting. This friend of yours can stay here with me."

I told Janos the new plan and went downstairs. I telephoned Fay from there and told her I'd call her later.

Even with the fate of the nation's leader in his hands I knew George B. would insist on a party.

CHAPTER FIVE

Candidate for a Killing

THEY drifted in, one at a time and by twos and threes, until we had about thirty good men and true in 829-C. All good substantial delegates or men who had good substantial delegates in their pockets.

About then, George B., followed by Janos, came in.

He said: "Look Mike! You and your friend go back upstairs. This wants to be quiet for a few minutes, if you know what I mean. The boys will want to talk right out in meeting."

"You don't trust me?"

He gave me one of his biggest laughs and patted me on the back and said: "Of course I don't."

So I nodded to Janos and started for the door. But there George B. stopped us and gave us a wink and said: "This isn't going to take forever. . . . I know what I want and the boys will give it to me. And afterwards, eh? A little party?"

Janos said he'd fix it up . . . and we went upstairs. There, I headed for the phone, but Hinder stopped me and asked: "Where'd Cathwell go?"

I said: "To the little boy's room, I guess."

He gave me a sour look and said: "Why kid me. I know where he's gone."

"Then what in hell did you ask me for?" I said. I got Fay Jarvis on the phone—Abe Stolz had worked around until he got my detective pal Janos cornered—and Fay said: "Hello."

I talked to her and watched Stolz and Janos. If ever there was a proposition made, there was one being made there. I said, "This is Mike Boyle!" to Fay, and just the same as heard Abe promise Janos five hundred bucks for advance information on what candidate George B. was coming out for.

I said: "It'll be another hour, hon. Then we'll meet you in the lobby. We'll

pick up another couple of girls and do the town right. I want to see George B. get so drunk tonight that he'll tell all, if you know what I mean."

Fay's voice sounded a little sharper when she said: "I understand. You think you'll find out . . ." She got smart then and shut up. But followed up by saying, "I'll wait for you to call me then."

I hung up . . . and Hinder grabbed me again. He'd been waiting. He said: "I'd like to talk to you, Boyle. Let's go in the bathroom."

I said: "Sure."

We tried the bathroom door and it was locked. We could hear somebody being very sick in there and also hear some kind friend advising the sufferer that he was doing the right thing in what he was doing about it.

I said to Hinder: "There's no rush about this. Just give me your best offer first—and why in hell did you get Stolz to dicker with me? Why didn't you talk to me yourself?"

He got red in the face and snapped: "A thousand dollars!"

"Nuts," I said. "If you want to get on the right side, here's your chance. But it'll cost you."

"It's found money for you."

"Sure. Granted."

"How much?"

"Five thousand. No less."

"I'd have to know tonight."

"I'm going to find out tonight," I said, but I crossed my fingers where he couldn't see them. "You'll still have time to get in right with the right people, Hinder."

He said: "I'm in the hotel. I'll be up expecting to hear from you."

He wandered away and I went over to Stolz and Janos and Armbruster. I said to Janos: "Hey! You'd better get on the phone and arrange for those two gals before it's too late. I got mine, just now."

Janos went to the phone, and Armbruster said: "He was telling Abe and me that you've got an idea of who's back of the two killings. *You* didn't tell me that."

"I didn't want you to go off half-cocked," I said, wondering what in hell Janos' idea was. Then I looked over toward the phone and Janos winked at me. It was the dope's idea of a rib on Armbruster and Armbruster was going for it.

IN about half an hour the politicians came angling back in the same way they'd left, in little groups, and with the last of them came George B. He had the cat-with-the-canary smile. I knew he'd gotten what he was after just by looking at him. He came over and patted me on the shoulder and said: "Ah-h-h, that old bacon! I came home with it, Mike."

"Hurrah!" I said.

"So let's let this bunch of swacks keep up this lushing and let's *us* have a real party. What d'ya say, boy?"

I asked for five minutes and got it and went downstairs to 829-C. I'd put the three highball glasses I'd taken from the dead girl's room clear in the back of a dresser drawer, and when I didn't find them there I knew they hadn't been taken by mistake. I'd about forgotten them until Janos had started his rib about me knowing the killer, but it had occurred to me that I *did* possibly have the answer to everything there. That the killer might have been drinking with the dead girl, and possibly the dead Dulwick for a third.

The glasses being gone gave me a lot of ideas. I went back upstairs and got there in time to say good-bye to Armbruster, who was leaving for the station, and then I called Fay and told her we'd meet her in the lobby in fifteen minutes.

She said: "I really don't think I should go, Mike."

"Want me to take somebody else?"

"Well, no. I've just got a feeling."

I told her she should read all the ads and take something for the feeling that would make it better, and that we'd meet her in fifteen minutes, according to plan. She said, "All right," none too happily, and I hung up and got George B. to take three quick ones, to get primed for the coming party.

He didn't require much coaxing.

Then we got Janos and went downstairs and didn't have to wait more than ten minutes for Fay, which is some sort of record for those kind of things.

She looked grand. She hadn't won any beauty contest by being hard to look at, and she was dressed right to the nines. She looked prettier than a new saloon . . . because George B. came right out and said so. He tried to move in, right then and there, and she got away from him in a

smooth little way and joined me . . . and I kept from grinning.

George B. *still* don't know we were up in the air about each other.

We went out of the hotel that way—she and I together, with George B. and Janos in the lead—and we were still in the same formation while standing on the sidewalk waiting for the doorman to whistle up a cab.

And then three things happened so fast together they joined. Something tugged at my ear for the first. I heard a solid noise right in front of me, for the second. Sounding like somebody smacking an orange with a hammer, more than like anything else. The crash of a heavy gun from somewhere behind me was the third.

Actually everything blended. The bullet that had come from the gun behind me had gone through my ear and into the back of Janos' head. That was what had made the noise like the smashed orange. I put my hand up to my ear while watching Janos go down to the sidewalk, and he was all the way down, getting there as though the bone and muscle in his body was something liquid, before I realized what had happened, and turned.

The doorman was at the side, with his whistle still held up to his open mouth, and his expression should have been comic but wasn't. I grabbed for my gun and got it clear, and George B. let out a strangled scream and started running past me and toward where the shot had been fired from. That is, in that general direction. The shot had come from an alley that went back and around the side of the hotel . . . and George B. was going down the street past it. He'd just lost his mind for the time being.

Fay was screaming in my ear and jerking at me with both hands, and I shook her off and went as fast as I could toward the alley. And that's another fool trick . . . a man shouldn't run in on a hidden gun like that.

IT TURNED out all right but it was just because the gunman didn't stay and argue it out. He'd put two garbage cans in the way, instead of staying and potting me from the dark, and I ran over both of them.

I heard feet pounding away as I picked

myself out of the wreckage of the first but nothing at all when I climbed out of the second . . . and by that time I had my good sense back. I stopped the brave hero stuff and went back to the street, and there was Fay, sitting on the sidewalk with the doorman just bending over her to help her to her feet. George B. was out of sight.

I said to Fay: "What in hell happened to you?"

"You knocked me down," she said. She didn't look nearly as well as when we'd started out of the lobby.

Janos was on his side and there was an awful mess of blood around his head. I could see where the bullet had come out through the base of his nose, just at eye level, and the slug had taken bone and everything with it on its way. It meant it had come from a big gun.

"Don't you move." I told Fay.

I ducked through the dozen or more people who'd already come out of the hotel, and went inside to the first telephone booth I saw and called the cops.

"Who wants 'em?" a very bored voice asked back.

I said: "Look, stupid! It's a murder, right in front of the Palace Hotel. I want 'em and I want 'em fast."

I got them, fast. A voice I could recognize as Armbruster's said: "Yeah, Homicide."

"Armbruster?"

"Armbruster."

"This is Boyle. Janos just got shot in the back of the head, just as we left here. Here at the Palace."

"He dead?"

"Lord, yes."

Armbruster said, in an aggrieved tone: "This beats hell! One-two-three, just like that. I wish to God I'd never heard of a convention."

I thought of telling him he was right along there with a lot of the voters, but I wasn't in the mood for light chatter.

Then I went back to the scene of action. Even in that little time a crowd had gathered. And George B. had come back from the hole he'd found for himself and was standing next to Fay, looking down at what was left of Janos.

He said: "My God, Mike! That could have been *me*."

"That's right," I told him.

"Why he was standing right next to me."

"That's right."

"It was a lucky thing it hit *him*."

"Why?"

"If it hadn't, it might have hit *me*."

I said: "Cathwell, so help me, if you open your puss to me in the next few minutes, I'm going to pop you square in it if I go to jail for the rest of my life."

He just stared at me and I didn't even bother to think about the raw-hiding I was going to get from the home office. For threatening assault on a customer. I'd only met Janos that evening, but he was a good egg and I'd liked him on sight. And the slug he'd taken had been meant for me. It had gone through my ear, but it had been aimed for the back of *my* head.

Thinking of this made me wonder about the ear, and I felt of it and realized for the first time just why everybody was staring at me. The slug had drilled it perfectly and that side of my neck and that shoulder were covered with blood. The second I thought of it, it began to hurt . . . which should show how a person's mind blanks out during excitement.

One of the cops that had come up in the dolly car was standing by Janos' head, and the other was making a pass at keeping the crowd back. He came over to me and I said: "I just called Armbruster, Lieutenant. He's coming right over. This is tied up with a couple of other ones that happened earlier in the evening."

"You want a doctor?"

"No, but thanks. As soon as Armbruster gets here I'll get patched up."

CHAPTER SIX

The Man with the Hurt Hand

WE ENDED back in the manager's office, as usual, with me getting patched up while Armbruster talked to the rest of them. I said to the doctor: "So you couldn't keep quiet, eh? You had to talk, did you?"

He asked me what I meant.

"You know what I mean. About seeing me pick up those glasses and walk out with them."

He said, with dignity: "I just told Cap-

tain Armbruster and Mr. Stolz about it. After all, it was my duty."

"And you done it," I said. I didn't like him anyway, so I shut up and watched Armbruster in action. He acted as if he was a little discouraged about the whole thing. Fay told him she'd heard a shot and then saw Janos fall, and that was all she knew. George B. said the same thing, except adding that he and Janos were practically hand in hand at the time.

Armbruster put a little comedy into the thing, right there. He said: "And then what, Mr. Cathwell? What happened next?"

George B. looked at me to see if I'd said anything about him running away.

He swallowed and said: "Well—during the excitement and all—I really don't know."

Fay kept her face as straight as mine and said: "Mr. Cathwell is too modest. He thought the gunman was across the street and ran over that way to catch him. At least that's what he told everybody when he came back."

George B. got himself a red face in a hurry, and Armbruster looked the other way, which was tactful. The doorman told the same story as the rest of us and Armbruster let him go back to work. And then he said: "Now I wonder where Mr. Hinder was during this shooting? After all, he was Dulwick's partner, and this last seems to tie in with the other two killings."

The explanation was for the benefit of the hotel management, who hadn't been supposed to know that Hinder was Armbruster's suspect.

Abe Stolz came lounging in through the door, just in time to hear this last. "I can answer that," he said. "I went upstairs to Mr. Cathwell's party and checked up. Hinder was up there all the time—he never left the room. There's a dozen people up there that'll swear to it."

"There's not a dozen people up there sober enough to swear to their own names," Armbruster said. "Well, I can't see there's anything more I can do about this tonight. You people will stay here tonight, after this, I take it."

This time, in spite of all Cathwell's political weight, it was an order. Put in a nice way, but still definite.

I said: "We're all going to stay here."

Armbruster said: "I want to talk to you alone, Boyle. After the others have gone."

Stolz said: "I can walk up with Mr. Cathwell, if you'd like, Boyle. If you're worried about him, that is. And stay with him until you're through here."

"It's not necessary," I said. "He'll be all right. He's worth more on the hoof every minute. He'd be worth nothing to anybody, dead. Besides that, Abe, I want to talk to you. We haven't had a real chance to chew the rag since I've been here."

And for Cathwell and Armbruster's benefit, "Abe and I have known each other a long time. We want a chance to trade gossip."

CATHWELL and Fay left, with me giving Fay a look to take with her that meant I'd call her a little later. I got a weak smile back that said the call would be O.K. Then the management hemmed and hawed its way out and that left just Armbruster and Stolz and myself. And

Armbruster made it just the two of us by saying: "D'ya mind, Abe? We'll be just a little while."

Abe said he didn't mind and that he'd be waiting for me in the bar.

I said: "Look, Captain, I know who did at least two of the killings. Maybe all three. I hope all three but I'm not sure yet."

"Who is it?"

"It's too early yet to tell you."

"Why?"

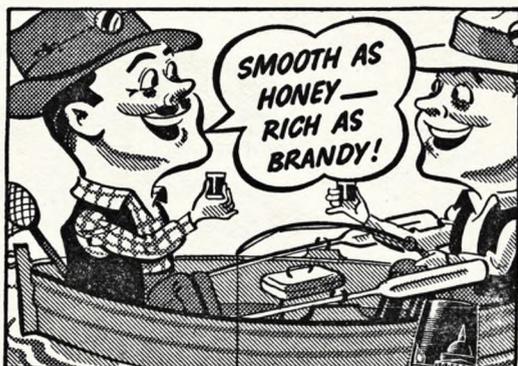
"No proof yet."

"Is that why Janos got it?"

"Hell, no. The killer was aiming at the back of my head but he pulled his shot. I took it just through the ear, but Janos was in line and took it fair and square. Janos didn't have an idea. I did, but nothing for sure until Janos got killed."

Armbruster said: "I've gone along with you, Boyle, but I'm through fooling. The doctor told me about those glasses. You'll give them to me and we'll stop this horsing around. I don't give a damn whether this boss of yours owns the world. I'll still put him away."

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"You mean if his prints are on the glasses, don't you?"

"They will be. You wouldn't have taken them if they weren't."

"I thought they might have been there myself," I said. "But now I don't. I know damn well they weren't. And anyway, I haven't got 'em any more."

"You aren't fool enough to have gotten rid of them, Boyle. I want 'em. You give them to me. I tell you I'm through with this horsing around."

"I tell you I haven't got them."

"Don't give me that."

"Somebody hooked them."

I hope I'm not what he called me then. He, ended with: "You dirty ——! You're figuring on holding them over this —— boss of yours and making him pay off for the rest of his life."

"It's a thought," I told him, "and if I'd thought it, I'd probably have taken better care of the glasses. Listen I'm not fooling. Somebody took 'em."

"Who?"

"Use your head. You'll get the same answer *I've* got."

He shook his head and said: "Now look, Boyle! I haven't got a thing to go on. This playing smart of yours isn't helping. Suppose this killer knocks you off, too? Then what? If he gets wise to your knowing who he is, you're a cinch. That is, if you *do* know who he is."

"I know."

"Look, Boyle. Why not do this. Write his name and what you've got on him and leave 'the paper in the hotel safe. Then if you slip and he gets you, I can go in with something solid to back me up. Don't hold out on me."

"You know every damn thing I do," I said. "Believe it or not, I'm not holding out a thing. And I wouldn't put a thing like that in the safe. I'm not that silly."

"Why not?"

"You'd have it five minutes after I put it there and we both know it. It's evidence in a murder case and the hotel would have to give it up. And then the thing would blow sky high. And I want to break it."

Armbruster tried to look as though his feelings were hurt at me thinking of such a thing, and he failed lamentably. He

tried to make me believe he'd run me in unless I told him who I thought was guilty, and I laughed at him.

And he was still up in the air, with nothing to go on, and so I got away with it. So we went in the bar, where Abe Stolz was waiting for us, and I bought a drink and Armbruster left for home.

ABE STOLZ grinned at me and said: "The guy's all right in his way, but he don't weigh much. Fifteen years on the force and on the last investigation they had, they found out that he'd only managed to save a little over a hundred and forty grand out of his wages."

"What's his salary?" I asked.

Abe kept his grin and said the captain had started at twenty-one hundred a year and worked it up to forty-five. We both agreed that a police captain who was really on his toes, should have been able to save a lot more in that length of time, from a big salary like that.

And neither of us were kidding. That thought of Armbruster possibly being out for what he could get had made it tough figuring for me all the way along.

Abe started it with: "Well, d'ya know anything?"

I said: "Everything."

"Who's going to be the candidate?"

"For how much?"

"I talked to my guy," Abe said carefully. "I can run the ante up to a grand."

"Nuts! I got a raise on that from your own guy."

Abe said: "And nuts to you! Would the guy tell me the most he'd pay is a grand, and then offer you more? You're nuts. Who d'ya think I'm dealing for?"

"I know. Hinder."

"Like I said, you're nuts."

I pointed out things to him, marking them out with a finger. "First, Hinder and Dulwick were big gainers. They got what my boss didn't want, if they guessed right on who my boss picked for a candidate. They'd have been on the right wagon and all set for the ride."

"How d'ya figure that? Every contractor in the country, that's dealing in government stuff, stands to gain if the right man's in."

"But Abe! Every contractor in the country isn't in on how Cathwell stands.

And Cathwell can only throw things out his way. Cathwell can't throw things outside of his own part of the country, and that part of the country is where Dulwick and Hinder are working. Look! Cathwell picks out the right candidate and the right candidate pays off with some contracts. He's just the same as gives Cathwell what he wants of the State. The business he doesn't want will go to Dulwick and Hinder, if the right candidate isn't sore at them. They're the only big ones out there, outside of Cathwell. And it don't make any difference to Cathwell. He's getting his gravy first spoon out of the pot. The only thing is, Dulwick and Hinder have to stick up for the right man at the nomination, or he's going to be sore at them and cut their throats when he's got the razor in his hands."

"Go on, go on," said Abe. "So far you're talking about what we both know."

"So Dulwick and Hinder are big winners if they know which way Cathwell is going. And now, with Dulwick out of it, Hinder stands to gain twice as much. He's got no partner to split with. If it hadn't been for that angle this thing would have been a lot easier to figure out."

"You figure then that Hinder did his partner in, so he wouldn't have to split with him?"

"Hell, no," I said, and then looked over Abe's shoulder. "Is that guy looking for you?"

ABE turned, and I slipped the gun out of my shoulder rig and put it in my lap. We were in a corner booth, one of those triangle things finished in chrome and red leather, and Abe was at my left and around the bend. Just right in case anything should happen . . . and I wasn't taking any chances of having the wrong thing happen to me.

Abe turned back and said: "I never even saw the guy before. The town's full of strangers on account of the convention. If you don't think Hinder knocked off his partner, who did? And who knocked off the girl and Janos?"

"We'll go into that, Abe. Dulwick hired you to find out which way Cathwell was going to go, and that's why he got the ten thousand, or had the hotel get it for him. You were holding him up for

that, and it was worth a lot more than that to them."

Abe said: "You're crazy. He offered me a grand, is all."

"And you ran it up to ten and he said yes. Hinder knew about it, but Hinder's scared now. Hinder knows the cops are looking his way, and he figured it might help his play if he made a big offer to me, rather than let you put it through for less. He was afraid to come out in the open until you'd sounded me out, for fear I'd tell Cathwell and Cathwell would get sore and gum up the works for him. I kept thinking politics was mixed up in the murder and it was. If it hadn't been for politics, Dulwick wouldn't have had ten thousand in cash on him, and that's what he was killed for."

"And you don't think it was Hinder?"

"We both know better," I said. "His hands aren't cut. Armbruster looked and I looked. And whoever used that knife on Dulwick got a cut hand out of it."

"I'd forgotten that," said Abe.

"Like hell you'd forgotten it. And you didn't forget when the doctor told you and Armbruster about me getting away with the glasses, from the girl's room. And you didn't forget it when Janos told you I knew who the killer was. You tried for me just outside the door but you got Janos instead. Sit down, Abe . . . it's pointing at you, right under the table. What I want to know is what you did with the ten grand and why you killed the girl with the stocking. I've got the rest of it straight."

"Smart, eh," said Abe, very softly. "I figured you knew, but I figured you'd be smart enough to play along with me for the cut on what we can make out of it. We've got Hinder and we've got Cathwell, and we can throw it to either of them. So let's get together on it."

"It's no proposition, Abe. Sit down and stay there. Why did you knock off the girl?"

"She saw me do for Dulwick . . . it all happened in her room. He was making the same proposition to the two of us. Ten grand for the one that told him which way your man was going to jump. A grand then, and the other nine when the convention made the story true. And I figured that maybe he'd pay the other

nine and maybe he wouldn't, if and providing I got the information he wanted. He shouldn't have shown the money, Mike. You'll want a cut on that too, I suppose."

"I'm not having any," I said. "I'm glad to know you were the one that killed the girl. I was afraid my man Cathwell might have and I was more afraid my girl did. They both had a chance at it."

ABE said blandly, just as though I hadn't been saying no: "It'll be easy, Mike. Cathwell has got the most money and he should be our best bet. As far as his hand not being cut, the cops will forget about that point. You and I can be eye-witnesses, as far as he's concerned . . . and he'll pay off for the rest of his life. We're set for life, boy."

I said: "Abe, you made your mistake when you killed Janos. Dulwick was a louse, and I can't feel too bad about him getting what he did. He was strictly louse and so was the girl. She was back here just to put her hooks in my man Cathwell, and so it don't bother me about her, either. But the Janos thing is different. You aimed for me on that one. And you'd do it again, the first time I turned my back on you."

"Why Mike!" he said. He sounded heart-broken. "Why I'd do no such thing. And, if it comes right down to it, you can't really prove a thing on me. You've got a good story, but it won't stand up."

I said: "Who but the house cop could go in our suite with a pass key and take those three glasses away from where I'd hidden them? It wouldn't have been the chamber maid, because there was no reason she'd want the glasses. And only you and the doctor and Armbruster knew I'd taken 'em. They had your prints and Dulwick's prints and the girl's prints on them and you had to get rid of them. And you knew I was close to you, because Janos said I had a lead on the killer. And Armbruster looked at everybody's hands . . . but he never thought of yours. He had the same thought I did . . . that the thing was political. He was looking at the politician's hands, and mine and Cathwell's. So why not show me your hands, Abe, so I can see where that knife haft cut one of them."

I shot then, just before he did. I'd just

been talking to give him the chance to take. He'd been squirming around, trying to get a hide-out gun from where he carried it in a holster clear down in the front of his pants. He went back out of the booth as if somebody had yanked him, and the little gun he'd managed to get free went flying back of him.

And there on his back, with me looking down at him and with a .45 slug through his belly, he tried to get the gun under his arm out. He almost made the grade. He had it free from the clip and I was all set to kick it away from him when he passed out . . . and I'll always think it was nothing but pure hate that kept him moving that long.

He didn't die until six hours after that, but hate had nothing to do with keeping him alive. It was the entire staff of police surgeons and two blood transfusions and a lot of shots in the arm . . . and the only reason they didn't let him die in peace was that they wanted to hear him talk. And he talked. I think he died having fun with Armbruster, pointing out to him that he had all the answers right under his nose and was too dumb to see them.

The ten grand he'd taken from Dulwick was under the carpet in his room.

I GOT the answers to some more things on the way back home. From Fay, who was traveling with George B. as a guest, by request. My request. Her lousy cousin was out of the way for good and all and Fay was going to adopt the cousin's little girl. There'd be no opposition. She was a blood relative and she could prove she'd been taking care of the child. George B. could fix any objection that might come up . . . and said he would. He was very interested to hear about how he'd been picked as a chump by Cousin Nonnie and her boy friend, Sloan, and he'd had Sloan picked up by the Oil City cops as soon as Sloan got back in town, which was the morning after the thing broke.

We were in the club car when George B. came in, very happy and half-drunk, and planted himself alongside of us. He beamed and said: "Ah, ha! Love's young dream! I'm a romantic, I guess, myself. In love with love and all that. Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"With you I wouldn't call it love," I said. "I'd call it passion."

"Just one and the same thing," said George B., handsomely. "That was smart work, Mike, picking Stolz out as the killer. I can see how you thought it *might* have been him, but then I can see how you thought it might have been somebody else. If you'll believe it, that police captain even suspicioned *me*, or so he said."

"So did I for a while," I said. "D'ya remember I told you how Janos was telling Armbruster and Stolz that. I knew the guilty man and that I'd spring it after the convention was over? You remember that?"

"Why yes."

"Then fifteen minutes later somebody tries to blow the back of my head off. Now Janos was only kidding, but neither Armbruster or Stolz knew that. One of them thought I really knew the score, and was worried enough about it to try and kill me. So it had to be one of them."

"I wouldn't have put a thing like that past that Armbruster," said George B.

"Neither would I," I said. "That's another thing that had me mixed. But Dulwick and Hinder with their attempted bribing is what really made it tough. I kept looking for the wrong motive, when I had simple robbery right in front of me. Armbruster was making the same mistake—and I kept figuring him as a possible killer. Working for what he could get out of it, the same as Stolz."

George B. declared: "I had him picked as a bad one the minute I saw him."

"Well, anyway, when I went inside, right after Janos was shot, I phoned the

station and talked to him. I had it narrowed to either him or Stolz, and he was at the station. He wouldn't have had time to get there, if he'd been the shooter. So that put him out and put Stolz in. But Stolz only had that cut hand to argue out of. The rest of the stuff was purely circumstantial. I figured the only way to make it certain was to devil him into a break."

George B. said: "Well it worked out and that's all that's necessary, I'd say. It was a clincher, all right. It's all turned out all right, anyway. We've got Pitkin just the same as in, and he'll be a fine man for the country."

