

SEPTEMBER

DIME
10¢
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE



10¢

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



SEPTEMBER

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



ASTIC SURGEON

**GIVE A MAN A CORPSE
HE CAN HIDE**

A BILL BRENT NOVELETTE
by **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

YOU BET YOUR LIFE !

A "BAIL-BOND" DODD STORY
by **NORBERT DAVIS**

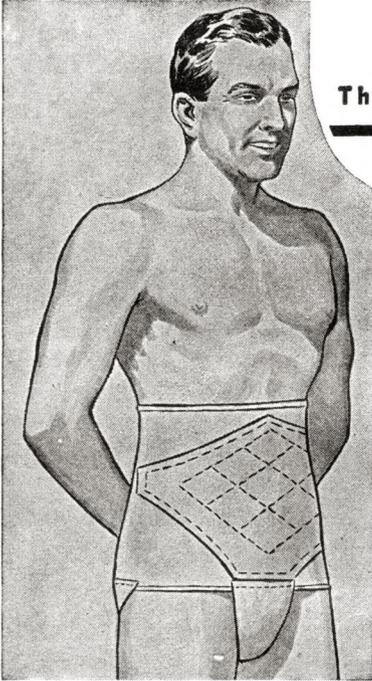
JUDSON P. PHILIPS AND OTHERS

THOUSANDS of MEN NOW

Appear **SLIMMER** Feel **BETTER** Look **YOUNGER**

with *Commander*

The Amazing NEW Abdominal Supporter



Yes, instantly you, too, can begin to feel ALIVE . . . ON TOP OF THE WORLD by joining the Parade of Men who are marching up the highway of happier living with the COMMANDER, the amazing new Men's abdominal supporter.

GET "IN SHAPE" INSTANTLY AND ENJOY A HAPPY STREAMLINED APPEARANCE
The COMMANDER presents the exclusively designed "INTERLOCKING HANDS" principle for extra double support where you need it most. It flattens the burdensome sagging "corporation" and restores to the body the zestful invigorating feeling that comes with firm, sure "day window" control. Order this new belt today and begin enjoying the pleasure of feeling "in shape" at once.

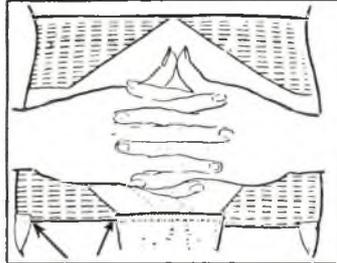
BREATHE EASIER—TAKE WEIGHT OFF TIRED FEET
The helpful uplifting EXTRA SUPPORTING power of the COMMANDER firmly supports abdominal sag. The instant you pull on the belt you breathe easier . . . your wind is longer . . . you feel better!

YOUR BACK IS BRACED—YOUR CLOTHES FIT BETTER—YOU APPEAR TALLER
The COMMANDER braces your figure, your posture becomes erect . . . you look and feel slimmer . . . your clothes fit you better. Your friends will notice the improvement immediately.

COMMANDER IS NEW AND MODERN!
The absence of gouging steel ribs, dangling buckles and bothersome laces will prove a joy. COMMANDER has a real man's jock type pouch, with fly-front opening. IT GIVES GENUINE MALE PROTECTION. Try this amazing new belt with full confidence . . . and at our risk. SEND FOR IT NOW!

*** THE SECRET OF THE "INTERLOCKING HANDS"**

Only COMMANDER contains this NEW principle. A special non-stretch material is built into the two-way stretch body of the COMMANDER. STRETCHES 10 to 14 INCHES HIGH . . . in the outline of two interlocking hands for EXTRA DOUBLE SUPPORT where you need it most.



MAKE THIS TEST →
WITH YOUR OWN HANDS
AND FEEL WHAT WE MEAN

Commander Wearers all over America Say—

"I am sure you will be pleased to know that it is by far the best and most practical supporter I have ever had. I have been pleased to show it to several of my friends and they are likewise impressed with it. You shall probably hear from some of them in the future."

Dr. A. M. R.
Standish, Mich.

"Enclosed find order for another belt. I wouldn't be without this supporter for ten times what it costs."

Dr. O. C. S.
St. Charles, Ill.

"Received the Commander about a week ago. To say that I am well pleased with it would be putting it mildly—I can see that it fits a long felt want, giving the needed support and a most comfortable feeling. I never miss putting it on the first thing in the morning. Enclosed is my check for another."

J. C. McG.
St. Paul, Minn.

"I recommend the Commander for what it is made for. It sure has been a great help to me. I want to thank you for what it has done. I might add it has helped me more than anything I have ever tried."

P. W.
Fort Knox, Ky.

Above are just a few of the many unsolicited testimonials for the Commander that we receive regularly. Originals of these and others are on file.

SEND FOR IT TODAY—USE THIS COUPON

INTRODUCTORY TEN DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

WARD GREEN CO., DEPT. 150
342 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK, N. Y.

Send me the "COMMANDER" for ten days Free Trial. I will pay postman the special price of \$2.98 plus postage. If not satisfied after wearing it ten days, I may return it and the purchase price will be promptly refunded.

My waist measure My height is
(Send string the size of waist if measuring tape is not available.)

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY STATE

Check here if you enclose \$2.98 with this order and we will pay postage charges. The same refund offer holds.

**10 DAY FREE TRIAL
SEND NO MONEY**

Wear COMMANDER ten days FREE. If it fails to do all we say, send it back and the purchase price will be promptly refunded.

ONLY
\$2.98

SIZES 28 to 47

SPECIAL LARGE SIZES 48 to 60, \$3.98

Make me Prove

THAT I CAN TRAIN YOU
AT HOME FOR A

Good Job in Radio



**I TRAINED
THESE MEN**



\$10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made \$600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of \$10 a week—just spare time.—JOHN JERRY, 1728 Penn St., Denver, Colorado.

Radio Technician at Ordnance Works

I am now Chief Radio Technician at Ordnance Works and very pleased with my new position. If I had not taken the N. R. I. Course I might be digging ditches or perhaps unemployed.—R. S. LEWIS (Address omitted for military reasons.)



\$200 a Month in Own Business

For several years I have been in business for myself making around \$200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field.—ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Avenue, Goose Creek, Texas.

Here is a quick way to better pay. Radio offers you the opportunity to make \$5, \$10 a week extra in spare time a few months from now and to prepare for good full time Radio jobs paying up to \$50 a week, MAIL COUPON. Get my Sample Lesson FREE. Examine it, read it—see how easy it is to understand. See how I train you at home in spare time to be a Radio Operator or Radio Technician.

WHY MANY RADIO TECHNICIANS MAKE \$30, \$40, \$50, A WEEK

The Radio repair business is booming as manufacturers have stopped making new sets and the country's 57,400,000 home and auto sets are becoming older, needing more repairs, new tubes, parts. This is opening new opportunities for full time and part time Radio Technicians to get good jobs, or to open their own Radio repair businesses. Radio Technicians and Operators hold good jobs in the country's 882 Broadcasting Stations and in Aviation, Police, Commercial, Marine and Government Radio. Loud Speaker Systems give good jobs to many. The Government is calling for Civilian Radio Technicians and Operators. Government orders for millions of dollars worth of Radio equipment offer opportunities in Radio factories. Men with Radio Training are in line for extra rank and pay in the Army and Navy. Many Radio developments such as Television, held back by the war, will make Radio a live-wire field for the future.



BEGINNERS SOON LEARN TO EARN \$5, \$10 A WEEK EXTRA IN SPARE TIME

Due to the boom in the Radio repair business, practically every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for conducting experiments and building test equipment to help you do better, faster Radio repair work. My 50-50 method—half working with Radio parts I send you, half studying lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, gives you valuable practical experience.

FIND OUT HOW I TRAIN YOU AT HOME FOR GOOD PAY IN RADIO

MAIL THE COUPON. I'll send you a Sample Lesson and my 64-page book FREE. Learn about my Course; types of jobs in different branches of Radio. Read letters from more than 100 men I have trained so you can see what they are doing, earning. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste it on a penny postal.

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 2189
Washington, D. C.

TRAINING MEN FOR VITAL RADIO JOBS

GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK SAMPLE LESSON FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2189
NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE, without obligation, Sample Lesson and 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No Salesman will call. Write plainly.)

Age.....

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State..... ZIP.....



EXTRA PAY IN ARMY, NAVY TOO

Every man likely to go into military service, every soldier, sailor, marine, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to several times a private's base pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. IT'S SMART TO TRAIN FOR RADIO NOW!



10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 40 CONTENTS FOR SEPTEMBER 1942 No. 2

4—SMASHING COMPLETE MIDNIGHT MURDER NOVELETTES—4

Let "Bail-Bond" Dodd cover you when

You Bet Your Life!.....Norbert Davis 10
 Along with fifty bucks on a twelve-year-old nag that never won a race, but make sure he puts up at least a pint of his own blood on the same sweeps or you may have trouble getting him to collect for you.

Turn the heat on a lump of

Orphan Ice.....Cornell Woolrich 35
 That dissolved in a kill-cauldron, then add a little gas to the residue and watch it carbonate overnight in the form of 50 G's worth of War Bonds for the Police Department.

Listen in on a

Freedom Station.....Judson P. Philips 52
 Broadcasting from guerrilla headquarters in the Balkan hills and pick up the death message that started a murder sequence in New York's swankiest hotel.

Watch Bill Brent, alias "Lora Lorne"

Give A Man A Corpse He Can Hide.....Frederick C. Davis 81
 And the law a killer as he combs a suicide note from his morning mush mail and tries to use it to lever himself out of the *Recorder's* heart-throb department and back on a police beat.

A GRIPPING SHORT DETECTIVE STORY

Follow

The Fugitive Face.....Hugh B. Cave 73
 That Doctor Wanilek molded where Dirk's features once had been, and learn, as Shamus Nick Sydney did, that it doesn't always take ten years in a Vienna clinic to make a mark as a plastic surgeon.

AND—

We want to know if you are

Ready for the Rackets.....A Department 6
 In this revealing series giving the lowdown on currently popular swindle-schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win \$5.00 at the same time.

The October Thrill Docket..... 6
 Some of the sure-fire hits scheduled for production in the next DIME DETECTIVE.

Cover—"KILLER, the Letters Spelled Accusingly."

From *The Fugitive Face*.

Black-and-white illustrations by John Fleming Gould

Watch for the October Issue

On the Newsstands September 4th

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Business Demands Accountants



... because Accountants Command Business

Accountants are usually in demand—at better than average earnings.

But today—more than ever before—the competent accountant finds his services at a premium.

Business in war has tightened up the reins and is watching costs—prices—every move—striving to operate on that basis of close control so essential to service and profits.

Then, too, business is working under tighter government regulations, with many more records and reports—war production, priorities, more and larger taxes, wage and hour laws, payroll deductions for Defense Bonds, etc., etc.

The Home Study Way to Accountancy Success

Thousands upon thousands of men have trained for Accountancy with LaSalle—at night—at home.

Their success—their progress—is a matter of record.

Whether their goal was a C. P. A. certificate or advancement in business, our files are full of letters reporting income increases far out of line with the time and cost investment.

Note for instance, these six cases out of many we might cite. (Names on request.)

A cost clerk, J. S. H. became, after completing 30 training assignments, cost accountant. Within nine months, only half through the course, he became chief cost accountant with a salary nearly four times what it was when he enrolled. C. K. was an immigrant day laborer. Within a few months he secured a bookkeeping job. Within a year, he secured three raises. In two years, he was in charge of his company's accounting department, although not yet through the training. W. J. F. moved up from store clerk to assistant bookkeeper after the first ten lessons. Now he is office man-

ager. S. W. N. knew nothing about bookkeeping. With 19 months of training he passed the C. P. A. examination on first attempt and opened his own public accounting office. Although a university graduate, P. M. was a grocery clerk at small wages. Today he is Secretary and Credit Manager with an income 300 per cent higher. Already in cost work, G. N. P. within nine months was earning 40% more; within two years, 100% more. The third year his income went up still more. Now he is manager.

These Men Won Success in Ordinary Times —You Have War Opportunities

Remarkable as is the success of these men—you will have an advantage over them—you will be entering accountancy when unusual national conditions work with you for success.

Conditions not only call for more accountants—but offer unusual opportunities for both quick and permanent success. The need for accountants will increase during war and will continue for years afterwards during the difficult post-war adjustment period.

—If You Can Qualify

Ask yourself three questions:

1. Are you ambitious?
2. Have you determination?
3. Can you see and grasp an opportunity?

If you have determination; if you are ambitious; if you can take advantage of circumstances—prove it by investigating. A three-cent stamp, sixty seconds time, and the coupon below will bring you full information regarding Accountancy training and the opportunities to which such training leads. Then you can judge intelligently.

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY

A Correspondence Institution

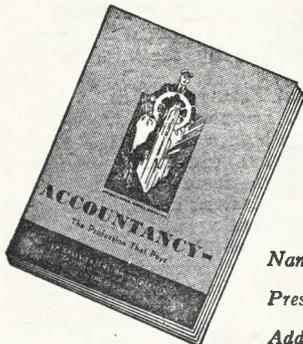
Dept. 9334-HR CHICAGO

Opportunities in Accountancy—Check below and we will send you a free copy of "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays," also, information about our training in Higher Accountancy, all without obligation.

Higher Accountancy

Other LaSalle Opportunities: If more interested in one of the other fields of business indicated below, check that:

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Effective Speaking | <input type="checkbox"/> Modern Foremanship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Expert Bookkeeping | <input type="checkbox"/> Law: LL.B. Degree | <input type="checkbox"/> Business Correspondence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> C. P. A. Coaching | <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial Law | <input type="checkbox"/> Stenotypy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Modern Salesmanship |



Name..... Age.....

Present Position.....

Address..... City and State.....

The October Thrill Docket

THE Marquis of Broadway is back! Back on his Main Stem, his multi-million-candle-powered Mazda Lane, dimmed out now for the duration, to guard a *Military Secret* that turned out to be not so secret after all and about as military as the fly-specked bar-and-grill where it all started. JOHN LAWRENCE, in this brand-new novelette, brings back the cagiest aggregation of cops that ever policed a tenderloin, and lets you join their squad as they put the bee on a bunch of chisel-as-chisel-can killers who regarded the war only as a cloudburst to rain crooked pennies from hell into their itching palms. You'll meet Sleeman, private shamus who'd been given the boot from the Broadway section by the Marquis, and was trying to buy his way back to the golden pastures with the inside upside-down lowdown on the "secret"—only to find himself thoroughly dead for his pains. And Daniels, the biggest bookmaker in town, who was willing to finance the fatal fiasco for a percentage—but couldn't collect before the blood bath was drawn. And Clevenger, who was "eliminated" almost before he drew cards in the game. And Lebaron, of course, of Homicide, who thought he had just what he needed in the kill-sequence to cook the Marquis' goose for once and all. The story of their shenanigans is LAWRENCE at his best and makes a thrilling addition to the roll of Marquis yarns that have gone before.

And T. T. FLYNN, in *Ride and Die*, brings back the bland Buddha of the bangtail circuit, Maddox, to cover your murder bets at the Oaklawn track in Hot Springs, deep in the heart of Arkansas. Cassidy, the portly bookie's Nemesis and personal fly-in-the-ointment, is there too, along with various and sundry gee-gee fanciers and race-riggers. Between the two of them it turns out to be quite a meet—with a bloodstain on every sheaf of long green lettuce that changes hands.

Plus stories by WILLIAM BRANDON and C. P. DONNEL, Jr. This great OCTOBER issue is on sale SEPTEMBER 4th.

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.

IN THE past few months we've exposed in this column the rackets practiced on unsuspecting and gullible folk with eye or tooth troubles by super-salesmen who canvass from house to house in rural districts offering to take orders, with a deposit, for corrective glasses or dental appliances. This month we have, as exemplified in the letter printed below, another facet of the same general type of swindle. To wit—

Represa, Calif.

The Racket Editor,
Dime Detective Magazine,
205 East 42nd Street,
New York City, New York.

Dear Sir:

"Fitting" shoes for persons with deformed feet is one more method of the salesman who collects a down payment, then fails to return.

A few yards of bandage, some quick-drying casting material, and convincing sales-literature combined with a glib line of sales-talk, are all the props used.

The bandage is wrapped around the malformed foot, the plaster brushed on, allowed to dry, then cut off, making a perfect cast. \$5 or \$10 is collected as down payment for the shoes, and the salesman disappears, leaving another victim fleeced by his heartless promises of a shoe that will relieve the disability caused by the deformed foot.

The recent arrest in San Francisco, of an operator of this racket, revealed he had worked this scheme for at least three years, from east coast to west coast. He had detainers placed against him from nearly every coast city and many eastern cities.

Trusting that this information will enable some prospective victims to escape the heartaches caused by being victimized by a chiseler of this sort, of which there are many more operating.

Sincerely yours,
J. M.

(Continued on page 8)

The 97 Pound Weakling

—Who became “The World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man”

“I’ll prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN!”

Charles Atlas

I KNOW, myself, what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn’t know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs.! I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

Then I discovered “*Dynamic Tension*.” It gave me a body that won for me the title “World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man.”

When I say I can make you over into a man of giant power and energy, I know what I’m talking about. I’ve seen my new system, “*Dynamic Tension*,” transform hundreds of weak, puny men into Atlas Champions.

Only 15 Minutes a Day

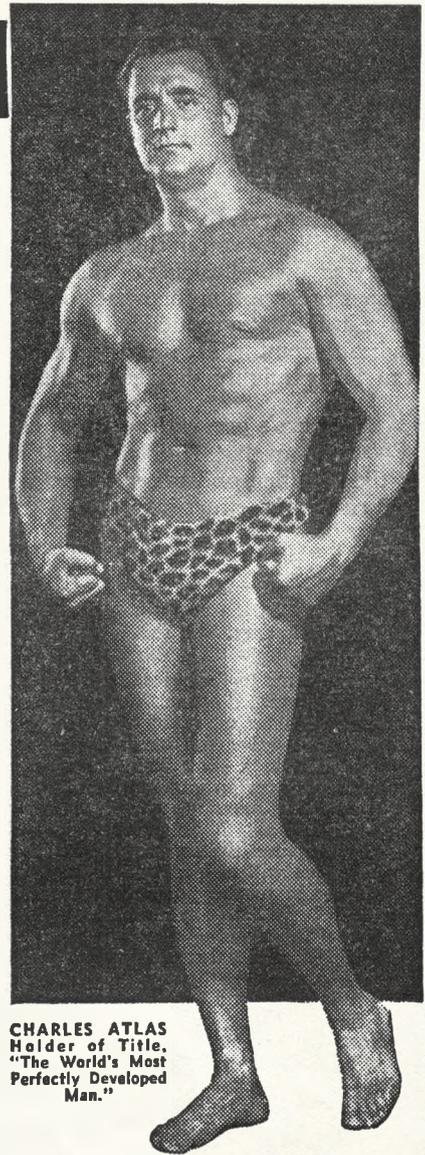
Do you want big, broad shoulders—a fine, powerful chest—biceps like steel—arms and legs rippling with muscular strength—a stomach ridged with bands of sinewy muscle—and a build you can be proud of? Then just give me the opportunity to prove that “*Dynamic Tension*” is what you need.

No “ifs,” “ands,” or “maybes.” Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, peppy? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about “*Dynamic Tension*” and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

“*Dynamic Tension*” is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it’s actually fun! “*Dynamic Tension*” does the work.

Send for FREE BOOK

Mail the coupon right now for full details and I’ll send you my illustrated book, “Everlasting Health and Strength.” Tells all about my “*Dynamic Tension*” method. Shows actual photos of men I’ve made into Atlas Champions. It’s a valuable book! And it’s FREE. Send for your copy today. Mail the coupon to me personally. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83-Y, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.



CHARLES ATLAS
Holder of Title,
“The World’s Most
Perfectly Developed
Man.”

CHARLES ATLAS,
Dept. 83-Y,
115 East 23rd Street
New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of “*Dynamic Tension*” will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, “Everlasting Health and Strength.”

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address

City..... State.....

(Continued from page 6)

People who need corrective footwear should watch out for these slickers just as truly as those folk who have eye trouble or dental difficulties should be wary of traveling, high-pressure "oculists" or "dentists." It'll pay you in the long run to consult your own physician or dentist, get the proper prescription for what you need and have it filled at a reputable place. Bargains in health comfort are no bargains at all and can bring mighty dangerous aftereffects.

AND here's one with quite an elaborate build-up that, from the point of view of the swindler, undoubtedly pays adequate return for the effort involved.

Columbus, Ohio

Rackets Editor,
Dime Detective Magazine,
205 East 42nd Street,
New York City, N. Y.

Dear Sir:

They came to the resort town and rented a large furnished house. The girl was stunning, the older man and his wife reserved and conservative like most of their neighbors. Within a short time the man called the local paper to announce his daughter's forthcoming marriage. It made a spread, picture and all. It was a beautiful buildup.

By the time the man had a nodding acquaintance with a local broker he was also stepping in to the jeweler's, "just to look around." It didn't take them long to put two and two together, and figure the reason: his daughter's forthcoming marriage. Scenting a nice sale, they got some items on speculation, with a return agreement. Then a phone call suggested that he might find something suitable in a new shipment. . . .

Nothing happened for some days, other than that the man talked stocks and bonds and securities in general with the broker. He became interested in a particular item, placed a tentative order for several thousand dollars—to be delivered C.O.D.

Again the jeweler's was favored with a visit, and somewhat reluctantly, it seemed, the man and his wife chose several pieces of expensive stuff. And tendered a check. The jeweler had been checked before and

was wary. The man apologized for his thoughtlessness and suggested a phone call to certify the worth of the check. It was to a city about a hundred miles away. The man didn't remember the number, but the operator would take care of that. It was the bank the check was drawn on. The call was placed and the female member of the duo called the jeweler to show her something else. And he hung up the phone. . . . When it rang some moments later a girl parroted the bank's name, listened with bored politeness and said, "You want to speak to the manager. Just a moment, please." A man's voice came on. The jeweler stated the case, described the man, his wife, his car and his handwriting. The banker checked each fact carefully, was properly deferential and very positive. "One of our best accounts. . . ." And so jeweler counted his handsome profit and parted with the gems.

Within a couple of hours the broker was put through the same routine, with the same result. And it was days later before both checks bounced back: "No such account." Frantically the dupes got in touch with the bank manager. He had never talked with either of them before. . . .

Reconstructed, it was almost childishly simple. The one necessary thing being that the phone in question be replaced after the call to the bank was made—allowing a confederate to cancel the call, then dial the unsuspecting victim and put on the act. And of course the wedding announcement was a fake, also, part of the window-dressing to assure a smooth swindle.

Variants of this could be, and probably will be, worked far and wide over the country.

Cordially yours,
Jerry West

We've heard of the above being worked on a much smaller scale, however, with the canceled phone call the basic ingredient of the swindle always remaining constant. Check and double check before cashing checks is a motto it would be well to keep in mind more than ever these days. We can think of a dozen better places to send our cash now than to the coffers of crookdom—War Bonds or USO fund for instance!



FOR VICTORY—

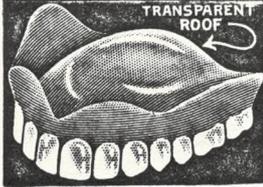
BUY

WAR BONDS
AND STAMPS!

WORLD'S LARGEST DENTAL PLATE MAKERS

FALSE TEETH

by MAIL



TRANSPARENT ROOF

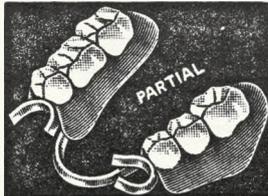
MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

MADE-TO-MEASURE DENTAL PLATES
We make to measure for you INDIVIDUALLY—BY MAIL Dental Plates for men and women from an impression of your mouth taken by you at your home. Over 100,000 in this country wear teeth we made.

\$7.95
TO 338 MAIL COUPON TODAY

60 DAYS' TRIAL

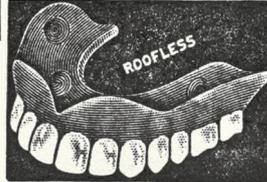
MAKE US PROVE EVERY WORD WE SAY—Wear our teeth on trial for as long as 60 days. Then, if you are not PERFECTLY SATISFIED, they will not cost you a cent. We take your word! Isn't that fair?



PARTIAL

NOW AT NEW LOW PRICES

If you find what others have paid for theirs, you will be astounded when you see how little ours will cost you. By reading our catalog you can learn how to save HALF or MORE on DENTAL PLATES for yourself . . . MONTHLY PAYMENTS POSSIBLE!



ROOFLESS



Professional Model

SEND NO MONEY!

We take this risk. We guarantee that if you are not fully satisfied with teeth we make for you, then, any time within 60 days, we will gladly refund your every cent.