"A fine man for George B. Cathwell, you mean," said Fay.

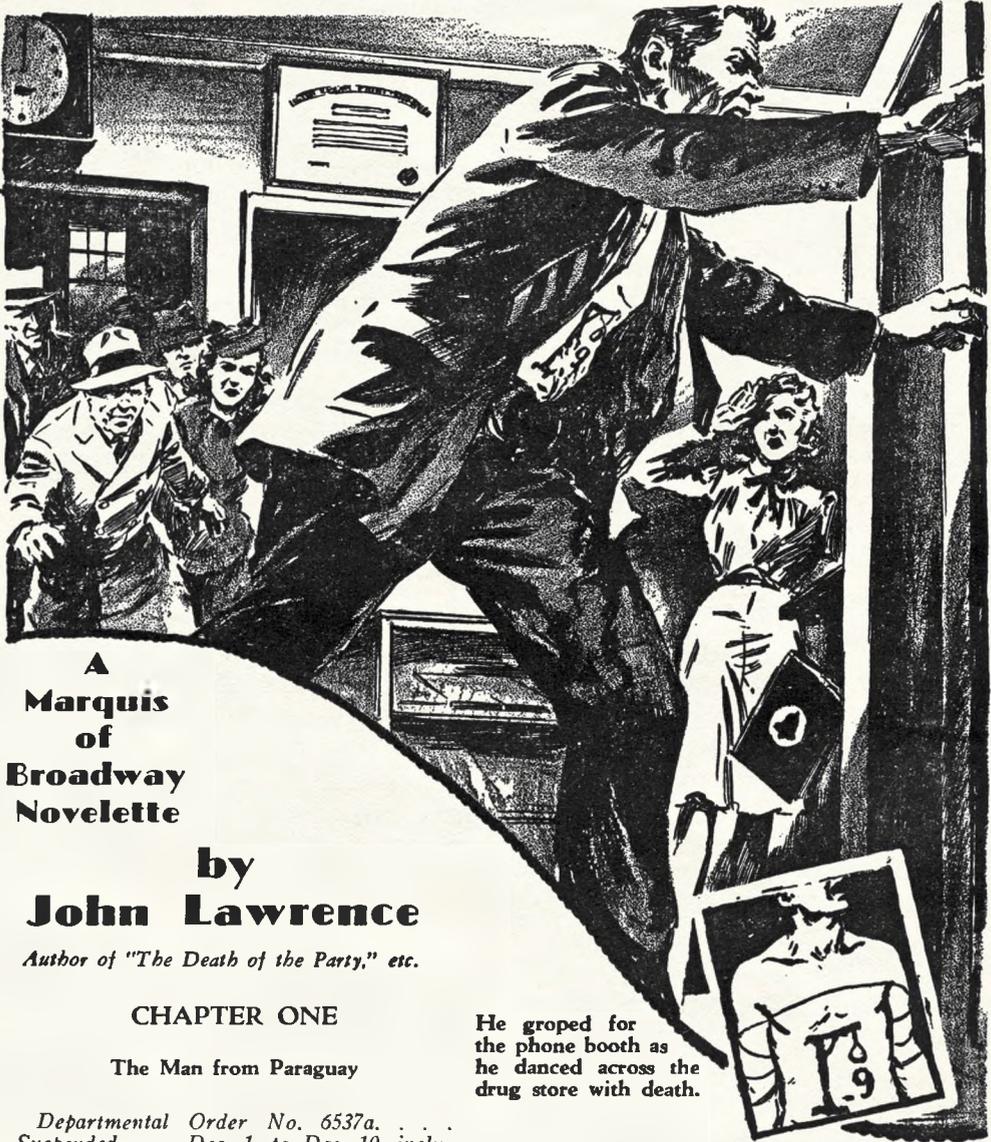
George B. really thought that was funny. He bought three rounds on the strength of that one alone.

BUYING drinks was about the only way George B. *was* free with his money, but Fay and I didn't find that out until we got married. Instead of a bonus for keeping him out of the trouble he'd so gayly sought and found, and instead of a little wedding present like you'd naturally expect from somebody you'd saved from storm and stress and danger, both bodily and by reputation, the louse sent us two bottles of Scotch. And it wasn't good Scotch, either. He's still going good, running the State, as always—and I'll say it proves politics is certainly a wonderful thing.

What made Fay and I sorer than anything else was that he knew both of us drank rye and hated Scotch.



GALLOWS 9



A
**Marquis
of
Broadway
Novelette**

by
John Lawrence

Author of "The Death of the Party," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

The Man from Paraguay

*Departmental Order No. 6537a. . . .
Suspended. . . . Dec. 1, to Dec. 10, inclu-
sive . . . fined ten days pay. . . . Assaulting
a citizen . . . Detective Harry Derosier,
Broadway Squad. . . .*

The Marquis' somber blue eyes were dark and glowing as he fingered the slip of flimsy. He put one black shoe on the running board of the headquarters' car. "So?"

"You know I swung that," Ochs said from the darkness behind the wheel.

"Yes—you and that brother-in-law of yours that sucks around the Hall."

He groped for the phone booth as he danced across the drug store with death.

Branded on the dead man's chest was a ghastly symbol—a crude gallows, its noose dancing above the numeral "9." What grisly secret in his past had brought him such a tortured doom? Not even the Marquis could guess the grim answer to the riddle till the night he decided not to go to church after all.

"I swung it, mister. Don't misunderstand that. I saw an angle and pushed right in. It just so happens that a friend of mine was the only witness to what actually took place that night."

"Which was?"

"Derosier was visiting somebody over there in Brooklyn—as I got it, some jane that he *couldn't* use for a witness no matter what happened. This drunken baker ran out of his house across the street, his wife after him, both of them blind, roaring drunk—at four A. M. in the morning.

"They started yelling and screeching, the baker with a bottle in his hand, fixing to go places, the woman hanging on to him and trying to drag him back inside the house. Derosier came charging out and the dame yelled at him to help her. The drunk broke his bottle about then, and when Derosier came for him he started making passes with the broken handle, so Derosier gave him a tap with the knucks. Only the jane was hanging on and went down on top of him and smashed her nose on his knee, passing out alongside of him. So Derosier takes them both inside and dumps them on the floor in their living-room and blows."

"And?"

"This friend of mine knew I was angling to get on your Squad, so he calls me and tips me off. I sent a lawyer around to see if I could use it and it turns out that it's just one of those run-of-the-mill ruckuses—except for one thing: Neither the baker nor his wife remember a damn thing about it, haven't the slightest notion what happened to them the night before. That is, they haven't till I figure there's maybe something there and have my lawyer 'remind' them."

"I see. 'Remind' them that they were coming out of their own house peacefully, as Derosier walked by? That they gave him a 'good evening' and that *he* was evidently stewed—that he turned on them, called them everything in the calendar and wound up by beating them both with knucks and throwing them back inside their house."

"Right. And then I, knowing you'd swing your weight downtown for Derosier, went to bat with mine—spoke a word here and a word there—and, to

your surprise, what happens but that you hit a brick wall. A member of the famous Broadway Squad gets a ten-day suspension, which doesn't do your precious prestige one single damn bit of good. And all because of me."

THE Marquis' eyes examined the other's glowing dark face, the deep-slashed lines and warped lips that marred his handsomeness. He slowly balled the printed flimsy, idly flipped it into the gutter, his round, red-cheeked little face blank. "So that's your idea of smart. What are you coming around here for now? To crawl?"

Ochs' grunt was a sneer. "Even you know I don't crawl. I'm still trailing that job on your squad."

Faint color tinged the Marquis' temples. "Well, for pure gall, you'll rate right up there. Or are you just stupid? I turn you down, cold. You see a chance to make a little trouble for us, frame Derosier up and sic your brother-in-law on to get him soaked. And then come around here expecting to open it all up again."

"Not again. Still. I never really took that 'no' as final."

"Well, you can. After pulling a smelly little gag like this out of spite. . . ."

"Spite nothing." Ochs' eyes were impatient. "Obviously you didn't appreciate quite how cosy I'm sitting downtown before. I flipped this one across to put it under your nose. Think it over. Naturally, any connections I have are yours, once I'm on the Squad."

The Marquis let out breath slowly. "You're not going to be on the Squad, Ochs. Understand? I considered you. I looked you up—and I turned you down. That's final. I don't want you."

"Don't be a sap, Marquis. I'm a natural for you. You can't take a two-bit cop into that mob of yours. You need somebody with plenty of stuff. I'm your meat. I know storks don't bring babies. I've a record. While I was on Safe-and-Loft, I got four citations—one each year. Since I've been on Homicide, I've knocked over half-a-dozen headline jobs. The papers call me 'ace sleuth.' I'd go good on your squad—from every angle you can think of. What the hell's wrong with you?"

"I just don't like a dirty cop, Ochs."

The other's face darkened and his jaw-points whitened. "What the hell's this? Because I got myself a nice house and a couple of cars and a half of that office building? Don't give me that. That crew of yours—Ace McGuire, Big Johnny Berthold, Al Hackett, Derosier—I suppose they live on their pay?"

"They don't 'take' a tenth as much as you think. But that's not the point. The point is that you're spoiled. You started off with a rush ten years ago and you've been coming with a rush ever since. You were entitled to fall on your face a dozen times, but you've skidded by. You must have brains of a sort. Some of the tricks you've turned on Homicide were really good, which is why I even considered you in the first place. But you're completely irresponsible. You play the women and the booze too much. Pure bull luck and your brother-in-law's drag have got you by oftener than your brains have, kept you from jamming up. You've got the morals of a package-thief. You're so damned shifty I wouldn't take your word for the time of day. All of which I might tackle—if you had the brains to handle part of my section."

"Yeah? I had the brains to get to be a lieutenant in ten years. It took you damned near twenty."

"You also had the brains to knock ten teeth out of a nineteen-year old girl because she wouldn't uncover a burglar for you."

"That was an accident. She got me mad."

"Yeah. Because the burglar was hiding out with eighty thousand in negotiable bonds. That stuff would go for about ten minutes on Broadway. I've got the toughest thieves in the world here but also some of the best people in the country come here. You couldn't stampede your way in my district like you've been doing right along. As for your rank—that's another reason I don't want you. You've been riding the crest for ten years and it wouldn't be long before you tried to give *me* orders.

"As a matter of fact, your being so damned anxious to come with me is fishy from the start—your wanting to drop a good spot as Homicide lieutenant to knuckle under to me. I know damn well

what's behind it. You think you see a fortune in grafts that my men have too much scruple to touch. So help me, I'd be more afraid of what you'd pull on honest, decent citizens than on what you'd do to the grifters. In the first place because you're so gaudy-headed that you wouldn't stop to *see* the difference, and in the second because you probably wouldn't give a damn—if you saw a dollar.

"No, Ochs—with that curly black hair and pretty pan, you may be the ladies' delight. Your record may look good because of the rare occasions on which you've used your brains. But you'd be a nightmare to me. I don't like you. I can stand a crooked cop, or even a rotten cop—but not a dirty cop. Now—you'd better get it once and for all. The answer is no."

Ochs' face was dingy. "O.K., Marquis. I get it." The tip of his tongue flicked slowly over his lips. "Yeah, I finally get it." He leaned forward and his eyes sparkled. "Would you be surprised to know that it suits me? This sucking up to you was my brother-in-law's idea—not mine." He sat back, thin-eyed, then forward again and fiddled with the ignition key, eventually toed the motor softly into life. "Maybe these peculiar brains of mine could think up another one. About how you ought to be about ripe for plucking—if a man set his mind to it. Maybe nobody's really considered it seriously lately."

The Marquis took his foot from the running-board.

"Uh-huh. One more thing Ochs." His eyes were like hot stars. "Keep off Broadway. Don't come into my section except on business. Understand? I don't want your kind of crook around—either with, or without a badge. You think you can remember that?"

"Why, you . . ."

Then the girl burst on them.

THEY were on the east side of Seventh Avenue, just above Duffy Square, where Seventh and Broadway cross. The girl came flying through the splash of light from a pineapple-drink stand two doors north of where they stood, trim silken legs flying, heels tap-tapping madly. She was bareheaded, her blue-black hair waved back over her ears in a long

page-boy bob. Her desperate eyes were a delicate brown, her features softly molded. She almost ran past them, eyes searching wildly in every direction, until she spotted the police department insignia on the side of the car.

She almost stumbled as she ran over, her short black Persian lamb coat flying open to disclose a trim-waisted blue silk dress patterned with white Vs. She cried breathlessly: "Oh, are you gentlemen police? For Heaven's sake, come quickly—there's a holdup!"

Ochs' eyes swept over her appraisingly, as he jerked round to peer quickly back up the street. "Yeah? Where, baby?"

"The—the haberdashery store—Wilkins—up there around the next corner—oh, please hurry!" She pointed hastily to the little block in the center of the street.

The Marquis said, "I . . ." as Ochs quickly palmed the handle of his car-door. Then he bit it off, kicked the opening door closed and snapped: "Stay in your car stupid. If you want to do something, swing around over onto Broadway and come up in front. That store has two entrances—one on Broadway, one on the side street. Cover the Broadway side if you want while I hit it from here."

The swarthy Ochs' dark eyes went wide, then thin, for the tenth part of a second. "All right, little man." He bent the wheels hard to get away from the curb. "You catch them as I throw them out. Wait up for me after, gorgeous." He sent the car zooming out and away.

"How many of them are there?" the Marquis threw over his shoulder as she ran at his heels, angling across the roadway toward the little cross-street above.

"Just one—a man with a gun—oh please—"

No one seemed to be aware of anything untoward when he reached the shop. Pedestrians were passing the open door of the haberdashery, in a thin stream. A dapper little oldish man with parchment skin and gray moustache and goatee idled practically with his back to the haberdashery's side entrance, smoking a thin black cigar. The Marquis had to almost shoulder him aside as he strode into the shop.

Down the narrow corridor of the brightly lighted store he saw Wilkins, the

bald little proprietor, huddled behind the cash register. A short, heavy-set man with coal black hair lounged with his back to the Marquis, half spread across the counter, to all appearances inspecting a tie in front of him.

Brakes squealed and a car door banged out front, just as the Marquis got the service gun from his hip. The timing was exact. Both Ochs and the Marquis funneled into the shop at the same instant.

Ochs' husky voice rapped, "Get them up—you!" before he was in the Marquis' line of sight and the man at the counter jumped, turned, dropping the tie. His hands went up. His squarish blank face was dark, gentle, with high-cheek-bones and a vaguely Indian cast.

He opened his mouth as the Marquis and Ochs converged grimly. Behind the counter, Wilkins caught his breath, gawked, blurted hastily, "Hey—what is this? What . . . ? *Hey!*" as Ochs plowed right in, snatched at the dark man's collar and spun him viciously out and around off balance.

"Drop the—where's your gun?" Ochs snarled at the staggering man.

"I—I have no gun. Please—" the other stammered as he flattened against the counter.

"Get your hands high! Come, turn around. . . ."

Wilkins' dried-apple face was torn between anger and alarm. "Marty—for Pete's sake—what is it? What . . . ?"

Ochs crowded the dark man against the counter, ran his hand over his overcoat for a weapon.

The other's soft, husky voice stammered: "Please—I—I haven't done anything—"

The Marquis snapped at Wilkins: "Wasn't this man heisting you?"

Wilkins' mouth sagged open. He clapped his hands to his bald head and fairly danced. "Heisting? Oh you block-heads," he howled. "No, he ain't heisting me! You mean that's why you . . . ? You mean you come in here and . . . Oh, you numb-brained flatfeet! Of course he wasn't heisting me—he was buying a good bill of goods—he's a customer!"

Ochs swung toward him. "What?"

The furious little proprietor bounced up and down. "Go on! Get out! Go about

your business! Leave me alone—leave us alone!”

Ochs' dark face was lowering, his eyes angry and muddled.

The Marquis said tartly, "All right, Ochs. Take your hands off him!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. We saw—we heard" Ochs scowled. "What sort of song-and-dance are . . . ?"

"Quit it," the Marquis voice lashed at Ochs. And to Wilkins, "We were tipped that you were being held up. It's wrong, eh?"

"Wrong? O' course it's wrong! You don't see no holdup, do you?"

Ochs flushed angrily. "Baloney! You're. . . . Say! Wait a minute!"

HE SUDDENLY grabbed the silent dark man, spun him round and peered into his face. "Yellow skin! Yah—wait a minute!" He turned and ran back toward the Broadway side of the store, plunged out onto the street. There was a handful of curious-eyed onlookers gathered on the sidewalk. Ochs whipped his dark head around, searching their faces. He stood a minute, peering hastily over their shoulders, backhanded two men out of his way for a better look. Finally, his face set and he came hard-heeled back inside the store. "You aren't pulling the wool over my eyes, yellow-puss. That little yellow-faced old man with the mustache and the chin-whisker was your lookout, eh? The dapper little guy smoking a pipe just outside the door on Broadway! He got the tipoff to you just as I came in and" He whirled on the baldheaded storekeeper. "Well? Speak up! That's what happened, isn't it? This punk isn't going to hurt you!"

Curious light was in the Marquis' eyes. "Wait a minute, Ochs. He was smoking a cigar, you mean, don't you? Not a pipe—a cigar."

"No—a pipe—a pipe with a yellow curved stem. I saw him when I piled out of the car in front, standing right beside the doorway."

The Marquis turned on his heel and walked out to the side entrance of the shop, looked quickly around. The little old man who had been smoking a cigar outside this door a moment or two before was also gone.

Inside, Ochs made a sudden exclamation, came hurrying out behind him. "Yeah—that's right! The girl! Where is she?"

"It seems as if she left too," the Marquis said.

For a minute, Ochs breathed heavily. Then he cursed low in his throat. "By God! Somebody's making a monkey of us! By hell, I don't go for this! I'll sort it out—I'll shake this guy till he rattles. . . ." He whirled back inside the shop, sailed back toward the still motionless dark man.

The Marquis snapped, "I'll take it from here, you moron," and missed a hasty grab at the big man's arm.

Ochs patted air without looking back. "Just relax."

The Marquis swore, went after him. Ochs, jabbing his gun into his coat pocket, strode up ominously in front of the dark-skinned man and snarled, "Lets have it, baby!"

The Marquis' furious, "*Ochs*," and the jumping-eyed dark man's blurted, "Please, I . . ." came together.

Ochs savage, "All right—we'll start with this," was half grunted as he let go a roundhouse swing for the hapless man's mouth. The Marquis jumped in, red-faced, just in time to kick hard at Ochs' shin-bone, neatly clip his foot from under him and send him flopping spread-legged to the floor with a crash that shook the store.

The Marquis was white-lipped. "Take that stuff back to Safe-and-Loft, you thick-skinned mule. Get out of here. There's no Homicide here."

The spread-eagled Ochs' face was torn with pain. He got laboriously to his knees, wincing. "You son of a—" he began.

The Marquis' service gun hung straight down at his side in one small, black-gloved hand. "You'll shut that crude mouth of yours and get back among the Bowery stiffs where you can get by. Shut up—get out of this play. Yeah—make a pass at me and I'll put a bullet in your kneecap so fast you won't believe it. Go away. I don't want your help any more. I'll take care of this from now on. This isn't any conceivable part of your business anyway—so this is where you get off."

There was a slight commotion at the Broadway door, as two of the Marquis' men, attracted by the crowd, pushed their way in. The chubby, redheaded, deceptively boyish McGuire led the way, his twinkling blue eyes curious. At his heels lumbered the battered-faced big blond giant, Johnny Berthold, holding his too-small hat on the back of his shaggy blond mane with a broken-knuckled hand.

The Marquis' hot eyes flicked up and saw them. He said grimly: "Johnny—Lieutenant Ochs is just leaving. See that he gets to his car—or the car he appropriated from headquarters—right away. And I mean right away. Asa—" He clipped descriptions of the girl and the two dapper little old men in McGuire's ear. "Get out and see if you can find them around," and the red-head trotted off.

The furious Ochs was grey-faced as he slowly straightened, ran blazing eyes over the Broadway detectives. He licked his lips slowly with the tip of his tongue. For forty seconds, he was as if carved of stone. His voice was so shaky with rage that it was almost inaudible as he husked: "Nobody ever lived that could get away with this, Marquis."

BOTH Wilkins and the dark-faced man were hushed and awed as the Homicide detective limped grimly out. The dark man's gentle, Indian-like face was still impassive, but sweat shone on his forehead as the Marquis turned back to him.

He blurted: "Th-thank you officer. . . ."

"Don't thank me. This still isn't quite clear. The coincidence of you and those two little old men, now—pardon me, but are you an Indian?"

"No. I was born in Paraguay. I am a South American, by birth, but a naturalized Canadian for many years."

"Have you something to identify yourself?"

"I—" The other started searching through his pockets. There didn't seem to be much success in this. Finally, he said, "I—I'm sorry, I don't seem to have. But in my car—"

"Where is it?"

"Just across Seventh Avenue about half a block west. If you would permit me to—"

"All right."

He ignored Wilkins' fretful, bitter, "Don't do *me* no favors, Marty," and followed the soft-footed dark man out of the store, walked west with him.

"You're a Canadian?"

"Yes. David Pirie is the name. I deal in real estate, in Toronto. I'm staying at the Hotel Jefferson here. You could call them up. Although I'm sure I have enough in my car."

The Marquis ran an appraising eye over the car as they reached it—a maroon Buick convertible, a de luxe eight-cylinder model, new, gleaming and spotless save where a minor mishap had left a little scratch of yellow paint on one fender. The dark-faced man quickly unlocked it, slid in and pressed the button on the glove compartment.

The Marquis asked him: "Do you know a very pretty little dark girl, with long-bobbed black hair and a vivid, glowing sort of skin—" He went on to describe the girl who had inveigled him to the store.

The other's face was honestly bewildered.

"Eh? No. I—I assure you, I do not know any such girl."

"Or two dapper little old men—maybe they're twins. As Ochs said, they have yellow skin and trimmed moustaches and imperials. One of them seems to smoke a pipe and the other thin cigars."

"I—no, I assure you—I know no one like that. Who—what?"

"This girl came racing up to us a few moments ago and told us there was a holdup in Wilkins Store. When we went in, there seems to have been one of those little old men at each door. They faded, apparently, as soon as we got there. And so did the girl. I don't see any sense in it—unless *you* can."

The South American couldn't. His identification papers were in perfect order. The Marquis perforce, had to let him go.

When, an hour later, McGuire returned empty-handed, there was nothing else to be done, even had it seemed of any great consequence.

This was on Thursday. On Sunday night it exploded right in the Marquis' lap.

CHAPTER TWO

The Gallows 9

McGUIRE got it first because Ninth Avenue in the Fifties was officially under his wing. He was not far from the trouble spot when the thing went off—in a quiet little bar on Fifty-fifth, just off Fifth Avenue, which he regularly patronized. The bartender had a small radio under one end of the bar, which he tuned to police calls whenever McGuire was there and the redhead, by sitting directly over it, could catch the flashes above the din of the joint's juke-box.

He was halfway through a highball, when the announcer gave the eight-o'clock time signal—and almost immediately followed it with: "Attention cars 3546 and 6374. Go to the corner of Ninth Avenue and Fifty-sixth Street. A demented man is causing a crowd to collect outside the drug store there. That is all."

McGuire set down his glass, cursed wearily, and hurried out. Naturally, he missed the second signal. He was in a cab when it was being broadcast. He automatically told the hacker to disregard red lights, and arrived at the spot even ahead of the prowl cars.

McGuire could see the crowd around the corner ahead, by then, and the sirens of the prowl cars were screaming all around as they neared the spot, but the redhead saw nothing to get jarred about. Not till the cab had driven up as close as the crowd would permit and he had paid off, got out and elbowed his way halfway through the crowd, did he catch sight, over their heads, of the so-called 'demented' man.

Then he gasped aloud.

The man was bareheaded, his cap of straight black Indian-like hair shining in the light. His back to McGuire, he was halfway across the floor, of the drug store, two steps below street level, one hand outstretched as though groping toward a row of telephone booths. His eyes were screwed tight shut in a grimace of terrific agony that contorted his whole face and he seemed almost completely to have lost control of his legs. Blood was running down his heels and there were great splotches on the floor behind him, mark-

ing his passage. His feet were jiggling, dancing a weird little shuffle as he forced himself frantically toward the phones.

McGuire dived, cursing the stupefied crowd aside, but before he could break through, the reeling man had half fallen into a booth, clutched the phone, fumbled a nickel into the slot. He lasted just long enough to gasp a number hoarsely into the transmitter. Then he swayed backward, hit the corner of the booth, bounced back against the mouthpiece of the phone, fell outward again and crashed to the floor. The rattle was in his throat as McGuire ran finally down the steps, dived to his side. He must have reached him in the exact instant that he died.

For seconds, the redhead's eyes were caught, horrified, by the man's torso. His vest and shirt were unbuttoned. His undershirt had been shoved up around his neck. On his stomach, still angry and red against the flesh, was a raw burn. It was not an accidental burn, but had been branded there with some red-hot implement. It was the design of a gallows, with a small number nine under the dangling noose.

McGuire had to swallow hard and the nerves in his whole body crawled. He grabbed for pulse, lifted the man's shoulder far enough to see the horizontal slash in the back of his coat, let him down again. Not till he had let go the lifeless wrist and stood up, dragging a sleeve across his forehead, did he look squarely at the man's now-open and glazing eyes, and at his lead-colored, high-cheekboned gentle face. He recognized him instantly as the South American-Canadian, Pirie, the central figure of the pseudo-holdup of four nights before.

THE first stroke of ill luck fell as McGuire stood for an instant, startled, only half conscious of the shouting bluecoats who were funnelling into the shop. Then his eyes jerked up to the dangling receiver in the booth which the dead man had tried to use. He took a quick step, reaching for it—and a savage voice yelled:

"Don't touch that, McGuire! Leave it alone!"

The redhead turned, just as the rangy figure of Ochs strode down the steps, eager satisfaction in his burning eyes. He

glanced down at the dead man, and at the bluecoat now kneeling beside it. He dead?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"That makes it Homicide," Ochs said. "And I'm running it. Get away from there, McGuire—over there against the wall. I understand I have to let you hang around but if you touch so much as one thing from now on . . ." His voice trailed away as he came to a stop directly over the corpse. He suddenly stiffened, half bent over.

When he straightened up again and looked at McGuire, his dark eyes were small and shining. "Well, may I be eternally damned. If it isn't the heist-guy—your boss's pal. Now, wouldn't it be funny if . . ." He closed his lips.

He looked up at the phone booth. "What's this? Who was using this?" he snapped at the prowl sergeant.

"The dead guy got to it, tried to make a call just before he fell, Lieutenant."

Ochs stepped into the booth, picked up the receiver. He listened a minute, then said, "Hello—wait a minute—" then told McGuire, "I know you'll excuse me—privacy you know," and slid the booth door closed, whipped a notebook and pencil from his pocket.

THE second evil stroke was that it took McGuire four hours of searching to find the Marquis and relay the news to him. By then, the investigation at the drug store had long been completed, the body taken to the morgue.

"And the pup has had the nerve to send out a broadcast to get hold of you—wants you urgently," McGuire raved as they drove down toward Centre Street in a cab.

He's probably been prowling my section ever since Thursday praying for a break that would let him crack down on me."

"Listen—it's none of my business, but if there was any 'private' business between you and that dead guy—"

"There wasn't. I didn't know him from Adam. What makes you think that?"

"Ochs called him your pal and it seemed to start him thinking."

"The rat has a crafty brain when he

chooses to use it and he'd rather get back at me than breathe. We've always had a bellyful of trouble with Homicide. *Every* killing is a headache. But with that rattlesnake to look out for we don't dare *not* keep one jump ahead of them, at least till we can find what's going on here."

"What do you suppose he got from that phone?"

"Who Pirie was calling. What else?"

"That gives *him* a starting point. Have we got any?"

"We've got nothing—except that I know who Pirie is and he didn't—at least until after he picked up that hanging phone. No, we've got to dig like hell"

The cab squealed in to the curb before the yawning garage doors of the morgue, and they piled out. The cop on duty in the public anteroom saluted.

"Where's the body—the knifed and branded man—from my district?" the Marquis asked him.

"Back in the autopsy room, Lieutenant. Lieutenant Ochs is in there."

"He would be," the Marquis growled, as they pushed on through the smaller anteroom and into the vast, high-ceilinged 'refrigerator' with its grim, blank rows of oversize drawers.

Their footsteps padded hollowly in the vault-like chamber, as they crossed to the door in the far wall, marked 'No Admittance'. The Marquis palmed the knob, pulled it open—and a slight, fawn-colored man who had been leaning against it inside practically fell out into their arms—Burton, a second-grade detective who worked under Ochs.

"Hey—wait a minute! Wait a minute! You can't go in th. . . . Oh, it's you, Marquis."

Beyond him, in the cold, bare marble room, the Marquis saw the naked body on a slab. Beside the slab, Ochs stood, hands on hips, hat on the back of his head obviously cross-questioning a distinguished-looking white-haired man.

The white-haired man looked down frightenedly out of the corner of one eye at the stiffened body. With a balled handkerchief, he was mopping his palms. He had a short, abrupt-looking face that would normally have been ruddy, heavy white eyebrows. There was white piping to the vest of the gray suit he wore under

his Chesterfield. He was saying in a nervous, uncomfortable croak: "I can't conceive any possible reason he should have been calling me. I do not know him. Never saw him in my life."

Ochs' voice was nasty. "You don't expect me to believe . . ." and then suddenly he became aware of the Marquis. He said tartly: "Please step out there for a few minutes, Mr. O'Connor, and wait for me. I've some urgent business to attend to." He stepped over and opened a door in the wall and the white-haired man, after a moment's hesitation, edged reluctantly out.

Ochs said harshly, when he had closed the door: "All right, Mr. Marquis. Kindly take a look at the item on the buffet here."

The Marquis' eyes were somber as he wandered over and looked down at the dead Pirie.

"Just to clear up any misunderstanding in your mind," Ochs bit. "I'm in charge of the investigation into this man's stabbing. Naturally, you'll give me every assistance in your power."

"Naturally."

"I suppose you recognize him—the holdup guy that you were so chummy with the other night?"

The Marquis looked down again. "I'm not chummy with any holdup guys, Ochs."

"What's this bird's name? Who is he?"

The Marquis shrugged. "You know as much as I do. The only time I ever saw him, you were with me."

"And you didn't take his name and address?"

"I?" The Marquis looked faintly surprised. "Why should I? Because he bought some shirts and ties in a Broadway store?"

For a moment, the blood rushed into Ochs' dark face and his eyes looked hot. Then he set his jaw. "I see. Then you don't know who he is?"

"How should I?" The Marquis' eye strayed to a table against the wall behind Ochs. Bloodstained clothing made an untidy heap on the table-top. "Wasn't there anything on him? Papers or something?"

Ochs compressed his lips. "No. Not so much as a damned match stick—except

money. There weren't even labels in his clothes."

"Tsk! Tsk! Sounds like you've got a tough one here." The Marquis strolled over and stood looking down at the clothes. "It'd certainly be a shame if you should flop on the first one you tackled in my section, Ochs."

"Don't bet any money on that, brain-guy."

THE Marquis picked up the clothes—carelessly, because it did not occur to him as possible that anything could have been overlooked in the pile. He held the trousers up by the waistband, saw the caked blood down the back of each. "What do you figure that brand is on his stomach, Ochs—or have you got round to that?"

"I—" Ochs started—and stopped as a soggy dark-blue pad dropped out of the pant-leg. He came quickly over.

The Marquis was before him, stooped and picked it up, inwardly raging at himself for lack of finesse—and an instant later redoubled his raging, as he shook out the folds of padded blue silk and saw what he had.

It was a handkerchief, almost bandanna size, with a very wide border of solid dark blue. The square in the center was of dark-blue background, but it was patterned with small white Vs. Oil soaked it in splotches.

Ochs' oath was startled. "*That girl!* That babe that blatted about the holdup! That's her handkerchief—she had a dress just like that on!"

He grabbed it from the Marquis' unresisting hand. "Where the hell was it?"

The Marquis' temples were flushed. "In the leg of the trousers. You do a nice job of searching, Ochs."

Ochs' momentary smile was thin and malicious. "Yeah. Nice of you to help me out. What's that on it?" He smelled it, and his forehead knotted for an instant. "What the hell? Olive oil." Then he swung toward the door. "Burton!"

The detective at the door came over. "Yeah—what. . . ?"

"Take this over to the I-bureau. It looks like imported silk. It was sold along with a dress with that same pattern on it. Tell those loafers to trace it for me."

"O. K." Burton started for the door.

"Oh—one more thing, Burton." Ochs' shining eyes were thin and his lips were tight again. "I just want you to take note that Marquis here couldn't identify the dead man—didn't know his name or anything about him."

"Huh? Yeah, sure." He went out.

"Well, I certainly appreciate your coming down, Marquis," Ochs said. "You wouldn't have any more surprises for me? No?"

McGUIRE blurted, the minute they were out of the room, "What the hell? Do you know who that guy is?"

"Of course I do. But I've made enough of a sucker of myself without doing any more of that pup's work for him. Listen—if anything comes of that handkerchief tracing, I've got to get it first. Go over to the I-bureau and talk business to whoever's handling that for Ochs. And if you can't buy them, then figure out some other way to get a line on the girl who bought that. I've got to know it at least an hour before Ochs does."

"All right—but it wouldn't hurt if I knew something about what we're into here."

"It wouldn't hurt if I did, either," the Marquis growled. "Up to now, all I know is that a girl in a dress that matches that handkerchief came up and hollered *holdup* the other night, that we charged the store, saw these little old men at the doors—though God knows if they're connected or not—and that Pirie was inside. He wasn't doing any holding-up and by the time we made sure of that the old men and the girl were gone. Now he turns up tortured—branded with this gallows nine, stabbed in the back—and with the girl's handkerchief soaked in oil. It could be that it was a swab put there to ease that burn, I don't know."

"Who's this O'Connor guy Ochs has got in there now?"

"You know as much as I do—he's the party that Pirie tried to phone with his last effort—or at least he's the party that got the call. He doesn't seem to know Pirie, so it may be that something went wrong on his call—got a wrong number maybe—and that this O'Connor may be an innocent bystander."

"Listen—how about trying to find where Pirie was stabbed? He couldn't have walked far with that cut in him. Maybe it was right around that neighborhood—in my section."

"It's certainly worth a try. Maybe the precinct cops will help you out in covering the ground. But get going on that handkerchief. I'm going to get Harry Derosier down here to tail O'Connor when he leaves, just in case."

When McGuire had hurried out, the Marquis walked out into the public ante-room and from the pay-booth called his Squad's unofficial headquarters—the little Times Square Theater Ticket Agency. He got Harry Derosier on the phone and said: "Grab a cab and get down here as soon as you can. Meet me half a block or so west of the morgue on Centre Street. I'll be waiting."

He left the morgue, walked smartly round the corner and then lagged idly along the narrow darkness of Centre.

He was grimly impatient to get to his one ace in the hole—the dead Pirie's quarters—the Jefferson Hotel. Once there, there should be some kind of light—something to at least hint at what was going on.

Five minutes passed without any sign of Derosier—ten. The Marquis walked on raging up toward the street light on the next corner, wondering if the sergeant had misunderstood his instructions.

The street was sparsely sprinkled with parked cars. When the Marquis reached the street-light he paused and glanced idly, for the first time, at the car curbed there. Then he stared incredulously. It was a maroon convertible Buick. He backed quickly and saw the Ontario license plate on the car's rear. Even then, he simply could not make himself believe that it might be the dead Pirie's car—the car to which the murdered man had led him four nights before—until he bent over the left front mudguard and saw the scratches of yellow paint on the otherwise spotless surface.

For moments the Marquis stood in astonished thought. How, in the name of reason, would the dead Pirie's car come here? Who. . . ?

He finally tried the doors, found both of them locked. He reached for a set of

master-keys in his hip pocket, backed a little and turned sideways to let the thin street-light beams fall on the keyhole in the door's handle.

Doing that let him catch the sudden violent flash of movement from the corner sixty feet away. His head jerked—and in one white second he saw the dark figure's arm flash up and down and saw the glinting streak of silver whistle at him. He ducked his head frantically.

He smashed his forehead, almost splitting it, on the chromium-steel handle of the door, and the ponderous throwing-knife exploded the plate-glass window of the Buick. The two crashes were blended as far as the Marquis was concerned and he sailed away into darkness, slammed down.

HE WAS not out more than a few minutes before sense spun back into his thundering head and his eyes flicked open. He found himself slumped on the curb, leaning sideways against the car's rear wheel. He got slowly, painfully to his feet, trying to control his jumping stomach—and a car's lights came dancing down the street and brakes suddenly squealed beside him.

He was dabbing at the cut on his forehead with a handkerchief when Derosier's long, English face poured out of the tonneau of the cab, explaining hastily: "Awfully sorry, old boy—had an accident in one cab and had to switch to an—Great Caesar! What. . . ?"

"Pay your cab," the Marquis ground through clenched teeth.

When the cab had rolled away, he silenced the blond-mustached detective's erupting questions with: "Somebody tried to anchor"—he looked round at the sidewalk, stooped down and picked the pound-and-a-half throwing knife from the gutter, "*—this*, in my back. I got off with a crack in the head."

"My God! Who?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. This thing's going crazy." He set his teeth. "I wanted you to tail a guy named O'Connor, who was in there talking to Ochs. Go in and ask the cop at the desk if he's left yet—a white-haired guy with sort of yellow eyes. Hurry it up."

While the loose-jointed detective hur-

ried back to the corner below, the Marquis, after a careful, sour look around, opened the car door with a master-key but, as he half-expected now, there were no papers or information of any sort in either glove compartment or pockets—or anywhere else in the car. That meant the attack had not been made to block him away from the car, but had been a deliberate attempt to kill. There was nothing in the car to worry anybody.

He had his clothes brushed off, the scarf neat at his throat, his hard hat clean and back on his head, when Derosier came hurrying back. The sergeant's long face was distressed.

"He left, chief—just a few minutes ago."

The Marquis clamped his lips and swore. "All right," he said finally. "Take a plant on this car. It's barely possible that someone may come to drive it away. If anyone does, grab them—because I want them bad. If nobody comes in two hours, call the Agency."

His head had subsided and was merely throbbing gently as he caught a cab two blocks away and told the driver: "Hotel Jefferson—on Lexington around Fiftieth—get there fast." And by the time he got uptown and across to the skyscraper, modern hotel, he was practically back to normal.

CHAPTER THREE

Chaco Oil

HE WASTED no time on the clerks in the plush-carpeted, multi-pillared, softly lighted lobby of the hotel, walked straight for the door whose illuminated green sign read: *Assistant Manager on Duty*.

He walked through into a dimly lighted walnut office and a slender, quiet gray man—gray eyes, gray hair, gray clothes and even gray skin—peered up at him from behind a desk. "Oh, hello, Marty."

"You have—or did have—a guest in this hotel named Pirie. A South American-Canadian. About five seven, thick should"

"We still have him. What's wrong with him?"

"He's lying down at the morgue, dead

from a knife in his back. I want to see his room."

The gray man groaned. "Oh, Lord."

He flipped an annunciator and when a voice answered, "Yes, sir," he asked, "Is the key to 2517 in the rack . . . It is? Send it here please," and an instant later a bellboy entered and handed the key to the harassed assistant manager. "Come on," he told the Marquis and they went out to the elevator, rode up. At the door to 2517 the manager knocked, then keyed the door and frowned when the room proved to be brightly lighted.

The Marquis advanced three steps and stood looking round at what might have been the visitation of a cyclone. It was a large, comfortable outside room. A large wardrobe trunk stood in one corner and a kneehole desk and typewriter in another. Papers were a sea around each of them and there was a mound of clothes in the center of the floor. The drawers of bureau and dressing table were yanked out, hung drunkenly.

Somebody had been through the room in a frenzy—but not in such a frenzy that he had missed removing every scrap of information that would have added anything to what the Marquis already had. In less than ten minutes of quick methodical examination, that became obvious.

"How long has he been with you?" the Marquis asked.

"About six months—although he's been here before for a few weeks at a time, for the past three or four years."

"Well, who did this? Certainly not Pirie." He went over and opened the door, hunkered down and played the beam of his pocket-flash about the lock for a minute, then stood up. "It wasn't forced or picked. Somebody used a key."

"There are such things as master-keys," Runyon's fretful voice said. "If his own has been out, the desk will know it. You want to . . . ?"

"Let's see that," the Marquis said as they trudged back down the hall, and the manager handed over the metal-tabbed key.

The Marquis said: "Well, your guest had a duplicate key made from this one. You can see the file marks. Or do you have your duplicates filed out from blanks?"

"I suppose we do sometimes. The desk will know if we had one made from this."

The head desk-clerk said: "No. We haven't had a key made for that room in many, many months. We have two spares downstairs in the safe, as well as the extra in here—" He put his neat white hand into the pigeonhole behind the desk which was marked with Pirie's room number, displayed a second tabbed key.

"Did he have any regular callers?"

The clerk pulled his right ear and vanished behind the rack of pigeonholes.

"What happened to . . . ?" the manager began.

A tired-looking thin blonde girl in a black dress with a white Eton collar came out from the opposite end of the honeycomb. She had a telephone headset clamped across her head, the plug dangling on her dress. She had a white slip in her hand and she reached up and ran it along till she located box 2517, then poked it in.

"Wait a minute, sister," the Marquis said. "Let's see that."

The girl turned back, looked questioningly at the manager.

He said, "Let him have it, Ruby," and she flicked the slip onto the counter before the Marquis.

"When did it come in?"

"Just this minute," she said with asperity. "I rang him half a dozen times and got no answer, so . . ."

"All right, Ruby. Let's have the slip."

The Marquis' eyes were intent on the scribbled message. It read: *Call Sean at Columbus 6-9945*. "Was the caller a man or a woman?"

"If you ask me, it was a pansy," the girl said.

The Marquis turned, saying, "Be right back, Sam," and walked quickly across the lobby to the row of telephone booths. He called headquarters. Two minutes later, he had the information that Columbus 6-9945 was listed in the name of one Mr. Sean Frawley, at the Lincolnshire apartments, on Sixth Avenue just below Central Park—in the flank of the Marquis' own district.

A CAB hurried the Marquis across and down and dropped him on the corner across from the Lincolnshire, on Sixth.

It was a semi-modern apartment house of gray stone, with a green canopy over its entrance. Under the canopy were four steps up to the miniature lobby. It was squarely on the corner, twelve or fifteen stories high and covering a sizable amount of ground.

Even at two in the morning, nearly three-quarters of the windows were lighted and the Marquis went in to the Italian-tiled little lobby.

"Who is Mr. Sean Frawley?" the Marquis asked the Negro switchboard boy.

"Why—why, he an artist, boss."

"What kind of artist?"

"Why—he just fixin' to be an artist, kind of, boss. He live with he uncle and go to art school."

"All right. Take me up. And don't call him to tell him I'm coming." As the elevator operator waited him up he asked "What kind of a layout has he got?"

"Apah'tment 6F—on the no'th-west coh'neh, capin, yassah."

The door at the corner of the green hall, when he operated the tiny knocker, was opened as though someone had been standing waiting for the knock.

The opener was a beautiful blond boy. He had a cleft chin, a pinkish skin, a head of thick, corn-colored curls. His face was big without being strong, his eyes light blue with a seemingly permanent expression of eagerness. He was tall, well-built, but with the indefinable air of softness all over him. His voice was a soft tenor. "Yes?"

"Are you Sean Frawley?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

The Marquis bellied his way unhurriedly inside, heeled the door to behind him. "You phoned a Mr. Pirie, at the Jefferson Hotel, just now."

The other's wide, smooth forehead wrinkled quickly. "Of course I did. May I ask what business it is of yours?"

The Marquis extended his gloved palm, his shield shining on it. "You know Mr. Pirie pretty well?"

"Yes, yes, I—oh, another officer. Well, where is my brother?"

"Your brother?"

"Yes. I understand another officer came for him, earlier in the evening while I was in my studio. They went away and I'm beginning to get worried . . ."

"What was this officer's name?"

"Eh? I really don't know. I'll ask my uncle—"

"Wait a minute!" the Marquis said as his eye fell on a row of packed bags in the hall behind the boy. "Whose are those? Who is going away?"

"Why—my brother," the youth's tone was mildly wondering. "That is why I'm worried about him. He called about an hour ago and told me to pack his things—that he unexpectedly had to go up to Toronto and that he would be home right away. But he hasn't come, you see . . ."

A door down the hall opened as the boy finished. ". . . That was why I called Pirie—to see if he might be there. He often is . . ."

A WISP of an old man with a wizened face like a monkey and tufts of red hair over both ears, and on the exact center of his head, darted out—darted, despite the fact that he leaned heavily on a walking stick to negotiate. He said sharply: "Sean—what's going on here? Who is that?"

"Another officer, Uncle Rourke. He—"

"Officer!" the old man yelled. "Dammit, what—here, Sean—you go along to the studio. I'll talk to this Peeler—"

He broke off, his eyes going over the Marquis' shoulder, as a snap-lock was clicked open and the door swung inward. A man of about the Marquis' height, but heavier, older, came in.

"Well, well," the Marquis said grimly. "Mr. O'Connor. Haven't seen you since the good old days at the morgue."

The blond youth's eye jumped wide. "M-morgue?"

O'Connor's face was suddenly pale, his amber eyes panicky.

"The boy couldn't possibly know anything to help you."

"No? Well, suppose I call Lieutenant Ochs and inform him . . ."

The other's abrupt, distinguished face shone with sweat. "Please—I—I realize—I will answer your questions. The boy is sensitive. Here—" He stepped quickly over to one of the two doors that faced them before the hall right-angled, fumbled open the knob and reached in to switch on lights. "If you will step in here, I will be glad to—to talk to you."

The Marquis eyed him for four full seconds curiously, then said: "All right. But don't go away, sonny boy. I may want you presently."

When the Marquis had walked into a charmingly decorated library, O'Connor hastily closed the door behind him.

"Mr. Marquis, I am a frightened man. But believe me, I am willing to face anything, rather than have that boy brought into this situation."

"Why?"

"Because he is completely ignorant of anything that has been going on. He is a very talented youngster, highly strung. He must be treated very delicately. He—I—"

"All right," the Marquis said after a minute. "We'll come back to him later. You—wait a minute. He's your brother—yet his name's Frawley—"

"My mother married a second time. He is my half-brother."

"The old monkey's his father?"

"No, no. Rourke is my uncle—my father's brother."

"All right. Go ahead. Tell me why you refused to identify Pirie in the morgue—and why you had your bags packed in a hurry to jump town. And come to think of it, why you ransacked Pirie's room tonight. Yes, by God and why you drove his car down to the morgue."

O'CONNOR sank into a leather chair, put his forehead in the heels of his hands. "I—I really own that car," he said huskily. "I own everything that Pirie had. He—well, worked for me, represented me, as it were, held my transactions in his name. I—when I heard he was dead, I went to his room—to remove anything that might point to me. I—I had to get out of New York so I could put through the transfers—I hold assignments for everything Pirie owned. The car—I was so used to driving it that I'd forgotten it was in his name. I didn't remember it till I started to go back to it outside the morgue and saw a man lying unconscious beside it, and a knife . . ."

"So what did you do with it since?"

"N-nothing. I couldn't think of anything. I—just left it there."

"That's swell," the Marquis said grimly. "Did you drive Lieutenant Ochs down in it from here?"

"Yes, yes. Oh Lord, I—I don't seem to be able to think. All I had in my head when I saw that—that man was to get away—get out of the country and . . ."

"Why? Did you kill Pirie?"

The other's startled gray face came up. "I?" he croaked hoarsely. "Good God, no. Don't you understand? Pirie was my—my screen—my protection."

"Against what?"

"Ag—against certain people who want to kill me—"

"What did you do to them?"

"I—I was the cause of—of two of their friends being killed and of their being tortured. It was an accident. But they won't even give me an opportunity to explain. Perhaps you'll understand when I tell you this: Pirie, I am positive, was killed tonight because he would not reveal to them where they could find me—to kill me. He—a few days ago they almost caught him—in a haberdashery store on Broadway. But some blind luck intervened—some detectives came along by accident and he got away. But he heard them describe these men and he knew they had spotted him, would try to get him again.

"They must have caught him at last tonight—tortured him to make him expose me—and killed him when they could not open his lips."

The Marquis' eyes were pinpoints. "And the gallows' nine?"

"That—that is the name of a certain hill—in the Chaco—in South America—the place where this terrible thing happened. They branded it on him as a warning to me—don't you see? As an index of what they are going to do to me!"

After a minute the Marquis said. "All right. Pull yourself together. Nobody's going to do anything to you. Just give me the whole story."

"I have given it to you. This thing happened in '20. They have been after me ever since. I managed to elude them because they have no funds. They have to work their way from city to city after me. Until about two years ago, I had no idea that they were searching for me still—till Pirie saw them in Montreal. They were talking to a—a sort of underworld chieftain and Pirie managed to overhear my name mentioned. I got myself out of the city, out of the country first. I had my

lawyer, who has a large criminal practise, make inquiries for me. But they had vanished from the city by then and he could find out nothing for me. Believe me, I wanted to find them, to explain to them, to make amends. . . .”

“For what? That’s the nub of it. What was this deal that started all this?”

The white-haired man sat up straight in his chair. His amber eyes were hot and frightened. “But that doesn’t matter, does it? The situation is as I’ve outlined it. I—believe me, Mr. Marquis, there is a reason—a good reason—why I can’t tell you, or anyone else in the world—the circumstances of that deal. And it cannot matter to you.”

“I’d have to judge that myself. And you’ll tell me, friend. You’ve started off swell—realizing that I’ve got you in a hell of a hole if I want to turn you up to Ochs. Now I know also that you get in a frenzy when anybody touches that boy. So just keep on letting it come or I’ll take young Blondie downtown”

The white-haired man was on his feet, his face gray. “You—no, you can’t—”

“Why can’t I? Maybe he knows a lot I’d like to know.”

“But he doesn’t! He doesn’t!” the other groaned. “My God, Mr. Marquis—I love that boy—he’s like my son. If—if it happened that he knew the truth—he’d turn against me. And I swear it cannot matter one way or another to you”

“If it doesn’t, then there’s no reason why I should retail it to him. But don’t try to stop now or hold out on me. I’ll keep your confidence”

“You—will you swear to—Mr. Marquis, if he should find out”

“I’ve given you my word to keep it to myself unless it’s absolutely necessary that it come out.”