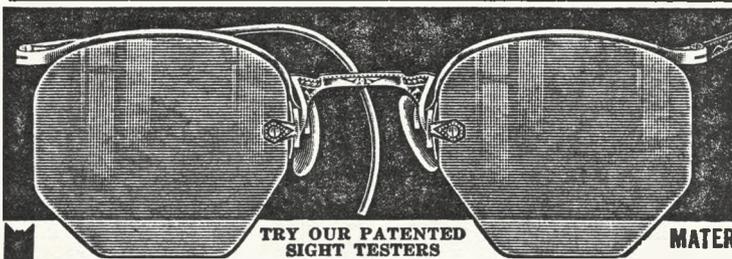
FREE Impression Material—catalog with our new LOW prices, and information. WRITE TODAY! Prices may advance! Don't wait. A LICENSED DENTIST SUPERVISES THE MAKING OF EACH DENTAL PLATE.

REPAIRS 48-HOUR SERVICE

UNITED STATES DENTAL CO. Dept. 9-87, 1555 Milwaukee Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

FREE U. S. DENTAL CO., Dept. 9-87 1555 Milwaukee Ave., Chicago. Send without obligation FREE impression material catalog, and information.

Name.....
Address.....
City..... State.....



TRY OUR PATENTED SIGHT TESTERS

EYE - GLASSES by \$2.95 MAIL AND UP COMPLETE HIGHEST QUALITY

MATERIAL: EXPERT WORKMANSHIP

SEND NO MONEY 16 DAYS' TRIAL

GRACE YOUR FACE with good looking glasses! Select for yourself from the many styles in our catalog the one that looks best on you. Wear our glasses on trial as long as 16 days with a money-back guarantee of satisfaction! Then, if you are not 100% satisfied with glasses we make for you we'll refund every cent you paid us for them. We take your word. Isn't that fair?

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION

FREE CATALOG OF NEW LOW PRICES AND SCIENTIFIC SIGHT TEST CHART.

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A Bail-Bond Dodd Novelette

By **NORBERT
DAVIS**

Author of "Who Said I Was
Dead?" etc.





CHAPTER ONE

Horse Car Jackson

IT WAS a hot night, and Dodd had thrown all the covers off the bed. He was lying flat on his back, long arms and legs thrust out in all directions, snoring like seven hundred dollars, when the telephone on the night-table rang suddenly and shrilly.

"Uh?" said Dodd, not moving.

The telephone rang again.

"Oh," said Dodd vaguely. "Wait." He groped out in the darkness and picked the instrument off its stand. "Hello. What?"

• • • • •
The stubby revolver jumped and roared in Dodd's hand.

A voice said: "This is Hennessey, Dodd."

"Who?" Dodd asked.

"Hennessey. Sergeant Hennessey from Central Police Headquarters."

Dodd yawned. "Hello, Hennessey. What are you doing on duty now? I thought you were working days."

"I ain't on duty. I'm in the hospital."

"Oh," said Dodd. "That's too bad. What's wrong with you?"

"There ain't nothing wrong with me. It's Meekins."

"Who?"

"Dodd," Hennessey said patiently. "Wake up, will you? Meekins, the little bald rummy that works for you, is here in the Emergency Hospital."

Dodd yawned again. "Is he? What's the matter with him? Has he been drinking bad liquor again?"

"No. He got shot, and he got his skull caved in."

DODD sat up with such a violent start he dropped the telephone on the floor. "What?" he yelled. He lunged over the side of the bed and fumbled wildly for the telephone. "Hennessey! What did you say about Meekins? Shot . . . Skull cave in . . . *Hennessey!*"

"I'm still right here, Dodd. Take it easy."

Dodd clutched the telephone with both hands. "Hennessey! What about Meekins? Is he—is he—"

"Naw. He ain't dead. At least, I don't think so. Not yet. They got him in the operating-room."

"Wait there!" Dodd ordered, turning on the night light. "I'm coming!"

"Don't get so jumpy, Dodd. You can't do nothing down here right now. They won't let you in the operating-room. They wouldn't let me in even with my badge. I am calling now from the pay phone in the hall right outside. I can see the door of the operating-room, and if they bring Meekins out I'll find out how he is."

"Who did it?" Dodd demanded. "Just tell me the guy's name, that's all."

"I dunno. But I think a guy by the name of Horse Car Jackson was in there somewhere."

"Horse Car Jackson?" Dodd repeated. "I never heard of him. Who's he?"

"He is an old bum that follows horse races from track to track all over the country. He never has no dough to pay bus or train fares, so he rides in the cars with the horses. That's why they call him Horse Car."

"What's he got to do with Meekins?"

"I'm telling you. He was picked up as a vag last week. I was there when he was brung in, and so was Meekins. Meekins looked over his stuff when I searched him to see did he have enough dough to pay for some bail. He only had a dime on him, so of course Meekins wouldn't put up no bail for him. In fact, all he had was this betting slip, and that was a very funny thing."

"Why?"

"Well, it showed that Horse Car had put down fifty smackers at two hundred to one in Lilybud."

"On what?" Dodd asked.

"Lilybud. It's a horse. Well, that's the joke, really, because Lilybud ain't a horse. It's strictly a dog."

"Just translate," Dodd ordered. "What are you talking about?"

"This Lilybud is nothing but a wienie, Dodd. It is twelve years old, and it ain't never won a race in its life. And it is entered in the Crater Lake Sweep with nine other nags that are really first class. So it is a joke that this old bum of a Horse Car puts down fifty smackers on it. It ain't got no more chance of winning that race than I have of being the next police chief. Meekins and me ask Horse Car what he throws his money away that way for, and it seems he rode thousands of miles with Lilybud and thinks it is an awful nice horse. He says Lilybud has lots of character, so when he wins fifty bucks in a crap game, he bets it all on the old glue pot. That just goes to show how crazy Horse Car is."

"If he's crazy—how about the fellow who entered the horse in the Crater Lake Sweep?"

"Oh, he ain't crazy," Hennessey answered. "That's Binley. He has eight or nine horses—pretty good ones—aside from Lilybud that he is racing out on the Coast. So they close the tracks out there on account of the war—like they are using Santa Anita for a Jap concentration camp—and catch Binley short. He

has to get in on some Eastern tracks. So he enters Lilybud in the Sweep to get stable rights at Crater Lake. He don't expect to win. He just wants an entry under his name. It is such a smell that even the sports writers are giving him the bird about it."

"**A**RE you watching that operating-room?" Dodd demanded.

"Sure. I got my eye right on it. So Meekins and me have a laugh on Horse Car, and he goes up before Judge

let Horse Car out for awhile, but I can't do that neither because the commissioner has been raising particular hell about us sendin' prisoners out to do errands for us. So Meekins runs out and gets Dunstead."

"Dunstead?" Dodd repeated.

"That crummy little lawyer who is always hangin' around police court. Meekins and him get up before old Judge Barth—you know, the dumb one that sort of drools in his beard when he chews tobacco—and they put on an act like you

When Lilybud, the twelve-year-old nag that had never won a race in her life, copped the Crater Lake Sweep, Horse Car Jackson had fifty bucks on her nose—at two hundred to one! But it was Dodd who had to collect the little bum's freak bet—or forfeit his life as well as his bail-bond.

Tracy and gets sentenced to sixty days for vagrancy and put away in jail, and we don't think no more about him until we are listening to the Crater Lake Sweep on the radio this afternoon. Man, you can't guess what happened!"

"Yes, I can," said Dodd. "Lilybud won."

"Aw, you was listenin'. But did you hear how it happened, huh? That was something like ain't never been seen before. At the half Lilybud was already trailin' by twelve lengths, and the other nags was all bunched, and this guy that was ridin' third tried to pull between the two leaders, and they crowded him, and all three of 'em went end-over-end. And the whole field piled right in. Three more went down, and one bucked his rider off, and one started runnin' the wrong way. And then Lilybud came around clear on the outside—"

"Yes, yes," said Dodd. "I'll read it in the paper. What has this to do with Meekins?"

"Well, right away he thinks of that betting slip of Horse Car's. He wants me to give it to him so he can go collect it for Horse Car, but I can't do that because it is sealed up in Horse Car's property envelope and there was three cops fired just last month for monkeying with them property envelopes. So he wants me to

wouldn't believe. They tell the judge that Horse Car is a man of property and substance who is wrongly accused and that he is a deacon in a church and has a wife and six kids dependent on him and that his life will be ruined if he don't get out of the sneaker right away. So Barth paroles him."

Dodd was trying to get out of his pajamas one-handed. "What?" he said in a muffled voice. "A parole? On a vag charge? From the county jail?"

"It sounded kind of funny to me, too," Hennessey admitted.

"Who did he parole him to? Meekins?"

"No. To you. On account of you had to put up the bond."

"Bond?" said Dodd.

"Yeah. For Horse Car's good behavior."

"How much?" Dodd asked grimly, feeling for his socks.

"Just five hundred."

"Just!" Dodd echoed, breathing hard. "All right. Tell me the rest."

"That's about all. Meekins went off with Horse Car to collect this bet. He asked me would I keep an eye on things for him. So I sat around there for three hours after I was off duty, and I was gettin' pretty mad because I figured they had collected that bet and then gone off on a tear. Then I hear they picked up

Meekins sort of in pieces in an alley off Ventner Street near Tenth. So I come over here."

"Stay there until I get there," Dodd said. "I'm on my way right now."

CHAPTER TWO

Sucker Bet

DODD pushed back the heavy swing door with a sudden *whoosh* of compressed air and entered the bright, anti-septic coolness of the hospital lobby. He looked harassed and mad and sleepy all at the same time. His coat collar was turned up, and his tie was jerked around under one ear, and his adhesive-patched horn-rimmed glasses were set askew on his long nose. His heels raised smacking echoes as he headed across to the small reception desk in the corner.

"How's Meekins?" he asked.

The receptionist wore a starched white uniform and a white nurse's cap. Her hair was gray and smooth, cut very short, and her lips made a thin, prim line in a face that was so sallow and colorless it looked faintly dusty.

"I beg pardon?" she said in a frigid tone.

"Meekins," Dodd said impatiently. "Meekins. My runner. How is he?"

"I'll look up the records."

"No, no," said Dodd. "He just came in. He was shot or something."

"Oh," said the receptionist disapprovingly. "That one. I imagine he is still in the operating-room. It's on the second floor. You may wait in the hall up there, if you wish. You will find a police person also waiting to see this Meekins. Did you say his first name was Runner? How very peculiar."

"No," said Dodd, heading for the stairs. "I said he was my runner. I'm a bail bondsman. He works for me. I don't know his first name. I don't think he has one."

He trotted up the rubber-treaded steps and turned into a long, glistening hall. Hennessey was sitting slumped down on a bench in front of two gray doors, elbows on his knees, chin in his hands. He had his uniform cap tipped on the back of his head, and his normally round face had

sagged into lines as disconsolate as those of a bloodhound's.

"Heard anything?" Dodd asked.

"Naw," said Hennessey. "These guys around here don't give out with nothing but the brush-off."

"Are they still working on him?"

"Yeah. I'm worried, Dodd. You know these butchers they got around this joint. They cut people up for fun if they ain't got nothing else to do. But anyway, I got Meekins' wallet, so they won't swipe his dough."

Dodd held out his hand. "Let's see it."

Hennessey gave him a worn, bulging wallet. Dodd opened the bill compartment and found that it contained three crumpled one dollar bills. He looked accusingly at Hennessey.

"So now you've taken to robbing the dead and wounded, have you?"

Hennessey looked up at him with round, innocent eyes. "What's that, Dodd? Oh, you mean that betting slip? He didn't have it on him. I looked all through his clothes."

"I mean the money," said Dodd. "I gave Meekins a twenty-buck advance on his salary this morning. You know Meekins. He never spent seventeen dollars of his own dough in one day in his life. Give."

Hennessey reluctantly produced a folded five dollar bill. "Well, he owes me this, and it won't do him any good if he's gonna die, and anyway I didn't take it from him. I got it from Crestwick."

Dodd put the five dollar bill in with the three ones. "Who is Crestwick?"

"The driver of the ambulance that picked Meekins up. He frisked Meekins, and he kinda misplaced the five in his own pocket while he was doin' it. I had an idea he might have did something like that, so I bumped his head against the wall a couple times and he coughed up. He didn't have the betting slip, though. I don't think Meekins had it on him at all. He tried to get it away from Horse Car at the station, and Horse Car kicked up a hell of a beef."

"Let's talk some more about that betting slip," Dodd said. "I don't play the horses, but it seems to me that two hundred to one on fifty dollars is a little out

of order. That means a ten thousand dollar pay-off in case of a win."

HENNESSEY nodded. "Yeah. I think it's sort of a joke bet. Horse Car tells Meekins and me that he goes all over town trying to get odds on Lilybud and all the bookies laugh at him because he is such an old crumb and because Lilybud couldn't possibly win that race unless all the other horses fell down. They did, like I tell you."

"Where *did* he place the bet?"

"With Dom Carlos. He ain't really a bookie. He's a betting commissioner. He hangs around at the Stagland Bar in the Savoy Hotel, and he'll take a bet on anything you want to name—like how long it will take a bug to crawl out of a bottle or whether the next guy that comes in will put his right or left foot on the bar rail first. There's a very flash crowd that hangs around the Stagland, and Dom Carlos does pretty well for himself because he is a bear-cat at figuring odds. From what Horse Car said, I think he sneaked into the Stagland and braced Dom Carlos in front of some of his ritzy pals. Dom Carlos takes a look at Horse Car and figures he don't have more than a dime, so he quotes the two hundred to one, and then he can't back down when Horse Car outs with his fifty."

"What do Dom Carlos' betting slips look like?"

"Fancy," said Hennessey. "Green with his name printed on them in gold. They are bigger than average because he has got to write bets with screwy terms. You can easy spot one if you see it."

"All right," Dodd said. "Have you got any lead at all on Horse Car? Has he been seen or heard of since Meekins was picked up?"

"Nope. He blew himself away like a puff of smoke. But I figure he is the innocent by-stander here anyway, Dodd. Where would he get a gun? And anyway, he is a scared, puny little bird that don't weigh more than a wet dish-rag. I figure somebody tried to stick him and Meekins up for that betting slip, and Meekins beefed, and Horse Car ran."

"I want to ask him a question. Where was he picked up on the vag charge?"

"On Water Street near Crail."

"Has anybody checked up on Dom Carlos?"

Hennessey pursed his lips. "Not unless it was Lieutenant Gudolfson."

Dodd stared at him. "Who?"

"Lieutenant Gudolfson. You heard of him. Whenever the cops make a real bad butch, why Lieutenant Gudolfson gets the blame for it in the newspapers and reports and stuff and gets fined and suspended and dismissed and sent out to herd goats and all that. There ain't really no such person, of course. We just use the name to take the heat off the police department so them reformers won't be clawing us all the time. Lieutenant Gudolfson is investigatin' this business about Meekins, unless you say different."

"How was that last?" Dodd asked.

Hennessey shrugged. "I figured maybe you'd want to look around a bit and wouldn't want to be trippin' over cops while you was doin' it."

Dodd smiled slowly. "You're kind of a handy person to know, at that, Hennessey."

"Now and then," Hennessey said blandly. "You know, that Meekins is a pest. He gets in my hair something fearful around the station, and he is always playin' snide tricks of one kind and another, but I'm sorta used to him now."

Dodd nodded in an understanding way. "So am I, Hennessey."

"Don't get caught killin' nobody, Dodd."

"No," said Dodd absently.

THE gray doors across the hall opened, and a man in a white surgeon's smock came out. He was tall and thin and sharp-featured, and he had an air of cynically bored superiority.

"Are you two waiting to hear about this man, Meekins?" he asked.

"Yes," Dodd answered. "How is he?"

"He was shot twice—once in the right thigh and once in the left calf. The bullet in his calf fractured the leg bone but didn't splinter it. The X-rays show he doesn't have a skull fracture, but he has a concussion and severe lacerations about his head. He was struck several times by a heavy instrument with sharp edges—probably a revolver—while he was lying

on the ground, shot, I should judge."

Dodd said: "Well, is he all right? I mean, will he recover?"

The doctor was lighting a cigarette. "Oh, I imagine so. Unless complications set in."

"Where is he now?"

"We're putting him in the out ward to await transfer. He can't stay here, you know."

"Oh yes, he can," Dodd said flatly.

The doctor looked up in faint surprise. "We have no facilities to care for any except temporary patients here. This is the Emergency Hospital."

"You have rooms on the third floor," said Dodd.

The doctor's thin lips tightened. "They are not open to the public."

"I know," Dodd agreed. "They're for city officials and other rummies who get a free medical ride from the taxpayers. But Meekins stays in one just the same, with a day and night nurse. Run him up there."

"That's quite impossible," said the doctor.

"If I was you, Doc," Hennessey said conversationally, "I would kind of do like Dodd, here, suggests. He's a bail bondsman, and he gets around quite some. If he should get mad, he might call up the mayor or the health commissioner and start talkin' to them about a lot of things they'd just as soon not talk about, and if that happened some innocent third party—like yourself—would get his teeth kicked right in."

The doctor lost his superior air. "Well, of course, it might be dangerous to move the patient at the moment . . . We might make an exception."

"Do that," Dodd said. "And just see that you stay on the job yourself."

The doctor stiffened up again. "I'll do my best."

"I wouldn't stop there, if I was you," said Hennessey. "If your best wasn't good enough, lots of queer things might happen all of a sudden around here."

The doctor ignored him pointedly. "Please sign for the patient at the reception desk. I will inform the nurse in charge, of the circumstances. Good-evening." He walked down the hall, shoulders very stiff and straight.

Hennessey was scowling in concentration. "Say!" he said suddenly. "I just got an idea! How much is eight from twenty?"

"Twelve," said Dodd. "Why?"

"You said you advanced Meekins twenty bucks this morning. He's got eight now, countin' that five I shook out of Crestwick. You said Meekins wouldn't spend seventeen bucks of his own dough in one day. I don't think he'd spend twelve, either. Do you?"

"No," Dodd admitted.

Hennessey slapped his fist down heavily on the bench beside him. "That damned Crestwick! He held out on me! Why, that guy is nothing but a crook! I'll fix his clock for him!"

He heaved himself off the bench and lumbered purposefully down the hall toward the back. He had gone about ten paces when he stopped and turned around.

"How much did you say you advanced Meekins?"

"Fifty dollars," said Dodd.

Hennessey nodded once. "That's what I thought you said. I'll make that Crestwick cough up." He started on down the hall again.

DODD went the other way and descended the front stairs to the lobby. The receptionist was bent over the desk filling out a white card. She ignored Dodd.

"Ahem," he said, after a moment. "Excuse me, but I'd like to make out an entry blank or whatever it is for my man, Meekins. He's staying here."

"I'm well aware of that," said the receptionist in a spitefully disapproving voice. "I'm filling out his card now. I took the particulars from his draft registration. He was identified by that when he was picked up."

"I see," said Dodd.

"Doctor Burns has informed me of the circumstances," the receptionist added, pen scratching furiously, "and I must say I think they are highly irregular. Fill out this, please. Name, address, relation to patient, and occupation—if any."

"Yes, ma'am," said Dodd mildly.

He filled out the blank spaces on the card and handed it back as Hennessey came puffing down the stairs. He held

his right hand up in front of Dodd's face and waggled his thick fingers.

"Look. That first knuckle again. I bet it's gonna swole up."

"Swell up!" the receptionist snapped.

"I like swole better," said Hennessey. "It sounds more like my knuckle feels. You was right, Dodd. That Crestwick went and lifted the whole of that sixty-five smackers you advanced to Meekins."

"Sixty-five?" Dodd said. "Is that so?"

Hennessey counted crumpled bills on the desk. "Yeah. Here it is. I'm holdin' out five dollars on account I figure Meekins owes me a reward or something for collecting, and anyway I want to buy him some flowers. I know a very tony florist that is a bookie on the side, and you'd be surprised how many flowers a cop can get in his place for five bucks."

"Scandalous!" said the receptionist.

"Aw, no it ain't," said Hennessey. "The guy just likes cops. Some people do."

"Bookies and other scum, no doubt. Mr. Dodd, Doctor Burns spoke of you

desiring special nurses. You will have to make additional arrangements for them."

"I'll attend to it myself," Dodd told her. "I'll get some from an outside agency. I don't like the looks of the ones they keep around here."

"That feeling is quite mutual. Instruct them to report to Doctor Burns. The patient, Meekins, is assigned to Special Suite Number 6 on the third floor. Are you leaving now?"

"Yes, thanks," said Dodd. "Coming, Hennessey?"

"Naw. I'll stick around. That there florist delivers, and I want to chat with Meekins when he gets conscious—if ever—and cheer him up."

"You can't!" said the receptionist flatly. "The patient is under the influence of the anesthetic and will be for several hours, and you can't talk to him even when he comes out unless the doctor authorizes visitors. It is useless for you to wait."

"Aw, I got lots of time," said Hennessey.

Dodd nodded to the receptionist. "What's your name? I mean, in case I

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want to call up and find out about Meekins I'll ask for you."

"The name is Nurse Parr, if it is of any interest to you, but we do not give out information over the telephone concerning patients."

"Oh, now," said Dodd. "Not even for me? I'll have Hennessey give you some of Meekins' pretty flowers if you will."

Nurse Parr straightened up with a jerk. "I do not accept gratuities—nor bribes!"

"Good-night, nurse," said Dodd, heading for the door.

CHAPTER THREE

Meekins Talks

THE Savoy Hotel was old-fashioned and proud of it. Dodd entered through the side door and went down a long, stiffly formal corridor lined with shiny Empire chairs and octagonal mirrors with deep brass borders. There was not a soul in sight, and the corridor looked like a museum display from the last century.

Dodd turned to the right and went down two steps and pushed open a leather padded door and stepped right back into the present. A subdued roar of noise welled around him. The Stagland Bar was for men only, and it was full of them now. They were all along the dimly lighted bar in gesticulating knots and crowded over the red-topped tables like flies over sugar.

Dodd worked his way through the press to the end of the bar and waited until the bartender approached at a dignified waddle.

"Your pleasure, sir?" said the bartender.

"Is Dom Carlos here?" Dodd asked.

The bartender shook his shining head slowly and sadly. "I regret to say that he is not now present, sir."

"How can I get in touch with him?"

"I am at a loss to tell you, sir. May I serve you with some libation?"

"No," said Dodd.

He turned away and started back toward the door.

"Dodd!" a shrill voice called. "Oh, Dodd!"

Dodd turned around and waited, and

his mouth dipped down a little at the corners.

"Just happened to see you," said the other man in breathless, quick spurts. "Wanted to speak to you."

He was small, and there was a round sleekness about him. He wore very nice clothes, and they were clean and pressed, but in spite of that he managed to look just slightly soiled. It was nothing you could point out specifically. It was just his general air. He had a furtive smile that came and went without any apparent reason.

"About Meekins," he said. "Shocking thing. So sorry. Wanted to tell you."

Dodd waited, staring at him.

The small man cleared his throat. "Well, you know me! You've seen me hundreds of times around the courthouse. My name is Dunstead. I'm an attorney. Don't you remember?"

"Yes," said Dodd. "I remember."

"Oh," said Dunstead uncertainly. "Well, I wanted to tell you. Think you should be informed. There's some sort of a conspiracy of silence about the course of the investigation into Meekins'—ah—accident. I asked at the police station and couldn't find anything out. Met with the most evasive answers. I was referred to a Lieutenant Gudolfson. I can't find any trace of any such lieutenant."

Dodd leaned forward a little. "Why were you asking about Meekins?"

Dunstead popped his eyes in surprise. "Eh? Why, my client. Interests of my client. Must protect them, you know."

"Which client?"

"Mr. Jackson. Mr.—ah—Horse Car Jackson."

"Where is he?"

Dunstead spread his hands helplessly. "I don't know. That's why I'm so concerned. In view of what happened to Meekins, his absence at this time is very damaging. Almost incriminating. I must find him and tell him to report to the authorities and give his explanation of the affair and clear himself of any suspicion."

"Have you seen Dom Carlos?"

"Who?" said Dunstead, puzzled.

Dodd leaned further forward and tapped Dunstead gently on one shoulder. "I know what's giving you that gleam in your eye. It's a matter of ten thousand

dollars. And now I want to tell you something. Don't try cutting any corners in front of me, or I'll make you hard to find."

Dunstead smiled and then stopped smiling and backed away a step. "Threats," he said breathlessly, "threats of physical violence don't frighten me. I shall do my duty by my client."

"Don't let me catch you at it," Dodd advised.

HE LEFT Dunstead standing there and went out through the padded leather door and up the steps into the corridor. He turned to the right and went on along the corridor, turned again and entered the empty majesty of the hotel's main lobby. A clerk behind the long desk in the alcove nodded deferentially and smiled at him.

"Yes, sir?"

"Where's the manager?" Dodd asked.

"Right behind you, sir," said the clerk.

Dodd swung around and looked down at a worried, bald, little man who was watching him anxiously through rimless glasses that were fastened to his coat lapel with a broad black ribbon.

"You—wanted me?" he asked timidly.

"No," said Dodd. "I want Dom Carlos."

"Is—is your name Dodd? Bail-Bond Dodd?"

"Yes."