The older man sank into the chair again. He swallowed desperately, twice. “Because—because his father is one of the men, God help me, that died through my error of judgement.”

“Oh?”

THE other’s face was shining and gray, his eyes tortured. “I—my own father was no good. He died from a drunken brawl in the West. My mother married again—Dick Frawley. He was much

younger than she—only ten years older than I. But we were friends from the minute we met—almost like brothers. He—I dare say he didn’t treat my mother any too well. She only lived till Sean was about three. But I idolized him.

“After my mother died Dick and I were in business together—oil. We were speculators in oil lands, royalties, properties—anything from which we thought we could make a penny. Wildcatters. But you must believe me—we were close—no two men could have been closer. We—

“To make a long story short, we ran into a Mennonite in Toronto who had been out to the Chaco—they seem to have a colony out there—and he hinted that there was oil there. We—those people are extremely religious, care nothing for money, and—all in all we felt we could place faith in what he told us.

“Well, we did go, there was oil there—and we did make a fortune.”

He swabbed at his face and neck. “I would to God that that was the whole story. But it isn’t the millionth of it. This is what happened:

“The district we were heading for seemed to be owned by Paraguay. I say seemed because since then a gory war has been fought by Bolivia, who also claimed it. At any rate, we had to deal with some government to get leases and the U. S. had, not long back, as arbitrator awarded the territory to Paraguay. So we went to Asuncion.

“I won’t weary you with a recital of the maddening difficulties we found facing us in the way of rapacious and dishonest bureaucrats. Furthermore, even the government itself was liable to confiscate any oil we found, under a very handy law they had on the book. We found ourselves in an almost impossible situation from the start. We solved it, in the end, by taking in as partners two Paraguayans—twins, with the right sort of connections in the government offices—two men with, oddly, American surnames—Harvey and Vernor Maleta. They were the last of a famous family and as deadly a pair as the country had, but they had a code of honor.

“They advised us on the terrain—the Gran Chaco is a terrible jungle—aided us in fitting out our expedition—did everything they could to aid us, even pointed

out the only way we could hope to cash in on possible success. Namely to transfer ownership to some American interests before anyone learned of our discovery. We, you understand, were Canadians and Canadians did not rate down there as powerful. Only the United States.

"We went into the interior by horse, and the horses down there are very perishable commodities. You have to buy them as you go along. We had to include a specialist in horse-buying as one of our party and—nepotism being the same there as anywhere in the world—two friends of the Maletas also had to be declared partners.

"Our horse buyer was Pirie. He was educated, could speak French and English, as well as Spanish—for all I know he too was from some ancient family and had fallen on evil days. He never spoke to me about his background. But the second day we were in the jungle, by luck, an outlaw horse got the better of him and was in the act of kicking him to death when I chanced to come along and shoot the beast. That was the beginning of his fidelity to me.

"Anyway, we went into the jungle—dead broke, for it had taken many times what we had expected to outfit ourselves and our guests'—and found the oil. It took us less than a month from the time we started, to have assembled absolute proofs of a fine oil field, just waiting to be tapped.

"Then disaster overtook us. Out of nowhere, a marauding band of deserters from the Bolivian army appeared and raided us, took us all prisoners. The Maletas did the only thing possible—pretended that we were rich and that we could pay well for our freedom. But the best deal we could make was for them to hold all but one of us, while the one of us went for money. They were half-skeptical. But they let me go and finally, Pirie, to guide me. We were to hit for Argentina, where Dick and I had a friend managing the local business of World-Over Oil. That is, we thought he was a friend, till then.

"The outlaws allowed us ten days to get out, get the money, and return. By desperate traveling, Pirie and I got to Argentina, to Buena Aconcuja, where this field agent was.

"I, unfortunately, must have betrayed my desperation to the agent in Aconcuja.

Because he offered exactly twenty thousand dollars for our entire interest—whereas I had expected at least a hundred thousand. Or maybe he had some sort of miraculous information—because that was the exact sum I needed for ransom."

THE sweating O'Connor swabbed desperately at his neck and face. "Haggling did no good whatever. And I—in my folly, I suppose—decided to charter a plane and fly to Cordoba. If everything went well, I knew the field agent of another company—the American Consolidated—would buy us for a fair price there and I could still get back inside my time limit.

"But the luck of the devil was against me. My man was away from home on a few days holiday and I had to wait twenty-four hours. When he did return, he snapped up our offer instantly, paid my price and did everything possible to get me back to the border in time—but I was late.

"To make matters totally disastrous, I was met at the border with news that a detachment of Paraguayan soldiers had stumbled on the outlaws in the jungle, shot them down to a man, in the vicinity of the Gallows Nine. Some of the bodies were mutilated and branded—evidence of torture. The commander of the detachment, by some weird process of logic, had decided that the members of our party were in league with the Bolivian outlaws and come to some falling out with them, thus starting internal trouble. He was vague about it—the outlaws were all dead, so why should he bother himself? He did not even know, nor did I find out for four years, that the Maletas, horribly tortured by burning, had feigned death and managed to escape."

He hesitated and his amber eyes were crawling holes of torment. "At any rate, there I was, with the fortune in gold, and Pirie—and not the slightest reason to believe that they all had not been butchered. I—Pirie pointed out that we might even get into trouble ourselves if we admitted our connection with the band, whereas we could do no good whatever. So we came away, came back to Canada.

"I took Dick's boy in—we had left him with my uncle when we went to South

America—and swore that he would never lack for anything. When, about two years ago, Pirie spotted them in Montreal, I instantly severed all possible connections with the boy—though I'd grown terribly fond of him meantime. The boy had shown talent for painting, so I sent the two of them here, so that he could have the best of teachers. Believe me—I have just been waiting for this blow to fall—praying that some miracle would intervene to cause them to accept what I have—I've nearly half a million dollars now—and go away without the boy having to know what really happened to his father. And that's the utter truth, so help me God. All of it."

The Marquis frowned dubiously. O'Connor came to his feet, his short face aghast. "You—my God—you look as though you didn't believe me."

"It doesn't really matter much whether I do—whether I think you calmly walked off with the loot and sicked those soldiers on your pals, does it? My job is to keep Broadway spotless . . ."

O'Connor jumped over and grabbed him by the lapel, his eyes frantic. "Dear God—I swear that I've told you the truth!"

The Marquis pushed at his hand calmly to disengage it. "I said it doesn't matter. It's all messed up with Pirie's murder now. I have to do all I can to prevent yours following it. But I'd like your story better if it contained a dark little girl—"

The other's amber eyes were frantically blank. "I—I don't know any girl like that."

"I mean she must have seen your Maleta twins closing in on Pirie the first time, and run for cops to break it up. She claimed there was a holdup going on and that's why the cops arrived to scare away your friends."

"But I swear I don't know her."

The Marquis tried to read his eyes. "There was also the matter of somebody trying to drive a knife into my back tonight. That wouldn't have been you?"

"Me? Good God Almighty. . . . Are you mad? Why would I. . . ?"

"I don't know why. There's all sorts of possibilities. Maybe you killed Pirie—in an access of fear that he'd cave in and turn you up to these Maletas. Maybe you got the idea that I had something on you

when you saw me examining your car. How do I know why?"

The other's face was twitching and desperate, his eyes pleading frantically. "I swear I didn't. . . ."

FROM the half-open doorway to the hall, Lieutenant Ochs snarled murderously: "You did, did you, you white-haired ——!" He strode in, slammed the door behind him, flung a bunch of keys on the table. "That ought to get you quite a few years in the can—obstructing justice. Though I like Marquis' theory better—that you knocked him off yourself. I'm sorry I didn't get here in time to hear *what* Pirie might have turned up to these Maletas. But you'll tell me, pal—you'll tell me everything you know."

He swung on Marquis and his swarthy face shone. "Well, Lieutenant—have you anything to tell me about this job that this one can't? No? Then get out, if you please. You are hampering my investigation."

The Marquis' face was dark. "I can abridge it considerably for you. Because of a business deal, a couple of men were after Mr. O'Connor here. The details of the deal aren't of any consequence, and. . . ."

"I'll figure that out. What's this about an attack on you?"

The Marquis' eyebrows went up. "Oh? Was there an attack on me?"

Ochs' teeth closed. "All right, Marquis. On your way."

O'Connor blurted crazily, "Mr. Marquis—if you see them—remember—I'll give them anything—anything. . . ."

"I'll remember. And I don't really think for a minute that you killed anybody. Call me if you need help."

Ochs' face was nearly turgid. He yanked open the door and said: "That's enough. Get out."

The wizened face of the monkey-like little old man, Rourke O'Connor popped out of the door down the hall. "What—who's in there? Who was that came in?"

"Lieutenant Ochs."

"What? How did he—I didn't let him in! Why, damn him, it's breaking and entering. . . ."

"I doubt it," the Marquis said. "Mr. O'Connor seems to have left his keys

sticking in the door when he came in." He hesitated, wondering how much this oldster knew of the story that had just been told him. So he let it go with: "My name is Lieutenant Marquis." He scribbled the number of the Times Square Theater Ticket Agency on a card. "If you—or Mr. O'Connor there—want to get in touch with me a message will reach me there."

"Hah!" the old man said caustically. "What would we want to get in touch with you for?" but nevertheless he took the card.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Girl in V'd Blue

FOUR times during the night and morning, he phoned the apartment in the Lincolnshire, in an attempt to find out the fate of the white-haired oil man. The first time he got as far as speaking to the ancient, Uncle Rourke, who told him: "He's still in there, talkin' with that Ochs." The second time, the bellboy-switchboard-operator told him that an officer had taken O'Connor away in a squad car. The third time—at seven o'clock—the Negro advised him that Ochs had stayed in the apartment for nearly an hour after O'Connor had been driven away in the squad car, then had come down alone. The fourth time—at noon, the odd news that the blond youth, Sean Frawley had, just ten minutes before the Marquis' call, gone out alone. The colored boy said he 'look like he was all strung up, like he walkin' in he sleep.'

Startled, the Marquis could only add it up to mean that, first, Ochs had decided to take O'Connor downtown, either to sweat him, or to book him on one of the charges that the seemingly foolish, distracted man had laid himself open to. Secondly, that the deadly Homicide lieutenant had stayed behind and spent an hour talking to either the monkey-faced old uncle and the blond youth, or both. Thirdly, that in view of the blond youth's exodus, it was probably the latter. What did *this* portend? What. . . ?

The phone rang on his library table and the operator downstairs announced that

McGuire was on his way up. A minute later, the redhead trundled into the room looking as fresh as though he had just risen from eight hours' sleep. "Well, I got the wholesaler of that silk out of bed hours ago. I got the distributor on the job just this minute and came over to grab some lunch at your expense."

The Marquis went over again to the phone, lifted it, and the clerk said, before he could utter a word: "Mr. Marquis, there's a blond boy on the way up to your apartment. He has a gun in his pocket. He threatened to shoot me if I warned you he was coming."

The Marquis said, "All right," quickly and hung up, told McGuire: "Go through the bedroom and out into the hall. There's a blond boy on his way up with a gun. I want you to get round behind him in case the need arises."

"Oh-oh." The redhead turned and darted through a door in the living-room's side—just as knuckles rapped on the door.

The Marquis waited. When the second rap came, he called, "Just a minute," walked over and, rattling the lock unnecessarily so as to give the redhead ample time, opened up.

The blond Sean Frawley's pinkish face was white and drawn, his light blue eyes bloodstreaked. He said, "Mr. Marquis? You know me," and the Marquis threw the door wide. "Why, yes. Come in. . . ."

The boy jerked a pistol from his side pocket and put it low in the Marquis' stomach. His eyes were frightened, desperate. He choked: "Go inside, Mr. Marquis. I—I've got to talk to you."

The Marquis backed obediently, the boy's half-glazed eyes clinging to his own. Over the boy's shoulder, McGuire's curious face loomed, as he kept step, no more than eight inches from the boy's back.

The Marquis said, "Hadn't you better close the door?" And the boy half turned. McGuire did not even bother to put a gun in his back, simply reached round his waist and yanked the neat blued-steel revolver from the boy's hand, broke it, spilling the cartridges in his hand, and kicked the door shut.

THE boy stood stupidly, looking around him as if he were going to burst into tears. Finally, he blurted: "Mr.—Mr.

Marquis—you know who killed Pirie, don't you?" It was almost a shout.

"Well, I hope to be able to find out."

"You do know! You know—and you know that the same person is going to try to hurt my brother. Don't you?"

"Who was telling you all this?"

"Never mind who told me. You do—don't you? And you're just waiting till the—the person attacks and kills my brother—you're using him as live bait—just so you can catch the murderer in the very act—aren't you? *Aren't you?*"

The Marquis' eyes suddenly focussed again on the youth. "Maybe I do know—maybe I don't. But your brother isn't going to get hurt if I can help it. Besides, didn't Lieutenant Ochs take him to jail?"

"Yes, he did, but he knew perfectly well you'd have him out by nightfall—because you have so much influence."

"I wouldn't have any more chance than—" the Marquis began—and stopped. "Never mind. Asa—take Mr. Frawley back to his apartment—it's on your way downtown. And phone me right away if O'Connor's back there yet."

The redhead's eyes were muddy, but he said worriedly: "Hey—how about my lunch?"

"Hell with it. Get down there. . . ."

The boy clenched his teeth, took a long breath and burst out, "Mr. Marquis—if you let anything happen to my brother, I'll—I'll—"

"Sure. I know," the Marquis soothed, practically pushing him out by main strength into the hall, the mutinous McGuire after him.

He went quietly to the telephone and called a number. "Solly? Yeah you're still my lawyer. What do I have to do? Get in trouble every day. Listen—for purposes of inheriting, is a half-brother the same as a full brother? He is? Now make sure. If a person has no living relatives nearer than an uncle, would a half-brother get his whole estate? . . . Yeah. Thanks, Solly. . . ."

He hung up, quickly lifted the receiver once more, called the Agency. He inquired as to what detectives of the Squad were there and when told that Big Johnny Berthold and Al Hackett were both on hand, told them: "Go up to the Lincolnshire Arms. Park in the drug store across

the street till Asa meets you there."

He paced the floor for five more minutes before the phone rang again. "Hey—O'Connor hasn't come back yet—wait a minute! Here he is now—just coming in the lobby. You want to speak to him?"

"No. Just find out if he ever made a will."

"Huh?" There was a second of silence. Then McGuire came back to say: "He says no. What the hell do you want to know for?"

"Just curious, tell him. Listen—are there any headquarters dicks around?"

"Yeah. I saw two outside—Ochs' guys, Minton and Wise."

"See if there are any others in the apartment, or in the building, or if the back entrances, if any, are covered. Hang up now and go across the street to the drug store and phone me."

In five more minutes, the redhead called back to say: "Say what the hell is this? Those two are watching out front, but there don't seem to be any others anywhere around. But Big Johnny and Al are here. They say you told. . . ."

"Yeah. Tell them *they've* got to watch that apartment like hawks. Give them descriptions of those two little yellow guys with whiskers—only remember the whiskers may be shaved off by now. Then get about your girl-finding in a hurry. I'll be right here, probably."

FOR a moment after he had finished, the Marquis stood with his hands in the pockets of his wine-silk dressing-gown. Then, on impulse, he turned and stared with uncomfortable, groping eyes at a set of the Britannica, went over and opened it at *Intestacy*, checked the information he had gotten from Solly.

He closed the book, stood staring down with unseeing eyes for three minutes of blazing thought. Something solid seemed to come into him.

And then the weird little mental lapse somehow occurred in his head. Somehow, he assumed unthinkingly that the red-headed McGuire would, positively, lay hands on the girl in the next little while. The plans that raced through his head took this as a fact. The rest—the logical follow-up of that—that the girl would give him the missing pieces of the macabre lit-

tle mystery—was pure gamble, but a fair one—one he would normally have taken.

Again he lifted the phone and called the Agency. To the detective who answered, he said, "Go up to the Lincolnshire Apartments and find Al Hackett. Have him phone me at once."

When Hackett's gloomy voice finally came over the wire, the Marquis told him: "Get this very carefully. Al—every word. Get O'Connor and take him into the library there. Then tell him I have contacted these Maletas. Yeah, Maletas. That's right. Tell him that, if he really meant what he said about being willing to pay off, they will take him up. They will take two-thirds of what he has and vanish. Tell him I have arranged a meeting for eight o'clock tonight in Central Park and that I will go with him—to the caretaker's pavilion there, the one that was converted from an old church. Now take him and tell him that while I hold the wire. Then let me speak to him."

It seemed ages before the hoarse, shaky voice of O'Connor came on the wire, but when he did, he said: "Mr. Marquis? I—I am willing."

"You understand that you will have to sign over everything tonight? That they are going to be distrustful of you. We must be prepared to satisfy them."

"Yes, yes." The other's gulp was plainly audible. "Do—do you think there is—is any danger, Mr. Marquis?"

"Danger? Well, a certain amount, of course. But I thought you—"

"Oh, I do—I do—" the other assured him hastily. "But I thought—I mean, in case anything happened to me—maybe I should leave some instructions. . . ."

"With whom? Your uncle? Can you trust him?"

"Implicitly, Mr. Marquis."

"Does he know about—the South American. . . ?"

"I—some of it. Not all of it. No."

"Well be damn careful what you tell anybody. And listen—this may be the last time I'll have a chance to talk to you before then. I'm a little mystified that Ochs let this get through. So, at eight, my man, Mr. Hackett there, will show you how to slip out and you meet me at the subway above Columbus Circle, on the Park side of the street."

To Hackett, he said: "Ochs must have somebody watching both front and rear of that building, even if you can't see them. So at eight fix it so that you or Johnny can put a blindfold on the birds in front, so that O'Connor can slip out. Don't miss now."

NOTHING happened. The minutes started dropping away. The telephone remained silent, grim. Outside the afternoon changed to twilight, to darkness. The street lamps came on. He realized his mistake by then, but it was too late to try to stop the scheme he had put in motion—or at any rate, it was too late to be sure of stopping it.

Five . . . six . . . six thirty—and sweat stood out on his forehead. He jerked himself out of the chair, peeled off the dressing-gown, his jaw hard, cursing wildly at his own madness, finally facing the certainty that he had to change everything, that everything had crumbled away under him. Without the girl, whole chunks of his picture were missing. Conceivably, he might prevent the murder of O'Connor, but as to evidence to convict the killer of Pirie's death—where was there any?

He dove into his street clothes, his eyes hot, strode for the door—and the phone rang as he reached for the knob.

McGuire's excited voice said: "Come quick—the Belnord Hotel—Thirty-fourth and Madison—she's here—in her room right now. . . ."

CHAPTER FIVE

Nobody Went to the Church

THE cab took him twelve minutes by his watch. He raced into the dingy, sagging little lobby and McGuire's red hair popped out from behind a pillar, steering him over to the elevator. The Marquis snatched the key he proffered and ordered quickly: "Go up to O'Connor's apartment and help Hackett."

He rode up to the Sixth floor, picked out the number that corresponded to the number on the tabled key—611, went in swiftly without knocking.

A chair went over as the girl sprang up and stumbled into a corner. Her face,

even in its paleness of terror, was still rich and lovely.

The Marquis closed the door in the same quick movement that had brought him in. There was a gun in his hand. He said, "Lady—I haven't a second to waste. For some reason, you didn't want Pirie killed by the brothers Maleta. Well, Pirie *was* killed—and the brothers Maleta are being hunted in every corner of this town now. Furthermore, whoever you are, you must know that killing Pirie was the first—the incidental—step to killing another party. That killing is due in minutes. If you have anything to say—say it fast. Who are you?"

Her pansy eyes swelled, dilated, her tight breasts rose and fell. The Marquis closed his teeth: "All right. Then you'll go to the jug with the first cop I can get."

"Wait—wait—" she blurted. "You—
are. . . ?"

"Lieutenant Marquis. I—"

"The Maletas did *not* kill Meester Pirie! They did not kill him!"

"If you can give me any reason to be sure of that—you may save their lives."

"Oh, I can—I can—" she cried wildly. "I—I am their sister—Ione—Ione Maleta. I—they had to leave Paraguay—they sent for me. I joined them. Then they tol' me—tol' me they were hunting for a man who had kill and defraud. . . ."

"I know all that. And they'd found him?"

"Yes—yes. They want me to take what money they have and go away—for fear they be caught. They—they—yes, they were going to keel him—but they did not."

"How do you know? Make it fast—"

"Because I did not go away. I move away from their room, yes—to thees hotel. But I plead with them, beg with them, not to keel anyone. They promise they weel not, but I do not believe them. I am watch, I am nearly out of my mind. . . ."

"And you saw them on Broadway—I know all about that—the first time they nearly had Pirie."

"Yes, yes—and I am going in their house last night—the night they *do* have him. I see them take him upstairs. I am afraid—my brothers are dangerous when they are determin'. I go upstairs and listen. They are burning him, to make him

tell where a Meester O'Connor is. He suffer, he tell them Meester O'Connor offer them money So he finally tell them an address on Fifth Avenue.

"I am outside in the hall—but I suddenly see someone else is outside there, too. It is pitch dark. I do not know what to do, so I run down the back stairs. I not know what to do. Then I see my brothers going out.

"Finally, I go upstairs. I do not see anybody—so I got in my brother's rooms. There is Meester Pirie—tied to the bed. His stomach—it is burned terribly. I put some oil on it, cut the ropes and tell him to go away. He tell me he gave my brothers a false address, hoping to gain time and escape. I tell him to run—that they weel be angry. He is seek, weak, but he go downstairs. I go down the stairs a minute or two later. I see a crowd at the corner. I go down and I see Meester Pirie—he is stabbed. I do not know that, but I know something is wrong, so I come back here queekly—but I know my brothers did not stab. . . ."

"So do I—now," the Marquis said quickly. "But I'm the only cop in New York who does. Understand this—I am the only one who can save them. They are being hunted for murder and are likely to be shot on sight. If you could get word to them to meet me—right away—say in the little caretakers' pavilion in Central Park—the one made over from a church—anyone can tell them where it is and it's deserted at this hour—I will expose the real killer and will see that they get not only freedom but some money. It's their only chance. I am not going to argue with you, because I have to leave now—but if you want to save them—that's how to do it."

"Oh, yes, yes—I weel do it—" her wild eyes flew to the telephone and she half swayed toward it. Then she checked herself. "But—but you mus' go out—you mus' not listen to the numbaire. . . ."

THE Marquis said, "Right," and was outside the door in two long steps. He closed it, stood a moment with his eyes starry—and then the creaky elevator suddenly opened down the hall and three men plowed off. The one in the lead was the darkly handsome, dark-eyed Ochs.

He stopped in his tracks as he saw the Marquis and his eyes flashed red fire. "You! How did you. . . ?"

The Marquis strolled casually to meet them. "Looking for somebody, Ochs? Or do you live here?"

Ochs said, "You ———! Hey—where you going?" as the Marquis strolled on past them and toward the stairs.

Content that the girl would by now have gotten her message over the Marquis said, "Nuts to you, chum," and sauntered down to the next floor. Above him he heard Ochs curse hoarsely, then a scrambling of feet that he did not understand. Then, by good luck, the elevator door opened to discharge a passenger on the floor he was on and he dived for it, snarled at the operator. "Here—get down to the ground as fast as you can—never mind any other calls," and to the two startled women in the car, "Sorry, ladies, police business."

IT WAS exactly eight-six when he piled out beside the subway entrance and saw O'Connor in the lee of the newsstand.

He blurted in a whisper as the Marquis reached him. "I—I—have the forms—some assignments—"

"Come on. We'll walk up Central Park West to the entrance."

"What—how did you find. . . ?" O'Connor whispered tensely as they walked.

"They had a younger sister. I located her," the Marquis fended him off.

Only a few, widely scattered walkers were sprinkled through the park. The Marquis tried to keep the urgency out of his walk, but now, at the last moment, a dozen little fears began to tantalize him. Under cover of the blackness, he eased his blued-steel service revolver from his pocket, nursed it between his black-gloved hands in front of him. They went down the winding, black path, under the bare-limbed trees. The Marquis' mind was spinning, over and over, the fantastically delicate little situation that he had racing to a focal point ahead. . . . The moment they arrived at the church-like pavilion. . .

They never arrived there. The whole thing suddenly went off the track in one mad eruption—

As they reached the point in the blackness where a path from the baseball field

converged on their own, a black blob suddenly materialized beside them and a voice said: "Excuse me. Could you tell me the way to the pavilion wheech is like a chur. . . ."

And in the exact instant that the Marquis discerned the two dapper little figures in the blob, the sound came from behind him.

It was a sound like a sob—and instantly a powerful torch beam sprang alight, bathing the Marquis, O'Connor, and the two dapper, yellow-skinned little old men—both still bearded.

The half-crazy, sobbing voice of the blond youth, Sean Frawley, screamed behind the light: "Tom—for God's sake—he's going to let you be killed—run—quickly"

The strain was too much for the nerve-tormented O'Connor. He made a little moan in the throat, whirled to flee. The Marquis dived after him, caught him, was almost yanked from his feet—and the thunderous shot crashed out from behind the light.

It was like a searing, ten-ton knife in the Marquis' calf, and he was instantly numb from the hip down. He fell, still clutching O'Connor, whirling in the same instant to pump two blasting shots at the light. The light exploded, flew up in the air as it went dark. There was a scream from the blond boy as he crashed down. Then the light hit the pavement and crashed in a thousand pieces—just as the Marquis, his own pencil flash jerked from his breast pocket, sent its bright finger lashing at the spot where the two South Americans had been.

They were pinioned in it as though an artist had drawn the picture—both in mid-stride, knees half bent, both small goateed faces turned over their shoulders.

And then the night burst alive suddenly with screaming police whistles, the criss-crossing flash of a dozen lights. Their beams made the little clearing like day.

The blond boy lay motionless, half on his side, the pistol a few inches away.

The dark face of Lieutenant Ochs burst into the circle of light. Two or three detectives and two bluecoats were at his heels—and far in the rear, his wizened little monkey face the picture of timorous determination, was Rourke O'Connor.

Ochs roared at the Marquis: "So—wise guy! You got him, eh? Don't tell me it wasn't blind luck. You had no idea . . ."

The blond youth moaned, stirred. O'Connor, still rigidly pinioned by the Marquis suddenly cried out frantically: "Look—he's alive—quick—for God's sake get a doctor. . . ."

Ochs flung around on the white-haired O'Connor as he struggled to rise. "Doctor?" he roared. "This baby is gallows-meat. Why, God . . ."

The blond youth swayed groggily up to one hand, his eyes foggy, senseless. O'Connor moaned, fought frantically. "Let me go—let me see how badly he's . . ."

"Are you crazy?" Ochs bellowed. "This guy is the killer! Wake up! Last night he was following your Pirie. He saw him captured by those babies over there. He was scared witless because he'd heard you tell Pirie to promise these spicks you'd turn over your dough to them. When Pirie did contact them, did make the proposition, they must have accepted it. So rather than let Pirie get back to you with that and have you calmly hand over your fortune to these two, he stuck Pirie in the back and ran in the crowd. He figured you wouldn't do business with them after that, or if you did want to, that they'd be on the lam for murder and there was no chance of you getting together again. That way your fortune would be lying there, ready, when he knocked you off—also blaming that on the spicks—for him to pocket."

THE blond youth suddenly let out a gasp behind Ochs, flung himself stumbling to his feet. His shrill tenor voice screamed: "You—you—I did not—oh you rotten. . . ." and dived for the pistol.

Ochs' throat-sound was of animal satisfaction. He whirled, kicked the gun from under the reaching fingers of the distracted, wild-eyed blond youth and in the same split second grabbed his shoulder. His cocked right fist went over and down, exploded in the other's mouth with a smashing sound and little flecks of blood splattered. The boy screamed, staggered backwards. Ochs went after him with sadist cruelty, driving left, right, left, right, into the sobbing cowering boy's face.

Pinioned by the Marquis, O'Connor was a wild man, his amber eyes mad. He fought, screaming at the Marquis, "Let me go—let me go—" and when he could not shake off the Marquis' grip, he suddenly spied the Marquis' pistol and snatched for it, half sobbing.

Up until then, the Marquis' jaw was set, his one-handed grip on O'Connor like iron, while he rubbed desperately at his shot hip. Now, life was flowing back into his leg and he levered himself up—and was instantly engaged in a wild grapple for the pistol. He snarled at him, "Stop it, you fool. I'll handle it," and as the old man hesitated, he ripped the gun free and plunged, hobbling at Ochs.

"Stop it, you damned butcher—or I'll put a slug in your back!" and, as the sobbing youth collapsed in a heap, shielding his head from further blows, Ochs whirled. His eyes were wildly alight. "So you want to stick your neck in here do you? By God, come ahead. I'm arresting this rat for murder. He resisted arrest. And you're interfering with my duty. I'll . . ."

"He's under arrest for murder?" the Marquis shot.

"You're damned right he is. And I arrested him, not you. Don't forget that."

"You also beat him up without mercy and without justification. Mr. O'Connor—how much of that half million dollars will you spend to see that this so-called officer gets his deserts for that?"

"All of it," O'Connor cried hoarsely. "Every cent. You damn beast . . ."

Ochs laughed harshly, loudly. "So I'm to be sued for being rough in arresting a murderer . . ."

"You might have gotten away with it, gaundy-head—if the boy had been a murderer. The hell of that is—he isn't."

Ochs opened his mouth to laugh again, stopped, and his eyes went hot.

"You're in the grease, stupid. You've got brains—but they just don't go quite far enough. You stopped thinking and got tough too damned fast—and this is what happens to you. You were smart enough to figure that this South American situation was just an opportunity that the real killer jumped on. But when you put the finger on the kid for it, you put your head in the lion's mouth. And the gag of pumping the kid full of the notion that I had

the goods on the killer and sending him up with a gun, wasn't so bad. If he had been the killer, as you thought, he would most undoubtedly have knocked me off, as you hoped. The joke was that he's as innocent as a babe unborn. He even came out here to protect his brother—or half-brother—followed him, because he distrusted me. It so happened that things went a little out of my control for a minute. Yeah, I put the idea into everybody's head directly or indirectly to come here to-night—and the killer got himself in a sweet spot.

"The shot that was meant to kill O'Connor—and that's in my leg at this moment—didn't come from the kid's pistol" He pointed at the ground—and his lips went tightly closed.

The pistol the boy had dropped and that the Homicide lieutenant had kicked to the edge of the sidewalk, had mysteriously evaporated. The Marquis' hot eyes, ranging over the ground and finally realizing that it was no longer there, kept on ranging—till they reached the stick on which the monkey-faced Rourke O'Connor was leaning.

He dived for him—but the monkey-faced little killer was too alert—and simultaneously the Marquis' leg suddenly betrayed him.

"Back! Back!" the wizened little cripple yelled. The gun—the boy's gun—jumped into his hand. "Don't anybody try to move"

The Marquis, as his leg buckled, let it go entirely limp and fell as though to light on his side. His incapacity wasn't that

bad, but it gave him a chance to shoot twice across his arm before he hit the ground. The first shot hit the killer's gun and it went off, a slug pinging on the sidewalk and—Ochs squealed, grabbed his ankle and began to hop around. The Marquis' second shot got the little monkey-faced man squarely in the throat, blasted him over backward, with a queer gurgling squealing in his larynx.

To Ochs, the Marquis said grimly: "All you overlooked, half-smart, was that these people are British. In Britain, the law of succession is through the father, not the mother. Because young Frawley was related to Mr. O'Connor only through his mother, he doesn't get a dime of inheritance. The little monkey—because he was Mr. O'Connor's *father's* brother—got it all—or would have."

To O'Connor he said: "I'd like to take you to see my lawyer, Mr. O'Connor. If ever a man had a suit coming to him for false arrest, mayhem, assault and battery and probably a dozen more items that Solly can think up—Hell, there even may be a criminal charge in it. I'm sorry to say that I think Lieutenant Ochs is the man. I hate to see such a thing happen to a brother officer, but, after all, I feel that police power should not be abused. Much as it hurts to say it, I am afraid that Ochs here has proved himself quite unfit for his high authority and I am sure you will—here let me take one arm" He looked somberly and sadly at the now gray-faced Ochs. "What makes it particularly painful to me is that I even once considered him for a place on my own Squad. *Tsk Tsk.*"

This Great OCTOBER Issue



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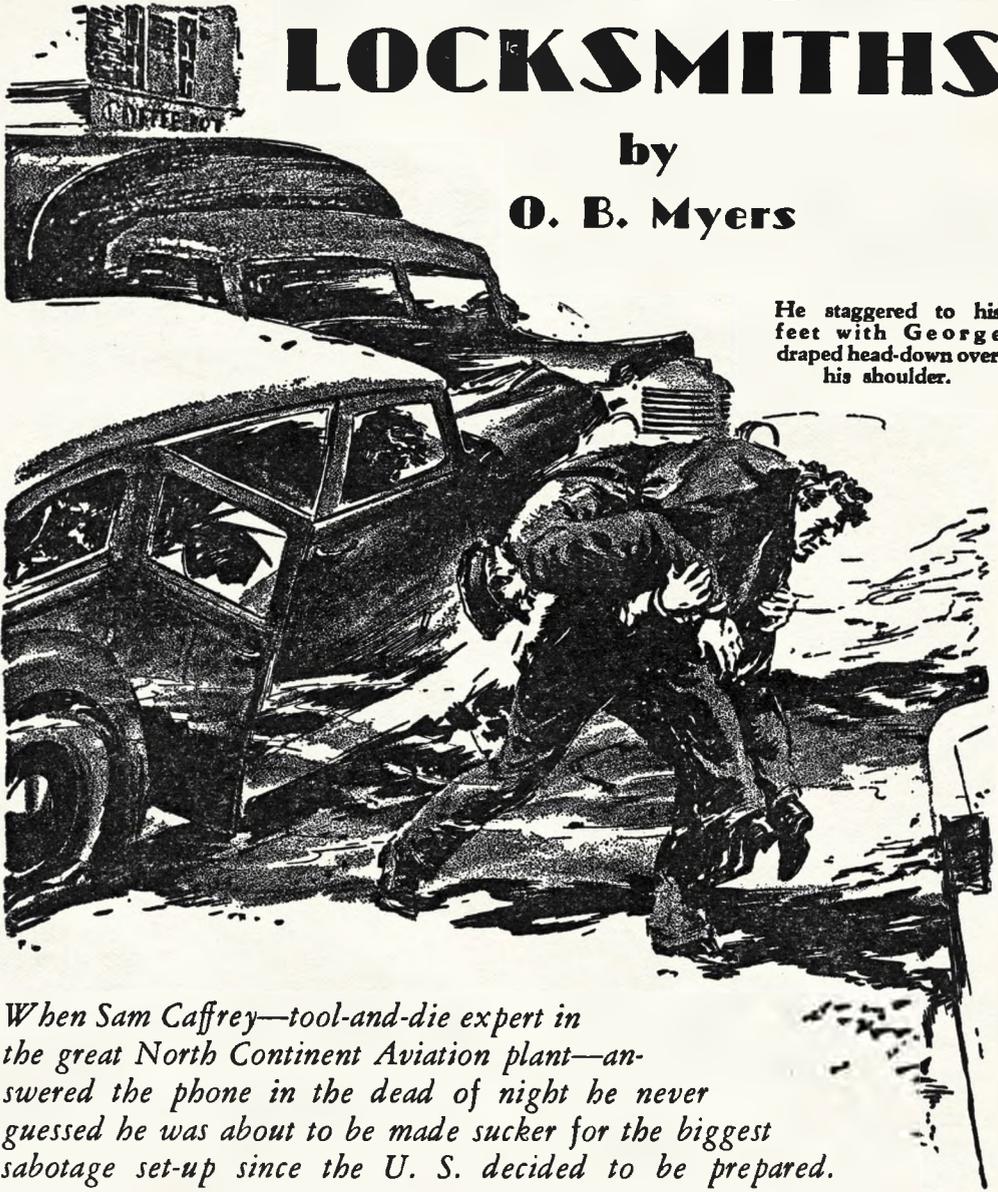
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DEATH LAUGHS AT LOCKSMITHS

by
O. B. Myers

He staggered to his feet with George draped head-down over his shoulder.



When Sam Caffrey—tool-and-die expert in the great North Continent Aviation plant—answered the phone in the dead of night he never guessed he was about to be made sucker for the biggest sabotage set-up since the U. S. decided to be prepared.

SAM picked up the telephone from the hall table, untidy with boarders' mail, his big brown hand swallowing the instrument in a gulp. By the dingy light of the single bulb on the landing he saw his landlady's back, bulging in a dressing-gown, disappear into the front room. The door did not quite close behind her.

"Hello! Mr. Caffrey? This is the plant

calling. North Continent Aviation. Office of Mr. Selkirk, production manager."

"Hello, yes? What did you, er . . . I'm sorry, I've been sleeping. Would you say that again please?"

It was a girl's voice; the office worked all hours, these days. She sounded young, but very crisp and businesslike. The voice was vaguely familiar, but he was too sleepy to be sure.

"You're being transferred to the Buffalo plant, Mr. Caffrey," she told him, after repeating what she had said at first.

"To Buffalo!" he echoed, waking up completely. "How soon?"

"Immediately. You know the company's policy of shifting men on confidential work frequently, since the National Defense Program was inaugurated. You will report to the Buffalo production department tomorrow evening, in time for the night shift. That means you must catch a train out of Grand Central in the morning. There is one leaving at seven forty A. M. that will get you there in time."

"Seven forty? All right, I'll try to make it. But will the shop be open? I ought to come down—"

"It won't be necessary for you to return here to the Allern Avenue plant at all, Mr. Caffrey. Mr. Selkirk's orders. You are simply to catch that train, and report in Buffalo. That's all."

Sam racked the instrument and climbed slowly up the two flights of carpeted stairs. That's the way it went. North Continent paid good money, especially to tool and die makers, but had to take extraordinary precautions on its government contracts. A fellow doing preliminary design work on the new motor patents never was allowed to stay in one place long enough to get acquainted, and when he was shifted it was apt to be on five minutes' notice, like this. He stuffed most of his belongings into a battered suitcase, and before he went back to bed he set the alarm ahead an hour.

THE suitcase was heavy in his hand when, late that afternoon, he stood swaying in the vestibule of a day-coach as the long train rolled into the Buffalo station. The platform, empty except for porters, became quickly a long river of humanity, flowing slowly toward the exits at the far end.

There it seemed to be slowed up, dammed back, like a traffic stream by an accident. Only one of the exit gates was open, so that the arriving crowd had to filter through in single file. Sam's long strides shortened perforce to a shuffle. He halted, took a couple of steps, halted again. He wondered why the delay.

There was the usual throng waiting to greet friends, back at a little distance. But nearer to the gate, posted on either side, was a smaller group—a couple of men in railroad uniform, and two others in seersucker suits who never looked aside for a minute. As Sam swung his suitcase past the brass-knobbed post a hand touched his arm.

"Just a minute, mister. Isn't your name Caffrey?"

A pair of hard blue eyes studied his face for a moment, then dropped to something in the owner's hand.

"That's right. Sam Caffrey. You looking for me?"

"Come over here a minute. . . . Where are you coming from?"

Sam, thinking this was a North Continent man sent to meet him, said: "Long Island City. Allern Avenue plant. I'm reporting to production, here in Buffalo."

The keen blue eyes exhibited a faint trace of surprise as they examined him. Their owner slipped his hand into his pocket and Sam saw that what it had been holding was a small photograph. His other hand never let go of Sam's arm. "All right, Ben," he called, over Sam's shoulder. "This is him."

The second man in street clothes was at Sam's side before he could turn. "I'll take care of this," he said, relieving Sam of his suitcase. "Come along over this way."

Sam chuckled pleasantly. "Pretty snappy service you give, in Buffalo. Got a brass band outside?"

Neither one replied. The man carrying his suitcase started at a leisurely pace across the waiting-room toward the street doors. The other stayed close to Sam's side, keeping a light hold on his arm. At the curb stood a touring car with a man in a light blue shirt and a peaked cap at the wheel. The car started off as soon as they had climbed in. There was still no conversation.

The Buffalo plant, Sam knew, lay well on the outskirts, in the direction of Niagara Falls. Therefore he was surprised when, after traveling no more than a dozen blocks, the car pulled up and stopped at the curb.

"Say, this isn't the plant, is it? I'm supposed to report—"

The hand on his elbow urged him peremptorily to the sidewalk. The others stepped out with him. When the driver's head turned, Sam saw for the first time that that peaked cap was faced by a police shield. Looking up at the doorway flanked by twin, green-paned lamps, he felt a sudden coldness at the pit of his stomach.

"Say, what is the idea?" he demanded. "Am I arrested?"

"You can tell us the idea inside."

SAM'S knees moved with a stiff reluctance, but he forced them to carry him up the steps and along a corridor. The man who had driven the car turned aside through an open door, but the other two directed Sam to a small office near the rear of the building. Here a police captain sat behind a desk that was cluttered with papers.

"Is this Caffrey? Where was he, on that train?" he asked curtly.

"Right where they tipped us—can you beat it?"

The captain gave a nasal chuckle. "Sometimes we get a break—when they're dumb. Have you searched him? No? Well, I don't suppose it's any use. He's had plenty of time to pass them along. But we'd better do it right. Harvey, you go through the suitcase, and don't miss any false bottom. Take off your clothes, Caffrey, right to the skin."

Sam was pale but his jaw was set. "If I'm under arrest, I've got a right to know what for."

The captain snorted. "Playing innocent, eh? All right. You're under arrest charged with running out of the Long Island City plant of North Continent Aviation with important, confidential information. That satisfy you? Now off with your clothes."

"But I was ordered to leave, to report here to Buffalo!"

"Nuts," snarled the captain. "We'll listen to your story later—and you'd better be thinking up a good one. Help him with his coat, Perkins."

"Leave me alone. I'll do it myself."

Sullenly Sam began to pull off his clothes. Puzzled, angry, trying futilely to understand the meaning of such a charge against him, he forgot about the extra

pocket sewed inside his shirt until it was half off. Before he could say anything the detective named Perkins caught sight of it and emitted a grunt. In a moment he was unfolding several stiff sheets of paper on the captain's desk.

"So—what's this, Caffrey?"

"The blueprints I've been working from," said Sam weakly.

He was beginning to get an idea of the position he was in, and to foresee what lay ahead of him. The captain spread the three blueprints flat on his desk and peered at them. In addition to the thin white lines of the original drawings, they bore a considerable number of pencilled additions and corrections. They were covered with greasy fingerprints, and the creases were heavily worn, as if they had been often folded and unfolded. In the lower right-hand corner were several identifying numbers and abbreviations, one of which appeared the same on all three. Heavy white letters said, *Model 404-M—Confidential*.

"Well," said the captain, "can you explain how you happen to have these on you?"

"Certainly. I've been working from those drawings for the past month, fabricating some of the dies to turn out the timing mechanism of that new liquid-cooled motor, the one on which the British turned over the patent rights. For safety's sake I've been carrying them with me, when not in the shop, for the past week or so. I intended to turn them over to the production foreman here in Buffalo as soon as I got to the plant."

"Oh, you did, eh? I suppose you never dreamed that there are foreign powers ready to give their eye-teeth to learn how this motor is being produced, and that this country is crawling with their agents?"

"Of course I knew that. That's why I was so careful—"

"Then who were you going to sell them to?"

Sam spread his palms. "I'm telling you—I wasn't going to sell them to anybody. I was going to give them—"

"Hash! You expect to get away with that story? I don't even know why I listen to you. You walk out of your job without a word to anybody, and you're picked up with confidential plans sewed

into your shirt. What more do we want?"

"But I didn't walk out of my job," protested Sam. "I was ordered to leave and come to Buffalo without stopping at Al-lern Avenue at all."

The captain, however, was not listening. He had picked up a telephone and was asking for long distance. To Perkins he said, "Shove him in Tier C, bag and all. I'll take care of booking him. . . . Hello? Get me Long Island City. . . ."

HALF an hour later a turnkey brought Sam's bag to his cell on Tier C. though the blue shirt with the hidden pocket had been held out, and after another hour or so they brought in some dinner on a tray. He had no other visitors until late in the evening, when the turnkey swung the door open and a tall, lanky man in a crumpled gray suit came in. Sam recognized him at once. He had often seen him snooping around the plant without knowing what his job was. It now appeared that he was a sort of private detective, on watch against sabotage and fifth-column activities.

"My name is Welsh," he said, in a flat voice. "I've just flown up from New York. We're going to take you back there the same way, but first I'd like to have a little talk with you."

Sam answered his questions readily enough at first, but it soon became obvious that Welsh didn't believe him at all. The investigator was already firmly convinced of Sam's guilt. His curiosity was all directed beyond that point, toward Sam's supposed accomplices.

"As far as you yourself are concerned, it's a closed book," he said. "You see, it's practically impossible for the company to protect itself against disloyal employees. The only reason you didn't get away clean was that your landlady overheard you mention Buffalo on the telephone. The same thing may happen again in the future. Our only chance of stopping it is to uncover the men behind it, the money-men who buy this kind of information. Now I can't promise you complete immunity, but I can assure you that things will go a lot easier for you if—"

"You're wasting your breath," Sam told him bluntly. "If there has actually been an attempt to steal information on

Model 404-M, I had nothing to do with it, and so can't tell you a thing."

"Then why did you run away from Long Island City?"

"I tried to explain before. I didn't run away." He recounted almost word for word the phone call in the middle of the night.

Welsh smiled coldly. "Now it's you wasting your breath. Mr. Selkirk's secretary happens to be a man. Furthermore, the night shift in the shops worked until one, but there was no one in Mr. Selkirk's office after eleven thirty last night. That's an hour before the telephone call that you claim directed you to come to Buffalo."

Sam stared at the floor. So that call had been faked. "If I only knew who that was that called me," he muttered.

"If you would only *tell* us who that was that called you," corrected Welsh pointedly. Sam only made a helpless gesture with his hands. The investigator went on: "Having those blueprints in your possession is pretty hard to explain. How long have you been carrying them?"

Sam thought. "Since last Monday."

"You know, don't you, that the company rules require all plans and confidential specifications to be left in your locker when you're off shift?"

"Of course I know it. That's why I said nothing to the foreman, or anyone else. I had to keep it to myself."

"You had to keep what to yourself?"

Sam straightened up and shoved his hand in his pocket. The contents of his pockets had been returned to him with his bag. "When I came to work on Monday, I noticed that my key stuck for a minute when I tried to open my locker. It had never stuck before. After I got to my work bench I examined it. When it was given to me it was a brand-new key. Now it showed certain marks, tiny scratches, such as might have been made by a grinder. I had a sudden suspicion that it had been used as a pattern from which to make a duplicate. That meant that somebody was trying to get access to my locker."

Welsh's sharp eyes looked interested. "But that would be no good to anyone outside the plant. All the employees use that same locker room, men, and women

from the shop and offices both, but no outsider is allowed to pass the gates."

"Exactly. It would have to be somebody inside the plant. The only way to find out who, I thought, was to keep my mouth shut. If I blabbed my suspicions, the lock would simply be changed immediately. That would spoil the attempt, but would discover nothing of who was behind it. So I kept quiet, started carrying my working prints home with me inside my shirt, and tried to keep an eye on my locker."

"And did you see anyone near it?"

Sam shook his head. "Nothing up till the time I left yesterday."

Welsh said: "Let's see that key." He took it from Sam and held it close to the light. "I can't see anything peculiar about it."

"Of course you can't," retorted Sam. "That's because you're not a die-maker. I am. I'm accustomed to working metals with a grinder to a ten-thousandth of an inch. I can see signs of an emery wheel there that you wouldn't spot under a magnifying glass. In any event, it's incapable of proof, because no one else would know the original appearance of that key the way I did. Naturally."

Welsh shook his head slowly, handing it back. "Furthermore, for a duplicate to have been made, the original must have been out of your possession. When did that happen?"

"That's the damndest thing about it. I'd swear that key hasn't been out of my clothes since it was given to me."

The investigator made an incredulous sound in his throat. "It won't do, Cafrey. It's an explanation that doesn't explain. If that's the story you're going to stick to, I'm wasting my time. Now if you want to change your mind, and tell us who was behind you . . ."

Sam saw that it was no use. His attempts to play detective had only forged the ring of suspicion about himself so tightly that no one could doubt his guilt. He would get a quick trial and a long term behind bars, and the investigation would go no further. The foreign agents, whoever they were, who were trying to get possession of the design of Model 404-M could go right on trying, and the next time they might be more successful.

HALF an hour later Sam was led up to the captain's office. There were half a dozen men there, only one of them in uniform, and he was surprised to see that this was George Tolan. North Continent, ever since taking on the manufacture of military planes, had by special arrangement maintained their own force of private police. They wore uniforms similar to those of the city police, and carried arms, but their duties were usually confined to the interior of the plants. Sam had become acquainted with George because their hours coincided and they lived near each other. They had occasionally passed holidays together.

Sam said, "Hello, George," and waited. George colored, and looked at the floor.

"He a friend of yours?" asked the captain suspiciously.

"Not so's you'd notice it," growled George. He was careful not to look at Sam, whose shoulders drooped.

The captain ran his eye over Sam's lanky six-feet-two, and remarked sourly: "He looks husky enough to cause trouble, especially up in a plane. You'd better put the bracelets on him."

George reached into his pocket. There was a glint of shiny metal, a couple of rasping clicks. When he moved his right arm tentatively, George's left arm moved with it.

"I'm sending Perkins with you, as a formality," said the captain. "He'll take a signed receipt for the prisoner as soon as he's in the hands of the New York City detectives. I understand North Continent pays his fare back. That right?"

"Yes, that's right," agreed Welsh.

"You might slip him the price of a few cigars," smirked the captain. "After ail, we've given you hot service on this."

The discussion of these details both depressed and infuriated Sam. He wet his lips helplessly.

"Let me have that key, George," said Welsh. "Just in case."

At the airport the plane stood down at the far end of the apron. After some maneuvering Sam and George got themselves seated on opposite sides of the narrow aisle, their linked wrists dangling in the middle. Perkins sat in front of Sam, crosswise on the seat so as to watch him out of the corner of his eye. Welsh was

on the other side, up near the pilot.

A light drift of clouds obscured moon and stars, and the ground was a black blanket only occasionally speckled by the clustered lights of some town. Inside the cabin the muffled beat of the motor did not prevent conversation, but made it an effort, so there was little talking. Sam had plenty of time to think, but it did him little good.

His right wrist was being jerked gently. George was trying to light a cigarette, and with only one free hand was having difficulty. Sam fished a folder of matches from his left-hand pocket and held them so George could scratch one. The flare of the flame against George's smooth-shaven cheek jerked Sam's mind sharply into the past.