"Well, would you mind proving it, please?"

"Not a bit," said Dodd. He brought out his wallet, opened it, and extended it on his palm. "That's my draft registration. Want to see my driver's license?"

"No, no," said the manager. "Thank you very much. I have a message for you. A message from Dom Carlos."

"What is it?" Dodd demanded.

"Well, I don't know. It's difficult to explain . . . If you'll just step in the credit office right here and wait for a few minutes, he'll call you."

"I don't like this Japanese spy stuff," said Dodd. "Where is he?"

"I don't *know!*" the manager wailed. "He calls here every half-hour, and he told me to have you wait if you came in, and he'd talk to you. He's due to call in just seven minutes. Please, just step in here . . ."

"All right," said Dodd.

They went into a small, square office equipped with an enormous flat-topped desk and a whole wall of filing cases.

"If you'll just sit here beside the desk," said the manager. "Here's the telephone—"

It buzzed suddenly under his fingers, and the manager started so violently that his glasses dropped off.

"That—that can't be he. He calls right precisely on the minute. Pardon me . . ." He picked up the telephone gingerly. "What is it? . . . What? For Mr. Bail-Bond Bird-Brain Dodd? Why—why, I don't—"

"Give it to me," said Dodd. He took the telephone from the manager and said: "Hello."

"I bet you can't guess who this is, Dodd."

"Hennessey," said Dodd wearily.

"Bet you can't guess where I am, though."

"In Meekins' room," said Dodd.

"Aw, shucks. You always guess right."

"How'd you get in there?"

"That was fancy, Dodd. I was waitin' out in front for them flowers I ordered, and when they come I see the delivery boy has on a uniform, so that gives me an idea. So I ditch my gun and my badge and stuff and have the flower guy pile flowers on me until they hide my face and all the rest of me except the edges, and then I walk right in the lobby and tell that old sourpuss of a Nurse Parr that I got to deliver the flowers right up to the room so I can arrange 'em, and here I am yet, still arrangin'."

"How is Meekins?"

"He's not so good. In fact, he looks like hell. But that old sourpuss in the lobby was cuckoo, Dodd, because he is conscious. Of course, he is full of dope and stuff, but he is almost as sensible as he generally is. Say, Dodd, did you pick out that nurse you sent up here personally?"

"No," Dodd answered. "I just called the medical bureau and asked them to assign a couple to Meekins. Why? What's the matter with her?"

"Man!" said Hennessey fervently. "There ain't *nothin'* the matter with her. She looks just like Lana Turner. Honest

she does, Dodd. It's wonderful, but it's too bad."

"Make some sense," Dodd invited impatiently.

"I mean, it's too bad Meekins can't see her when she's so wonderful. His eyes is swole tight shut. They look like a couple of blue balloons. The swellest shiners, bar none, that I ever did see."

"Can he talk to me?"

"He ain't supposed to. The nurse just went out to get him some gruel or something, and she gave me strict orders that I wasn't to talk to him. Huh? Wait a minute, Dodd . . . Hey, Meekins says he can talk, all right, if you can understand him. He has got his jaw in a sling. I'll give him the phone. Here, Meekins. Be careful, now."

MEEKINS' voice was a blurred, feeble croak. "Hello, boss. It's me again."

"Hello, fella!" said Dodd warmly. "How do you feel? Is it—is it pretty painful?"

"Naw. I can't feel nothin'. I'm wrapped up like a mummy and blind as a bat."

"Look, Meekins," said Dodd. "I don't want to upset you, and I'm not mad, but just what the hell kind of a fandango were you trying to pull with Horse Car Jackson and that betting slip?"

"I wanted to help the old dope, Dodd. The cops that pinched him said that he'd been wavin' that betting slip all over Water Street. Lots of people knew he had it. They'd remember when they heard Lilybud came in and come swarming around and roll the old boy before he could wink. And then I figured we might as well make a small piece of change out of it for being so kind-hearted."

"Sure. So what?"

"Well, he was in the jail on a bum rap, Dodd."

"Why?" Dodd asked.

"He was in for vagrancy. A vagrant is a guy that is destitute and poverty-stricken and all that. A guy with ten thousand bucks certainly don't fit that definition."

"No," Dodd admitted.

"Well, so when Hennessey couldn't cooperate, I got hold of Dunstead because I was in a hurry."

"I know. You couldn't have picked worse. I just saw the little rat. He's

hanging around here to get a line on Horse Car or Dom Carlos. He says he wants to protect Horse Car's interest. You know what will happen to that ten thousand if he does."

"Well, Dodd. He ain't Horse Car's lawyer. He's *your* lawyer."

"What?" Dodd said, startled.

"Yeah. I figured he'd try to chisel, so I drew up a little receipt and had him sign it. I paid him ten bucks of my own dough as a retainer. In that receipt, I put it that he was our lawyer and that our interests were opposed to Horse Car's because we were on his bond. Dunstead was so boggle-eyed over that betting slip that he never read the receipt, but it puts him on notice. He can't represent both sides of a case. If he tries it, we'll jerk him up before the Bar Association."

"Where is that receipt?" Dodd demanded tensely.

"In my wallet."

Dodd slapped his side pocket and felt the weight of the wallet and breathed a deep sigh. "That's good! I'll fix the little rat the next time I catch up with him. Wait a minute. You said you paid him ten dollars of your own dough. How much did you have left of that twenty I gave you?"

"Eight bucks. Why?"

Dodd chuckled. "Tell Hennessey that sometime, but not now. What about this parole idea?"

"That was Dunstead's notion. He couldn't figure out any way to get Horse Car out of the cooler right away, and so he says he will try this gag on old Judge Barth. Dunstead quoted a lot of phoney cases and reeled off some double-talk he claimed was in the Civil Code or somewhere, and Barth was so dumb he took it in. That old boy is half-witted."

"Now we come to the squeeze," said Dodd. "How about that bond on Horse Car?"

"That's us, Dodd. That's our cut. When I told Horse Car that Lilybud had won the Sweep, he nearly went nuts. He's a very suspicious old guy, and he was sure somebody would cheat him or something if he didn't get right out and collect his bet. So I say I'll try to get him out, but it will cost some dough, probably. He says he'll pay it. So, before I

sign that five hundred dollar bond, I ask him about it. He says if we put up the five hundred so he can get out he will pay us five hundred when he collects from Dom Carlos. That's a hundred per cent on a bond, boss. That's good business."

"You bet," Dodd agreed. "Then what happened?"

"Well, Horse Car is so afraid somebody will cheat him that he is nuts. He gets that betting slip in his mitts, and he won't let go. I mean, for a fact. He holds it like a kid holds a piece of candy he's scared of losing. So I see the old guy is a little off his trolley, and I think I better tag along and collect for us."

"Sure," Dodd agreed. "Go on."

"DOM CARLOS has a drop at the Allied Apartments on Tenth near Ventner where he pays off his bets. It is dark by the time we get there, and Horse Car is seeing hob-goblins behind every fire plug, so we sneak in the alley heading for the back door. Somebody just up and shot at us without no warning at all. It felt like somebody hit me in the legs with an axe. I fell down and started to roll, and then this party hit me on the dome with something heavy. That's all."

"Did you see the guy at all?"

"I saw his legs when I rolled over. He was wearing white shoes and white pants."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. They showed up in the dark. I think Horse Car got away O.K., because the last thing I can remember is hearing his feet going down that alley like a machine gun. He was really runnin'. You got any line on him at all?"

"No. Not yet, but—"

Hennessey's voice sounded, faint but frantic: "She's comin' back! Gimme that phone! Gimme— Yes, Mr. Magruder! Yes, Boss! I'm right here now, and I arranged them flowers just like you told me, and they sure are pretty . . . What, ma'am? . . . Me? Oh, no! I wouldn't let him talk on the telephone, not after you told me—"

There was a faint scrabbling sound, and then a feminine voice that sounded pleasant even when it was angry said furiously: "Who is this? Who is on this line?"

"Mr. Magruder," said Dodd. "From Magruder's Flower Shoppe."

"Were you talking to my patient?"

"Oh, no," said Dodd. "I just wanted to check up on my assistant. He's very untrustworthy and unreliable—"

"You don't need to tell me! I can't see why a florist would hire a big hulk who doesn't know a lily from a gardenia and tries to put his arm around people and kiss them. I don't think you have a flower shop at all but don't—you—call—my—patient—again!"

The line snapped so violently that it popped in Dodd's ear. He put the telephone carefully back on its stand.

The manager was jiggling from one foot to the other in an agony of nervousness. "You talked past the time Mr. Carlos was supposed to call! Now you'll have to wait—"

The telephone buzzed again.

"Oh!" said the manager. "Thank goodness! He must have got a busy signal and tried again!"

Dodd picked up the telephone and said: "Dodd speaking here."

There was a humming silence for a good ten seconds, and then a smooth, low voice said: "This is Dom Carlos, Dodd. I want to see you."

"All right," said Dodd. "When and where?"

"Go out the Third Street entrance of the hotel and walk west. A cab will pick you up within a half-block. He knows where to take you."

The line clicked softly.

"Is it—is it all right, Mr. Dodd?" the manager asked anxiously.

"It had better be," said Dodd. "Thanks for the service."

He went out of the office and crossed the lobby and pushed through the doors on the Third Street side of the hotel. It was late now, and a cooling breeze stirred away the remainder of the day's heat and felt fresh and soothing against Dodd's face. He started walking west, his footsteps sounding loudly hollow in the darkness.

Ahead of him and across the street, a car starter let go with a sudden rip. Headlights bloomed and then shined squarely on him as the car swung around in a U-turn and coasted in along the curb.

"Your name Dodd?"

"I think so," said Dodd.

A door latch snapped, and light bloomed softly yellow in the interior of the cab. There was no one in it but the driver.

"Hop in."

Dodd got in and sat down, and the cab slid smoothly down the street.

"Want me to close my eyes and promise not to peek?" Dodd asked.

"I don't know nothin' about nothin', chum," said the driver. "I'm ignorant."

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Hundred to One

HE MADE no attempt to complicate his route. He turned off on Travel Boulevard and went straight across town, heading up into the exclusive apartment house district on Bryant Hill. Halfway up, he turned off on a narrow side street, went two blocks and part of another, and then made a swing up the steep slope of a private drive and rolled down into a gloomy, cavern-like garage.

An attendant in white cover-alls was polishing a car beside the grease-pit, and he stopped and came toward the cab immediately, tucking the polish rag into his hip pocket. He opened the cab door and said: "This way, please, Mr. Dodd."

Dodd got out. "Do I owe you anything?" he asked the driver.

"Nope."

Dodd followed the attendant back farther into the garage. The attendant stopped in front of a wide white door and pressed a button beside it. They waited for a moment, and then the latch clicked. The attendant opened the door. There was an elevator on the other side.

"Step right in," the attendant invited. "I'll ride you up."

He got in the elevator after Dodd and pressed one of the buttons on the control panel. The elevator rose slowly, wheezing a little, and stopped at the fifth floor.

The attendant slid the door back. "It's 502, Mr. Dodd. Right ahead there."

The hall had white walls and a thick, bright pink carpet on the floor. The doors along it were the same shade of pink with spider-like numerals in-set in the panels. Dodd knocked softly on 502.

"Come in."

Dodd opened the door and stepped in-

side. This was a single apartment—one long room not much wider than a pullman car, all modernistic and built-in, with indirect lighting like over-bright sunshine. There was no one in sight.

"Put up your hands, Dodd."

Dodd located the voice. It came through a half-opened door, the only one in the apartment, ahead and to his left. He raised his hands slowly.

"Turn around."

Dodd turned around. Feet whispered lightly on the rug behind him, and a round object poked warningly against his back between his shoulder blades.

"Stand still."

A hand patted him quickly and expertly, under both arms, both hips, around his waist.

"All right. Go over and sit in that chair."

Dodd strolled over and sank down into fibroid cushions that looked hard but were surprisingly comfortable. He looked up at the other man and smiled thinly.

"You've been seeing too many gangster movies."

"Probably," said Dom Carlos. "But I've heard a lot about you, Dodd. You've got a reputation for being tough, rough, and nasty in a clutch. I wanted to make sure I had a chance to talk to you before you started rolling."

HE WAS thick-set and taller than average and very fit-looking. He was deeply tanned, and he had black hair with streaks of gray in it and a black pencil-line mustache. He was the type that would have seemed very much at home on a polo field or at a hunt club or even on a yacht. He was wearing a black dressing gown and black silk pajamas. In his right hand, he was holding a stubby hammerless revolver, and he dropped it into the pocket of the dressing gown now.

"All right," said Dodd. "You talk. I'll listen."

"About your runner," said Dom Carlos. "This man, Meekins. I had nothing whatsoever to do with that deal. I was over at the Allied Apartments when the shooting happened, but I was in my own apartment at the time. I can prove it."

"Sure," said Dodd.

Dom Carlos made a helpless gesture.

"That's just what I was afraid of! Good God, Dodd, be reasonable! Do you think I'd try to murder somebody just to keep from paying off a bet?"

"Ten thousand dollars ain't hay," said Dodd.

Dom Carlos walked the length of the apartment and back again. "I know it isn't. Two hundred to one. Good God! I've been kicking myself ever since!"

"I thought it was sort of off-center," Dodd commented.

"I'll tell you how it was. I was in the Stagland in the afternoon talking to some members of the Stirrup Club. They were having a polo game the next Sunday with that Army outfit from Fort Clark. They didn't have a chance against the Army—as a matter of fact they were beaten 15 to 2—but I was needling them a little to see if I couldn't get them to put some dough down at odds on themselves. This damned Horse Car sneaked in through the kitchen and braced me for odds on Lilybud. I tried to brush him off, but then he started to yell about me being afraid to take a bet. I could have had him thrown out, but it wouldn't have looked very good. Not when I was trying to needle these other boys into betting. You see what I mean?"

Dodd nodded, interested. "Yes. Go ahead."

"This Horse Car was obviously a bum. I was sure he didn't have more than four bits on him. So I said two hundred to one. And then he came up with fifty dollars, and I had to take it. Good God, Dodd, two hundred to one is only one-half of one per cent return on your money if you win. You don't think I could stay in business if I made deals like that?"

"No," Dodd admitted.

"I never make a bet at those odds unless it's for nickels to tease a sucker along, but as a matter of fact two hundred to one was fair enough in the circumstances. I've got lines on every track. That Lilybud was always a hay-bag, but I happened to know that Bimley had retired it. It wasn't even in training. It was out at pasture. But Bimley couldn't get any of his other horses back from the coast on account of war railroad priorities. He had to enter something to get his stable rights for the meet."

"I know," Dodd said.

Dom Carlos took another turn up and down the room. "I'm not claiming I can pay out ten thousand without weeping in my beer, but I thought I'd just make the best of it and use the deal for advertising. I figured on sticking the receipted betting slip up in the Stagland and letting people see what a sucker I was. I'd have made it back. I'm not fooling you, Dodd. If you will make several bets with me and let me name the odds, I can take you every time."

"I believe you," Dodd agreed.

Dom Carlos picked up a big manila envelope from the table and flipped it into Dodd's lap. "I'm ready to pay off. I'm not trying to dodge it."

The envelope had *Lilybud* scrawled across it. The flap wasn't glued, and Dodd opened it and looked inside. The envelope was packed full of hundred dollar bills.

"Count them," Dom Carlos invited simply.

Dodd sighed and shook his head. He shut the envelope reluctantly and put it back on the table.

"Have you heard from Horse Car at all?" he asked.

"No. Not a word."

"How do you know he hasn't called at your drop over at the Allied Apartments?"

"I've got a man over there. I told him to send anyone who tried to collect over here."

"Anyone?" Dodd repeated sharply.

DOM CARLOS moved his heavy shoulders. "Now that's what puts me behind the eight-ball. I have to pay off on the slip, Dodd. No matter who has it or how he got it. I couldn't run my business any other way. That slip is a receipt and a claim on me. I have to honor it and no questions asked. That's why I've been trying to get hold of you—to tell you that. I can't hold the pay-off back for you or Meekins or Horse Car or anybody else."

"I see," said Dodd slowly.

"I don't want trouble with you, Dodd," said Dom Carlos earnestly. "I'll tell you who collects, but I can't stall him. In fact, you can sit here and wait for whoever comes around, if you want."

Dodd shook his head. "I want to find

Horse Car—if someone hasn't found him already."

"How much are you in him for?"

"Five hundred dollars. For his bond."

"That's bad," said Dom Carlos. "I can't even hold out that for you. You can see why. I'm sorry about this whole business, Dodd. I'm right in the middle. It's no pleasure for me."

"Meekins didn't have fun, either," said Dodd. "Do you play tennis?"

"What?" said Dom Carlos blankly. "Tennis? Why, sometimes?"

"Do you ever play at night?"

"No," said Dom Carlos, puzzled.

"Were you playing late yesterday afternoon?"

"No."

"Did you see anyone around the Allied Apartments that had been or was going to?"

"No," said Dom Carlos. "But why?"

"Just checking up. Do you know anybody off-hand who makes a habit of wearing white shoes and white trousers at night?"

Dom Carlos shook his head slowly. "No, I don't."

"Somebody does," said Dodd. "Or did. I'd like to locate him. He's a man I want to meet."

A telephone bell hummed softly somewhere. Dom Carlos went over to the streamlined bureau, opened the top drawer, and took a telephone out of it.

"Yes?" He waited for a moment, listening intently. "Who? Lieutenant Gudolfson? I don't know him."

Dodd sat up straight suddenly.

"What?" said Dom Carlos into the telephone. "An assignment? That can't be—"

"What is it?" Dodd interrupted.

"Wait," Dom Carlos said into the telephone. He nodded at Dodd, scowling. "This is the man I left over at the Allied Apartments. He says a detective by the name of Lieutenant Gudolfson is there with what he claims is an assignment of Horse Car's interest in my betting slip. He hasn't got the slip, but it's described in the assignment. He claims the assignment takes precedence over the betting slip because it's a legal instrument—"

"Oh-oh," said Dodd. "Tell your man to put Gudolfson on the wire. I'll talk to him."

"Let me talk to Gudolfson, Dick," Dom Carlos requested. He handed the telephone to Dodd.

Dodd said: "Hello, Dunstead. This is your client."

THERE was a long silence, and then Dunstead's voice asked cautiously: "Who—did you say you were?"

"Your client, you louse. Dodd is the name."

"Oh! What? Why—why, I'm not—you're not my client I'm representing—"

"Me," said Dodd. "I've got it down in black and white. You should have read that receipt Meekins had you sign."

"Receipt?" Dunstead repeated. "I didn't—I mean, I resign! I'm representing Mr. Horse Car—"

"Oh, no," said Dodd. "I refuse to accept your resignation without due notice. And even if you do resign, you can't represent Horse Car because the receipt states that his interests and mine are opposed and that you understand they are. Do you understand *that*?"

"I didn't—it didn't—you can't—"

"Any more of your lip, and we'll argue it out in front of the Bar Association," Dodd warned. "Now listen, Dunstead, I've got a job for you. I've decided to lease the Empire State Building in New York City. I want you to make out a master lease on it and a separate lease for each tenant in the building, giving all particulars in detail."

"What? Empire State? Why, there are hundreds of tenants—"

"Haste is imperative," said Dodd. "I want everything ready by tomorrow afternoon."

"I couldn't possibly—"

"You get it done. Start working right now and don't stop until you're finished. If you're not ready on time, I'll sue you for a billion dollars and have you pinched for impersonating an officer and disbarred for trying to represent both sides of legal case. Now, scat."

Dodd handed the telephone back to Dom Carlos. "He won't bother you any more. I've got to run along now."

Dom Carlos put the telephone back in its drawer. "Do you mind telling me where you're going?"

"Down on Water Street. I figure Horse

Car will head for his old hangout if he wants to get under cover. If you want to get in touch with me, try the Emergency Hospital."

Dom Carlos frowned thoughtfully. "Water Street. Are you going down there alone?"

"Sure."

Dom Carlos took the stubby revolver from the pocket of his dressing gown and extended it butt first. He didn't say anything.

Dodd nodded once and put the revolver in his coat pocket. "Thanks. I'll see you."

CHAPTER FIVE

Benny the Beef

WATER STREET was rough and tough and—literally—full of fleas. Formerly it was accustomed to roll over and roar every Saturday night, but since the war industries had opened up the town it roared every night. It was after two o'clock in the morning now, but the sidewalks were full of tramps of both sexes and bums of every hue. Store-fronts and saloons dripped blindingly incandescent streaks of neon, and shills lay in wait in every doorway, ready to grab you and drag you inside if you so much as glanced at a window display. This had been posted out-of-bounds for soldiers, sailors, and marines, and there were no uniforms visible except for an occasional shore patrol or military police detail.

Dodd got out of a taxi at the corner of Crail Street and stood there for about ten minutes, watching the crowd stagger

past. After awhile, a voice spoke to him from just below the level of his left shoulder.

"I can't pay you tonight, Dodd."

Dodd looked around. "What did you say?"

"I can't pay you tonight. I can't pay you for another couple weeks. I can't pick no fifty bucks off a bush. I got to put out for the stuff. They ain't gonna give me no tea on credit. I told Meekins that."

He was a very small man, very thin, dressed in a dark suit that was shiny at the seams. He had a still, dark face, and the skin was pulled so tightly over his cheekbones that it glistened. He opened his mouth a little when he talked, but he didn't move his lips.

"Meekins said it was O.K.," he went on.

Dodd remembered him now. His name was Benny Beef, or so his record stated, and he had been arrested for every petty crime the state legislature had been able to discover and make a law against.

"You peddling marihuana now?" Dodd asked him.

"Sure. Only to my pals, though. Strictly private. I ain't no wholesale house. Roll 'em up myself. Cost me a nickel apiece. Sell 'em three for four bits."

"Have you got any on you now?"

"Naw. I got six or eight drops along the street where I keep 'em stashed away. I can easy get you some, though. All you want. Compliments of the house."

"No, thanks," said Dodd. "I just didn't want to talk to you if you were carrying any. This district is floating with feds. I don't want any part of them."

NO FINER DRINK...



"You and me," Benny Beef agreed. "They don't bother with no small-time stuff, though. Japs, they're lookin' for, and fifth columns and blast-boys and like that."

"I want some information," Dodd said. "I'm looking for Horse Car Jackson."

"Sure," said Benny Beef. "Everybody is—or was."

"What do you mean?" Dodd demanded.

Benny Beef licked his colorless lips. "Fifty fish at two hundred to one. And Dom Carlos pays off like the U. S. Mint. Sure, everybody was lookin' for Horse Car."

"Why aren't they still looking for him? Did someone find him?"

"Naw. Not yet—I don't think. Red Tano put the word out that he was poison."

"Come again," Dodd invited.

"Red Tano," said Benny Beef. "He runs the Ritz-Plaza Cocktail Salon. He's got fifty-sixty guys out scoutin' for Horse Car. Them guys put the word out that Red Tano don't want to hear of anybody else lookin' for him."

"Is Red Tano a tough guy?"

BENNY BEEF'S lip curled slightly. "He claims. He gets funny with me he's gonna get a knife stuck in that fat pot of his. I don't like his business methods."

"Such as what?" Dodd asked curiously.

"The Ritz-Plaza is nothing but a smoke-hole. Why, he makes his whiskey out of anti-freeze fluid and rubbing alcohol and like that. Sells it for a nickel a shot. He's ruinin' a lot of my customers' healths."

"You think marihuana would be better for them?"

"Well, sure. Mary-Jane don't hurt you. I smoked it for years, and look at me."

"I am," said Dodd. "But I'd rather look at Red Tano. I'll forget that fifty bucks if you'll come along and introduce me to him."

"It's a deal," said Benny Beef. "Only I tell you, I don't like that guy. I don't figure he's ethical. We had words about it more'n once. I tell him the last time that if he lays any more of my customers away with that there acute alcohol

poisoning, I'm gonna cut out his heart and feed it to him."

"How about his fifty or sixty tough guys?"

Benny Beef looked up slowly, and his eyes were all shiny black, dilated pupil. "Why, I ain't scared of no fifty-sixty guys, Dodd."

"Oh-oh," said Dodd, swallowing.

Benny Beef smiled, showing dark, wide-spaced teeth. "Now don't worry, Dodd. I ain't loaded up. I ain't smoked more than two or three or four, I don't think. I'm just feelin' normal-like. You can see that."

"Sure," said Dodd warily. "But maybe we'd better forget Red Tano—"

"Come on along," said Benny Beef. "This way. It's only a block."

He began to drift along with the crowd in a peculiarly effortless, gliding walk. Dodd hesitated a moment and then shrugged his shoulders and followed him.

People muttered and milled around them, and the air was full of rackety swing and the hibber-gibber of sidewalk barkers and a complicated miasma of odors that hung over the street like a fog.

"Right here," said Benny Beef.

He turned into a pitch-black alley, and the bricks were unpleasantly slimy under Dodd's feet.

"Keep in the center," Benny Beef advised. "There's garbage cans and drunks and stuff along the walls."

Dodd stopped short. "Wait a minute. I can't see a damned thing. Let me put my hand on your shoulder."

"Here I am," said Benny Beef.

Dodd groped in the darkness and located his narrow, thin shoulder. "Lead on."

Benny Beef either could see in the dark or felt it wasn't necessary, because he went right along regardless. The air moved and stank and whispered invisibly around them. Dodd was beginning to feel very edgy. He put his free hand in his pocket and gripped Dom Carlos' stubby revolver hard. Benny Beef was whistling a very complicated arrangement of a popular tune. "Turn," he said, and did so.

DODD stumbled around behind him. A weary light gleamed over a white-painted door ahead of them. Benny Beef

walked up to it and kicked it open, and sound funneled out at them like banshees howling from the bottom of a well.

The Ritz-Plaza Cocktail Salon was a long room, unpainted and unadorned with anything resembling furniture. The customers roamed back and forth between the walls until they fell down and stayed there or got up again. They yelled and argued with each other and themselves, too. They were all filthy and stinking drunk and some of them were obviously mad, and the all-over picture was something that had to be seen to be believed.

Benny Beef pushed one man in the face and elbowed another in the stomach and walked right through to the short, narrow bar at the far end of the room. The bartender had no front teeth and only one ear.

"Is Red in the back room?" Benny Beef asked him.

The bartender spread two enormous hands flat on the top of the bar and leaned forward. "Scram, muggles-pincher! We don't want no reefers today!" he said.

There was a little snap and a glittering flick in the air, and Benny Beef pressed the blade of a knife delicately and gently against the first knuckle of the forefinger of the bartender's right hand.

"You're so sweet," he said, smiling, "that I think I'll hack me off a souvenir to remember you by."

His knife was the type known as the Arkansas toothpick, sharp-pointed with a thin, cruel blade. The bartender looked at it, and he didn't move. He stood as rigid as a statue, slowly turning green around the mouth. There was another snap and a flick, and the knife disappeared.

"Joke," said Benny Beef, winking. "Ha-ha. Is Red in the back room?"

"Yes," said the bartender, with a gulp.

"Come on, Dodd," said Benny Beef.

He went around the end of the bar and pushed open another door. Dodd followed him into a narrow hall with walls that were greenish and mildewed and peeling away in ragged strips.

Benny Beef pointed to a door at the side. "Exit," he explained. "In case we come out fast. Gives out into an alley that leads to a parking lot that faces on Crail below Water. Catch?"

"Catch," said Dodd. "But let's not come out fast."

"You never can tell," said Benny Beef. "I'm riding, and when I'm riding you just never can tell. Come on."

HE WENT on down the hall and opened the door at the end and walked through. Dodd followed him gingerly. There was a bridge lamp with a blue shade in the middle of the room and an iron cot with a striped mattress on it against the far wall. A man lay like a great wheezing, inert mound on top of the mattress.

"Hi, Red," said Benny Beef.

The man wheezed louder once, and then said thickly: "You tea-dancer, you're fulla hop or you wouldn't dare show your ugly puss around here. Who's that droop with you?"

"Dodd," said Benny Beef. "Bail-Bond Dodd. This is Red Tano, Dodd."

Dodd nodded. "Hello. I want to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to you. Get the hell out of my place."

"He's sassy," said Benny Beef. "Fat and sassy."

Red Tano rolled over, and the springs on the cot groaned under him. Puffing laboriously he pushed himself up to a sitting position. His face was as big and flat as a snare drum and redder than the fringe of rusty hair that circled an immense, nakedly gleaming expanse of skull above his wrinkled forehead.

"Get the hell out," he repeated.

"Relax," Dodd advised, closing the door behind him. "I hear you're prowling around after Horse Car Jackson. What for?"

"Owes me dough."

"How much?" Dodd demanded.

"Fifty bucks."

"For what?"

"He won it here in a crap game."

"How does that make him owe it to you?"

Benny Beef was leaning against the wall in an elaborately graceful way. "That's the way it is in this dive. Red runs a crap game in front when he can find anybody with dough, but nobody but him ever walks away with any winnings. If Red can't take 'em away with loaded dice, he

gives the guy a mickey and rolls him when he passes out. When the guy comes to, Red tells him he spent all the dough on drinks, and the guy feels so bad he thinks maybe he might have."

Red Tano didn't trouble to deny it. "You two blow outa here. Don't want you around. Beat it, or you get some trouble."

"How did Horse Car get out with the fifty?" Dodd asked.

"Ran like hell," said Red Tano. "You guys gonna leave—under your own power?"

"When we get ready," said Dodd.

Red Tano bounced once on the creaking bed, preparing to heave himself to his feet. Dodd took the stubby revolver out of his pocket and pointed it casually at him.

"Sit still, fatso."

Red Tano relaxed and wheezed thickly. His lips pulled back from teeth that were as sharp and yellow as a wolf's.

Dodd said: "Listen. I'm taking care of Horse Car. You leave him alone. Call in your boys and keep out from under my feet."

There was a sudden pound of footsteps in the hall, and a fist slammed against the door.

"Hey, Red!" a hoarse voice said. "I got somethin'."

Dodd stepped sideways away from the door. He moved the revolver meaningly and nodded at Red Tano. Tano sat mountainously silent, glaring at him with red-rimmed eyes.

"Hey, Red!" said the voice outside.

Dodd murmured softly: "Maybe I'm fooling. Maybe this gun isn't loaded."

"Come on in," Red Tano called sullenly.

CHAPTER SIX

Call the Morgue

THE door opened, and a heavy-shouldered man in a patched red sweater and a checked cap slumped through it and with a contemptuous heave hauled another man in behind him and dumped him in a heap on the floor. The heavy-shouldered man opened his mouth to say something to Tano, and then he caught sight of

Dodd's gun. His mouth stayed open. "Shut the door," Dodd said.

The man groped behind him with one thick arm, finally hit the door and knocked it shut. Nobody moved for a long, dragging moment. The man on the floor lay like a bundle of rag-clad sticks, and now he raised a smeared, sick-white face and peered around with eyes that seemed to cringe in their sockets.

"What's your name?" Dodd asked the heavy-shouldered man.

"Joe Haley."

Dodd jerked his head toward the thin little man on the floor. "Where'd you get this, and what did you have to tell Red about him?"

Haley looked at Red Tano questioningly.

Dodd moved the revolver. "Talk to me. Red's sitting this one out."

Haley moistened his lips. "The guy's name is Sailor. I caught him buyin' food."

"What of it?" Dodd demanded.

Benny Beef said: "The old bird is a canned-heat drinker, Dodd. They don't eat."

"What?" Dodd said, startled.

Benny Beef shrugged. "Well—hardly any. Just what they can pick off garbage cans and like that. No canned-heat drinker would *buy* food. It ain't that important to him. That's why Haley nabbed the old boy. He was buyin' the food for somebody else. Some pal who is under cover and don't want to come out and buy it himself. Catch?"

"Yes," said Dodd. "You, Sailor. Who were you buying that food for?"

Sailor stared with eyes that were bleary, watering slits. He shook his head once, and then he wound his skinny arms around his head and waited, resigned for whatever came next.

"Now you're going to have a hell of a time," Benny Beef said. "Them canned-heat bums get numb from drinkin' so much of the stuff. You can stick pins in 'em, and they don't even know it. No use beatin' the guy up to get him to talk. It won't hurt him."

"Haley," said Dodd. "What did you get out of him?"

Haley said: "Nothin'. I slapped him around, but he wouldn't talk."

"Does he know Horse Car?"

"Yeah," Benny Beef answered. "I seen 'em together. Horse Car was tryin' to reform him. That Horse Car has got some cylinders missin'."

Sailor unwound his arms slowly and cautiously. "That's a dirty lie. Horse Car's as smart as anybody, and he's a nice fella, and you better leave him alone." He glared malignantly at Haley. "That fella took somethin' else from me besides the two bits."

"What?" Dodd asked quickly.

"Piece of paper. With writin' on it."

"Let's see it," Dodd ordered.

Haley reluctantly produced a ragged slip of paper from the pocket of his corduroy trousers. He held it out, and Dodd stepped closer, reaching for it.

"Look out!" Benny Beef yelled.

Haley grabbed Dodd's hand and tried to snap a wristlock on his arm. Dodd slashed him across the nose with the blunt barrel of the revolver. Haley yelled, and Dodd jerked his arm away, spinning around.

RED TANO fell flat on his back and flipped one arm over and back of the cot. He came up to a sitting position again, not wheezing and panting at all now, but moving as smoothly as a coiled spring. He had a sawed-off shotgun in his hand, and he swung it at Dodd.

Before Dodd could move there was a quick whicker of steel in front of his face, and the toothpick knife hit Red Tano with a little slapping sound just under the fat bulge of his chin. It stayed there, black handle jutting straight out and trembling.

A hand clawed across Dodd's back, and he spun again, ducking, and tripped over Sailor's stick-like leg. He fell flat on his back, and Haley loomed over him, arms spread wide and blood from his nose smeared across one cheek.

"Back up!" Dodd shouted.

Haley dived head-first at him. The stubby revolver jumped and roared in Dodd's hand, and Haley writhed in mid-air and fell sprawling and leadenly motionless over Dodd, knocking him backwards. Dodd's head banged against the floor, and Benny Beef went over him in a cat-like leap.

Benny Beef was laughing crazily. He was clear out of this world now, and he went for Red Tano, whipping out one hand to grab for the hilt of the knife.

"*Yeeeah!*" yelled Benny Beef.

The shotgun thundered. Benny Beef went whirling across the room as if he had no weight at all, and his face was a formless red smear. He hit the wall and bounced off and fell flat on the floor. He didn't move again.

Dodd sat up and looked at Red Tano. The shotgun slipped out of Tano's freckled, fat hands and thumped on the floor. He sat there, hunched forward a little, chin propped on the knife handle, staring blindly ahead. Then he made a noise like a cough. Blood came out of his mouth in a dark, welling flood. He fell forward off the cot in a quivering, jelly-like heap.

Dodd got up stiffly. The smell of powder smoke bit at his nostrils and made him choke with nausea.

"Oh!" Sailor whimpered. "Oh, oh!"

Dodd leaned down and caught him. "Come on. We've got to get out of here."

"My paper," said Sailor.

He scrambled across the floor and picked up the ragged scrap of paper. Dodd hauled him to his feet and thrust him toward the door.

Dodd opened the door and looked down the hall. The one-eared bartender was thrusting through it, a sawed-off billiard cue swinging in one hand. Dodd fired twice, shooting high, and the bartender howled and jumped back out of sight.

Taking a firm grip on Sailor, Dodd pulled him along the hall to the exit door. Benny Beef had pointed out. Dodd knocked up the latch with the barrel of his revolver and thrust Sailor through into steamy, squirming darkness, slamming the door violently shut behind them.

"Run!" he ordered.

The mud was slippery over cobblestones under their feet. Dodd slammed into a garbage can and sent it rolling tinnily and stepped on something soft that roared a drunkenly incoherent protest. Sailor was as light as thistledown, and he tried to jerk away now.

"No, you don't!" said Dodd, getting him by the nape of the neck.

THEY ran on in a kind of shuffling lock step, and then blurred lights showed ahead, and Dodd steered Sailor sideways between rows of dusty cars packed into a long, narrow parking lot. Apparently there was no attendant on duty this late, and Dodd pulled up, breathing hard, between two of the cars. He listened intently, but there was no sound of any pursuit from the alley. He sighed and dropped the revolver into his coat pocket.

"You—you lemme go," Sailor whimpered.

"Sit," Dodd ordered, pushing him down on the running board of one of the cars. "Where's that piece of paper, Sailor?"

"I et it."

"What?" said Dodd blankly.

"I swallowed it."

"Well, why?" Dodd demanded.

"'Cause that's what I was supposed to do if anybody tackled me. I woulda done it before, only that Haley grabbed me before I could. I ain't gonna tell you nothin' about Horse Car, not even if you was to kill me."

"So," said Dodd. "You *do* know something about him?"

"I ain't gonna tell you nothin'. He's my friend, and he's nice to me. Go ahead and beat me. I don't care."

"Now listen to me," said Dodd. "I want to help Horse Car. I want to locate him before these wolves around here find him and pull him down. In fact, I have already helped him. I'm the one who got him out of jail. My name is Dodd. Didn't he say anything about that?"

Sailor's eyes were blearily suspicious. "Bail-Bond Dodd?"

"Yes."

"What's the fella's name that works for you?"

"Meekins."

Sailor nodded slowly. "Yeah. That's what Horse Car said. He was right sorry Meekins got shot. He said Meekins was tryin' to help him collect his bet. He's awful scared now, Horse Car is. He says them shots was meant for him—not Meekins."

"They were. What were you supposed to do with that piece of paper he gave you—I mean, besides eat it?"

"Call the number that was on it on the telephone."

"Whose number was it?"

"I dunno."

"What were you supposed to say when somebody answered?"

"Just tell 'em that Mr. Jackson was awful sick and to come down and get him."

"Is he sick?"

"Nope. Just scared."

"Do you remember the number?"

Sailor hesitated warily. "You sure you honest want to help Horse Car? You ain't lyin' to me and foolin' me?"

"Do you think I'd have a gun-fight with Red Tano just for a thrill?" Dodd asked. "Didn't I advance Horse Car five hundred dollars to get out of jail? Doesn't that prove I'm a friend?"

"I guess so," said Sailor, still doubtful. "Well . . . The number was Center 4567. I remember because it was like countin'."

"That sounds like an official number," Dodd said slowly. "Did you call it?"

"Yeah, and I said just like Horse Car told me to and then hung up quick, and then Haley grabbed me."

"Where is Horse Car now?" Dodd asked casually.

SAILOR studied him in silent misery. Dodd said: "You'd better tell me, Sailor. You saw what happened in Red Tano's. Just the thought of that ten thousand makes these boys around here get red in the eye. If I don't help him, someone else will find Horse Car, and that'll be the end of him for sure."

Sailor swallowed. "At 18 Calcutta Street. Number 82—upstairs in back."

"Thanks," said Dodd. "You'd better go a long ways away from here—quick. People are going to be looking for you. Here."

He took Meekins' wallet from his pocket and pulled out the bills Hennessey had collected from Crestwick. He wadded them up and put them in Sailor's grimy hand.

"Gee," said Sailor in an awed whisper.

"Lay off the canned-heat until you get out of town," Dodd advised. "Scram now, Sailor."

Sailor scuttled away, ducking expertly around and between cars, and disappeared

without a trace. After a moment, Dodd walked the length of the parking lot and came out into the shadowy quiet of Crail Street. He went on up to the corner of Water and looked down the block.

There were two police prowler cars and a shiny white ambulance parked at the mouth of the alley into which Benny Beef had led him so confidently. As Dodd watched, two uniformed figures carrying an empty stretcher came slouching disgustedly out of the alley. They heaved the stretcher into the back of the ambulance.

"Hey!" called a policeman who was pushing the crowd along the sidewalk. "Was it a false alarm?"

"Why don't you guys look before you start hangin' on the telephone?" one of the ambulance attendants answered. "Them guys is dead. Call the morgue."

Dodd stood rigid, watching the attendants climb into the front of the ambulance. His eyes were wide and startled behind his glasses. The uniforms the attendants wore were white. So were their shoes. . .

He found that he was staring absently at a sign across the street that spelled out in red neon script the words: *UNCLE LEMUEL'S LOANS*.

Dodd walked across the street and went through a narrow doorway into the incredibly cluttered interior of the pawnshop. Uncle Lemuel, behind the high counter at the rear, was young and sleek and beady-eyed. He wore a pink suit and a pinker shirt and a turquoise necktie.

Dodd nodded. "Hello, Lem. Have you got a few .38 Short revolver cartridges lying around that you don't want?"

"I ain't supposed to sell cartridges or even give 'em away free, Dodd, but right now I got asthma something terrible and I positive got to step out and catch a snort of fresh air. If you looked in the second drawer of this desk while I was gone, could I help it?"

"Thanks," said Dodd, going behind the counter. "Can I use your phone?"

"I ain't stopping you, am I?" asked Uncle Lemuel, strolling elegantly out.

DODD pawed around in the drawer until he located an opened box of cartridges that fitted the stubby revolver. He reloaded it and dropped several more cartridges into his pocket. Sitting down

on Uncle Lemuel's stool, he lifted the telephone and dialed Center 4567.

"Hello," a voice answered at once.

Dodd's head jerked back, and he stared incredulously into the mouthpiece.

"Well," said the voice, "are you gonna talk or ain't you?"

"Hennessy!" Dodd exploded. "Where are you?"

"Well, right where I been all the time. At the Emergency Hospital."

Dodd's lips pursed in a silent whistle, and then after a second he asked: "How come you're answering the telephone?"

"Meekins, that big rat, went and peached on me. He told his nurse—is she gorgeous!—that I wasn't no delivery boy for no florist, so she slapped my face and threw me out of his room. So I come down to the lobby and waited."

"What for?" Dodd asked.

"Well, I ain't gonna give up that easy, Dodd. You should see that nurse. She's wonderful. Pretty soon she's gonna feel sorry she slapped me, I bet, and then I'm gonna quick ask her for a date. So I been waitin' for her to get sorry and chattin' with that sourpuss, Nurse Parr. She is not so bad when you get to know her, Dodd, although she is full of some of the screwiest ideas I ever heard. So she has to go to the rest-room and powder her nose and what-not, and there ain't nobody to relieve her, so I say I'll handle the board at the reception desk for a moment. How am I doin'?"

"Fine," said Dodd. "Listen. You said that Crestwick, the ambulance guy, picked Meekins up. Are you sure he did? Or did he just search Meekins when they got him back to the hospital?"

"I dunno, Dodd."

"Find out. And also find out if Crestwick plays the races."

"He does. I found a *Racing Form* in his pocket when I shook him down. So does that doctor that is fixin' Meekins. He has had three calls from a bookie since I been on the board here."

"O.K.," said Dodd. "I'll see you soon. Keep the home fires burning."

He put the telephone back on its base and went to the front of the store. Uncle Lemuel was lounging in the doorway.

"Where's Calcutta Street, Lem?" Dodd asked.

"Down Water a block this side of the piers. It ain't what you'd call elegant. I was wondering—did I see you tonight, Dodd?"

"No," said Dodd.

"I knew all the time it wasn't you," Lemuel told him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lilybud Pays Off

IN THE old days Calcutta Street was infamously known and cursed on every sea in the world. Crimps roved up and down its roaring length with a bottle of doped whiskey in one pocket and a blackjack in the other. They offered you the whiskey first. If you refused it, you got the blackjack without any more argument. You woke up in a hell-ship with the rats gnawing at your toes.

All that was gone now, with the sailing ships, and even the War hadn't stirred the street out of its aged, evil decay.

Number 18 Calcutta was only a half-block up from the piers, standing gaunt and blackly ancient between the squatter ruins of two abandoned warehouses.

A single bulb burned at the front, and below it the door gaped like a toothless mouth. Dodd went into a narrow hallway. There was a desk at the side, and a yellowish skeleton of a man slept in the swivel chair behind it, tipped far back, with saliva making a glistening line through the stubble on his cheek.

Dodd went softly up the flight of narrow stairs and came out into a long, narrow hallway at the top. There was no one in sight but behind one of the closely spaced doors someone was moaning in a dreary cadence and behind another someone talked in a raving monotone that went on and on without pause for breath or punctuation. Dodd walked down the hall and stopped in front of the door numbered 82. He knocked softly and said in a hoarse murmur: "Horse Car, it's Sailor."

There was no stir, no sound, from behind the door. Dodd tried the greasy knob. It clicked, and he pushed the door back with a squeal of rusty hinges.

Dodd didn't attempt to enter. He stepped back and sideways, revolver balanced in his right hand. The room was

dark. Dodd found a match with his left hand, snapped it alight.

The flame painted a quick, smeared picture of utter barrenness. The room was as narrow as a grave and contained nothing but a shelf-like bunk. Dodd went on in and pulled the knotted string dangling from the unshaded bulb that hung down from the ceiling.

HORSE CAR was lying on the bed. The crusted blanket under him had soaked up most of his blood, but there was a thick little pool of it under the fingers of the hand that dangled lifelessly toward the floor. A thin safety razor blade glistened brightly against the red background. There was a small red nick, no more than half an inch long, under Horse Car's ear, and he had been dead for about an hour.

Dodd began to swear to himself in a soft, bitter whisper. Someway, the whole time, he had felt this was going to happen. Events had been marching inexorably toward this very climax, but it didn't make him feel any better to see it. That betting slip had been Horse Car's death warrant, and after it had become valid he had just been living on borrowed time. The horrible part of it was that he had known it. He had run as fast and far as he could and hidden as deeply, but it hadn't been good enough.

Dodd put the revolver back in his pocket and reached up to turn out the light. There was nothing more he could do. He froze suddenly, then, staring incredulously. Horse Car's left hand, pulled in close against his side, was doubled into a fist, and the edge of a green piece of paper peeped out between the rigid fingers.

Still incredulous, Dodd stepped closer and leaned down. Very gently and slowly, he worked the paper loose from Horse Car's grip. It was crumpled and sweaty, and Dodd unfolded it carefully. He saw the name *Dom Carlos* printed in gold at the top and under it, written in red ink, *Fifty dollars at two hundred to one—Lilybud—Crater Lake Sweep* and the swirling initials *D. C.*

It was Dom Carlos' betting slip. The murderer certainly couldn't have missed it, had he searched at all.

It didn't make any sense at all, and

Dodd had a creeping, uneasy feeling that made the sweat come out cold on his forehead. He went down the hall, trying to look in every direction at once. He went down the stairs, and the yellowish man was still snoring behind the desk.

He found a taxi on Water Street. "Emergency Hospital," he said hoarsely.

"You do look kinda sick, at that," the driver observed.

DODD came into the lobby of the hospital in a hurry. He was scowling, and his eyes were narrowed and hard and puzzled behind the lenses of his glasses. His heels cracked hard on the tile floor, and Nurse Parr, behind the reception desk, looked up with annoyance.

Hennessey was sitting on the bottom step of the stairs. "Hi, Dodd," he greeted. "I was wonderin' if you would get here in time. Listen, I want you should go up and tell that nurse that it's time she should go home and have a rest, and you're gonna give her a police escort—"

"Shut up," said Dodd. "What did you find out about Crestwick?"

"Well, he was the one that picked Meekins up just like he said. If you think maybe he is the baby that blew at Meekins, you are wrong. The neighbors called in not five minutes after the shootin', and Crestwick was here then."

"What about that doctor?"

"I dunno about him. You didn't ask me to find out."

Dodd turned toward the reception desk. "Nurse Parr, do you know if Doctor Burns was here in the hospital when that call on Meekins came in?"

"He was," Nurse Parr snapped. "He was operating. I know, because some bookie person wanted him. He made such a nuisance of himself that I went to see if the doctor was busy finally to get rid of him. Doctor Burns is an excellent physician, but this vicious craze for gambling that has him in its grip will result in his certain ruin. I warned him."

"You see?" said Hennessey. "I told you. She has nutty notions."

Nurse Parr's sallow face flushed slightly. "I'll thank you to keep your mouth shut! I know whereof I speak. The greatest calamity that ever befell this state was when gambling on horse races was legalized. I fought it with all my power. I wrote letters to every member of the legislature but they ignored me."

"You're very bitter," Dodd abserved.

Nurse Parr raised her voice. "I have the right to be! Gambling on horse races broke up my home—ruined my marriage! My husband *loitered* at horse race tracks!"

"Gee," said Hennessey. "Did he beat you, too? I don't see hardly how he could have helped it."

Dodd asked confidentially: "Your hus-

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band's name wasn't Parr, was it?"

"No! I wanted no reminder of him and his evil ways. I gave him his choice—horse races or me. He chose, and then I resumed my own name, but I've never divorced him. His name was Jackson."

Hennessey jumped. "What?"

Dodd said: "Your husband is dead now, Nurse Parr. He was murdered."

"That is of no interest to me," said Nurse Parr spitefully. "He invited it by his gambling and his vicious life. Now I suppose I'll have to pay for his funeral. I'm certain that *he'd* leave no estate."

"I wonder," said Dodd slowly. "Hennessey, you said Horse Car had a dime on him when he was picked up."

"Well, he had two nickels," said Hennessey. "That's a dime, ain't it?"

Dodd nodded. "Two nickels. He used them both—in telephone calls. He called the same number both times—this number. Didn't he, Nurse Parr?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," said Nurse Parr.

"Horse Car *must* have been a little crazy," Dodd said thoughtfully. "He had kept track of you, and he still loved you, even after the permanent brush-off you gave him, and the first thought he had was to share his good luck with you. He called you up and told you all about it. About Dom Carlos and the ten thousand dollars and where and when he was going to get paid off. Only you didn't want to *share* with him, did you? You wanted all of that ten thousand. You waited in the alley and shot at him, but you hit Meekins instead."

DODD was watching Nurse Parr. "You borrowed the revolver from Crestwick or someone else. But you'd never shot one before, I don't suppose, and you missed badly. You hit Meekins, and you smacked him over the head to keep him from seeing who you were. He caught a glimpse of white shoes and what he thought were white trousers. You wear white stockings. They were what he saw."