Why, it was only last Sunday—though now it seemed ages ago. Just so had he held a light for George, that evening, as they were coming out of the men's lockers at the big municipal swimming pool in Astoria. The vivid detail brought back others. George's sunburned shin, after a long afternoon in a bathing suit, the grateful coolness of the first long swallow of beer, the intense red of Letti's fingernails against the sheer white of her suit, the abstract appraisal behind the veil of her dark eyes.

It was Letti, he remembered, who told George to bring him along, though why, Sam could not quite figure out. She had really paid him no attention after he came. She had been quite content to pass the hours stretched in a canvas chair, acquiring a deeper patina of sun-tan, listening sleepily to their small talk.

HIS SEAT was tilting slowly forward. Sam discovered that while his thoughts had been milling in futile circles, the plane had reached its destination. As it banked he caught a glimpse of the hangar roofs of La Guardia Field.

He was glad that it was late, long after midnight, because there were only a few attendants to stare curiously as he was marched along the roofed passage to the parking space. There were three cars waiting, and a New York City detective who took brusque charge.

"He's cuffed, I see. Fair enough. We'll leave that as is. The inspector is waiting for us over at the plant. Who's carrying the key? You, Welsh? All right, you get in the sedan with me. You can be telling me what he said. Pratt, you drive my coupé over, will you? Put him in the touring car and follow us. Don't let him pull any fast ones."

The coupé pulled out first, then the sedan, but the touring car, with Sam and George in the rear seat, was delayed a couple of minutes when the motor wouldn't start. When it did come to life, the driver, another North Continent private cop whom Sam did not know, gunned across the parkway and set out to make up lost time through the criss-crossing streets of Astoria and Long Island City. He tore along between unlighted house-fronts, past the long blank walls of warehouses and loft buildings, and squealed around occasional corners on protesting tires.

"Take it easy, Jake," muttered George.

A turn made Sam lean heavily. Staring dully across the intersection, the street

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 48 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the

invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances. You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 11, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 11, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

sign caught his eye. The name was familiar. It awoke a train of memories. They were nearing the plant through a neighborhood he knew quite well, but it was probably because he had been thinking of the sloe-eyed Letti a short time before. Yes, she lived on Merrill Avenue. He remembered George pointing out the house to him. It was odd the way things kept bringing Letti to his mind. To Sam she had never been more than a good-looking girl-friend of George's who worked in the office and who spoke with a soft, Mediterranean drawl. Sam's brows, knitted in a frown, suddenly lifted in amazement. His jaw dropped. He twisted sideways in the seat.

"George!" he blurted abruptly.

"Save your breath," said George harshly.

"That girl that called me up last night, and said she was Mr. Selkirk's secretary. The one that told me to report to Buffalo—her voice! I just remembered who it—who it sounded like—"

The driver, hearing their voices behind him, half turned his head to listen.

"So what?" asked George roughly.

Sam's eyes widened. "*Look out!*" he yelled.

THE street they were on ran along a hill. They were approaching an intersection at close to fifty miles an hour. The cross street came down a steep grade, and billboards fronting a vacant lot made the corner blind. All except a couple of feet between the base of the boards and the ground, through which narrow gap Sam had just caught sight of the wheels of a truck. It was coming fast and silently, evidently coasting the grade.

The man at the wheel heard Sam's shout, but he had not seen the truck and he misunderstood its meaning. When Sam's free hand darted out and jabbed his shoulder he leaped to the wrong conclusion. He thought Sam was trying to pull a fast one on the back seat. Instead of looking ahead, he twisted round to look behind him as a huge oil truck shot out from behind the billboard. Tires squealed as brakes were slammed on, and his desperate tug at the steering wheel careened the car onto two wheels. The next moment there was a heavy, sullen

crash, and Sam felt himself flying through space.

He was hit painful blows in half a dozen places at once. Then a solid wall smacked him flat in the face, knocking him breathless. It was not a wall, as he discovered in a moment, but the asphalt pavement. Gasping, he pushed at it until he was on hands and knees, where he swayed drunkenly, trying to recover his wind. Everything was suddenly very quiet.

Sam lifted his head as the mists cleared from before his eyes. He was sprawled thirty feet from the touring car, which lay on its side in the middle of the street, a shapeless heap of junk. The driver's feet protruded from under what had been the windshield. They were twitching feebly. The huge tank truck had mounted the curb and jammed itself nose first into a brick wall. Sam could see into the cab, where the driver was draped limply over his wheel.

Sam started to climb to his feet, but his right wrist restrained him. George was still linked to him inexorably.

Sam heard a window creak, somewhere nearby. The occupants of these houses were long since asleep, but that crash would doubtless awaken them. Telephones were being reached for. In a few minutes this corner would be swarming. *It's right now, or never*, thought Sam.

Still on hands and knees, he managed to sling George's bulky form across his shoulders. Crawling like an animal, he slithered across the curb and glided under the lower edge of the billboard. He remembered almost at once that Welsh had the key to the handcuffs, and his hopes fell. But he felt something else. George's service revolver in his holster. He slid it out with his left hand and passed it over to his right. At least it served to give him a feeling of confidence. Through the weeds he reeled and stumbled, making for the far corner of the lot.

The billboards ended at a high board fence enclosing the yards of a building-supply company. He paused, peering back along the street. At the corner he could see the lights of another car, just arrived. A number of figures were moving quickly back and forth. The two drivers, at least, would be taken care of, though he hoped

that they did not recover consciousness too quickly. All he asked was half an hour.

He glided along the sidewalk, hugging the band of shadow close to the fence. At a gate, where there was a recess, he paused again to look back. There were more men there at the corner now, all very busy with what they were doing.

Sam started on again. Fortunately he was big and husky. He had not realized how heavy an unconscious man could become. The handcuffs made it impossible to put his burden down without getting down himself, and he dared not stay in the open any longer than necessary. To any law-abiding citizen on the street or in a window, one look at him would be enough.

He slowed a little, peering uncertainly for numbers. After a moment he moved slower yet. There was a light ahead. These houses stood close to the sidewalk. On one of them the porch had been boarded up to make a front room which served as a place of business. At the side of the door a plain sign said *N. Molanda, Locksmith . . . Keys Made to Order*. Through the transom over the front door came a faint gleam.

Sam covered the last few paces on tip-toe. In front of the door he shifted George's weight slightly, and used the muzzle of the revolver to rap lightly on the panels. For a moment he heard no response from within, but just as he was about to rap a second time he heard a board creak underfoot. A bolt grated, and the door began to swing open cautiously. Instantly Sam launched himself.

His lunge, with the weight of two behind it, carried the door wide open and thrust the man who had opened it back on his heels.

"Shut that door!" husked Sam.

His glaring eyes, his torn and disheveled clothes, his gaunt face smeared with dirt and oil, were enough to chill any man's blood without the added threat of the revolver in his hand. The door clicked shut, the bolt snapped.

"Where is Letti?" demanded Sam hoarsely.

The other man backed away. He was short, stocky, with black brows over deep-set fanatical eyes.

"My daughter is not here," he said steadily. "I thought it was Letti knocking, or I should not have opened the door. What do you want?"

Sam hesitated. In point of fact, he did not know exactly what he did want. To ask Letti if it had been her voice that had given him those false instructions? She could deny it. And then what? He had no proof. Only a vague recollection of her inflection. And to question her father about it would certainly get him nothing.

"You expect her soon?" he asked.

"Perhaps. I am not sure. Why do you want her?"

Sam said nothing in reply. He glanced around the little shop. Behind a workbench was a rack on which hundreds of keys hung on hooks. On the bench itself was a small motor-driven grinder with precision attachments, and a number of files and other tools.

"Get behind that bench," ordered Sam, gesturing with the revolver. "You can get these bracelets off me, while I wait."

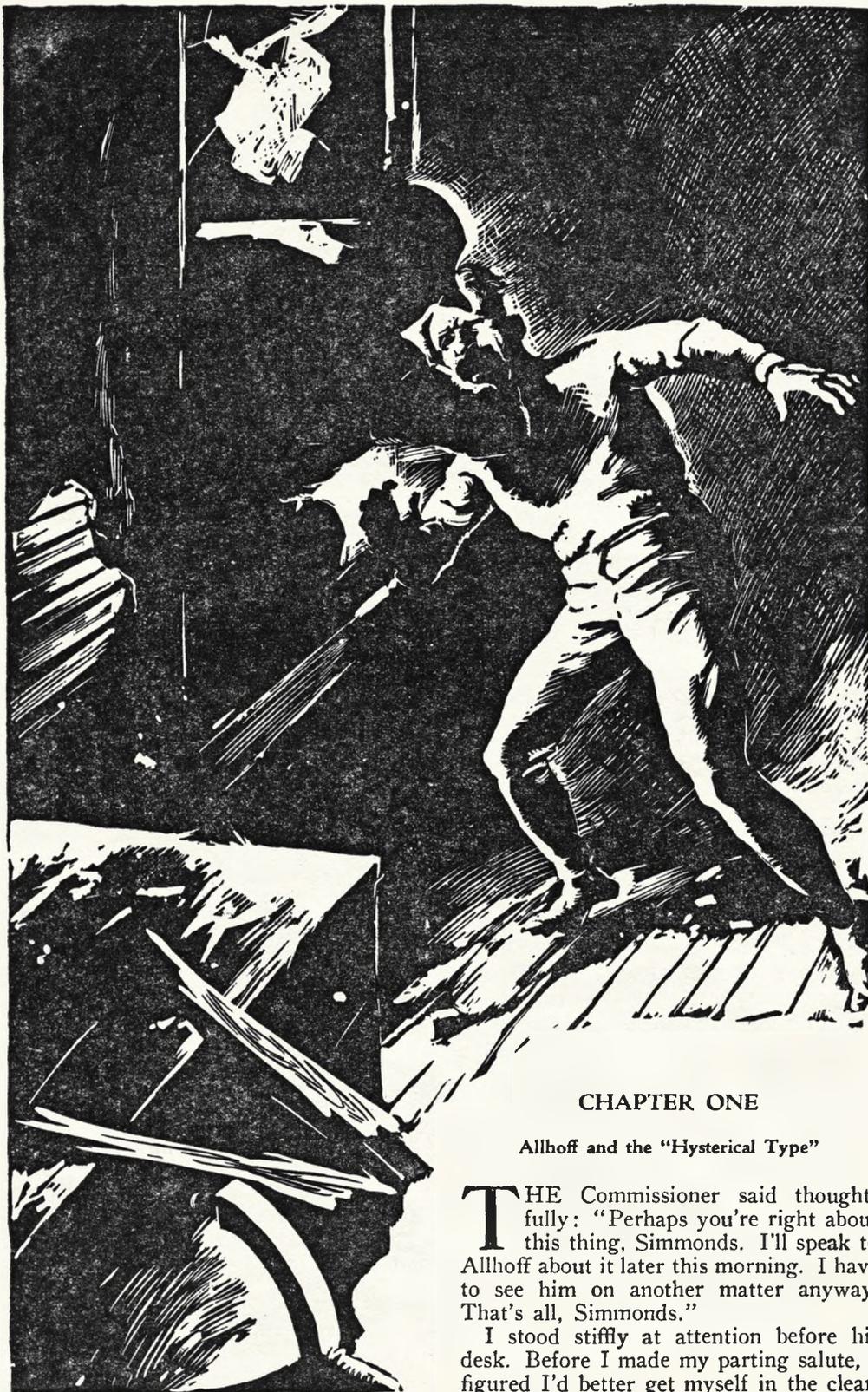
THE other moved as directed, lowering his hands. "All right, Caffrey," he said. "You don't need to wave that gun around. Just remember you used it to threaten me with, though. There'll be hell to pay when you're caught, especially if he's dead."

Sam's eyes narrowed. "That's why I'm not going to get caught. You're going to help me see to that. Come on, get started."

The Latin busied himself examining the handcuffs, and trying several key blanks. Finally he clamped one in the machine and started the little motor which hummed softly in the stillness and gave off a rasping squeal as the emery bit into the metal. Nick Molanda dressed the edges with a file, took it out and tried it, and put it back again for more filing, working with unhurried calm.

There's something queer here, thought Sam. He can never make up a key without having a duplicate to work from, and he knows it. The only way to get these things off is to slam them up against that grinder. Does he think I don't know that? He's stalling—

(Continued on page 110)



CHAPTER ONE

Allhoff and the "Hysterical Type"

THE Commissioner said thoughtfully: "Perhaps you're right about this thing, Simmonds. I'll speak to Allhoff about it later this morning. I have to see him on another matter anyway. That's all, Simmonds."

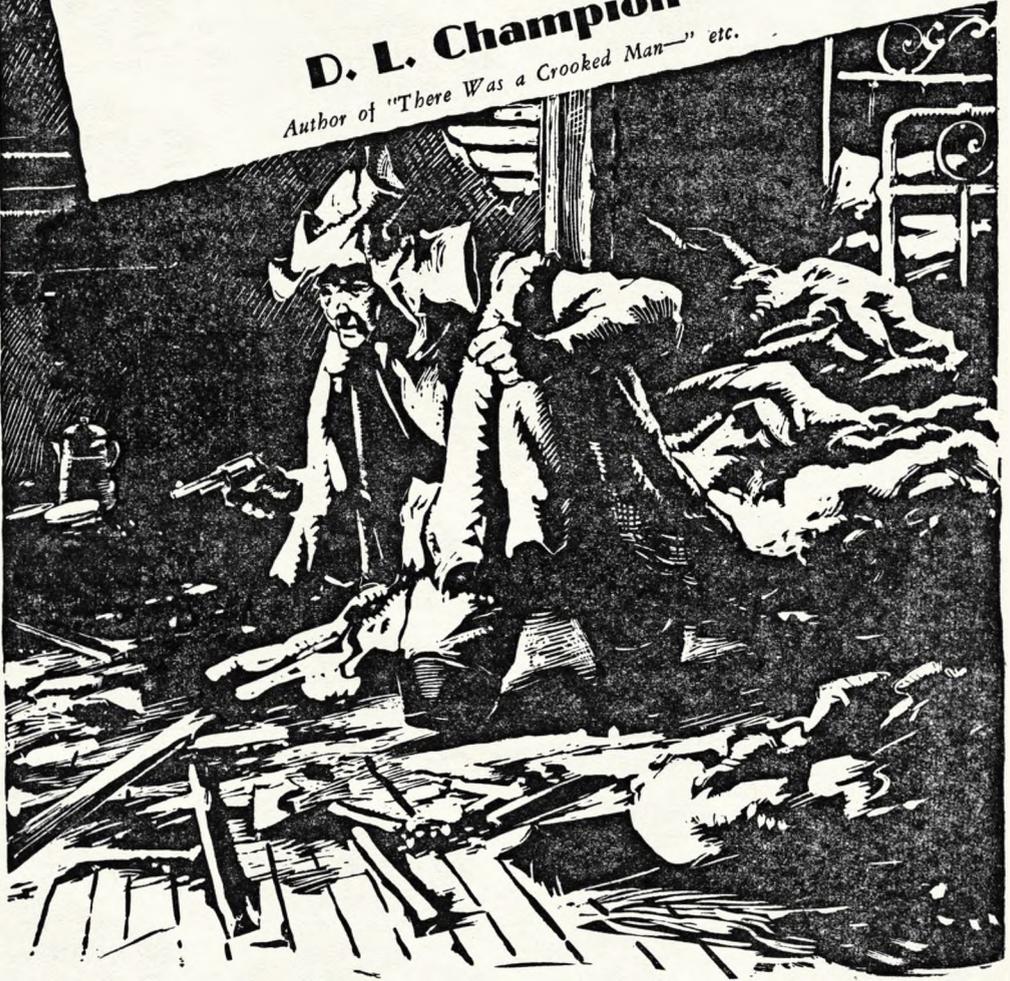
I stood stiffly at attention before his desk. Before I made my parting salute, I figured I'd better get myself in the clear.

SUICIDE IN BLUE

An Inspector Allhoff Novelette
by

D. L. Champion

Author of "There Was a Crooked Man—" etc.



"Who's that?" I yelled. "Put up your hands! You're covered!"

The legless coffee-drunkard of Centre Street—with more venom than usual in his veins—decides to prove that the police department is no place for "the hysterical type." And winds up with a brand-new definition of "sadist"—demonstration free—when Simmonds and Battersly, his clay-pigeons-in-uniform, balk at the experiment.

"I'd be obliged, sir, if you—if you—"

He looked up, grinned and anticipated me. "If I didn't tell Allhoff you had anything to do with it, eh, Sergeant? Don't worry. I won't."

I thanked him, saluted, and swung around on my heel. I strode down the corridor, out of the red brick building which housed police headquarters, into Centre Street. I had the warm satisfied feeling of a man who is acutely conscious that he has put something over. More than that, I felt like a Boy Scout who is three good deeds ahead of himself and can rest on his oars for the remainder of the week.

I crossed the street, entered the dank hallway of a dreary tenement house which was a crime against the Federal Housing Act, and climbed a flight of creaking stairs. I opened the door of Allhoff's apartment, walked in, and noted with some surprise that he had not yet rolled out of his sagging mattress.

The bedroom door was ajar. The sun shone through the unwashed window with reluctance. It landed, a diluted spotlight, on Allhoff's face. Even in slumber, I observed, his ugly features were not relaxed. Beneath the skin the muscles seemed taut and the heavy vertical lines on his brow attested that he frowned even in sleep. A snore, harsh and restive, floated through the doorway, came to rest in my ear. I sat down at my desk and sighed.

I looked around the room, shook my head, and wondered how any man could live in it. The sink, with more enamel chipped off it than remained, was half filled with greasy water. An egg-stained plate floated like a discouraged garbage scow on its top. Thick cafeteria cups, spattered with coffee stains stood in a precarious tower beside the water. Silverware, which was that only nominally, lay strewn and blackening over the drain board. Beneath the sink an uncovered garbage pail furnished a self-service breakfast for a score of buzzing flies.

Opposite this delicate scene, by the side of the bedroom door a pile of soiled clothing and linen lay on the floor. In itself this was no unusual sight. But it seemed to be getting out of hand. In five years I had never seen it so mountainous. It stretched a gray, dank peak half-

way to the cracked ceiling. Allhoff, the chatelaine of all this luxury, snored on. I lit my pipe and went to work.

I pored over the departmental reports that had been sent over early this morning. I conned the crime news in all the papers. I had all the answers ready at my tongue's tip, in case Allhoff, upon rising, had any questions.

Finished, I glanced at my watch and noted that the sounds of snoring had ceased. In their place mumbled oaths emanated from the bedroom. It was now a few minutes after ten o'clock. It was unusual for Allhoff to sleep so late. More unusual was the fact that Battersly had not yet put in an appearance.

The bedroom door creaked open wider. Allhoff emerged like something zooming out of Pandora's box. He was unwashed and his hair looked as if someone had starched it during a moment when he was very frightened. I offered him no greeting. Allhoff observed no social amenities, uttered no word, save his guttural oaths while dressing, until he had consumed at least two pints of coffee.

He clumped across the floor, squatted in his swivel chair and proceeded to dump coffee with a prodigal hand into the percolator. Silently, I got up and filled the pot with water. Allhoff put it on the electric plate, switched on the current and awaited its boiling with all the patience of an insomniac alcoholic hanging on until eight o'clock for the saloons to open.

THE minutes ticked by. Allhoff glared at the glass top of the percolator awaiting for the first bubble to appear. Outside, I heard a footfall on the stairs. A moment later the door opened and Battersly, neat and trim in his patrolman's uniform, came in. Allhoff, of course, didn't look up. I nodded a greeting, which Battersly ignored. He stood in the doorway staring apprehensively at Allhoff's percolator. He swallowed something in his throat then came nervously into the room and took off his cap. At the moment he looked more like a dip, who has just seen a member of the pickpocket squad, than a policeman.

He reached his hand out and touched the switch that controlled the overhanging light. It clicked as he pressed it.

The light did not go on. Battersly looked at me with wide fearful eyes until I felt like a hammer murderer who'd just come into his bedroom.

"My God," he muttered. "Oh, my God!"

He turned around and approached Allhoff's desk as if it were the gallows. He cleared his throat nervously and said: "Inspector—"

Intellectually, I had always known that Battersly was not even a distant cousin of Einstein. But until now, neither had I considered him a complete idiot. For anyone to venture a remark to Allhoff prior to his morning coffee was dangerous. For Battersly to do so was suicide.

Allhoff kept his eyes fixed on the percolator and didn't answer. Frantically, I tried to get Battersly's eye, to flag him away. Miserably, he shook off my signal and said again: "Excuse me, Inspector, but I—"

Allhoff's head spun around on his shoulders so savagely that the swivel chair creaked. His little eyes were hot slag. His lips were contorted grotesquely. His voice vibrated like an angry dynamo.

"Damn you!" he yelled. "Get to your desk. Don't bother me in the mornings. I've told you that a million times. Get to hell away from me. Can't you see I'm making coffee?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," faltered Battersly. "But—but that's what I wanted to tell you, sir. You're—you're not."

"I'm not what?"

"You're not making coffee, sir. You see yesterday I forgot to—"

He never finished that sentence. Allhoff had reached out his hand and touched the electric plate. It was, as I had figured by now, stone cold. Allhoff's face was reminiscent of a desert dawn. His eyes were dark and burning charcoal. Battersly looked like a man awaiting the drop of Doctor Guillotine's blade. Despite myself, I grinned. The idea of Allhoff thirstily awaiting the coffee's boiling while the electricity was turned off did not appeal to my better nature.

"You see, sir," said Battersly hurriedly, "that electric bill I was supposed to pay for you yesterday afternoon—well, I forgot. I didn't think of it until this morning. When I got there they told me they'd

already turned it off. It'll take an hour or so before it comes on again."

"Idiot!" howled Allhoff and his enraged voice rose and scraped the ceiling. "You blundering dull-witted fool! Or are you? Damn you! You did this deliberately. You've made a fool of me."

"No, no," said Battersly unhappily. "I'm sorry, Inspector, I forgot, that's all. I—"

That was another sentence he never finished. Allhoff reached down deep into the sewers of his mind for the rest of his vocabulary. He smeared the unfortunate Battersly with language which would have impelled a corpse to rise from its bier and smack him. I knew full well where this conversation was leading us. I got up and essayed to head it off.

I pressed a quarter into Battersly's cold palm. "Here," I said. "Go downstairs to the Greeks. Get a container of the strongest coffee he's got. Hurry."

BATTERSLY hurried. He needed no urging to flee the room. Allhoff flung a biological remark after him, then turned the vials of his wrath upon my head. "I won't drink that damned slop from downstairs. Hell, that's not coffee. You want to know what it is?"

I didn't want to know what it was, but he told me in roaring obscene chemical detail. He was still protesting profanely, vehemently, that he wouldn't drink it when Battersly returned. Allhoff snatched the container and ingested a full pint before he took it away from his twisted, dripping lips.

I went back to my desk and ran through the reports seeking a diversion to keep him away from the thing I knew he was going to hurl at Battersly when he had finished the coffee. Battersly crossed the room, stood by the window, staring down into Centre Street with shadowed eyes.

"Allhoff," I said casually, "did you know that Wheeling killed himself last night? You remember Wheeling. He came up when we did. Sergeant. Safe-and-loft Squad."

Allhoff grunted into the coffee container. "That's over twenty police suicides since the first of the year," I went on. "There's a committee of three psychiatrists looking into it."

Allhoff put down the container. "Psychiatrists!" he said, and his voice curled with so much scorn I knew I had diverted him, temporarily, from Battersly. "What the hell do they need psychiatrists for? I could've told 'em ten years ago Wheeling would probably kill himself. I could've told 'em that about most of those other coppers who've blown their brains out."

I raised my eyebrows at that. I had always known that Allhoff's opinion of himself reached Himalayan heights, but heretofore he had never boasted he was occult, that he could detect a crime before it had been committed.

"Well," I said, permitting my incredulity to seep into my tone, "that's a very good trick if you can do it."

He spun around in his chair and glared at me. "It's no trick, you muddy-brained copper. It's simple observation and reason."

"All right. Let's take Wheeler's case. Go ahead. Observe and reason."

"An hysterical type," said Allhoff. "Never should've been allowed in the department. Remember the time they brought him up on charges? He was innocent. He was cleared. But he had a breakdown immediately afterwards. Then there was the time he saw his kid brother's corpse after those dope runners shot him down. He wept over the body. A copper, mark you," he said indignantly, "crying."

I blinked at him. "Do you actually mean to tell me that you could have predicted Wheeler's suicide on those two items?"

"Not definitely. But those two episodes are indicative. I've observed a hundred other things since I knew Wheeler. There's a lot of people like that. With most guys it doesn't matter. They get hysterical, so they get drunk and sleep it off. And that's an end of things. With a copper, it's different."

"Why," I asked, "is it different with a copper?"

"Because, you stupid flatfoot, he's always got a gun handy. When a copper broods and considers suicide he's only got to unlimber his Police Special and it's all over. A layman has to devise some means of killing himself, then go out and buy the weapon. That gives him time to

think it over. Wheeler was a natural to kill himself. Always worrying, always brooding about the least thing."

I lit my pipe, digested this theory, then decided I didn't believe it.

"So you really think that only coppers of the hysterical type, as you call them, kill themselves. And then only because there's a gun handy?"