"That's childish nonsense," she said.

"Horse Car didn't recognize you in the dark," Dodd went on. "He had no idea that *you* would try to kill him. So the poor guy gave you another chance. He didn't

have anyone else to turn to. He thought he could trust you. He had his friend call and say he was sick at 18 Calcutta Street. He knew you'd get the message and understand. Unfortunately for him, he was right. You went down there. This time you didn't trust to a revolver. You've had training as a surgical nurse. You knew just how to nick that artery in Horse Car's neck, and he bled to death because he wouldn't call out or seek help because he didn't want to involve you."

Nurse Parr smiled primly. "Mr. Dodd, I think you must be quite mad—as well as stupid. You know very well that you can't prove one word you've said."

"Here's one thing I *can* prove," said Dodd. "You should have studied that law that legalized betting just a little more closely. You left that betting slip in Horse Car's hand because you wanted it found on him. You thought you'd inherit the ten thousand dollars that way. That's why you mentioned, just now, that you were his wife. You were already starting to lay the foundation of your claim. But that law that legalized betting legalized it at the race track through mutuel machines. It didn't legalize betting with bookies. That's just as illegal as it ever was. A bet like the one Horse Car made with Dom Carlos is an illegal debt, and you can't collect it through an action at law. *You* can't inherit it."

Nurse Parr sat perfectly still and frozen. "You're lying," she whispered.

"Naw, he ain't," said Hennessey. "Do you think that if that there bookie-florist was legitimate he would have give me all them flowers up in Meekins' room for only five bucks?"

Nurse Parr screamed. The sound went on and on endlessly and crazily until it filled the whole lobby, and the cords stood out rigid on Nurse Parr's neck. Her face was a queer dusky purple. And then suddenly she collapsed. Her head banged down on the top of the desk and rolled a little, and her white cap fell off. She made little whimpering sounds.

"Say!" said Hennessey. "That there betting slip! You said she left it on Horse Car! Somebody's liable to steal it! It may be an illegal debt, but Dom Carlos will pay off on it and right now!"

"Is that a fact?" said Dodd blandly.

ORPHAN ICE

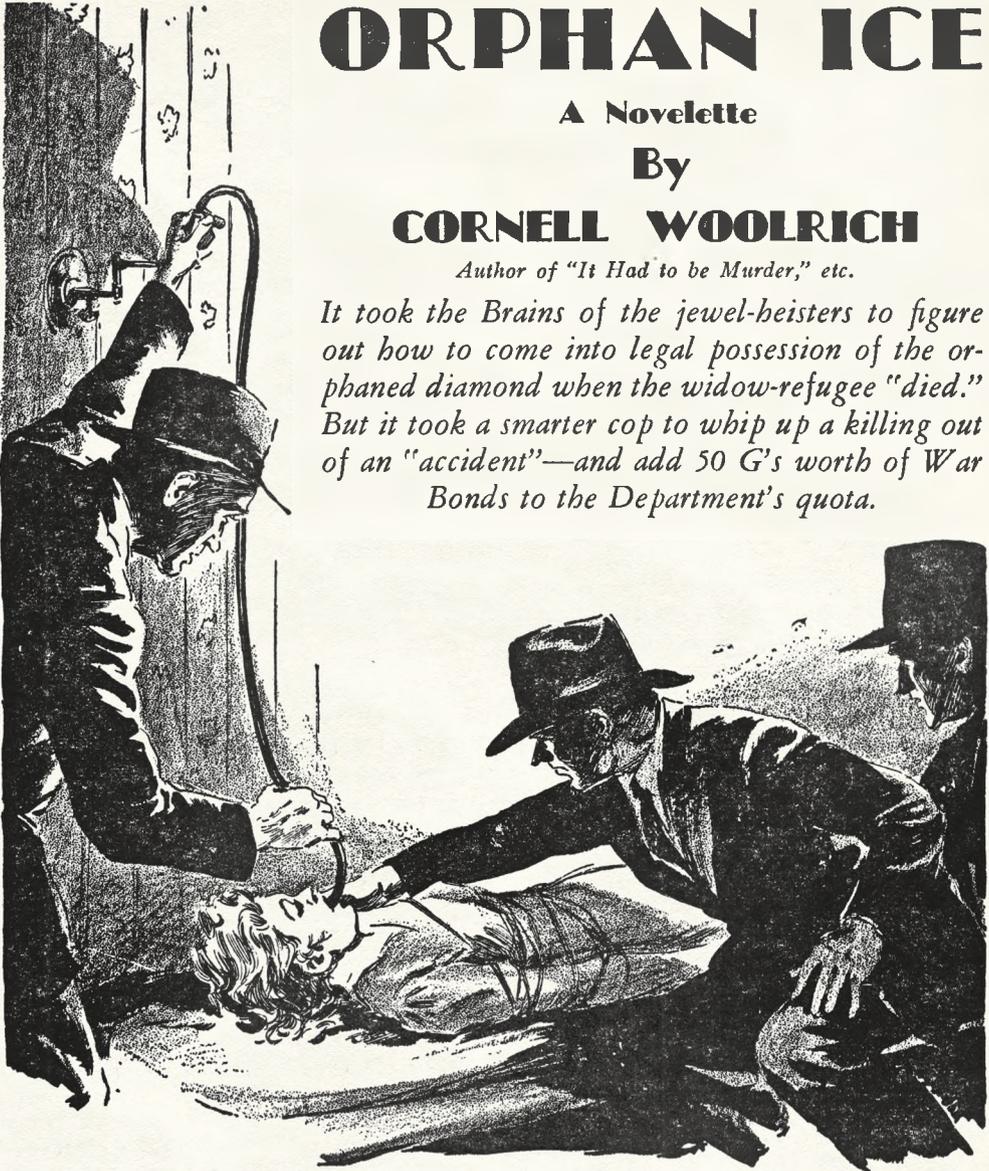
A Novelette

By

CORNELL WOOLRICH

Author of "It Had to be Murder," etc.

It took the Brains of the jewel-heisters to figure out how to come into legal possession of the orphaned diamond when the widow-refugee "died." But it took a smarter cop to whip up a killing out of an "accident"—and add 50 G's worth of War Bonds to the Department's quota.



Reyder inserted the nozzle between her lax lips.

CHAPTER ONE

Plan for Possession

REYDER had a scout or spotter—they called him the Appraiser—who roamed around the various night-spots on the look-out for just such items, and it was he who sent in the first report about it. He called Reyder and the other man one night about ten from a place called the Restaurant Vendome.

"I've got something for you here. Something I thought you might want to take a look at. It's a third-finger solitaire, the biggest thing you've ever seen. A fiver, if I know my karats. Emerald cut."

"How is it surrounded?" Reyder wanted to know, as matter-of-factly as though this were a report from a legitimate purchasing-agent. "Who's with her?"

"She's alone, and about sixty years old. Just made to order, I never saw anything like it." Reyder took a moment or two to

answer, while he considered. The Appraiser went on: "Do you think you fellows would like to come over, or should I go on down the line somewheres else?"

Reyder had learned to rely implicitly on his scout's judgment. "I think we'll be over," he decided. "Hold down a table for us there. And find out all you can in the meantime."

A quarter of an hour later two well-dressed men got out of a taxi at the entrance to the Vendome Restaurant, paid it off and went casually inside to the carpeted foyer. From there, divested of hats and coats and taking their time about it, they entered the main part of the restaurant. There was nothing about them that looked out of place, and they neither stared nor looked furtive nor gave any indication that they weren't as much a part of the clientele as anyone else. That had always been one of Reyder's strictest tenets: your clothes and bearing shouldn't have anything to do with what your—occupation happens to be. Only fools don't look as though they belong wherever it is they are.

It was not a night-club, but a sort of expensive and very conservative supper-restaurant, without music, dancing or any of the other accessories. An aristocratic sort of place, filled with well-dressed, slightly pompous people, many of them in evening clothes, to most of whom the underworld was just something they read about in books. Or would have, only they didn't read that sort of trash.

The two new arrivals made their way to a table at which a third man was sitting alone, strictly minding his own business to all appearances. He was a scholarly-looking man, who gave the impression of someone engaged in scientific research. This was due most likely to the glasses he wore, glasses with magnifying lenses. As a matter of fact, he had to remove them before he could read anything, but they were a considerable aid in focussing and appraising objects such as precious stones from a considerable distance away.

His cohorts joined him at the table with a minimum of commotion, and if their arrival had been noticed at all, it was as promptly forgotten again. It was very well managed for inconspicuousness.

Nothing was said for some time by any

one of them. They had the air of men who are getting the "feel" of a place before they commit themselves even to a stray remark—who would rather make no move at all than make some move that is out of key with their surroundings and accidentally attract attention to themselves.

FINALLY Reyder, who seemed not to have turned his head so much as a quarter of an inch to take in his surroundings since coming into the place, said softly into the cuff-opening upraised beside his face: "Is that her?"

"Her" was a placid, wren-like little woman with graying hair, seated by herself at a small table some distance away. She was attired in all her finery, but somehow conveyed the impression of not being very used to decking herself out like this. She was being served wine from time to time, and there were two glasses of it standing on her table, but only one chair, the one she was on, was drawn up to it. She would touch one glass against the other each time she took a sip. She was obviously unaware of anything going on about her, was lost in some world of her own.

Reyder didn't have to wait for confirmation. A hand that had been hidden below the table-line until now came into sight just then, and there was a distinct flash from it. A flash that was almost a liquid ripple spilling over the back of it.

"Quite some," was all Reyder said.

Neither of the other two men with him said anything. They waited to hear what he would decide.

Finally after a short pause he spoke again. "What's the data to go with it? Did you get any?"

The Appraiser inclined himself slightly forward on his braced elbows to make himself heard better. He didn't seem to be saying anything, or if he was, it was something very desultory and languid. His companions didn't seem to be listening. Reyder was looking vacantly upward at a distant point on the ceiling, with the expression of someone whose mind is a blank. Morse, the other man, was staring down at his own ankle, crossed above the other on the floor. They made a very bored-looking trio.

"So here it is," the Appraiser said.

"She's alone in the world. And when I say alone, I mean alone. Nobody, not even a friend or an acquaintance, to her name. Kolman's the name, and she lives by herself at the Van Zandt Apartments. No maid or anything. Just her and her pet cat. And now even the cat's gone, been missing several weeks, musta strayed away. She and her husband came from the Other Side, see? Were among the first of the refugees a few years ago before the trouble got real bad. Didn't stop going when they got to New York, came on out here to the Middle West.

"Later, the rest of her relatives that stayed behind were wiped out. Not a soul left, not even a fifth cousin. Then her husband died. Now she don't go out any more, all year 'round, just stays put like a hermit. Except just on one certain night a year. She and her husband evidently used to come here to celebrate their wedding anniversaries. So now, just once a year, on her wedding day, she keeps up the custom without him. Puts on all her jewelry, like you see her now, comes in here alone, and celebrates in memory of him, making out like he's sitting there at the table with her. That's what the second glass of wine on the table is for. That's supposed to be him, sitting there behind it. If you'll watch real close, you can even see her talking to him once in a while, real quiet-like."

"And she don't wear the stuff except just once a year?"

"Only just on each wedding anniversary. Nobody'll see a sign of it again until one year from tonight. The manager went over to pay his respects to her, and I got most of the info that way, listening in while she gave him the story of her life. About the cat being gone, and about being alone in the world, and about the ice only seeing daylight once every year. The rest pieced together, from here and there, in ways that I've got. So that's it. Now how d'ya like it?"

REYDER thoughtfully stroked the edge of a fork along the table before committing himself.

They waited for his verdict; he had the final word in all their enterprises.

He yawned, finally. "I think I'd like to take a closer look at it," he said. He rose sluggishly to his feet and made his

way without any undue haste over in the general direction in which the telephone booths were located. The tables were set fairly close together, and he chose a lane that led him past the one at which the lone celebrant sat. In brushing by he managed to graze it so that a glove she had perched on the edge of it fell off.

"Sorry, madam," he murmured politely, and bent down to pick it up for her. Instead of replacing it on the table, however, he held it out toward her herself. She took it with the hand that bore the ring, and for a moment the stone was only inches away from his eyes.

He threaded his way through the rest of the tables, ensconced himself in a phone-booth, deposited a coin, let it cool off for a minute, then hung up so that it came back to him.

He came back by a different way, so that he didn't approach that particular table.

The other two men looked at him expectantly when he had seated himself with them again.

He shook his head slightly.

"No?" they both echoed, disappointed.

"No. Not for us. Couldn't do anything with it."

"But the *size* of it, Rey," the Appraiser protested forlornly.

"And that's just the reason for it. It must be some kind of a family heirloom, that she brought over with her. It's cut in a special way. It would be too easily identifiable. There's a difference between something that's just hot, and something that's a dead give-away, a walking advertisement to the cops. We'd never be able to get it off our hands safely. No fence would touch it for us with a ten-foot pole. It would be more than hot, it would be flaming. And we're not collectors, you know. We don't want it just to keep it, we want the cash for it."

There was a gloomy silence. No further argument was offered. Whatever he said went.

Finally the Appraiser sighed, edged his chair back. Morse did likewise. "Shall we go, then? Nothing to keep us around here any longer—"

"Just a minute," Reyder checked them. "I'm thinking." They drew in close again, waited.

"I'd like to own that stone legitimately—without any risk being attached to it," he went on pensively, after a moment's thought.

The Appraiser gave him a look. "You're talking about us," he remonstrated.

"It's simple enough. I don't know why somebody hasn't thought of it before. Put your heads down a little closer so you'll get this, and don't look over that way." He fumbled in his pocket, took out a letter at random, spread it open. "I'm reading you two a letter, that'll be the excuse for the huddle."

Their heads drew together in a three-leaf clover formation.

"Now. We start off by hijacking it just like any other rock we've ever handled."

"But I thought you said legit—" Morse began.

"I'm doing the telling, will you let me go ahead?" Reyder squelched him disgustedly. "The first thing we do is get rid of the setting, of course, like we do with all our stuff. That's doubly important in this case. Now the second step is, we turn the stone, by itself of course, over to the police."

BOTH his auditors gave an audible gasp.

"Are you kidding? Did you say the police?"

"I said the police. We turn it in at the regular lost and found, preferably at some station-house as far away from where she lives as possible. Turn it in just like any honest finder is supposed to do when they pick up something on the street. You're good at rigging yourself up, Appraiser. You can fix yourself up to look like some shabby guy out of work. It dropped out of its setting and you found it, see? They can't pinch you for that, you're doing the right thing, you're turning it in."

"But hell, she'll only get wind of it, show up there, identify it, and get it back again in no time."

"Naturally," agreed Reyder with perfect equanimity. Then he added: "If she's still alive by that time. Now the third step, of course, is to see that that doesn't happen."

"You mean—" the Appraiser said with bated breath.

Reyder nodded just once, briskly. "I mean." He tilted over one hand in a gesture of self-evidence. "If the one and only legitimate claimant dies before she has a chance to go there and claim it, why it stays with the police. At the end of six months if there is no one to claim it, it reverts to the person who originally found it. That's their own regulation. That's been done over and over again.

"I admit," he went on presently, "it's too much trouble to go through with the average rock. It means a wait, and it means—the other thing." Both his listeners knew what he meant: murder. Their faces gave no sign of compunction. Their blood was up now. "But with this piece it's different. The circumstances make it so. The value of the stone is enough to make it worth the trouble. It's too easily identifiable to be handled in any other way. And finally, it's foolproof, there are no surviving relatives or friends to horn in and spoil things. She and she alone can give the identification that will link it to herself. Once her mouth is closed, it becomes an orphan diamond, a diamond without an owner. No one knows anything about it, except ourselves. No one can even describe it accurately, except ourselves."

He began to fold the dummy letter, put it away.

"Those are the two important things about it," he summed up. "To make sure she never gets to the police alive to claim it. And then after that, to have the patience to wait six months for it, all in good proper order. And always remember, there's this advantage: at the end of those six months it's *legally* ours. There's nothing hot about it, we don't have to hide it. We can sell it on the open market and command our own price, not take the beating that fences always give fellows like us. And you know what diamonds are bringing these days. I can walk up openly with it to Tiffany's or Cartier's, holding it out in the palm of my hand if I feel like it, and nobody can stop me!"

The Appraiser blew out his breath admiringly. "Rey, you're a genius," he said softly.

"She's getting up to go," Morse warned, without raising his eyes, almost as though he could look out through his forehead

with them, straight through skin and all.

Reyder made an unnoticeable gesture with his finger, to keep them where they were. "No hurry, we'll sit here where we are a while longer. We know where she's going, we know where to find her when we're ready, and we know she'll be alone there when we do find her. We'll do this thing right. That way you never go wrong."

CHAPTER TWO

The "Perfect Accident"

THE apartment was quiet save for the strangled rippling of water running into a bathtub. Mrs. Kolman, in bathrobe and slippers, was standing at the bureau putting her jewelry away piece by piece into a worn leather case. The emerald-cut solitaire went in last, on top of everything else, drowning out their feeble twinkles under its Klieg-like brilliance.

She stared down sadly, before closing the lid, but she wasn't seeing the jewelry. "Until next year, Max," she sighed. "Until we celebrate again next year, you and I."

The sound of the backing water interrupted her reverie. She left the case standing there as it was, turned and hurried into the bath to adjust the taps before the receptacle began to overflow. She modulated them slightly, took down a thermometer and dipped it in to test the temperature.

It was while she was standing there scanning it that a faint sound from outside her apartment-door reached her. Faint but familiar, not in any way alarming, and oh so welcome! a sound she had strained her ears many a night in vain trying to hear. A sound she had almost given up hope of ever hearing again. It was the querulous and unmistakable meow of a cat claiming admission to where it belongs. It came a second time, and then there was the added importuning of claws raking at the edge of the door.

"He's back!" Mrs. Kolman murmured, wringing her hands in gratitude. "My Toby! Oh, I knew he would come back sooner or later!"

She padded hastily through the apartment to the well-guarded front door, her hands shook a little with eagerness as she

took down the safety-chain. The chain that always made her feel so secure at nights. The meow had come a third time. She opened the door unthinkingly, her suspicions lulled. She was already automatically bending to the cat's height as she did so. Then she froze, staring at the small furred shape on the threshold before her.

There were two things wrong with it; she saw them one after the other. In one lay simply disappointment. In the other, danger. The more immediate one was that it wasn't Toby. Its coat was different. It was some stray, it wasn't the same cat. And the second one was that it wasn't touching the floor, it wasn't a free agent. It was suspended, paws dangling an inch or two clear of the floor. A human hand cradled its soft furred underside. She could see the fingers of it curving up around the animal's side.

For only a split second she hovered there like that, arched over from the waist, her arrested arm reaching down toward it. A split second that was too long.

She didn't see what happened next, she only felt it. A loose cloth or rag of some kind, like something stirred up by a stray wind, seemed to flap against her averted face, cling there. It was like when you walk against a flying newspaper in a gale and the thing seems to stick to you. She could only see white now. It smelled peculiarly, like an operating-table, although she didn't have time to analyze that.

Death was being very lenient with Mrs. Kolman. It was appearing to her in its least frightening guise. A harmless housecat, that was the form it took. That was her last look at life.

SHE tried to claw the stifling adhesion away, still hardly understanding what it could be. Something was holding her hands down. She could feel herself moving under a propulsion that was not her own, going backwards, losing the carpet-slippers off her feet as a result.

A voice, a man's voice, whispered close to her ringing ears: "Keep the cat out." A door closed guardedly, her own door.

It was getting hard to breathe now, it had to come off, that thing. She strove valiantly to reach it. Her arms would go up only a little way, beyond that they

couldn't seem to rise. She decided to scream. She could hear the scream produced full-tone in her own throat. Then that sodden mass sealing up the point where it should have emerged, soaked it up like a sponge, drained it away to a mere smothered mumble.

She felt lazy now. It didn't really matter, let it stay on, there was no *pain* with it. She wanted to lie down and sleep a little. Her head gave a loose roll over to the side, stayed that way.

The white cloth came off at last, but she wasn't behind it to see any more. It revealed two men on the other side of it. They had just let her down into a sprawled-out position in a chair, one by her feet, the other by her head. The outside door was closed. The apartment was as quiet as before. The only sound was the intermittent gurgle of water, drowning now in its own ascending level.

One of the two tilted his head, identified it, traced it to the bath door, looked in. Then he stepped inside. A faucet ticked and the flow stopped.

He came back. They spoke quietly, like two men who have an undertaking under such complete control there is no need whatever for excitement. "Good thing I heard that in time, before it started running over."

"Here it is here. Right out in full sight. She didn't even finish putting it away yet."

They went over to the case, looked at it. Reyder reached out, and the Klieg-like dazzle came off the top, giving the crumbs and splinters beneath it a chance to blink dimly into view once more.

"Nothing but that," said Reyder firmly. "Leave the rest just as they are." He lowered the lid of the case, began opening and peering into the bureau-drawers one by one. "Here's where it went, in here, in the bottom one. There's a clear space left that just fits it." He carefully inserted the case, spread out a furled-back undergarment that had originally been used to cover it, closed the drawer once more. "That's what she would have done herself, if we hadn't interrupted her when we did. How are they going to tell, then, that she didn't?"

The other man nodded in agreement. Then he glanced over at the recumbent

form, breathing quietly as in deep sleep. "We going to go ahead with the rest of it right now?"

They both knew what was meant.

"We better, as long as we're in here. The important thing is to make sure she don't report its loss to the police, and that's the first thing she'll do if we clear out and let her come to. Without that, and once it's out of its setting, they won't know whose it is. Unless The Appraiser has slipped up something fierce, and I never knew him to do that yet, she has no close connections at all who can trace it to her, identify it just on sight alone."

Morse nodded. Then he asked, "How?" as unconcernedly as though they were discussing a surefire method of getting rid of moths.

REYDER took a moment or two to answer. "If we hadn't come in when we did," he murmured, "and she'd gone ahead with her preparations for the night, just what could have gone wrong, what sort of accident could she have had, that would have—" He broke off short, pronged two fingers toward the open doorway through which the water had been sounding before. "The bath. That's the answer there." He moved toward it.

"You mean hold her head under? The thing to watch out for, though, is the lungs. They can tell by that, can't they, whether—"

"I've got it," Reyder said. "Come here a minute."

He pointed, when his accomplice had joined him in the doorway.

On a small shelf bracketed to the wall, just past the foot of the tub and overlapping it by a fraction of an inch, stood an array of various bath preparations: talcum, bath-crystals. And a small radio, plugged into an outlet just above.

"Oh," nodded Morse, with instant comprehension, "yeah, I see what you mean."

"It could happen to anybody. I'll attend to it. Two of us would only get in each other's way in here. Wait for me by the outside door. And don't touch anything, or smoke."

They went back together. The form in the chair sighed deeply with an imminent return to consciousness, as Reyder gathered her up in both arms. He turned deft-

ly sideways, so the doorway wouldn't block his burden, and stepped into the bathroom with her.

His confederate, waiting by the outer door as ordered, could only command a triangular wedge of it from where he was. There was a small, three-legged bath stool in sight just within the entrance, very little else. Reyder's arms appeared above this, presently, deposited a bathrobe on it, carefully folding and arranging it as meticulously as its owner would have herself. The arms disappeared, and a grotesque shadow swept across the wall for a moment, dipping downward. A shadow composed of two interlocked forms, not one. There was the soft lapping sound of gradual immersion, of something being carefully deposited in a body of water. For a moment nothing more, while the disturbed water stilled again. Someone sighed hollo-ly against tiling.

Then there was a small snap. The click that a radio-dial makes when it is turned on. Reyder came out, advanced almost to where the second man stood waiting, picked up the discarded carpet slippers lying there. "Let's have your flashlight," he said, "so I can see my way coming back." Morse handed it to him and he reentered the death-chamber. He put the slippers down under the stool, as carefully as he had arranged the robe on top of it, even adjusting them so that they stood even, toe to toe and heel to heel. Then he passed from view, went deeper into the enclosure.

A whining hum was becoming audible, increasing in intensity moment by moment. Before it had a chance to warm up to full reception-point, there was a splash from the water, this time a violent one. Every light in the place snuffed out.

Then nothing more, silence. The hum had stopped now. A wan finger of torch-light spoked out from the bath.

Reyder appeared in the doorway, stood looking back for a minute. Then he came on out and joined the other man.

"All over?"

"All over. Just like that, without her ever knowing it. Real humane, too. I'm surprised one of the states don't adopt it legally."

Morse opened the outer door narrowly, peered through, scanning the hallway.

"All clear."

As Reyder came out after him in turn and softly closed the door behind the two of them, he muttered grimly: "Now let them figure this one out!"

HIS name was Cooper, and he didn't claim to be any wizard. He always had an air of helpless bafflement, when he was sent to places like this. He would roam around, in one room, out the other, with a look on his face as though he didn't know what it was all about, didn't know what to do next.

It was noticeable, however, that those detailed to work with him had stopped criticizing or snickering at this quite some time before. Outsiders were the only ones who were still taken in by it, would make the mistake of commenting behind the backs of their hands: "What's the matter with that guy, he don't act like he knows what he's doing at all."

This, of course, was just an accident, freakish but self-evident, this thing of Mrs. Kolman, and he should have cleared right out as soon as the autopsy finding came in. "Death caused by electrical shock, as a result of grounding of current in bathwater." He didn't seem to have sense enough even to do that. Instead he hung around some more, even after that, asking an irrelevant question every once in a while.

"Do women leave hairpins in their hair when they get into a tub, I wonder?"

Nobody seemed to know for sure, him least of all.

"What wave-length was the indicator of the set pointed at?"

"Seventy-nine," somebody answered, with scarcely-concealed impatience.

At one point a jewelry-expert whom he had sent for arrived, and he showed him the contents of the undisturbed case that had been found bedded-down in the drawer. "I'd like a rough estimate of what this stuff is worth."

Several heads were shaken in the background. Since the objects in question had definitely *not* been stolen, had remained untouched, it seemed more than ever a waste of time to bother having them evaluated. That was usually only done with missing articles.

"The case wasn't touched," somebody

objected. "We had to hunt for it ourselves before we came across her place for keeping it."

The expert had brought a glass with him. He sat down where the light was good and passed on the trinkets piece by piece, turning them this way and that under his lens, occasionally doing a bit of polishing with a scrap of chamois. In five or ten minutes he had finished. "There is at the most five thousand dollars worth of jewelry here, at present market prices. The stones are small, and the settings are dingy. You must realize, however, that in ordinary times the worth of the lot would be only half as much again. Twenty-five hundred dollars."

All Cooper said was: "I see. Thanks very much."

The jeweler left.

After he'd gone one of the other men asked Cooper: "What'd you want to have that done for? What good did it do?"

"I don't know exactly," was his characteristically inept answer. "But what harm did it do?"

Finally, when everyone else was ready to leave, someone stood in the doorway and called inside to where he was still lingering doing nothing: "Are you coming? Ain't you going to make out your report?"

"Not right away," he drawled. "I'd like to think about it some more." He came as far as the door, began to toy with the dangling chain-head, causing it to dance up and down on the nail of his thumb. "Funny," he commented, more to himself than to the other man, "if she went to all the trouble of having an extra chain like this put on her door, you'd think she would have laced it up, not left it unfastened like they found it."

"What's there to think about?" his listener demanded. "Don't it look like an accident to you?"

"Yeah," the unfathomable Cooper admitted readily. "In fact that's why I'd like to think about it some more. *It looks too much like an accident* to me. And when a thing looks too much like a thing, that's just when I start suspecting it of being something else."

With which enigmatic remark he closed the door after him carefully and took his leave.

CHAPTER THREE

Lost and Found

HIS honesty created a sensation at the station-house when he walked in with it and calmly dumped it down in front of all of them. It was an outlying precinct-house where nothing much ever happened anyway. The most they got was a strayed kid or a guy who'd mislaid his doorkey and couldn't get into his own house.

He explained with trustful simplicity: "I'm walking along and I feel something under my shoe. You know, where the sole's worn thin. I pick it up to throw it away and I see it shines, kinda. I got my doubts it's real, but just in case it is I thought I better let you guys take charge of it."

They soon disabused him on that score, after it had been passed on to an expert summoned for that purpose. "D'ye know how much it's worth?"

"Couple hundred dollars, maybe?" he ventured, sitting there twirling his hat-brim around in his hands.

"Add a couple of naughts to that and you'd be closer. Anywhere from twenty-five to fifty thousand, just roughly."

He seemed thunderstruck. He opened his mouth and swallowed. Not only that, he almost seemed frightened of it now himself, relieved at having it off his hands. He was only too glad to relinquish it to them, that was obvious. He said his name was Joe Miner, and he gave them the address of the furnished room he lodged at, and he told them what he worked at when he worked, and all the rest of it.

Just before he turned to leave one of them remarked half-jokingly: "No telling, you know, if no one appears to claim it within six months, you might get it back after all. What wouldja say to that?"

"Aw, naw, no chance of that," he protested disclaimingly. "Nobody loses a thing that vallyble without finding out about it pretty quick and reporting it to you fellows right off. Anyways, I wouldn't want it. I ain't a hog, I wouldn't know what to do with it, probably ony get it swiped off me the first thing. Tell you what I wouldn't mind, though," he confided wistfully. "If the real owner maybe would slip me a little something, fifty

bucks reward, like, for picking it up for him. If he shows up, maybe you guys could put in a good word for me, kind of drop the hint."

His candor was refreshing. The cops wagged their heads to one another in approval after he'd gone. "Decent sort of a guy," was the consensus of their opinion. "Too bad there aren't more people around as honest as him."

Items about it appeared in all of the papers. But with very little actual information about the finder outside of his name, and the fact that he'd found it, and the value of what he'd found. He'd been too diffident to tell the newsmen who had been drawn to him as he was coming down the police station steps, with that uncanny faculty of theirs for scenting a good human interest story a mile away, very much about himself. He'd said all his friends would only kid him about it. One of these accounts drifted Cooper's way, in due course. "Bashful sort of a guy," he commented to himself. "Wonder why? Most poor cusses like that enjoy the moment or two of limelight such a thing brings them."

He hadn't made his report out yet. He was still thinking.

He shrugged, tossed the paper aside, finally, and just went ahead thinking, looking as befuddled as ever.

THE three of them were gathered at Reyder's headquarters, waiting in a state of leashed tension, as the deadline slowly inched around the dial of the clock, six months later to the night.

The post card from the police department, addressed to Joe Miner and notifying him of the expiration of the time-limit on lost article number so-and-so, turned in by him, lay on the table before them.

"We ought to frame that," Morse snickered.

"Think I should start out now?" the Appraiser kept saying every few moments, turning his head away from the window-shade behind which he was peering out. He was made up in the guise of Joe Miner, ready for his second and final appearance at the police station.

"Don't be in such a hurry," Reyder calmed him. "Don't spoil it by appearing

over-anxious. A few minutes more ain't going to make any difference, it'll still be there. There's nobody can possibly take it away from us now. *She* ain't going to show up there any more, we all know that. It's *legally* ours now, just waiting for us to go there and get it. That's the point you guys can't seem to get through your heads. The police—get this—the police are just our trustees!" He picked up the post card and flourished it derisively.

The three of them chortled appreciatively.

Reyder, the only outwardly composed one of the three, uncrossed his legs, stood up, put out the cigarette he had been whiling away the time with. "O.K., we may as well be starting. We'll drive over that way slow, Appraiser, and let you out three or four blocks away from the station-house. We'll wait there for you, and as soon as you've got it, you come back, and we'll pick you up again."

Morse threw down the deck of cards he had been endlessly shuffling as an outlet for his nervous energy. "Sometimes I've thought these six months would never be up," he complained.

"You should talk!" snapped the Appraiser. "What about me, having to put on this crummy outfit two or three times a week, show up at that cheesy furnished-room, and sleep in it overnight, just to keep my identity on tap!" They filed out and got in the car.

A short while later, at exactly one minute to eight, they drew up inconspicuously on a quiet side-street two blocks down from the precinct house and killed their lights.

The Appraiser got out and adjusted his seedy attire.

"Now take it from here," Reyder slurred out of the side of his mouth. "And once you've got it, don't hang around, hit it back fast."

THE girl was blond and fragile, she looked as though she hadn't been eating any too regularly of late. She hurried along in the dusk, and there was a frightened air about her, that expressed itself in the slight incline at which she held her head and the defensive bunching of her painfully thin shoulders.

She stopped for a minute under a street-

light, glanced quickly about to make sure she wasn't observed, and fumbled in the shabby purse she carried with her. From this she took a small piece of paper with something penciled on it, and stood studying it. Her lips moved soundlessly, as though she were memorizing something.

Footsteps sounded somewhere along the other side of the street from her, and removed as they were, she quickly stuffed the paper away again and hurried on. A few minutes later and several blocks away she had stopped again, this time beside a lighted store-window, and repeated the process. Again she took out the small scrap, again she pored over it. Again her lips fluctuated in mental repetition. She moved on finally, with another of those wary looks about her. Obviously she was about to undertake or engage in something that filled her with misgivings, if not outright dread.

Over the doorway it said, "Police Department, 69th Precinct," and there was a green lamp on each side of it. She slackened her pace, as if she were about to turn aside and go in. Just then a policeman came down the steps. She seemed to change her mind, or the sight of him seemed to do it for her. She swerved with a suddenness that was almost a jolt, and went on past.

A few door-lengths away she slowed again, looked back tentatively. The policeman was out of sight now, hadn't given her a second thought. As though this emboldened her, she turned and came slowly back again.

She raised her foot, put it to the bottommost step, stood still like that for a moment. She was obviously summoning up her courage. That could be detected in the way she tightened her hold on her handbag. Then she went on up the steps and in.

A moment later she stood before the desk-sergeant.

"Lost and Found, please."

"In there. No, all the way back. See that door there?"

There were two men in it. One at a desk, the other standing talking to him. They both looked up.

Her voice was steady enough, but a little taut. "Is this where you come to put in a claim for something that's been lost?"

"You mean you want to report losing something?"

"No, it's been found and turned in here. I want to claim it."

"What is it you want to claim?"

"A diamond."

He got up, went over to a filing-cabinet. His fingers stopped working through the manila tabs finally, stood still on one. He asked, without turning his head: "When was it lost?"

"October sixth last."

"Whereabouts?"

"Somewhere along the two blocks between Clark and Huston."

He took out one of the file-cards, with data closely written on it, came back to the desk with it.

"About what water would you say this stone was?"

"Five karats."

"What cut—rose, hexagonal, round?"

"It was emerald-cut. By that I mean oblong, flat on top—"

He nodded imperceptibly. She had evidently given all the right answers so far.

"Have you any idea of the value? Have you ever had it appraised?"

"I can't give you its exact value, I've never had it appraised myself. It belonged to my mother, and—well, from what she told me, it must be worth over ten thousand dollars."

"Well over," he said dryly. "What I'm driving at is this. If you realized its valuation, how is it you didn't report losing it at the time? We have no record of your ever having reported its loss to us. Why did you wait until now?"

SHE floundered badly for a moment. "I—well, it's a personal matter. Is it— is it absolutely necessary that I give you my reasons?"

"We think so."

"I had a boy-friend at the time. He used to get into debt, bets and things. He'd already taken several smaller pieces of jewelry from me and raised money on them. I—I didn't want him to get hold of this, so I told him I had nothing more left. Then after I lost it, I was afraid he'd find out I'd lied to him, been holding it out on him, if I reported losing it."

It sounded lame. It showed on their faces. "So you'd rather have lost a stone

worth over ten thousand dollars than risk displeasing your boy-friend?"

"Just because I never reported it doesn't mean it isn't rightfully mine." An expression of grim determination came over her face. "I can prove it is. Look, will this satisfy you that I'm the owner?" She opened her bag, dredged deep down into it. She extracted something wrapped in a crumpled ball of tissue, discarded this, put something down on the desk before him. "There. That's the original setting that it fell out of. I still have it with me. Try the diamond against it, see whether the two fit."

He went to the safe, opened it, searched in an indexed filing-compartment it contained, removed a small manila clasp-envelope. He kept his back to her while he busied himself taking something out and matching it against the small circlet she'd given him. The other man stood beside him looking on. She saw them raise their heads, look at one another, and exchange a nod.

He turned and came back to her, but with the setting bare again.

"Now try the setting on my finger, see whether *that* fits on there," she insisted. She held her finger extended toward him, compelled him to slip it on for himself without any aid from her. It rolled on snugly but easily, all the way to the cleft.

He sat down again. "You've given the correct answers up to a point, and you have the original setting that fits the ring," he admitted. "The only possible hitch would be your failure to report its loss until now, at the very last minute." He turned to the other man, "Think I better get an O.K. on this?"

Before he could hear the answer, he was interrupted by the telephone. All he said was "Yes," three times, with a spaced interval of listening between each one. Then "I see," and then "O.K." Then he hung up, returned to the matter in hand.

He opened the clasp-envelope, spilled something out into his hand. "Is this the diamond you say is yours, and you say you lost?"

Her eyes opened wide, but there was more of first-sight amazement in them at the ripple of watery fire that seemed to lick over his palm than there was of mere recognition. "Yes," she breathed.

They acted as though this was a mere matter of form—as if they expected this answer from anyone who was trying to claim anything.

HE STARTED to fill out a form, looked up at her to ask: "Do you know how close you came to losing it?"

"I—I did lose it," the girl before him faltered uneasily.

"No, I mean losing your legal claim to it. We don't know the exact time you lost it, of course, but we do know the exact time it was turned in here to us. We keep a record of those things. It was turned in here at eight o'clock in the evening, last October sixth. Today is the sixth of April"—he pointed up to the large wall-clock behind her over the door—"and it's now seven fifty-five. If you'd come in here only *five minutes* from now, you would have forfeited your claim to it, it would already have reverted to the man who found it."

"Four minutes," amended the other man, taking a second look.

"You mean—" Something in the thought seemed to terrify her, or at least make her suddenly anxious to be on her way. She glanced at the closed door under the clock, as though half-expecting to see it open at any moment. Then she turned back to him, held out her hand importunately, a hand that was not quite steady in spite of her best efforts. "Won't you give it to me, please, and let me go? It's—it's getting late and I'd like to get home."

He dipped a pen, passed it to her. "Sign here, please. Name and address, both."

She bent over and hastily scratched out, "Vera Evans, 82 Wayne Street," at the bottom of the form. "This won't be given out to—to anyone, will it?" she asked uneasily. "All these reporters out there—"

He blotted it for her with a fresh, snowy-white blotter newly-placed on the desk. Then he passed her the manila envelope containing the diamond. "No, no, that's just for our own information."

She almost snatched it from him. She dumped the stone out into the middle of a spread handkerchief, tied the four ends together, and deposited the lumpy little nugget into the depths of her bag. Her face was pale from prolonged strain as she

turned to make her way out without a word.

"Better hang onto it," the man at the desk suggested kindly. "Don't go losing it again now that you got it back."

She glanced up at the clock as she passed beneath it. The minute hand was two notches short of eight.

As the door closed behind her, they turned and looked at one another. "Something fishy about that, didn't it strike you?"

The man at the desk carefully folded the receipt she had just signed. "She might have been just scared she wasn't going to get it back, lots of them are. After all, it fit the setting she had for it, and the setting fit her finger. That's good enough for me."

The girl was running full-tilt down the front steps by now, dogged by a small but persistent rearguard of reporters.

Just as she flew by a man passed her on his way up them. She jostled him in her hurried passage, and he turned to look after her.

She jumped into a taxi, it struck off into the darkness and was lost to view. A few blocks away her hand dipped into her pocketbook, crumpled something, and flung it away into the gutter beside her. It was the scrap of paper that had occupied so much of her attention on her way to put in her claim just now. On it, had there been anyone to read it, were jotted down the answers she had given to their questions just now, prepared and rehearsed ahead of time.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Orphan Diamond

"**H**ERE he is," Morse muttered, peering ahead into the darkness. "He just turned the corner down there. And is he coming fast! Must be trying to shake somebody off his tail." He reached down and turned on the ignition, to be ready for a quick get-away.

"If there was anybody tailing him he wouldn't come near us at all," Reyder contradicted. "He'd know enough not to."

By that time the hurrying figure was up to the car. He thrust head and shoulders inside at them, and without waiting

to enter it bodily, blurted out: "It's gone! Somebody—somebody's jacked it away from us!"

Reyder reached out and wrung his shoulder in a grip of iron, that showed his external composure must only have been assumed after all.

"Somebody stepped in and swiped it right under our noses! Just minutes before I got there, they told me! Some frail, playing a lone hand—"

"Who?" Reyder said in a guttural voice.

"They wouldn't tell me. I passed one on my way in, just as she was coming out—it musta been her. I couldn't say too much to them, shoot off my mouth that she put one over on them, or they might have tumbled that I knew all along who it belonged to—"

"What was she like?" Reyder said with that same tomb-like intonation.

"A tall skinny blonde. Our sleeves brushed, that's how close we were."

"If she just left ahead of you, and we get a move on, we may still be able to pick her up someplace around the neighborhood," Morse suggested, thin-lipped. "She can't have gotten very far away from here yet."

"And if we don't, here. I got this for you." The Appraiser produced a blotter from the inside pocket of his coat. "A little trick fingerwork got it off the top of his desk for me. There's only one signature on it and it must be hers, the time was too short for anyone else to be in there between her and me."

"Bend down that rear-sight mirror," Reyder ordered. They lingered a moment longer to peer at the blotter in reverse against the glass.

V-e-a E—ns, 82 Wayne St—t

"The last name didn't come out," mourned the Appraiser.

"The last name came out, all right!" Reyder blazed with naked savagery. All the polish had peeled off him now. "The last name is Death! We got the street and number, and that's all we need!"

THE girl was extremely nervous, as though she realized that the faster she got out of there the better. The room she had come back to was a dilapidated one, with rents showing here and there in the

plaster on the walls. It lacked even electricity. A lighted gas-jet flickered wanly on the wall, causing a great shadow to leap up every time the girl moved about. A disconnected rubber tube was slung over it, one end of it still plugged into a little four-legged iron stove nestling within an open bureau drawer. The single window the place possessed was covered over with a patched, threadbare dark-blue shade. She had the decrepit iron bedstead backed up against the door, to impede sudden entry. A small battered satchel stood on the floor, filled to overflowing with her belongings and waiting only to be closed.

She was seated on the edge of the bed, hat and coat already donned ready for departure, but with one shoe off, and the heel pried off that in turn. She was gouging out a small hole in the latter, with the open blade of a pair of scissors.

She fumbled in the bodice of her dress, removed the small nugget of handkerchief containing the diamond, opened it, and tore off a tiny segment with her teeth. This she cupped around the stone, and prodded the smaller pellet it now formed into the crude, splintered trough she had dug. Next, with infinite pains, she fitted the heel back against the upper, so that the four holes in it once more took the shoemaker's nails protruding like prongs from the upper part. A gap remained, and this she closed by tapping the heel lightly but persistently against the floor, and pounding it with the flat of her hand, until the two had been forced tight together again.

She put the shoe on once more, stood up, took a few tentative steps. The heel continued to adhere. Then, with an access

of frenzied haste, as though to make up for the unavoidable delay this had caused her, she closed and picked up the bag, turned down the gas. In the dark she shunted the bed aside, opened the door narrowly, and slipped out into the hall. She trod warily down the dimly-lighted stairs, bag in hand, listening as she went.

She set down her bag for a moment just within the street-door to reconnoiter. She opened the door, sidled cautiously forward until her head was clear of the stone doorway-embasure, and looked up and down the street. It was barren of life, a succession of inscrutable black doorways notching the house-fronts, of narrowing width as they drew away into the distance, until they had become mere slits and then could no longer be seen.

Reassured by the absence of both movement and sound, she reached behind her, picked up the bag, and stepped out more fully this time, striking down off the doorstep with her foremost foot. The second one never came out to join it. Something drew her eyes suddenly to the one place she had not thought of looking until now. To the doorway directly opposite, facing her in a straight line across the way. It was black and impenetrable, and there was nothing there to see. Yet as she watched, it seemed to her that its outline altered a little, as if some of the blackness had withdrawn itself further to the rear. She could sense, rather than see, motion stealthily taking place within that obscurity. Or thought she could.

LUCKILY the door behind her had not yet closed completely, shutting her out. She still had one hand to it, holding

NO FINER DRINK...

for Salesgirl—or Sailor



it off. She began to retreat by inches, holding her gaze steady on that impenetrable niche opposite. Trying to get back inside without giving the appearance of motion.

Without any warning, as though the attempt at retirement had only succeeded in attracting the danger to her all the quicker, the blackness in the immobile doorway became a hurling mass, stretching toward her like rubber, then broke loose into the figure of a man, sprinting straight as an arrow toward her, to stop her before she could get in again.

She gave a strangled sound of dismay, flung the impediment of the bag from her, and floundered back through the door. She got in, but in doing so, was forced to give the door so wide a push that it failed to swing back in time, gave him entry too, by a narrow last-minute margin, behind her. By that time she was already halfway up the stairs, legs going like pistons.

She got to her own recent door, flung it open, slapped it closed after her, turned the key and pushed the bed back in place. Her harried breathing sounded for a minute in the dark, while she waited, listening.

Her recent pursuer out there was shrewd enough not to make any commotion that might have aroused others—pound on the door or fling himself against it. Instead the knob turned cautiously, first one way, then the other, in trial of its resistance. Then nothing more. He was waiting, like a cat outside a mouse-hole. For some reason the whole subdued procedure made her blood run colder than berserk violence would have. She thought she could detect an additional vibration of tread come along the hall, vibration without sound, as though a second one had joined him.

She turned and moved through the darkness. There was the tick of a match against sandpaper, a bead, then a brightening flare, and she had relighted the gas.

As the shadows stripped from the walls, a voice purred softly from behind her in the corner: "Change your mind about going out?"

She flung herself around just in time to meet the hand that fastened itself like a poultice across the lower part of her face, silencing her. She was trundled back-

ward, her hands futilely engaged in trying to claw it off. Behind her she heard the bed jarred aside, the key given a turn. The door opened, then closed again.

Reyder said: "We had you covered every which way. Going out to the street, going up to the roof, even going back to the yard. The only place we couldn't get, was in here with you. And now you've given us that chance yourself. This was the only place you were safe. If you'd stayed in here, you would have lasted an hour or two longer, you little fool."

He motioned, and the Appraiser's mask-like hand dropped from her face. "If you scream, you know what you'll get. Now I've got a question to ask you. Come on, where is it?"

"I don't know what you—"

HE DIDN'T strike her or anything; he lighted a cigarette with cold-blooded precision. Then he said: "Cover up her mouth again, Appraiser, so she doesn't make a lot of noise. We just want the answer, we don't want a lot of howling in here. Got a good grip on her?" He held out the cigarette toward her cheek, close under one eye. She writhed uselessly, then fell limp again in the Appraiser's grip. "Blink your eyes twice when you're ready to answer, that's the only way we can tell," Reyder told her, as quietly as though he were a doctor about to paint iodine on a tiny cut.

The cigarette came in closer. Her eyes shuttered twice. The muffled hand fell away.

"Well?" Reyder demanded.

"I—I gave it to my boy-friend, he was the one put me up to the whole thing. He took it with him, as soon as I got back—"

Reyder shook his head. "Nope," he said as dispassionately as a lie-detector. "We've been watching the place, nobody's left here, nobody's been here with you. As a matter of fact, it might interest you to know we got here *ahead* of you, on your way back from the cops. We let you *in* through our little net, because it was more convenient that way. Now start again."

This time it was she who shook her head. "You can burn me, it won't do any good. It's mine, it belongs to me."

"You're lying and you know it. What d'ye think we are, a pack of dumb cops?"

He turned to his two henchmen. "Hold her still a minute, I'll get it." He slapped brutal hands all up and down her body. "She hasn't got it hidden on her."

"It's not in the bag," Morse said, "she ditched that down at the door."

"It's not around the room," the Appraiser added, "because she was quitting the room." He let go of her, took a case out of his pocket, donned the thick-lensed glasses he used in his work. "Just a minute. I *thought* I saw something on this bed. Little wood-splinters. Look." He showed them a couple, on the flat of one finger. Then as their heads circled in unison: "No, not the floor. She wouldn't lift up the whole floor onto the bed and trim it." He pointed. "One of her kicks."

A moment later Reyder held the jewel, like a piece of frozen sunlight, in the hollow of his hand. The Appraiser was already engaged in refitting the twice-severed heel, back onto the upper.

"Go down and bring up that bag, Morse," said Reyder. "We'll have to unpack for the lady, she isn't going anywhere—she's just going to sleep."

REYDER had seated himself on the only chair the place offered, cocked up one knee, comfortably crossed his arms. "I like these normal occurrences, know what I mean?" he drawled.

"Yeah, but there ain't no bathtub and there ain't no radio in this dump," the Appraiser objected.

"There's always something, if you use your head and look around," Reyder said.

They followed the direction of his eyes. He was gazing at the wing of flame over the gas-jet. A stillborn scream trickled through the seams of the fingers cementing the girl's mouth.

"Walk her over that way between the two of you," Reyder ordered indolently. "Hang onto her tight, now."

As the three backs turned on him, he rose treacherously to full height, rounded and backed off his fist, pounded it down hard on the nape of her neck in a typical rabbit punch. Her legs went dead, and she hung suspended in the middle of the two men.

"Tie her hands and feet now, she'll be coming back in a minute. No, not with

the bedding, they'll look at that when they get here. Use your neckties. Spread her out there on the bed. Now get out that battery-light of yours, Morse, and stand it up so we can use it. I'm going to turn down the gas. Have to, there's only one valve on the damned jigger up there."