"Of course. Every rookie should be put on six months probation under my supervision. I could tell in that time if he was the hysterical type or not. If he was, we could get rid of him. Stop the department getting a bad name with all these suicides."

I puffed at my pipe and asked: "Am I the hysterical type?"

Allhoff sported. "Hell no. You're too damned bovine. It takes a degree of sensitivity to be the hysterical type. Like Wheeler, or—" He looked around the room and his bitter little eyes settled on Battersly. "Or Battersly over there. He's a real hysterical type. Wouldn't be a bit surprised if he blew his brains out some day."

If he does, I reflected, I'll know damned well who drove him to it.

"So there you are," said Allhoff with the air of a man who has settled the problem of creation. "Hysterical types make bad coppers. Wheeler kills himself just because he belongs to that type. So three psychiatrists delve into their books to discover why instead of asking me. Hell, I've known why for ten years."

In front of him the discolored coffee pot gurgled morbidly as the electricity came on. Allhoff stopped talking and grabbed his cup eagerly.

He was pouring a tarlike concoction from the spout when I heard someone coming up the stairs. A moment later the commissioner entered.

BATTERSLY and I saluted. Allhoff bowed with the respect he offered no one else. The commissioner put his hat on Allhoff's desk and sat down.

"Inspector," he said, "I have something for you. It has to do with the death of Sergeant Wheeler."

Allhoff buried his nose in his coffee cup. Then he took it out again and said:

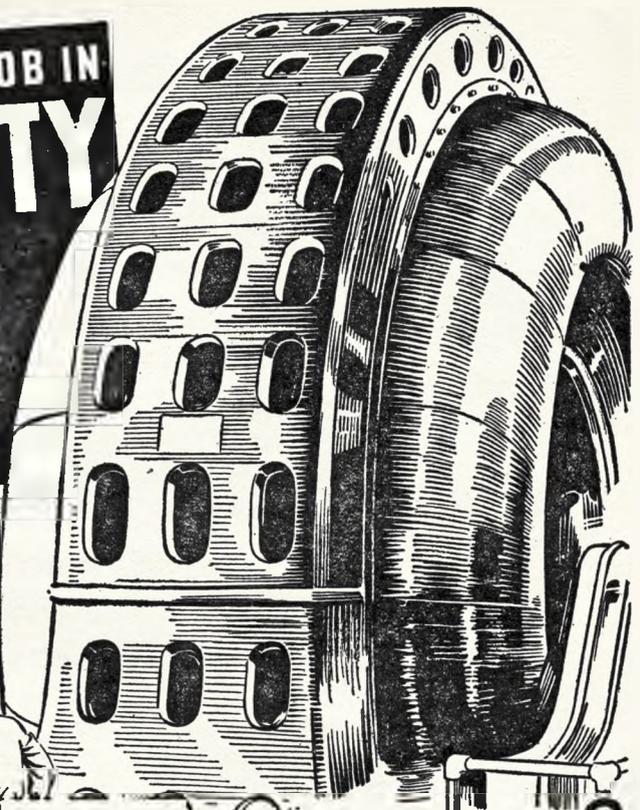
(Continued on page 94)

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(Continued from page 92)

"I'm not surprised at that suicide, Commissioner. Not surprised at all. Now there's—"

The commissioner interrupted Allhoff's pursuit of the "hysterical type" theory. "It wasn't suicide, Inspector. It was murder."

Allhoff appeared very annoyed that Wheeler had not killed himself. He would far rather be tubercular than wrong. And here was his "hysterical type" theory blowing up in his face before he'd fairly got it under way. I grinned at Battersly as Allhoff said: "Of course, you have proof of this, Commissioner?"

"Here, Inspector. Read this."

Allhoff took the sheet of typewritten paper from his hand. He read it, aloud.

"Wheeler:—

"You will withdraw from your bank ten thousand dollars in small bills. At four o'clock Tuesday afternoon you will be instructed how to get them in my possession. Failing this you will die at precisely three o'clock the following afternoon."

Allhoff put down the paper and picked up his cup. "So," he said very slowly. "And when did Wheeler die?"

"As closely as the medical examiner can figure," the commissioner told him, "somewhere between two and three on Wednesday afternoon."

Something clicked in my brain at that. "Say," I said, "there've been three or four notes like that in the last month. They were found in the houses of men who'd just died. It's here in the reports."

"Precisely," said the commissioner. "That's what I want you to look into, Inspector. The sergeant's reports will tell you as much as I can. Well, I must get along now."

He stood up, walked to the door then turned around again and winked broadly at me. "Oh, and by the way, Inspector, I've been thinking of giving a transfer to Battersly here. Can you spare him?"

I held my breath as I waited to see how Allhoff would take that. Battersly swung around from the window, surprised and anxious. The commissioner, himself, was aware of the tension in the room.

"Transfer him?" repeated Allhoff in a taut voice. "To which bureau, sir?"

"Detective. He's due for a promotion. And he certainly should have picked up something from you, Inspector. Can you think of any reason why not?"

Allhoff was silent for a long time. He could think of several reasons why not, but none which he was willing to admit. Finally, he said: "Yes, sir. Battersly'd be no good in the Detective Bureau, sir. No good at all."

The commissioner lifted his eyebrows. "Why not?"

"The hysterical type, sir. Definitely the hysterical type. They make very bad policemen, sir. And worse detectives. Better leave him here, sir, where I can keep an eye on him."

Well, if the "hysterical type" theory hadn't served one purpose for him, he was certainly trying to make it serve another.

"Oh, come now, Inspector. I have great regard for your gifts but you're not a psychologist, you know."

"I'm right," said Allhoff stubbornly. "I'll prove I'm right, if you'll give me time."

The commissioner shrugged. Allhoff was the white-haired boy in his book. "All right," he said. "I'll give you time. Say a month. But you must have definite evidence by then that Battersly is what you call the hysterical type. No opinions, no theories. Facts."

We saluted again as he turned around and left the room.

AS THE door slammed behind the commissioner Allhoff blew up like a bomb. His face was twisted with wrath. His eyes flashed with hell's own light. He jerked his head around on his spinal column until he was facing Battersly. Then he opened his mouth, his voice was a cascade of rage.

"You slimy anaconda," he roared. "Not only are you a yellow coward, but a back-biting snake as well. Behind my back you sneak to the commissioner asking for a transfer. Trying to run away as you did on the night you cost me my legs!"

He pushed his chair away from the desk with such force that it rolled halfway across the room. At the edge of his chair where his knees should have begun, his

two stumps wriggled furiously. Battersly stared at him, scared and startled.

I breathed a heavy sigh and took my rap. "Allhoff," I said, "it's not Battersly's fault. He knows nothing about it. I asked the commissioner for that transfer. I figured the kid was entitled to a promotion by now. It was all my fault."

But there was no diverting him this time. True, he didn't like me a great deal, but he hated Battersly with all the venom that had collected in his warped brain for the last five years. He paid no attention to my confession. He raved on, obscenely and blasphemously at Battersly.

I gritted my teeth, turned to my reports and kept my mouth shut. Long ago I had learned that words merely poured oil on the fire of his wrath. Battersly stood, pale and miserable, before the outburst as we both waited for him to subside through sheer exhaustion.

THE affair had had its genesis some five years ago in the days when Battersly had been a raw rookie. A raid had been scheduled on a West End Avenue apartment where a notorious gangster and his aid were hiding out. The department had learned through a stool-pigeon that the front door was guarded by a machine gun planted on the stairway. Battersly's assignment had been to effect a rear entrance and close with the machine-gun operator at the precise moment that Allhoff, at the head of the raiding squad, charged through the front door.

Battersly had got in the house all right. Then at the last moment had suddenly developed a quite understandable case of buck fever. Instead of disarming the man at the tommy gun, he had fled upstairs as soon as the battle began. That resulted in Allhoff's crashing through the door just in time to receive a hail of machine-gun bullets in his legs. Gangrene and amputation had followed in the order named.

However, despite the loss of his legs, the commissioner had arranged for Allhoff to continue to work and draw his former salary, although he was no longer an official member of the department. Allhoff, with some grim idea of poetic justice in his head had demanded and received Battersly as his assistant. I had

been sent over from headquarters to handle his paper work and act as peacemaker between the pair of them. I relished neither job.

CHAPTER TWO

Five Who Died on Time

NOON came and went. When Battersly and I returned from lunch Allhoff had apparently numbed his fury with caffeine. At least he appeared to have forgotten Battersly temporarily. He was ready to go to work.

"Simmonds," he snapped. The commissioner has sent over all the data on those extortion notes. The Wheeler case and the others. It's on your desk. Look it over. Tell me how many guys got those notes before Wheeler."

I picked up the stack of documents from the desk. Battersly retired to the other side of the room to brood. After a moment's research, I said: "There were four of them before Wheeler was killed."

"Damn you," he snarled, "I didn't ask you for an opinion."

"Opinion? I didn't give you one."

"The hell you didn't. You said Wheeler was murdered. I'm going to prove he was a suicide."

I raised my eyebrows. So that was it! Allhoff had said Wheeler was a suicide, and Allhoff was going to be right no matter what the evidence.

"Now," he said. "Those notes. They're all there including Wheeler's. I glanced at them. They all read exactly the same, don't they?"

I checked them. The phrasing was identical and I said so. Allhoff grunted.

"What about the death certificates? What causes of death do they give?"

"Edwards, cancer" I said. "Robertson, pernicious anemia. Wheeler, suicide. Gelberstson, heart failure. Graham, Bright's disease."

Allhoff pursed his lips thoughtfully and poured himself another cup of coffee. "That all looks very kosher," he said. "Yet all those notes predicted the death within one or two hours."

"Has it occurred to you," I asked excitedly, "that the murderer might be a doctor? A doctor could deliberately fake

the death certificates and get away with it."

"Brilliant," said Allhoff in a tone which implied I was ripe for the loony bin. "Coruscating. Especially considering that each of those guys had different doctors."

I sat there, the papers in my hand watching him. He was registering heavy thought and I knew better than to interrupt him. Then his face lit up. He nodded his head slowly and said: "Now assuming Wheeler was a suicide—"

"Which I don't," I told him.

His eyes blazed and he slammed his fist on the desk. "Damn you, Wheeler was a suicide! He was the type, the hysterical type. He—"

I was saved further expatiation of the theory by the entrance of a dignified elderly man. He strode with military mien toward Allhoff's desk. He stood there stiffly for a moment, his gray mustaches bristling and his blue eyes fixed upon Allhoff.

"Inspector Allhoff?"

Allhoff sullenly admitted his identity.

"I'm Colonel Whittaker. The commissioner's a friend of mine. He sent me over to see you. To show you this."

He handed Allhoff a folded piece of white paper. Allhoff took it, opened it and read aloud.

"Whittaker:—

"You are herewith given notice of an assessment of twenty thousand dollars (\$20,000). This money to be paid in cash as per instructions you shall telephonically receive. Failure to accede to this demand will result in your demise. Said demise to take place at precisely 4:15 post meridian on the 29th Inst."

"Damn," said Allhoff as he finished. "This interferes with my theory."

"Ah," I said happily, "you mean Wheeler wasn't a suicide?"

He didn't answer me. He looked up at Whittaker. "When did you get this, Colonel?"

"In this morning's mail. I took it to the commissioner at once."

Allhoff gulped some coffee. "You don't intend to pay this money?"

The colonel bristled. "Most emphatically not! I shall pay no money to extortioners."

"Well," said Allhoff, glancing at his desk calendar, "this is the 23rd. That

leaves six days before your extortioner gets serious. I don't think you need worry, Colonel. I rarely take that long to clean up a case."

Despite the arrogance in his voice I was compelled to admit that as a general rule, he didn't. The colonel shook his hand and left.

AS SOON as the door closed, I blurted out the discovery I had made several minutes ago. "Hey," I said, "did you notice that the colonel's note is different from the others? The wording is changed. Maybe it's from another guy, a different extortionist."

"My God," said Allhoff, "how many times must I tell you that if you think of it, I've *thought* of it."

"All right," I said, nettled. "But if you insist Wheeler killed himself, how do you explain the colonel's letter?"

Allhoff shrugged his shrunken shoulders. "I don't know yet. 'We'll have to wait.'"

"For what?"

"Goodman, Regan and Langley."

"Who are they? Vice-presidents? I never heard of them."

"One," said Allhoff, "was Wheeler's lawyer. Regan is Wheeler's cousin, probably next of kin. Langley's an employee of the Acme Paper Company."

A little light penetrated my skull. "You mean you can trace the paper the notes were written on?"

Allhoff nodded none too enthusiastically. "Maybe. Most of them were written on unmarked cheap paper. One of them, however, the letter that went to Edwards, was written on bond paper. Paper put out by the Acme people. They're sending up one of their men for me to question. I can't do anything until I've tried that."

I went back to the sport pages of the evening paper I'd brought in from lunch. Battersly conned the funnies with moronic intentness. Allhoff sucked up coffee, registering profound thought over the chipped cup.

SOME twenty minutes later Goodman, a wiry, restive little lawyer, arrived with Regan. Regan was young and well built. I particularly remarked the size

of his shoulders. Then, before they had been properly introduced, the door opened again and Langley came in.

Langley was a typical clerk. His shoulders were bent and he wore a worried air. Allhoff greeted him and sat the trio down in chairs arranged fanwise about his desk.

"I may as well tell you at once," he announced, "that no matter what may have happened in the other cases, I am of the firm conviction that Sergeant Wheeler committed suicide."

I watched both Goodman and Regan. It was difficult to say which of them registered shocked surprise most heavily.

"Good heavens, no," said Regan. "I'm sure my cousin'd do nothing like that. It's impossible."

"Ridiculous," said Goodman. "No reason for it at all."

"You don't convince me," said Allhoff. And I knew no one ever would since he'd already gone on record with a contrary opinion. "You, Goodman, what do you know about this?"

"Nothing much. As soon as I heard of the—the tragedy, I went up to Wheeler's place, to look over his papers. I took the beat coper in with me. I always like to have a witness under such circumstances. While there we met Regan, who'd heard of the death of his cousin and come down from Utica."

"Ah," said Allhoff, "and as next of kin, Regan, I suppose, gets what money Wheeler left."

"He's probably entitled to it," said Goodman, "but he's waived any claim, in favor of distant relatives in Ireland. Regan believes they'll need the money more than he does."

Allhoff uttered an annoyed grunt. "And that's all either of you can tell me?"

"That's about all."

Allhoff sighed and turned to Langley, who'd been sitting in deferential silence.

"You," he said, "what do you know about this?"

Langley flushed nervously as if Allhoff were pinning the rap directly on his stooped shoulders. He took the Edwards letter from Allhoff's hand and examined it closely. He read the writing with moving lips. Then he said with the air of a man coming upon a remarkable dis-

covery. "It's our paper, Inspector. Made by the Acme Company."

"Magnificent," purred Allhoff. Then he roared: "You idiot, I know damned well it is. Why do you think I sent for you?"

Langley became white, then flushed again.

"To whom was it sold?" demanded Allhoff. "Can you check that?"

Langley shook his head unhappily. "No, Inspector. There'd be no way of telling. We've given reams of this stuff to the jobbers recently. There's no way of telling at all."

Allhoff filled his coffee cup and looked annoyed. He waved his three visitors away with an angry hand. "All right," he said, "that's all. You can all go now. If any of you thinks of anything, remembers anything pertinent to this case let me know."

As Goodman led the trio out the door, I watched Allhoff closely. I began to think that the thing I had long hoped for had come to pass. Allhoff, apparently, had run up against a brick wall. For the first time in his career he had no clue, no inkling about anything. Beyond a rather shakey theory about the hysterical type to account for Wheeler's death, he had drawn a complete blank. I stood up, lit my pipe, and told him so with vast satisfaction.

Then, observing it was five o'clock, I put on my cap and got out of the room in a hurry.

Battersly followed right at my heels, before he could answer me.

THE following day was Saturday. Since I was going fishing early Sunday morning, I prepared my tackle and outfit before I went to work, with the net result that I was a good hour late. I steeled myself for profane admonition when I entered Allhoff's slum. However, I found him alone, grinning into his coffee cup, almost happily.

"Well," I said, "and what are you beaming about?"

"Langley," he said. "The paper guy. He's dead."

"What are you so happy about? He was no enemy of yours."

"If what I think happened," said All-

hoff. "He will always be my friend."

Which would be a warning thought for Langley in his tomb.

"There was one of those extortion notes in his apartment," said Allhoff. "Battersly's across the street picking it up for me now."

As he spoke Battersly returned. He handed the letter to Allhoff. I read it over his shoulder. It was an epistle demanding payment of five thousand dollars, threatening Langley with death on Friday night if he failed to pay it.

"Listen," said Allhoff to Battersly, "what have you got on this? Has Homicide decided that this is a suicide or a naturally caused death?"

Battersly shook his head. "No, sir. Murder. Window broken. Langley shot through the head in his chair. No weapon found. Murder all the way, sir."

"Good," said Allhoff.

"Good?" I repeated. "Why?"

"I wouldn't expect you to know. Look here, do you notice anything about this letter?"

"One thing. Its wording is exactly the same as that received by Whittaker. It's different from the first ones we got."

"And what do you figure from that?"

"Precisely nothing."

"You're not only more than ordinarily stupid," said Allhoff reaching for the coffee pot, "you're a completely useless adjunct to this office. Since you've made plans to go fishing tomorrow why the hell don't you go today? Your absence may permit me to get some work done."

I put my hat on before he could change his mind.

"Thank you, inspector," I said, striding from the office as Battersly stared after me with wide and envious eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

Half a Ghost

IT WAS a little after ten o'clock on Sunday night when I drove back to town after a day's fishing in Connecticut. A healthy weariness was in my muscles. The country air, after a week of the constricting atmosphere of Allhoff's tenement, had loosened my nerves, cleared my brain,

and deluded me into believing that I was yet young enough to pound a beat.

Nothing was more remote from my mind as I unlocked the door of my apartment. Nothing was closer to it a moment later.

My wife came bustling out of the kitchen. She took my arm, kissed me and said without preamble: "Tom, the inspector's dead."

I dropped my fishing tackle on the floor and stared at her in wide-eyed amazement. "Not Allhoff? You don't mean Allhoff's dead?"

She nodded her head. "Killed, Tom. Blown up by a bomb in his own apartment. It's here in the Sunday papers. And that poor lad, Battersly's been trying to get you on the phone all day."

I raced into the living-room, snatched up the *Sunday Times*. Apparently the news had reached them just in time for the last edition. They'd run barely a stick of type which stated prosaically that Inspector Allhoff had been killed late Saturday evening when an explosion had occurred in his apartment. Headquarters had announced that the inspector had been experimenting with amonol explosives.

For a moment, I stood stunned. Then I ran down the stairs, jumped in the car and headed for Centre Street as if I were on radio patrol. I drove recklessly with at least two conflicting emotions in my breast. If Allhoff were dead I most certainly could not feel sorry. In my book he was much better off. Battersly and I most assuredly were.

However, a doubt remained in my mind. I had heard nothing about Allhoff's bomb experiments. And I knew him well enough to suspect anything connected with him until it had been well checked.

I parked the car before the tenement house across the street from headquarters. A uniformed copper was on duty outside the door. I identified myself.

"Happened about midnight last night," the patrolman told me. "Lieutenant Hayes was coming out of headquarters when he heard the explosion. He came right over. Found the inspector's apartment wrecked, the inspector dead. The M. E. said the percussion killed him. The commissioner

Suicide in Blue

himself took charge of the body. They're trying to locate relatives."

I took off my hat and mopped my brow. This certainly looked on the level.

"All right," I said. "Thanks. I'll go upstairs and look around."

The copper saluted, then said: "Say, Sergeant, this guy Batterslys' been hanging around all day. Been trying to get hold of you. He seems pretty hard hit."

"Battersly? Where is he?"

"Down there at Noonan's. He's been soaking up whiskey all day. Better take a look at him Sergeant."

I spun around and headed down the street to Noonan's. At a table against the rear wall sat Battersly staring at me through red-rimmed sleepless eyes.

"Sergeant," he said. "For God's sake, where you been? You hear about it, Sergeant? He's dead. I killed him. First, I chopped his legs off, then I killed him."

I yelled for Noonan and ordered black coffee and spirits of ammonia.

"Battersly," I said, "don't be a damned drunken fool. He blew himself up, didn't he? What did you have to do with it?"

Battersly shook his head with drunken earnestness. "You don't know the facts," he said leaving out the t's and slurring the s's. "It was me who done it. Oh, my God, I killed him. I killed him!"

There was small profit in arguing the point at that moment. I kept my mouth shut as I poured the coffee and ammonia into him. Then I dragged him to his feet.

"Let's get out of here. We'll go upstairs. You can sleep it off in Allhoff's bed."

He looked at me as if I'd suggested he violate the corpse. "Good God, no!" he said, horrified. "Sleep in the bed of the man I've murdered! I—"

He broke off into wild drunken laughter. I grabbed his arm and led him from the saloon. I practically carried him up the creaking stairs to Allhoff's apartment. I switched on the light and deposited him in his own chair.

HALF the room—the bedroom side—was normal enough. The other half was a wreck. Allhoff's desk was a splintered ruin. The back of his swivel chair

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lay on the floor over by the sink. Plaster from the wall was scattered everywhere. Papers from the desk were strewn all over the room. A handful of dark reddish stains dotted the desk and plaster.

I surveyed the scene for a long silent moment. Then I shook my head and said: "My God, it's true!"

Battersly lifted his brooding gaze to me. "True?" he said, and his voice broke just this side of hysteria. "Of course, it's true! And I did it." He sprang suddenly to his feet. "I can't stay in this room, Sergeant. I can feel his presence. Everything here is his. His clothes, his coffee pot. They all remind me of him."

As he spoke I automatically looked at the pile of laundry which leaned grayly against the wall at a height of some three feet. I looked on the desk for the coffee pot, didn't see it. I walked around the room and found the electric plate and percolator placed neatly under the sink. I screwed up my brow at that. In seven years I'd never seen that pot anywhere save on Allhoff's desk. Then the unnerving sound of Battersly's sobbing brought me back to other things.

I went across the room and shook his shoulder roughly. "Battersly," I said harshly, "you're being a hysterical fool. You've as little to do with Allhoff's death as I have. You've—"

"No," he said. "No, no. You don't understand, Sergeant. I mixed that explosive for him. I must've mixed it wrong. And that's what killed him."

I stared at him blankly. "What explosive? I've never seen an explosive around here in seven years. What are you talking about?"

"After you left yesterday he told me he was conducting some experiments. He gave me some chemicals to mix up for him. Told me to be very careful. Gave me exact measurements. Told me it was dangerous if I made a mistake. He gave me so many instructions all at once that I forgot some of them."

"Well, why the devil didn't you ask him again?"

"I did. Once. He repeated them and called me all kinds of a damned fool. I was scared to ask again. I trusted my memory, hoping I was right. But now I

know it was my fault. I killed him!"

"Have you told anyone else this?"

"No. I wanted to tell you first. But what the hell's the difference? It's my fault. I killed him and the only thing I can do now is kill myself."

He was sobbing aloud now. I went to the doorway and whistled up the copper from downstairs.

"Look," I told him, "this kid's drunk and almost out of his head. Get a taxi and take him up to my house. Tell my wife to put him in my room and watch him."

The policeman saluted. He took hold of Battersly and propelled him, still sobbing, from the room.

I sighed, went into Allhoff's bedroom and sat down on the edge of the sagging mattress. My wife had had more experience with weeping infants than I.

I switched out the light in the living-room, returned to the bedroom and undressed. I climbed into the creaking bed in my underwear, flicked off the reading-lamp and closed my eyes. I lay there in the dark hazily speculating on a number of things. . . .

I AWOKE abruptly and alarmed. There was empty apprehension at the pit of my stomach as I oriented myself. It took a full five seconds to remember where I was. I sat up in bed and listened.

Thin sound trickled to my ears from the other room. A shuffled footfall, the rustle of paper. Silently I cursed the fact that my gun was in the second bureau drawer at home. Slightly less silently, I maneuvered myself out of the squeaking bed and tiptoed to the door.

Beyond the window was moonless night. A faint yellowish ray of light traveled up from the street-lamp below and formed an odd pattern on the ceiling, which shed almost no light at all in the room. Yet there was someone, something, there.

I stood with my body pressed against the bedroom wall so that the white of my underwear would not give my position away. My head was thrust around the door-jamb, my eyes straining into the darkness, staring at a moving dark blob that was not part of the night.

I took a deep breath to still my leaping nerves. I hadn't been in a rough-and-tumble for years. And at my age I

was going to need a lot of luck. Carefully I moved one foot through the doorway. The element of surprise was an ally I intended to keep. Then, just as I was prepared to spring upon the intruder, my aching eyes blinked once and I froze to horrified immobility.

A ghost was rising on the far side of the room. Whitely, eerily, it crawled waveringly up the side of the wall. Through no volition of mine, my voice came out of a dry throat, high-pitched.

"Who's that?" I yelled. "Who's there? Put up your hands. You're covered!"

The darkness suddenly became Stygian madness. The ghost uttered a vehement and foul oath, and sprang across the room. There was a crackling noise of crumpled paper. Feet raced across the floor-boards toward the open window. I emerged from the bedroom to make a futile flying tackle at a figure suddenly silhouetted against the windowsill. A fist swung full into my face. I clutched at the figure as I reeled backward. My outstretched fingers touched a pocket, somehow closed about a pencil. Then the dark form had straddled the sill and now the ghost was upon me.