The room blacked out, with simply a pale moon against the ceiling. The battery-light was less diffuse than the gas had been. Reyder capped one end of the tube to the wall-jet, plucked the other from the stove in the drawer, and paid it over toward the form on the bed.

"Is it going to reach?" one of them murmured.

"No, not where she's got it, by the door. Bring it over this way, against this wall. That's it, right under it. Now you sit down by her feet, and you sit down by her head." He inserted the nozzle between her lax lips. "Hold her lower jaw firm, so that it stays in. It'll only take a few minutes." He thrust a tiny pellet of rag into each nostril.

Her chest rose and fell. There was a horrid silence, a death-bed sort of silence for a few moments.

"Is it getting her yet?"

"She ain't fighting it, so she must be under already."

"Feel her heart."

"Still going."

"Another minute or two, I guess." Reyder turned from his task of grisly supervision, brought back a scrap of paper from one of the drawers. He drew up a chair, sat down close to the bedside. "I may as well start getting her farewell-note ready. Left-handed, so there won't be anything to trace, and drooling off in the middle, like it always does when the gas gets her. Just enough to show that this boy-friend of hers double-crossed her after putting her up to getting the diamond for him—"

"Don't waste your time, she ain't going to need one," a voice remarked coolly, somewhere close at hand but still unseen. "Better start writing your own."

THE three of them jolted to their feet, snapping their heads every which way about the gloomy interior. Reyder was already drawing, but didn't know where to sight at.

The dark-blue shade screening the win-

dow billowed outward a little, a leg dropped to the floor under it, a second one came down a moment after. It shot up with a terrifying whirr, and revealed first and foremost a gun, and behind that a man whom none of the three had ever seen before. His name happened to be Cooper.

Reyder fired, and it missed, gave the shade-roller overhead a hectic extra turn or two. Then he had fallen down between the chair and bed and was clutching his shoulder.

Cooper came a little further forward, through the smoke of his own shot. "Now do you other two guys want to go out standing up or lying down like him?" Their palms slowly climbed up, shaking as they went. Two more had climbed in from the fire-escape landing in his wake. He turned the key in the door, and another pair showed up from the hall.

The trussed-up girl on the bed, reviving with uncanny suddenness several moments before, had by now wriggled upright, expelled the nozzle from her mouth with a wry grimace, and was being released by one of the headquarters-men.

"You all right?" Cooper asked her anxiously. "You didn't get any of that stuff, did you?"

"Just a whiff in the beginning, not enough to hurt me."

"I had to think fast there for a minute. We got it right over the wire, of course, in the room over this where we were listening in. I had a man out on the fire-escape, covering you with a drawn gun through a hole in the shade, in case it was going to be bullet, knife, or strangulation, but I wasn't expecting gas. I had to send down word fast and have the main key turned off below that controls the gas for the whole house, but at that I was afraid enough might remain in the pipes to—"

He broke off to turn to the men with him. "All right, haul them outside. We've got enough to go to town on them."

He and the girl were the last to leave the room. He and the girl and the diamond. "Well, have you changed your mind yet about trying to get an appointment to the department as a police-woman? Didn't this frighten the idea out of you?"

"No," she smiled. "As a matter of fact, it did frighten me, but only in one way. I'm afraid now that if I do get on the force, none of the assignments I get will be half as exciting as this one was."

"AND this," Cooper said to his superior, "is my report on the Kolman case. It's six months late I know, sir, but I think you'll find it accurate."

His chief scanned through it rapidly, reading aloud under his breath. "Murdered by electrical shock, caused by the immersion of a radio-set in a bathtub filled with water, at the hands of Eugene Reyder, Harry Morse, and Frank Andros, commonly known as the Appraiser. Culprits apprehended and confessions obtained." He set the document aside, nodded in approval. "The results speak for themselves," he told Cooper. "We're all aware of them, of course, and you've turned in a good, competent job. But what interests me chiefly right now is how you arrived at them. There has seldom been a case in which there was less evidence of murder."

"I pieced it together out of a lot of little odds and ends. Each one by itself meant nothing, but added together they finally got me the result which is contained in that paper," Cooper explained.

"At the scene of the crime there was only this: Mrs. Kolman had gone to the trouble of having a safety-chain attached to her door, and yet it was not in place when she was found; the superintendent gained entrance simply with a passkey. She might have absent-mindedly forgotten to string it up that one night, that was all. It *could* happen that way, you know. However, it kept me from making out my report then and there, and closing the case, if nothing else.

"Nothing was missing, but then nobody's known just what she had. I had an estimate made, and the pre-war value of the jewelry we found on the premises was \$2,500. The dial of the radio, when it fell into the water, had been tuned to 79, which is Station WJR.

"So much for that. Next came a rather peculiar incident of a stone of striking value being turned in, all the way over at the other end of the city, but *within twenty-four hours of her death*. That was the

only peculiar part of it at first sight: the short time-lag between the two.

"There were a couple of little incidental touches to that, though. The honest finder seemed a little camera-shy, for one thing. And the second is one that it's going to be difficult for me to explain to you even now. It was not the *closeness* of one precinct to the other that first caused me to tentatively link the two in my mind—it was their remoteness. I admit my mind works in reverse sometimes. When an accident looks too convincingly like an accident, too pat, too perfect, I begin to wonder if it isn't something else. The same way with this. I consulted a map and I discovered that the precinct where this stone was turned in was geographically the *exact* furthest away you could get from the one in which Mrs. Kolman had met her death, and still remain within the metropolitan confines. It was almost as though somebody had taken a yardstick and measured it off.

"The first thing was to try to determine her ownership or not of the stone. She'd come from Europe in the mid-thirties with her husband. I checked with the Customs Bureau in New York, and I found out that she'd declared, and paid duty on, \$52,500 worth of jewelry on entering the country. There was no record of her ever having parted with a piece of jewelry since her arrival here.

"That made sense to me. That coincidence was too glaring to be overlooked: \$52,500 worth on arrival; \$2,500 intact at time of death; a stone worth \$50,000 turns up within the next twenty-four hours at an outlying precinct-house. Logic and cold arithmetic said it was her stone, but there was no way of identifying it as such through the stone itself. She had purchased it in Europe, in a country with which we are now at war.

"I WENT back to the matter of her death, and I was able to make a slight additional dent in it. I checked with Radio Station WJR, and I learned that they habitually go off the air every night at one. And yet at two-thirty o'clock, which was the time of her death as fixed by the medical examiner, she'd been tuned in to a station that wasn't giving out with anything but silence.

"That covers the majority of the odds and ends I told you about. I was convinced the stone was hers, and I was convinced she had been murdered for it. It wasn't difficult to identify this honest finder 'Joe Miner' as a character known as the Appraiser, and through him to get the identity of the other two into focus. And by that time, of course, I'd guessed the rather novel strategy involved: to deliberately make us custodians of the stone until they could come into possession of it openly and unhindered.

"But that wasn't enough. I needed proof, and I didn't have that yet. Well, I figured if somebody suddenly cut in and snatched it away from them—not somebody whom they'd have to watch their step with, like ourselves or some supposedly bona fide relative of Mrs. Kolman's—but a phoney like themselves who had no more right to it than they did, they'd cut loose, pull a second stunt like the first one. Set a thief to catch a thief, you know.

"The rest was simply a matter of enlisting the aid of a girl who's an applicant for appointment to the department—and a fine policewoman she's going to make—and fixing it so she could walk off with it just minutes ahead of them. It would take a smart crook to keep cool and pull his punches under a provocation like that. I had a mold taken of the diamond, and then a setting made to fit that, so it would look more plausible when I sent her in there. I didn't take the personnel of the Lost and Found into my confidence, because those three are sharp-witted and I didn't want them to scent anything remotely resembling a trap when they went in there after her, but I did telephone in while she was being interviewed and sort of smoothed the way for her, vouched for her unofficially, so they wouldn't make too many difficulties. That about covers it."

"It was worth taking six months' time about, at that," his superior agreed. "A murder that could never otherwise have been proven is all neatly tidied up, and three men are facing the chair for it. Who gets the diamond now?"

Cooper hitched his shoulders. "It's an orphan, sure enough. All alone in the world. War Bonds for the department, I guess."

FREEDOM STATION

By
JUDSON P. PHILIPS

Danny Coyle wasn't known as "Lloyd's of New York" for nothing when he laid 10 to 1 odds on the safe arrival of lovely Mrs. Latimer in her husband's home—even though he knew that every Axis agent this side of the Atlantic was sitting in on the game. But just as the cards were stacked against him—with a snatch and a double killing—the fat man proved he could still collect—in his own fashion.





The body of a man came hurtling through the glass roof.

CHAPTER ONE

Odds on Safety

INSPECTOR MORAN, of Homicide, was in a jovial mood.

"I'm afraid," he chuckled, "that Mr. Latimer has very little faith in the metropolitan police."

Latimer tugged at his carefully-waxed white mustache. "It isn't exactly that," he said, embarrassed. He looked around the walls of Coyle's office as if he didn't quite understand how he happened to be there. Hundreds of photographs stared back at him: photographs of fighters, actors, ball players, socialite polo stars, bicycle riders, jockeys, trainers, referees, hockey players, football coaches, radio announcers, and two Supreme Court justices. Then he looked at Coyle.

Coyle weighed two hundred and eighty pounds and he did not often walk them around. For hours at a stretch he sat in his office or behind the flat-topped desk in the board room outside it. In each room his armchair was custom built.

He was almost always engaged in one of two pastimes: eating, or manipulating a deck of cards which he carried in his coat pocket. At first glance his pudgy hands appeared clumsy, but when he began riffling the cards, accordioning them from one hand to the other, that impression changed. The slickest card mechanics in the country crossed themselves devoutly when Coyle's name was mentioned.

On the surface it seemed that Coyle, laying out a game of four-card Canfield on his desk top, was not listening to anything Moran or Latimer had to say. When

he did look up at Latimer his gray eyes had that curious dead-pan squint gamblers get from working under bright lights. They told Latimer exactly nothing. They showed neither sympathy nor interest. But he spoke.

"Why are you here, Mr. Latimer?"

"I think the inspector was trying to reassure me," Latimer said.

Moran chuckled again. He was a gray little man—gray suit, gray hair, gray tie, gray eyes. He wasn't the rubber-hose type of cop, although there were times when he wished he were.

"Mr. Latimer was a little nervy," he said. "We had a couple of hours to kill and I thought you might cheer him up. I'm surprised you don't know who Mr. Latimer is."

Coyle's eyes had gone back to his solitaire. "I know," he said. "His son is Bruce Latimer."

"That's right, Mr. Coyle," Latimer said. He crossed his legs, adjusting perfectly-creased trousers.

Bruce Latimer had been much in the news lately. He was one of those almost mythical heroes of the war. A former correspondent for a news service, he had been trapped in the mountains of Yugoslavia after the German invasion. He was given up for dead when suddenly he reappeared. Protected by Serb guerrilla bands, he was operating a Freedom Station in the Yugoslavia hills—broadcasting news and encouragement to the conquered peoples of Europe. For a year the Nazis had tried ineffectively to trap and silence him. His daily broadcasts were sharp thorns in their sides.

FOR the best part of that year Bruce Latimer's wife had shared the dangerous hide-and-seek with him. Then she had fallen ill, and somehow Latimer had got her to Lisbon where she had secured passage on the Clipper, the first private citizen to be given space on it since the entry of the United States into the war. She was due to arrive in New York in two hours.

"Some minor complications have come up," Moran said. "The Clipper's arriving a day early. Mr. Latimer had planned to meet his daughter-in-law and take her directly to his place in Connecticut. Now he

must stay over in New York for twenty-four hours."

"Must?" said Coyle, moving a black ten to a red jack.

"Under-Secretary Graves of the State Department was to interview Grace when she landed," Latimer said. He sounded worried. "The early arrival of the Clipper has thrown out our schedule. Graves can't get here till tomorrow. So we have to wait."

"And we have been delegated to protect Mrs. Latimer while she's in town," Moran said, grinning. "Mr. Latimer isn't sure we can handle it."

"Protect her?" Coyle looked sharply from one man to the other.

"My dear Mr. Coyle," said Latimer, "the Axis people in this country would give a great deal to get hold of Grace. It would be a way of silencing Bruce, don't you see? I've turned my country place into a fortress: guards I can trust, a high-voltage wire fence. But until I can get her there she's in danger—real danger."

"Interesting," said Coyle, "but why tell me about it?"

Moran's grin broadened. "Mr. Latimer's heard of you, Danny. I thought you'd be willing to lay odds on the chances of our getting Mrs. Latimer safely to Sharon."

A faint twinkle came into Coyle's eyes. "A hundred to one against, I should say." Then the twinkle faded as he saw Latimer stiffen in his chair, his hands gripped tightly together. "You're serious about this?"

"Deadly serious," said Latimer.

It was a famous columnist who had first referred to Danny Coyle as the "Lloyd's of New York." It was said that Coyle would bet on anything in the world, provided he could name the odds. The result was that he was in a sort of delirious insurance business. Theatrical producers bet on the run of their plays; people bet on their chances to survive an operation, on the probable corn crop in Kansas, on horse races, the sex of unborn babies, the outcome of the battle in Russia, elections, football games. One time a housewife had bet with him whether a soufflé would fall in the cooking. Coyle had laid odds it wouldn't and won. He wasn't a bookmaker in the ordinary sense, because most

people who wagered with him were trying to insure themselves against failure or disaster. They really wanted to lose.

"I don't quote odds," Coyle said to Latimer, "unless I'm actually risking something. It's too easy to quote odds that will please the customer. Moran is the best police officer in New York City. I'll say that, Latimer, if it's any comfort."

"I'd give a good deal if I could be sure of Grace's safety for twenty-four hours," Latimer said.

COYLE'S eyes narrowed. His hands were still, suspended over the cards. "I've got fifty thousands dollars that says your daughter-in-law arrives unharmed in Connecticut if you have five thousand to place against it, Mr. Latimer."

"That's a nice compliment," Moran said.

"But there are conditions," said Coyle. "What conditions?" Latimer asked.

Coyle picked up one of the telephones on his desk. "Send Harvard," he said. He hung up, and leaned back in his chair.

Latimer leaned forward. "Let me get this straight. I put up five thousand dollars. If Grace arrives safely in Connecticut tomorrow, you collect. If she doesn't, you pay me fifty thousand."

"That's right," said Coyle. "Naturally I'm assuming you want her to be safe."

"Good God, yes!" said Latimer.

"Then it's a bet," said Coyle. "On three conditions."

The office door opened. Claude Donovan was tall, with the shoulders of a crew man, curly black hair, and blue eyes that were cold until you knew him. A star athlete at Harvard, Donovan had come to New York six years ago to write the great American novel. After one visit to Coyle's, the novel wound up in a bottom bureau drawer and Donovan became Coyle's confidential agent and bodyguard. You could not call Donovan by his unfortunate first name and live. Coyle called him "Harvard" and he was stuck with it.

He waved to Moran as he came in and stood looking questioningly at Latimer. Coyle introduced him, explained the set-up and the proposed bet.

"It doesn't sound so tough," said Donovan.

"You spoke of conditions, Mr. Coyle?" Latimer said.

"Three," said Coyle. He checked them off on the stubby fingers of his right hand. "One, the bet doesn't begin until your daughter-in-law actually arrives and is under Moran's protection."

Latimer nodded agreement.

"Two," Coyle went on, "if your daughter should die of natural causes or as a result of injuries received *before* she steps off the Clipper, it's no bet."

"I should say that was fair enough," Latimer said.

"Finally," said Coyle, "Harvard here will go with you to meet the Clipper and stay with you until Mrs. Latimer is safe at your place in Connecticut. You will agree to take any protective measures he suggests."

Latimer looked at Donovan, who grinned. "It won't be too tough, Mr. Latimer. I'll just want to stick with you."

"I'm satisfied," said Latimer. "Satisfied and somewhat relieved. Who holds the stakes?"

Coyle said: "Harvard, on your way upstairs, have Slide-Rule draw up the terms of the bet." Donovan nodded and went out. "You will write me a check for five thousand dollars, Mr. Latimer. If your daughter-in-law doesn't reach home, you come back here and collect from me. My word is my bond."

"Uh-huh," said Moran as Latimer glanced at him.

"Very well," said Latimer. "If you have a blank check—"

"Certainly," Coyle said.

HALF an hour later Donovan, Moran, and old Mr. Latimer went down to the street where a glittering Packard limousine was drawn up at the curb. The chauffeur, in a trim uniform, was lounging behind the wheel, smoking a cigarette. Somewhat to Donovan's surprise he made no effort to open the car door or to smarten himself up.

Latimer must have noticed his expression because as they settled into the rear seat he spoke apologetically.

"Saunders isn't really my chauffeur, Mr. Donovan. He's one of the guards I hired. Very efficient with an automatic, but I'm afraid he doesn't know much

about the etiquette of chauffeuring," he said and picked up the speaking tube.

"We'll go direct to the plane base, Saunders." Saunders nodded and pulled away from the curb. Latimer went on, still holding the tube. "This gentleman is Mr. Donovan. He's going to stay with us till we get Mrs. Latimer home. We are to follow his instructions."

Donovan saw Saunders' eyes shift up to the rear-vision mirror for an instant. Then Saunders grinned and waved his right arm.

"He doesn't look as though he'd rattle easily," Donovan said.

"I've got five other men, all recommended by the F.B.I., patrolling my place in the country," Latimer said. "I'll be glad when we get there."

Moran seemed to be enjoying himself. His pipe was going and he leaned back against the cushions contentedly. "Well, master mind, what's your plan of campaign?" he asked.

"Well first, if the situation is as touchy as Mr. Latimer says, we should have had a few more men on the job."

Moran pointed with his pipe stem toward the rear window. "Take a look."

Donovan did. A police car was following close at their heels.

"And I've got a half-dozen men already stationed at the hotel."

"Which hotel?"

"The Clevedon," said Latimer. "I've taken a suite there."

"So," said Moran to Donovan, "you and Saunders can pass the time playing gin-rummy."

"Suits me," said Donovan. He glanced at Latimer and saw the old man was nervously fingering the buttons on his coat. "This reunion with your daughter-in-law must be pretty swell for you, sir."

Latimer's smile was wry. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Donovan, this is a rather odd situation. You see, I've never laid eyes on Grace in my life."

"Never laid eyes on her!"

"No," Latimer said. "Bruce met and married her in England a year and a half ago. They haven't been home since. I've never even seen a photograph. Haven't the faintest idea what she's like, except for the one or two letters I had from Bruce before he went to the Balkans. He's very

much in love and his description of her was a sort of cross between Hedy Lamarr and Helen of Troy! I haven't a doubt she's a charming girl, but I really don't know what to expect."

"Well, I'll be damned," said Donovan. "And she's staying with you for the duration?"

"Yes."

DONOVAN had met the Clipper before. Each time he found himself holding his breath as the great flying boat drifted down to the surface of the water. It taxied up to the float and was made fast by the land crew. Several military and naval men, a couple of diplomats, and a girl got out of the plane. News-camera men surged forward.

Donovan stood at the head of the gangway with Mr. Latimer. He found himself holding his breath all over again as Grace Latimer came toward them. Whatever Bruce had said in his letters, it wasn't enough. She was tallish, dark, with the deepest, warmest blue eyes Donovan had ever seen. Her eyes were shadowed with fatigue, but, if anything, the shadows added to her loveliness. She hesitated at the top of the gangway.

"Grace," said Latimer, "I'm Bruce's father."

She looked at the old man, searchingly for a moment, and then she came forward and into his arms.

"I wouldn't mind having her stay with me for the duration," Moran said.

"How about handling the gentlemen of the press?" said Donovan. "I want to get away from here in a hurry."

"O.K.," said Moran, regretfully. "Boy, what a figure!"

Latimer and Grace stepped off the gangway. "My dear, this is Mr. Donovan who has been detailed as a sort of special guard for you."

"Hello," Donovan said. "Smooth trip?"

"I slept almost all the way," Grace Latimer said. Her voice matched her face.

"We'll go straight to the car, if you don't mind," Donovan said.

On the way to the hotel Latimer explained things to Grace, but Donovan doubted whether she heard a word of it. She was looking at the streets of the city,

bright in the late afternoon sun. Once she murmured: "Everything whole! Nothing destroyed!"

Mr. Frederick Lorch, manager of the Clevedon, was waiting. He was sleek and shiny, with a gardenia in the lapel of his morning coat. He was overwhelmed with joy that Mrs. Latimer was to stay with them. He was sure she would be comfortable. He didn't say it, but he looked a little distressed at Moran's entourage. Sergeant Haggerty and Sergeant Teliski, Donovan knew of old. Neither they nor their two companions looked anything like the regular customers in the swank Clevedon's lobby. Mr. Lorch seemed uncomfortably aware of it.

Mr. Lorch personally escorted the Latimers, Donovan, and Moran to the suite on the twenty-sixth floor. As he opened the door for them a heavy-set man got up from one of the living-room chairs, hastily putting out a cigar in the ashtray beside him. He was Benson, another of Moran's men.

"If you don't mind, Mrs. Latimer," Donovan said, "I'd like to have a look through this place before you settle down."

Moran laughed. "What do you think Benson's been doing here?"

"Look, chum," said Donovan, "your boss is the police commissioner, but mine is Coyle. I have to report to him, and I only report what I see for myself."

He made a quick examination of the suite. There were two bedrooms, two baths, and the living-room. There were no doors connecting with any other set of rooms. Closets were empty. There was no enemy waiting here to pounce on Grace Latimer. Donovan rejoined the others.

"Everything's in order," he said.

"Thanks for the O.K.," said Moran.

"It was nothing," Donovan said. "What do your men do now?"

"Benson will stand watch in the hall," Moran said. "The rest will circulate downstairs. If it won't interfere with your plans, Harvard, I'd appreciate it if, before you use the elevator to go to the dining-room or the bar with Mrs. Latimer, you'd telephone down and let Haggerty know you're coming. He'll see that you get an empty elevator. I'm taking it for granted you won't leave the hotel till after Mrs.

Latimer sees her State Department man in the morning."

"Not a chance," said Donovan.

"I'm going to headquarters to clean up some work," Moran concluded. "I'll be back later in the evening, just to see how you're getting along."

"Thanks," Donovan said.

"And don't forget," said Moran, impishly, "the bet's begun."

"I'm not forgetting it for a minute, chum. By the way, Benson, take that cigar butt out with you, will you? People are occupying this place now."

The door closed on Moran, and Donovan was alone in the suite with the Latimers.

CHAPTER TWO

Bodyguard for a Lady

THE living-room windows overlooked Park Avenue. Donovan stood there, watching the traffic which looked pigmy-size from that height. Latimer and his daughter-in-law had gone to their rooms to unpack. Twilight was creeping over the city and lights were popping on everywhere.

Donovan rechecked the situation in his mind. There was no access to the suite except through the little foyer that opened into the living-room. Before anyone could get at Grace Latimer, he would have to pass Haggerty, Teliski, and the others in the lobby. This wouldn't be difficult because they had no idea for whom to watch. After that it got tougher. No one could get to the door without first dealing with Benson in the hallway. Inside was Donovan himself.

The fingers of his right hand loosened the automatic he carried in a holster under his arm. He remembered, too, that both Latimer and Saunders were armed.

He turned as Grace Latimer came into the room. She was wearing a wine-colored house coat that added warmth to her pale face.

"Do you suppose we could have a cocktail, Mr. Donovan?" she asked.

"Of course," he said, going to the phone.

"I think I'd like a martini, very dry, and very, very cold. It's been a long time

since I've had a really cold drink." Her eyes clouded and she stopped.

Donovan ordered a shaker and glasses. He offered Grace a cigarette. As he held a match for her he laughed. "You know, when I heard Mr. Latimer's story about an unknown English girl his son had married, I had a vision of something slightly horse-faced in heavy, serviceable tweeds. You were a very pleasant surprise, Mrs. Latimer, when you came up that gangway."

She sat down in a deep armchair, resting her dark head against the back. Donovan took his eyes away from the graceful line of her throat.

"Do you know what I'd like to do?" she said. "I'd like to put on my one evening dress, which is probably desperately out of style, and have dinner downstairs where there will be people and lights and music."

Donovan frowned. "I don't know," he said.

"There's really no danger, Mr. Donovan—not with the precautions you've taken. You see, no one's going to take a pot shot at me." A faint shiver ran over her. "I wouldn't be very much use to them dead, Mr. Donovan."

Donovan took a deep drag on his cigarette. They had to talk about it after all. "I'm not quite sure I'm clear about what we're protecting you from, Mrs. Latimer."

"There are two things they would like to do to me, Mr. Donovan," Grace Latimer said. She wasn't looking at him. He had the feeling that her deep blue eyes were staring back at some sort of horror that would never fade out of her memory. "They would like to stop my reporting to Mr. Graves tomorrow. But most of all they would like to silence Bruce. Killing me is the last thing in the world that would accomplish that. I think if they could, they would like to take me prisoner, and get me to a short-wave station somewhere to prove to Bruce they had me."

"I see," Donovan said.