The ghost, I noted, as I fell to the floor, was only half a ghost now. At first it had been completely white. Now it appeared spotted. White on top and at the side, black and disembodied everywhere else. I heard a curse in my ear as it tripped over me, got to its feet again and raced to the window. I saw a revolver thrust itself over the windowsill, fire two crackling shots into the street below.

I scrambled to my feet, lurched across the room to the electric-light switch and clicked it on. I stood staring across the room, my eyes wide as the Grand Canyon.

For over by the window, glaring at me balefully was Allhoff! Allhoff with a pair of dirty drawers resting on his head, hanging down over his ears, a soiled pillow case dangling from his shoulder, and an old shirt flapping around the stump of his left leg.

"You drooling idiot!" he screamed at me. "You damned meddling lunatic!"

I KEPT on staring at him too utterly astonished for resentment. Then, when he paused for breath, I said in be-

wilderment: "But where did you come from? I thought you'd been killed?"

"I'm a miracle," said Allhoff bitterly. "I'm risen from the grave. Buried beneath a pile of dirty laundry, I have broken the tomb. Only to find that you are still the same damned interfering cretin that you were when I died."

I cast my gaze in the direction of the laundry pile. The mountain of linen had erupted, a huge crater was in its center. "You mean you were hiding under that pile of clothes? What for? And who was the other guy? The guy that came in the window?"

"That," said Allhoff disgustedly, "was the guy I was waiting for. That was the guy we've been looking for. That was the guy whose capture would've solved this case."

"But I—"

"But you, you stupid ox," he roared savagely, "screwed everything up. You butted in and he got away. Neither of us could see him in the dark."

I looked down at my right hand, noted it still clutched the pencil I had inadvertently grabbed from the intruder's pocket. "Look," I said, "I've got his pencil. Maybe that's a clue."

"A pencil," sneered Allhoff. "A plain yellow pencil. There are fifty million of them in the country. Hell, I've got his glove."

He held up an ordinary canvas workman's glove. It was one of the sort that can be bought in any ten-cent store. I shrugged my shoulders and said: "So what? That's about as good as my pencil. There are fifty million of those gloves in the country, too."

Allhoff bobbed his head up from beneath the sink where he was reaching for his coffee-making apparatus. "And there are fifty million dumb police sergeants," he snapped. "Now get the hell out of here. I'm going to have a cup of coffee, then I'm going to bed."

I went into the bedroom and began to put on my clothes. My brain was still dizzy from the events of the evening.

I put on my coat and emerged from the bedroom. "Allhoff," I said, "what was all this business about experimenting with bombs? This cock-and-bull story about your being killed?"

Allhoff turned on his electric plate. He filled the percolator to the brim.

"It's three o'clock in the morning," he said. "You usually manage to botch things up earlier than this. For God's sake, go home and let me think."

I went to the door in silence. I could see one of his moods coming on him.

"Say," he said as I stood on the threshold. "Tomorrow morning, get that lawyer fellow and Wheeler's cousin down here at about ten thirty. Get Colonel Whittaker, too. You might tell the commissioner as well, that if he drops over here a little after eleven, I'll have his case all wrapped up and ready for him."

I blinked at him. "How can you break the case when you say the guy got clean away, didn't leave a clue? If you didn't know who he was when he came in the window, how in hell do you know now?"

He looked up at me and came as close to smiling as he ever did. "I've got his glove, haven't I?" he said. "Now for heaven's sake get the hell out."

CHAPTER FOUR

A New Kind of Sadist

WE GATHERED in Allhoff's slum a little after ten o'clock the following morning. Battersly sat glumly at his desk staring blankly at the wall with red sleepless eyes. Despite his horror at Allhoff's death last night, he didn't appear overjoyed to see him alive this morning. He had come to the conclusion that Allhoff's fake demise had been planted for the sole purpose of embarrassing him.

Colonel Whittaker, looking as if he had stepped from a full-page Arno cartoon, sat at the side of Allhoff's new desk.

Goodman, holding a brief case on his knee, fidgeted in his chair like a man who has an engagement elsewhere. Regan smoked a cigarette and seemed bored by the whole proceeding.

On Allhoff's desk the battered coffee pot, that he had so carefully preserved from damage during the explosion, gurgled invitingly. Allhoff rubbed his hands together.

"Well, well," he said and he sounded as if someone had buttered his vocal cords with margarine. "I see we're all here on

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time. I always say there's nothing like a cup of good coffee to get the brain cells functioning in the morning. Battersly, cups!"

Battersly looked up at him wonderingly. "Cups, sir?"

"Cups," said Allhoff testily. "For everyone. We'll all have a cup of coffee to begin with. Come on, hurry it up."

Battersly got up and went over to the cupboard above the sink. I regarded Allhoff with a fishy eye. Allhoff going hospitable was rather like Hitler patting a neutral country on the back and assuring it everything was going to be all right.

Battersly laid five cups on Allhoff's desk. I counted them mentally and said hastily: "Count me out, inspector. I just had breakfast."

The colonel contemplated the chipped, unsterile china. His blue eyes looked upon the stained and battered coffee pot. He regarded the pair of amorous flies that flirtd above the sugar bowl and his mouth pursed until he looked like Calvin Coolidge.

"Thank you, no, inspector," he said. "Just came out of a restaurant. I—"

Now Goodman and Regan entered their polite refusals. Allhoff, however, paid no attention to anyone. He filled the five cups with a liquid that looked as if it had come from Trinidad's pitch lake and pushed the mugs around the desk.

"Nonsense," he said. "You can always stand a good cup of coffee. I insist. Come now, drink up or I'll feel insulted."

Allhoff insulted! I nearly slid off my chair at that one.

Reluctantly everyone picked up his cup. We all sipped the pungent black liquid with the enthusiasm of a Greek patrician knocking off a hemlock and soda. The colonel downed his bravely. He replaced the cup on the desk and said: "Now, inspector, will you tell us what's on your mind?"

"In just a moment," said Allhoff. "I'll clear the cups away. I hate disorder."

Battersly and I exchanged glances. Allhoff couldn't stand disorder much as I couldn't stand a million dollars. Battersly stood up, went over to the desk and reached for the cups.

"No, no," said Allhoff affably. "Don't



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"And," I said ironically, "what were you looking for?"

"An extortionist," said Allhoff.

"You mean he didn't kill those guys, after all?"

"He did not," said Allhoff. "I told you I knew Wheeler was a suicide. It was obvious. He was—"

"I know," I interposed hastily. "He was the hysterical type. You've already explained that."

"Wait a minute," said Goodman. "If the extortionist, as you call him, didn't kill these guys, who did?"

"Well," said Allhoff judicially, "Wheeler killed Wheeler. Cancer killed Edwards. Pernicious anemia killed another of them. You'll find it all on the death certificates."

"That's crazy," said Regan. "What about those notes? Do you mean to say it was sheer coincidence that all those guys died just when the notes predicted they would?"

"Those notes predicted nothing," said Allhoff, helping himself to more coffee. "They were based on past occurrences, not future contingencies."

The colonel leaned forward in his chair. His blue eyes were alertly gleaming. "I think I see what you're driving at."

I was damned if I did and I said so.

Allhoff put his cup down in its sloppy saucer. He drew a deep breath, leaned forward over his desk and said: "Those notes were planted *after* the recipients had died. Not *before*!"

There was silence in the room broken only by Allhoff's triumphant and stertorous breathing. Each of us considered the import of this information.

Goodman was the first to decide it wouldn't do. "That doesn't make sense, inspector," he said. "Why should anyone plant notes in the house of a man who was already dead. You can't extort from a corpse—legally or actually."

"You can't," agreed Allhoff placidly. Then his tone changed suddenly. It came loud and savagely. "But you can use a corpse to scare the drawers off the living!"

I still didn't see it. "Allhoff," I said, "are you sure you're not developing into the hysterical type?"

HE SWUNG around in his chair and glared at me. All the saccharine Shirley Temple qualities he had assumed dropped from him now. His face was weirdly contorted and I could hear the stumps of his legs rattle angrily against the under part of the desk.

"You blind, blundering fool!" he roared. "Did you bribe your way through the Civil Service examination? It's as obvious as you're own damned stupidity. Look here. Men die. Our extortionist finds out quite easily when and how they died. He steals into their homes. He plants his note demanding money upon pain of death. He predicts that death to the hour, because he *knows* when his victim has already died. Now, do you see it?"

Whittaker nodded his head before I could speak. "I see it, inspector," he said. "By so doing, the extortioner would build himself up a terrific reputation as a killer. Once he'd established that reputation through the newspapers, the *living* recipients of his letters would pay what he asked."

"Right," snapped Allhoff. "First he plants his letters on corpses. Then when he's received the attendant publicity, he plants 'em on live guys. The live guys, believing he's murdered all these other mugs in a manner which has completely baffled the coppers, promptly reach a condition where they need no cathartic and pay through the nose."

"Damned ingenious," said Regan slowly. "And who is this extortioner?"

"I don't know," said Allhoff blandly. "But I will in a very short time."

Goodman pursed his lips. "Of course, then," he said, "your killer is no killer at all. He gained all the menacing reputation of a murderer, but legally he can never be indicted for homicide."

Allhoff lifted his coffee cup. "Oh, yes, he can," he said over its rim.

"How?" I demanded. "If he killed no one, how can you get him for homicide? Besides, I've been thinking this over and it sounds screwy to me. What about Langley?"

"Well, what about him?"

"There was no point in planting a note on him. Hell, he only made about forty bucks a week. It'd arouse suspicion at

once if an extortioner went to work on him. His later victims might start figuring there was something funny about the whole deal. Why should he take that chance?"

"Ah," said Allhoff, "I'm glad you mentioned Langley. What did you notice, if anything, that differentiated Langley's death from the others?"

"Well," said Regan, "what?"

"It *looked* like murder," said Allhoff. "All the others looked like something else. Langley's death didn't."

We all stared at him.

"And why was that?" asked the colonel.

"Two reasons," said Allhoff. "First, it *was* murder. Second, our extortionist, who, by the way, has now become a killer, *wanted* it to look like murder.

"Go on," I said, "Why?"

"Good God," said Allhoff, "do you mean to say you don't see it yet? Our man began to worry that, perhaps his system was defeating itself. Heretofore none of these deaths had looked like murder. Of course, considering they weren't that's not odd. Perhaps his living victims would begin to wonder, to believe that our extortioner wasn't a killer at all. One genuine murder, with no doubt about it, would do his reputation a lot of good. So he killed Langley."

"It was a damned poor choice," said Regan. "Why didn't he kill a guy with dough?"

"I'm glad you asked that. He didn't kill Langley primarily for reasons of profit. He killed him because Langley had knowledge which would give the whole thing away. Since he had to kill him anyway he made no attempt to conceal its being murder and he planted one of his notes."

I SAID: "Well, since Langley told you nothing of any importance when he was here, since he was killed shortly afterwards, I gather you've been in touch with your astrologer again."

"You're a damn fool," said Allhoff contemptuously. "It struck me as damned odd, too, that an extortioner would pick on a guy who made as little dough as Langley. So then I began to think. I came to the obvious conclusion that Langley

had been killed for some other reason. What?"

The colonel did straight man for him this time. "All right, Inspector," he said. "What?"

"If not money," said Allhoff, "it must have been to silence him. There was no other reason. If he knew something, it was in all probability something to do with the paper. So I called Langley's firm. I examined and cross-examined about that paper. Finally, I got the answer."

Goodman shifted uncomfortably in his chair and said: "Which was?"

Allhoff leaned over his desk and jabbed his finger at the air to emphasize his point. "The paper on which the note found at Wallace Reading's house was written was not put on the market until July 17th."

I took my pipe out of my mouth. "And Reading died on July 15th. Is that it?"

"That's it," said Allhoff. "As soon as I knew that, I knew everything. The whole scheme was obvious. Langley neglected to mention that item while he was here. But he thought of it later. He was killed before he could tell me."

"Well," said Regan, "that's all very ingenious. But who was it? Who is this guy? Do you know?"

"I will."

"How?" I asked.

"I've got his glove," said Allhoff triumphantly.

The telephone on his desk rang. Allhoff snatched it up. For once, I noted, the guy at the other end of the receiver did more talking than Allhoff.

He was still holding the receiver intently to his ear when the outer door opened and the commissioner walked in. He sat down quietly, didn't speak until Allhoff hung up.

"Good morning, Inspector," he said. "I have a message that you've cleaned up the case of these extortion notes. Who's the guilty man?"

"Number three," said Allhoff. "Number three is the murderer. I told you I had his glove!"

The commissioner nodded as if he understood what Allhoff was talking about.

"So what?" I said. "A moment ago you didn't know who the killer was. Now you know. How did you find out?"

"I blew myself up," he yelled, beating the desk with his fists. "Are you so dumb

Suicide in Blue

you don't see it yet? Listen. This guy's building up a reputation. He's a subtle murderer. Pay me or I'll do to you what I did to those other guys, see? Well, he hears I'm dead. Me! The smartest copper in the world! Is he going to pass up a chance like that. The hell he is. He's going to plant a note on me so the whole world can see what a great guy he is."

Allhoff was laying it on rather thick, but still I saw what he meant. "So," I said, "you framed your own death, then hid in the laundry pile waiting for him to climb in the rear window and plant his note. Then you could jump him red-handed?"

"Sure. It was perfect. How could I figure on a dope like you wrecking my plans. If I hadn't snatched his glove, he'd be in the clear now, thanks to you."

THE commissioner looked at me sternly. For a moment I felt like a one-man fifth column who had been sabotaging the police department. I covered my confusion quickly by asking: "How could you trace that glove? There are thousands of glove's like that? And who in the devil is number three?"

"I couldn't trace the glove," snapped Allhoff. "But if a guy had to climb down that waterspout outside the window there, with only one glove, he had to leave fingerprints, didn't he? Fingerprints that would tally on one of those coffee cups this morning. I had those cups numbered. I took 'em into the bedroom and wrapped them up in tissue paper. The laundry guy wrapped them up, in turn, in the dirty clothes and took them over to the Identification Bureau. The prints on the waterspout tally with the prints on cup number three."

"Who's number three?" asked the commissioner.

"Regan," said Allhoff, and his gun was in his hand.

Regan got out of his chair. His face was ashen and his fingers trembled. He shot a swift glance at Goodman. The lawyer leaned forward and said: "That's ridiculous. Wheeler's own cousin. It's too coincidental. How could he—"

"He's not Wheeler's cousin," said Allhoff, "and no one knows that better than you, Goodman."

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"Are you accusing me—" Goodman started to bluster.

"I am," snapped Allhoff. "I'll tell you just when and where you came into this thing. You were Wheeler's lawyer. You first met Regan when you found him in Wheeler's apartment planting his note. You went into that apartment with a policeman. Regan claimed he was Wheeler's cousin. You knew damned well he wasn't, but you let the claim go until you found out what the angle was. When you did find out, you cut yourself in, instead of turning Regan over to the police."

Goodman laughed. Not a very mirthful laugh, either. "Absurd," he said.

"Sure," said Allhoff. "And I'll tell you something even more absurd. Before and including Wheeler's death, various brands of paper and different typewriters were used to write those notes. Since Wheeler's death there has been a uniformity of both paper and typewriter. As soon as I knew you were involved in it, I had all the machines in your office checked. I've just heard over the phone that a locked Royal portable in your private office has been identified as the machine that wrote all the notes since Wheeler's death."

"Including," asked the commissioner, "the one found at Langley's home?"

"Including that," said Allhoff. "Langley left here with those two on Friday. It was undoubtedly in their company he remembered that fact about the paper. He mentioned it to them, and died as a result."

Regan sat down again. He looked appealingly at the lawyer. Goodman stood up, clasping his briefcase to his breast.

"You still haven't a case," he said and there was desperation in his tone. "Not a homicide case."

"We know you wrote the notes," said Allhoff. "We know Regan tried to plant one here in this house. That's all we have to tell a jury. They'll believe you killed every one of those guys."

The commissioner nodded. "That's right. You can take your chances confessing to Langley's murder or stand an indictment for a score of killings."

Regan's white lips moved. "All right," he said, "I killed Langley." He pointed at Goodman. "But he was in it with me."

The commissioner got up and went to

the door. He called one of his personal bodyguards who had been stationed outside. The copper took Goodman and Regan out of the room.

The colonel leaned over and shook Allhoff's hand. "Wonderful work," he said. "Wonderful. Now that those two are in jail, undoubtedly all those living men they extorted money from will come forward and testify. But there's one thing I still want to know. How did you realize that Goodman was mixed up in it?"

I wanted to know that, too. I leaned forward and listened. Allhoff poured himself some more coffee.

"Did you ever see a lawyer who didn't know it all? Who simply didn't have to be the general of any enterprise he got his fingers into? No? Neither did I. All those notes, up to Wheeler's death, were written simply, as you or I would write them. After Goodman got in on the deal, he, holding a college degree, had to write the notes himself. Then they were written in stilted language using the barbarous syntax that all attorney's affect. I could see a lawyer's hand in it miles away."

"And," put in the commissioner, "because before that the notes were different, you figured Goodman came in at the time of Wheeler's death. And you figured how."

Allhoff nodded. He didn't seem much interested any more. He had solved another case, taken his bow and was now ready to bury his nose in his coffee cup for the rest of the day.

WHITTAKER got up to take his leave. The commissioner told Allhoff what a terrific copper he was and walked to the door. He paused upon the threshold.

"By the way, Inspector," he said, "Have you made up your mind on that Battersly transfer yet?"

Allhoff put the coffee cup back in the saucer with a bang. His little eyes flashed mordantly and he shot a malevolent glance at the brooding Battersly.

"I was right the first time, sir," he said. "He'll never make a detective, sir. He'll never make much of a policeman. Better leave him here where I can keep an eye on him. He's quite definitely the hysterical type, sir."

The commissioner raised his eyebrows. "You said that once before, Inspector. Can you offer me any evidence of it, other than your own opinion?"

Allhoff inhaled deeply. He looked very much like a cat that has just swallowed a very bloody canary. "Yes, sir. Last night he was drunk and unnerved. Threatened to kill himself, sir. Very unstable character, sir."

The commissioner frowned. Departmental suicides preyed on his mind. He liked them even less than he liked homicides.

"Is this true, Inspector?"

"Indeed it is," said Allhoff grinning. "The sergeant heard him, too. Didn't you, Sergeant?"

I gave him a dirty look.

"Yes, sir," I said reluctantly. "But there were certain circumstances which—"

"There are no circumstances which excuse a man's taking his own life," said the commissioner angrily. "Either morally, legally or ethically. Battersly will stay here, Inspector."

Allhoff nodded, grinning, and went back to his coffee as the commissioner left the room.

Battersly stared at Allhoff through beaten eyes.

I didn't take it so calmly.

"You're a louse," I told Allhoff. "You could have managed your fake death without involving Battersly. You didn't have to get him to fix your damned bomb. You only did that to break him up, to make him think he'd killed you. You're a stinking, uncivilized little sadist. Nothing more!"

He fixed me with glittering eyes.

"And just what's your definition of a sadist?"

I was so damned sore at him I stumbled right into the trap. "A sadist," I told him heatedly and without too much accuracy, "is a guy who goes around hurting other people's feelings."

"Ah," said Allhoff. "You mean the sort of guy who blows another man's legs off with machine-gun bullets? I'm glad to hear there's a name for it."

He buried his nose in his coffee cup leaving me staring at his back with insensate, outraged and thoroughly futile fury.

(Continued from page 87)

"How's it coming?" asked Sam aloud.

"Take your time, Caffrey." The other's upward glance from under the heavy brows was furtive, calculating.

Sam felt the figure on his shoulder quiver faintly. George was far from dead. In a few minutes he would be coming around, perhaps, and then there *would* be hell to pay.

The locksmith fussed over his tools. "How'd you get in this jam?" he asked cautiously.

Sam assumed a confidential air. "I tried to get away with some confidential plans, but somebody else was playing the same game at the same time. I got as far as Buffalo before they picked me up."

"They picked you up in Buffalo?" The tone was almost casual.

"Yeah. With the plans right in my pocket, damn it. In another half hour I'd have been clean."

A file clattered on the work-bench. "With the plans in your pocket? But what were the plans in your locker then?"

"Old ones. Obsolete designs. I left them there, while I carried the real ones. . . . *How did you know there were plans in my locker?*"

The locksmith stared at him for a long moment, an angry glitter in his eye. Then he leaned slowly across the bench. "You're smarter than I thought, Caffrey. Where are they now?"

Sam touched George's ribs. "Right in there." With his other hand he lifted the revolver again. "You want them?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

Sam opened his mouth to say something, but a sound froze the words on his lips. There was a gentle rapping on the door. The locksmith straightened up abruptly. Sam dropped his tone to a whisper.

"Letti! . . . Open the door—quietly, now!"

The other nodded stiffly, moving around the corner of the bench. Sam backed aside, keeping the revolver ready. The locksmith turned the bolt and opened the door slowly inward, saying something quickly in a low tone in Italian which Sam did not understand. Letti Molanda stepped in. She did not glance toward Sam, but kept her eyes on her father with

a surprised expression. The door swung to behind her. "Get over back of the bench, both of you!" said Sam sharply.

Letti's head jerked around; she saw first the gun, then Sam. Her dark eyes flickered like lightning, but she moved slowly across the small room. Sam, following her movement with the muzzle of the revolver, was turning so that his back was toward the front door. Then suddenly it was as if a mountain fell on his back.

His knees buckled, he went half down. Only a desperate shove of his powerful legs forced him erect again. He was immediately the center of a mad whirlwind of forces. There had been a man with Letti, whom Sam had never seen because, warned by her father, he had not entered until Sam's back was turned. Then he had leaped like a tiger. At the same moment Letti and her father had sprung from the other side, the girl to claw savagely at his face with her long scarlet nails, the locksmith to seize the hand that held the revolver and jam it toward the floor.

With three vicious antagonists on him, and handicapped by being cuffed to a dead weight, Sam felt that he hadn't a chance. But suddenly he discovered that that dead weight was dead no longer. George's limp form had stiffened, his legs were waving, his whole body writhed. He was meeting the attack from the rear with astonishing vigor. Sam heard a fist land with a crunch. With the locksmith's full weight on his wrist he went to one knee. But then one of George's blindly waving heels caught the Latin full on the nose. Blood spurted, his grasp slackened.

Sam jerked the gun free. His jerk brought it up in an arc that ended against Letti's shoulder. The jolt threw her back, but she came at him again immediately with renewed fury, spitting like a wild-cat. Without a qualm he slapped her face with the hand that held the gun. The blow had enough behind it to fold her up in a neat little heap.

A strangling scream of rage burst from her father's throat. Gathering himself, he sprang. The unseen struggle going on behind his back helped to upset Sam's balance. He crumpled at last under the load he was trying to carry. With the weight of three others on top of him he hit the floor with a crash, and for a few

Death Laughs at Locksmiths

moments everything whirled in dizzy darkness. As from a great distance he felt the revolver slip from his limp fingers. A hand closed on his windpipe.

Three ear-splitting explosions pierced the layer of numbness that was enwrapping his brain. He made a last effort to struggle. The hands that were strangling him relaxed. He caught a gulp of fetid air, fought to raise his head. A weight slid from his shoulder and he sat up.

The little room was suddenly very quiet, except for his own gasping breathing. The handcuffs, inexorable as fate, still linked him to George, who leaned weakly against his shoulder. George had the revolver in his free hand. A tiny plume of blue smoke curled up from its muzzle. In front of George the locksmith crouched face down on the floor, knees drawn up under him and hands clamped over his abdomen, from which blood was seeping. Beyond George a short fat man lay stretched on his back, eyes half closed. In the exact center of his bald spot a purplish lump was swelling. Letti, except for a faint bruise on her cheekbone, might have been asleep.

"George," panted Sam. "I can ex—"

"Save your breath," said George, unconsciously using the same words he had used earlier that night, but this time with a different intonation. "I came to five minutes before I began to move, and heard plenty. Locksmith, eh!" He extended his foot. The Latin's form toppled sideways, jerking spasmodically as the limbs stiffened. George turned to gaze reproachfully toward the girl. "And I was

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Dime Detective Magazine

thinking about asking her to marry me!"

"You could have saved that breath yourself, George," said Sam, with a faint grin. "How do you suppose he got a key to my locker?"

"I haven't doped that out yet."

"Why, that's why she asked you to bring me along, last Sunday. There's no place easier for a skeleton key than a bath-house locker. While she kept us entertained in the pool, her father here got into my clothes, brought my keys to his shop, made a duplicate, and then returned them before we went to get dressed."

"But how did he get into the plant to use it?"

"He didn't. She used it. The first shift in the shop works from eight to four-thirty, doesn't it? But the office force works from nine to five-thirty. That gave her an hour, after I'd left."

George nodded. "And if she took those obsolete plans, where do you suppose they are now?"

"Unless I miss my guess, they're in his pocket." Sam gestured with his head toward the well-fed bald man, but stopped George when he reached out his hand. "If you don't mind, George, let's wait until we have some more witnesses. I've been learning something about the weight of circumstantial evidence, and I'd like to see Welsh pull those blueprints out of that fellow's pocket with his own hands. After all, that bird right there is the one we want to get the goods on. The higher-up. . . Isn't that a prowler I hear coming now?"

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(Continued)

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