"With the protection you've arranged, I don't see how that can be managed. After all, they can't barge into the dining-room and take me by force." She looked up at him, pleading. "For a year, Mr. Donovan, I've lived in mountain camps,

eating crusts of bread and weak soup. I haven't seen any people but ragged, half-starved guerrilla fighters. Lights and music and pretty clothes—that would be very exciting, Mr. Donovan."

DONOVAN crushed out his cigarette and reached for the phone on the center table. He called Coyle.

"Well?" Coyle said, sharply, when he was connected.

Donovan asked his question.

"Why not?" Coyle said. "She's right. She'd be no use to them dead."

"Who is 'them,' Danny?" Donovan asked.

"That's for you to find out," Coyle said, and the receiver at his end clicked into place.

Donovan smiled at Grace. "The green light," he said. "You can get into your glad rags."

She got up quickly from her chair. "You're an angel," she said.

There was a knock on the door and when Donovan opened it Benson stood there with the white-jacketed waiter from the bar. Donovan took the tray from him and put it down beside the phone. He poured a cocktail and went to the door of Grace's room.

"Cocktail coming up," he called to her.

There was no answer. He knocked sharply. "Mrs. Latimer!"

No answer! The effect on Donovan was as if someone had thrown a pitcher of ice water in his face. He wrenched open the door, the cocktail he was carrying spilling over his left hand.

"Mrs. Latimer!"

The door of the bathroom opened, and Grace Latimer looked out. Donovan's breath escaped him in a long sighing sound. "Sorry," he said. "I guess I'm a little jumpy. May I leave this cocktail for you?"

"I'm afraid I didn't hear you," she said. "If you'll just leave it on the dressing table—"

Donovan put the drink down and went back to the living-room drying his hand on his handkerchief. Old Mr. Latimer was there, pouring himself a cocktail. Donovan explained they were to dine downstairs. That they had Coyle's O.K.

There was another knock at the door.

Donovan answered again. This time Benson had two people in tow: a tall, thin, bald man who peered at Donovan through thick-lensed spectacles and behind him a girl in the white uniform of a trained nurse.

"This is Dr. Berger, the house physician," Benson said. "He says Latimer sent for him."

Latimer came up behind Donovan. "That's right, Mr. Donovan. I arranged for it before we went to meet the Clipper. I knew Grace had been ill. I thought perhaps she might need to see Dr. Berger."

Dr. Berger moistened his thin, pale lips. "This is my nurse, Miss O'Dowd. Possibly Mrs. Latimer might care for a massage or rubdown?" Miss O'Dowd was a cheerful-looking Irish girl.

"I'm afraid your services aren't needed, Doctor," Latimer said pleasantly. "We are to be allowed to have dinner in the main dining-room and the prospect seems to have worked miracles on my daughter-in-law. But I appreciate your coming up."

"That's quite all right," said Dr. Berger. "If you do need me, just telephone my office in the main lobby."

Donovan and Latimer had a cocktail and a dividend and then Donovan phoned the lobby and got Haggerty. He asked Haggerty to speak to the headwaiter for a table that wouldn't be conspicuous yet so located that Grace could see the dance floor and the music and to send up an elevator in fifteen minutes.

DONOVAN was not an expert in women's styles, but he was certain, when Grace Latimer joined them, that she couldn't have been lovelier. Afterward he described the dress to Coyle as "some sort of green, shimmery stuff, cut like that in front, with a full skirt, gold slippers, some sort of gold bangles in her ears."

She did a little pirouette. "How do you like my 1940 model, gentlemen?"

"It is entirely charming, my dear," said Latimer. He offered her his arm in a courtly gesture.

They went out into the hall. Benson was on the job. He was talking with Saunders, the chauffeur—or bodyguard. Saunders eyed Grace appreciatively. "Just

coming up for orders," he said to Donovan.

"Had your dinner?" Donovan asked. Saunders nodded. "In that case I suggest you stay on tap inside the suite till we get back."

"O.K.," Saunders said, taking the key from Donovan.

An elevator waited for them. Haggerty stood behind the operator. He tipped his hat awkwardly as they got in and were whisked without stop to the main floor. Teliski and another man were standing on either side of the elevator door. Latimer took Grace toward the dining-room, while Donovan hesitated to have a word with Haggerty.

"I'm keepin' my boys on the doors," Haggerty said. "I'll be right outside the dinin'-room myself. O.K.?"

"Right," Donovan said. The headwaiter, lacquered and suave, was bowing to Grace.

"I am Paul, madam," he said. "I have picked out a table I am sure will please you. And I have taken the liberty of ordering your dinner. We would like the pleasure of serving you something quite special."

The table was near the edge of the dance floor, but not too close to the orchestra. The ceiling over the dance floor was of frosted glass, set with subdued colored lights.

Paul brought more martinis and a tray of hors d'oeuvre. And then the orchestra started a soft Viennese waltz. Couples filtered out onto the floor. Donovan looked at Grace.

"I'm not an expert," he said. "But if you'd risk it?"

"I'd love it."

They both stood up. Latimer, too, rose and pulled out Grace's chair.

It was at that precise moment that the glass roof over the dance floor shattered into a thousand pieces. A grotesque object came hurtling through a jagged rent in the glass to land with sickening impact on the polished floor. It was the body of a man.

Bedlam broke. Waiters and diners swept forward as if drawn by a powerful vacuum. Women screamed. Instinctively Donovan stepped toward the edge of the dance floor. Latimer was at his elbow.

"It's a suicide," somebody said. "Must have jumped out a window on the court." By some miracle no one had been hit, but the flying glass had cut several people.

Then Haggerty was in the middle of the floor, taking charge. The suave Paul was with him, with presence of mind to cover the broken body with a tablecloth.

Donovan turned back to Grace Latimer. There was nothing he could do to help.

But Grace Latimer wasn't there!

CHAPTER THREE

The Lady Vanishes

FOR a matter of seconds Donovan's mind refused to accept Grace's disappearance as a fact. He had turned, expecting to discover that she had come with him into the circle of colored light. But she hadn't.

Their table was a good twenty yards from the door. It didn't seem possible that she could have got out of sight, unless, quite voluntarily, she had sprinted for it.

"Where's Grace?" It was Latimer, his fingers closing suddenly over Donovan's arm.

Donovan glanced at him without speaking. The look on his face must have been enough, for the old man's legs seemed to buckle and he reached out to the back of a chair for support. Donovan shouldered his way through the crowd onto the dance floor. He took Haggerty by the shoulder and spun him around.

"She's gone!" he said, and didn't recognize the sound of his own voice.

Haggerty stared stupidly. "Mrs. Latimer? Gone? She was right with you! You were just going to dance!" But he didn't need to be retold. He also saw that Donovan wasn't kidding.

The confusion in the dining-room had increased. Diners were trying to get out of the room. Other people crowded in from the lobby and the bar, shoving against the tide. Women's voices were hysterical.

"Follow me off tackle!" Donovan said. He rammed a path to the door, Haggerty directly behind him. Haggerty looked white and a little frightened.

"This'll cost Moran his job if anythin's

happened to her," he said miserably.

"All of us!" Donovan said. But he wasn't thinking of jobs. He was thinking of those deep blue eyes, looking back at some never-to-be-forgotten horror. And now it had caught up with her again.

Donovan's usual reactions in a crisis were of the split-second variety. Ordinarily he knew what to do. But when he reached the lobby, searching with a last flicker of hope for Grace, he felt lost. She wasn't there, and the place itself had emptied of people, all converging on the dining-room—bellboys, clerks, even the shiny Mr. Lorch.

Haggerty had disappeared. He was checking with his men on the doors. He came back after a moment, his face dripping with sweat.

"She didn't go out," he said.

"Positive?"

"Yep."

"What about the service entrances?"

"They're covered too," Haggerty said.

"I'll check."

Then Donovan had a last upsurge of hope. Perhaps Grace had been frightened by the crash in the dining-room. Her nerves, in spite of her cool front, must be worn thin. Maybe she'd made tracks for her rooms without waiting for Donovan or her father-in-law. After all, to her they were both strangers. Instinct might have driven her to take care of herself.

Donovan raced for the inside telephones and called the suite on the twenty-sixth floor. At the third ring, Saunders answered.

"Donovan here. Has Mrs. Latimer come back upstairs to her room?"

"No," said Saunders, and Donovan's shoulders sagged. "What's wrong?"

"Plenty," said Donovan. "Better get downstairs and bring Benson with you. There was an accident in the dining-room. Mrs. Latimer's gone."

"How long ago?"

HOW long? Donovan glanced foolishly at his wristwatch. He hadn't noticed the time. It seemed hours ago that the orchestra had started to play the waltz and he had said, "I'm not an expert, but if you'd risk it?" He steadied himself. It couldn't have been over five min-

utes or so. And he told Saunders that. "She might not have had time to get here yet," Saunders said. "Hold the wire a minute."

Donovan held on. He turned to look over the lobby and realized he could see the elevators from where he was standing. There were four of them. One stood at the floor level, the lights in the car extinguished. Another, the door open, was waiting for passengers, the operator craning his neck to see into the dining-room. The indicators over the other two cars showed that one was going up and the other coming down. The needle on the up-car rose to 19, 20, 21—stopped there. Then it started down. Not Grace. The second car reached the main floor and several people got out.

"Nothing doing," Saunders said over the phone.

"Benson on the job?"

"Sure. He's gone down to the elevators, but there's no sign of her. Why would she leave you, Donovan, without saying where she was going?"

"She wouldn't," said Donovan, grimly. It had been childish even to hope that was what had happened.

Haggerty's lack of imagination was serving him in good stead. Having assured himself that Grace hadn't left the hotel, he gave orders to block the exits till Moran arrived. The colossal proportions of the job of holding seven or eight hundred people would have frightened a less stolid person.

The inevitable happened. Word spread like a forest fire that no one was to be allowed to leave, and instantly everyone had a pressing engagement. Haggerty stood his ground, a flat-footed Horatius. His meager force of men was reinforced by uniformed cops from prowling cars. Something like panic was in evidence in the lobby. Haggerty chewed on an unlit cigar and was immovable.

Donovan went to find Mr. Latimer. The old man had gotten as far as the dining-room door. There, he was leaning against the wall, watching the confusion.

"No luck?" he asked, his voice shaken.

Donovan shook his head.

"I don't understand it!" Latimer said. "I don't understand it. She was right there—only a few feet away from us. I

had just pulled out her chair for her when that poor devil fell through the roof. If someone approached her, why didn't she call to us?"

"Everybody was yelling at the top of their lungs," Donovan said bitterly. "Maybe she did and we didn't hear her."

Latimer lifted a blue-veined hand to his eyes. "Could she have left of her own free will?"

"I thought of that. I phoned the suite. She isn't there."

"Maybe she saw someone she knew—someone who frightened her."

"But why run from us?" Donovan said. "We were armed, and here to protect her!"

"What about the policeman who was stationed here at the dining-room door?"

Poor Haggerty. That, Donovan knew, was going to be Moran's first savage question. Why had Haggerty left his post? If he hadn't, Grace couldn't possibly have been spirited away. Haggerty had acted on an irresistible policeman's impulse. There was trouble and he had headed for it. And through that tiny loophole, left open only for a minute or so at most, Grace had gone.

Donovan thought it was hours before Moran came. It was actually less than fifteen minutes. When Donovan saw him push his way through one of the side doors he went to meet him.

THE little gray inspector's eyes were blazing as they lit on Donovan. "So you muffed it!" he said. "Do you know what this means?"

"I've thought of everything including your shield!" Donovan said. The inner rage he had been sitting on himself began to boil. "Suppose you find out what happened before you start looking for a goat!"

"Take it easy," Moran said. "Let's get out of this madhouse where we can talk. Where's the manager's office?"

"Over there." Donovan beckoned to Latimer to join them.

Mr. Lorch, the manager, arrived in the office at the same time with Moran. Donovan, and Latimer. Mr. Lorch and his gardenia were both wilted. He was wringing his slender, womanish hands.

"You've got to do something, Inspec-

tor!" he wailed. "We're going to be sued from hell-to-breakfast! You can't shut people in like cattle in a pen! You can't interfere—"

"I have!" Moran shouted. "Now, Donovan, tell me what went wrong."

Donovan gave him all the details. Moran's gray eyes, unblinking and unwavering, were fixed on Donovan.

"Where was Haggerty?" he demanded sharply.

Donovan sighed. "When this bird fell through the roof, Haggerty made for the dance floor."

"Damn him!" said Moran. He glanced at Mr. Lorch. "Haggerty! Get him!"

Mr. Lorch's jaw dropped. Then he said primly: "You can't order me around like a common—"

"Get him!" Moran said, so savagely that Lorch's color faded to a pale green. He went out in a hurry.

"How long were you in the dining-room before the crash?" Moran asked Donovan.

"Five—ten minutes," said Donovan. "Time enough for Paul to get us a round of martinis and a tray of hors d'oeuvre. Then the music started and—"

"Had you looked at the tables around you? Was there anyone suspicious?"

"I had looked—carefully," Donovan said.

"And you and Mr. Latimer went to the dance floor. How long were your backs turned on Mrs. Latimer?"

"A minute or so—not more," said Donovan. He looked at Latimer for confirmation. "Perhaps not that much."

Moran rubbed his chin with the back of his hand. "It beats me how she got away so quickly without attracting attention, particularly if she was being forced to leave."

"If you'd seen the hullabaloo in the dining-room, you'd understand why no one might have noticed. But it was quick. Damned quick."

Then an angry gleam came into Moran's eyes as Haggerty shuffled into the office, followed by Mr. Lorch. Haggerty's square jaw was set hard.

"I know what you're goin' to ask me, Chief," he said. "I pulled a boner, but I thought I was doin' right."

"Famous last words!" said Moran.

"Well, what did you think you were doing that was right?"

"Donovan and Mr. Latimer and the girl sat down at the table, see? I was in the doorway, watchin'. Everythin' was quiet. They had cocktails and then the music started. I see Donovan and Mrs. Latimer get up to dance. I—I had a cigar. I thought it would be all right to smoke it, but I didn't have a match. I stepped inside to one of the tables to get one. I suppose I had my eyes off 'em twenty seconds. But it was in that twenty seconds this guy come divin' through the roof."

"Go ahead," Moran said grimly.

"I didn't know what was up at first. Everybody was screamin' and yellin', and there was dust blowin' in from the roof. I couldn't see through it, but I knew Donovan and Mrs. Latimer had gone out on that dance floor. At least, I thought they had. I made a beeline for it, thinkin' somethin' might have happened to her. So help me, Inspector, I wouldn't of moved an inch if I hadn't thought she and Donovan were out on the floor."

MORAN was silent for a moment. Then he reached out and patted Haggerty's shoulder. "O.K.," he said quietly. "It's a bad break, but O.K." He turned to Lorch.

"Who's the guy who took the dive?" he asked.

"They won't let us move him, Inspector!" Lorch chattered. "He's lying out there in the middle of the floor. Everybody's left the dining-room! Our entire dinner trade is gone! Do you know what that means in dollars and cents?"

"If you don't stop jabbering and answer my question," Moran threatened, "you'll lose more than your trade. Who was the suicide?"

Lorch wet his lips. "His name was Lewis—Ray Lewis. He had room 1406. That's all I know about him. He wasn't one of our regular clientele."

"Let's have a look in the dining-room," Moran said.

Donovan and Latimer followed him. There was a crowd around the dining-room door but inside the place was deserted, except for waiters huddled together in the corners, and the elegant

Paul talking with Saunders and Benson near the bandstand.

Benson saluted. Moran lifted the tablecloth from Ray Lewis's body, took a quick look, and replaced it. The corner of his mouth twitched. Benson handed him a packet of papers, a wallet.

"I took these off him, Inspector," he said.

Moran glanced through them, made a wry face. "He was to be inducted into the Army tomorrow," he said. "Couldn't take it. Here's a note—says he hopes his folks will forgive him."

"A distressing affair," said Paul, in his suave, headwaiter's voice.

"He certainly picked a swell moment to finish himself," Moran said. He looked around. Glass still sprinkled the floor and the tablecloths fluttered in the spring wind. "Where were you sitting, Donovan?"

Donovan pointed out the table, and showed the inspector the spot on the edge of the dance floor to which he and Latimer had gone when the crash came.

"There are only two ways out of this place that I can see," said Moran. "The main door and the kitchen. She'd have had to cross the dance floor to get to the kitchen."

"She didn't," said Donovan, positively.

Paul backed him up. "There are fifty waiters and helpers and chefs in and out of the kitchen, Inspector. I've questioned them."

"You didn't see anything yourself?" Moran asked.

Paul shrugged. "My first impulse was to hurry to the center of trouble. I saw nothing."

Saunders interrupted. "What's that. A coatroom?"

There was a door, about ten feet from the table where Donovan and the Latimers had been sitting, leading into a darkened room.

"Yes. But we only use it for overflow. It was not in use tonight."

"Any way out of it besides the door we see?" Moran asked.

"Yes," Paul said. "There is a door at the back. It opens into the lobby."

Moran headed for the coatroom. He found the light switch. There was nothing in the room but several long iron poles,

on which were coat hangers, and one straight chair for the attendant. Moran crossed to the rear door and opened it. He came face to face with the angry crowd in the lobby, and shut it quickly. As Moran started back toward the others, Saunders bent down and picked up something from the floor. It was a gold earring of the pendant type. Donovan's lips tightened.

"Looks like Mrs. Latimer's," Saunders said.

"It is," Donovan said.

MORAN sighed. "At last something makes sense," he said. "She was taken this way, and out directly in front of the elevators. That's why no one noticed."

"Does it make you feel better to know it?" Donovan asked.

Moran glared at him. Then he looked at Lewis's body on the dance floor. "God, why did that little twerp have to jump when he did?" He looked back at Donovan. "We're going to have to search every room in this blasted hotel. It's going to take time—hours. Have you reported to Coyle?"

"No," said Donovan.

"It's got to be done," Moran said. "I'd like to hear what he has to say. Let's call him from Lorch's office."

It was a moment Donovan had been dreading. He had hoped, before reporting to Coyle, that there would be something in the way of evidence to pass along. He dialed the number, got Coyle's place, and was finally switched onto the phone in Coyle's private office.

"Well?" Coyle said.

"Danny? Harvard here. Look, Danny, I'm afraid things have gone sour."

"They got her?" Coyle's voice was emotionless.

"Yes. It was the damndest piece of luck. We're positive she's still in the hotel, but—"

"Tell me from the beginning," Coyle cut in.

Donovan told him. He listed the precautions they'd taken. He traced their movements from the time they'd left the suite upstairs until Lewis came plunging through the glass roof. There was no sound from the other end except Coyle's

slow, somewhat labored breathing. Donovan could visualize him, sitting in his massive armchair, his gray eyes opaque and cold. Finally he spoke.

"Your back wasn't turned for more than a minute or so?"

"That's right. It was the damndest piece of luck that Lewis chose that moment to settle *his* problem."

"I doubt it," Coyle said.

"Doubt what, Danny?"

"I doubt it was luck," said Coyle. "Put Moran on."

Donovan handed the phone to the inspector. He could still hear Coyle's sharp, incisive voice through the receiver. "You're slipping, Moran," Coyle said. "Don't you recognize a phoney when you see it?"

"What's phoney?" Moran demanded.

"Lewis. He was murdered, of course."

Moran flared. "Now look, wise guy, you're sitting on your fanny twenty blocks away trying to tell me this guy—"

"I tell you he was murdered," said Coyle, imperturbably. "It's too slick, Moran. The timing was too perfect. It's a motheaten principle of all card tricks, sleight-of-hand, magic. Distract attention from what you're really doing with something elaborate in another direction. That abduction couldn't have been managed in nothing flat unless they'd been prepared for the diversion. So it wasn't luck."

"The guy wrote a suicide note! I've got it here in my pocket."

"Quite a few people know how to write," said Coyle. "Can you prove it's his writing?"

"No, but—"

"You want evidence," said Coyle. "If you're not too late, you'll find it in Lewis's room."

"But, Danny, listen. I —"

Then Moran swore, slowly and with artistry. The buzz of the dial-tone was coming over the wire. Coyle had hung up.

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder Goes Double

OLD Mr. Latimer, still looking badly shaken, stared at Moran in disbelief. "You mean Mr. Coyle suggests

that poor fellow was thrown out the window deliberately—just to draw our attention away from Grace?"

"That's what he suggests!" said Moran. It wasn't the first time Coyle had cut him off that way on the phone, but it always burned him.

"It's preposterous!" said Mr. Lorch. "A murder, here at the Clevedon!"

"But the horrible brutality of it!" Latimer protested.

Donovan was kicking himself for not having seen the light from the very start. He had worked for Coyle long enough to be able to think along Coyle's lines. The thing *had* been too slick, much too slick. Only perfect timing and perfect groundwork would have made it possible.

"We're supposed to be dealing with enemy agents," he said to Latimer. "In their book, human life is about the cheapest commodity on the market. That's one of the things we're fighting to change."

"Just hold your horses, all of you," Moran said. "I'm not accepting this cockeyed theory of Coyle's till I've got something more than his imagination to back it with. Benson!"

"Yes, sir."

"Get the men organized and search every room in this hotel."

"Yes, sir," said Benson, without blinking.

"But there are over a thousand rooms!" That was Mr. Lorch. "It will take you hours! Do you mean to hold all our guests till you've finished?"

"I do. You'd better start thinking up ways to entertain them."

Lorch moaned. "But what can I do! I can't use the dining-room!"

"That's your problem," Moran said, "until the medical examiner and the homicide squad have finished with Lewis. Then we'll move him. Get going, Benson."

Benson got. Donovan smiled at the inspector. "Homicide squad? So you aren't going for Danny's 'cockeyed theory,' eh?"

"Like most of them, it'll probably turn out to be right," said Moran, sourly. He changed the subject. "It might be a smart thing, Mr. Latimer, if you'd go back to your suite. Saunders, you go along with him."

Saunders nodded.

"But I can't just sit doing nothing!" Latimer said.

"I'll do a little crystal-gazing myself," Moran said. "These people are going to want to get Mrs. Latimer out of the hotel. They'll probably try to bring pressure on us to call off our dogs. I think they'll try to bring that pressure through you. It would be a good idea if you were somewhere you could be reached on the phone."

"They'll never call from inside the hotel," Saunders said. "We'd have 'em sewed up."

"Uh-huh," Moran said. "So they've undoubtedly got plenty of pals on the outside. Keep them talking if they do contact you, Mr. Latimer. It'll give us a chance to trace the number."

"I'll do my best," said Latimer.

"You," said Moran to Lorch. "Get the key to 1406."

"You want me to take you to Lewis's room?"

"Nobody else, sweetheart," said Moran. "Mush."

MR. LORCH, armed with the key to 1406, unlocked the door. He handled the key as if it were hot. The door opened inward, and Moran stopped on the threshold, with Donovan peering over his shoulder.

"Holy smoke!" said Moran in an awed voice.

The room was a shambles. The first thing Donovan saw was a splash of blood against the white window casing. The second thing he noticed was that *the window was closed!*

Moran saw it too. "Who's been in here since Lewis fell?" he asked Lorch.

"Why—why, no one," said Lorch, who evidently saw nothing. "I gave strict orders that until the police—"

One straight-backed chair had been smashed to kindling wood. The mattress was bare and half off the springs. Donovan thought he could read the signs. Lewis had been lying on his bed, reading. Someone had come into the room and dragged him off the bed. The unfortunate Lewis had grabbed the bedding to save himself and it had been pulled to the floor. The bedside table was overturned, but by some freak the telephone had fallen with-

out disengaging the receiver or else the murderer had replaced it before the switchboard downstairs could answer.

There wasn't any question at all that it *was* murder. Even Mr. Lorch, who missed the conclusive point, was reluctantly aware of that.

"Why did it have to be here?" he kept repeating to himself.

Lewis's suitcase, a battered gladstone, had been opened and all his belongings tossed around the room. If there had ever been any letters or papers in his handwriting, they were gone.

Moran stood motionless in the center of the holocaust for a moment or two, absently filling his pipe. "There are a number of cheering things about this, Harvard," he said, at length.

"One look at this room and you didn't need Danny's tip, huh?"

"The snatch worked like a greased pig," said the inspector, unsmiling. "When Lewis fell through the roof everyone reacted just the way they expected. You and Latimer were drawn away from Mrs. Latimer. Haggerty deserted his post. They whisked her away from you. Every detail of the plan is perfect up to there. But this room tells me that something went wrong after that."

"It tells me," said Donovan, "that they didn't care whether you discovered, later, that Lewis had been murdered."

"Smart boy," said Moran. "They knew we'd concentrate everything on finding Mrs. Latimer. We'd look in Lewis's pockets and find the suicide note, but it'd be quite a while before we got to check his room. By the time we did, the way they had it planned, it wouldn't matter that we diagnosed it as murder."

"Why not?" Donovan said.

"Because they intended to have Mrs. Latimer safely *out of the hotel! Safely out of our reach for good!* Time was more important to Lewis's murderer than having the suicide hold up indefinitely. He had to get away too."

"So?"

"So their plan cracked up there," Moran said. "They made a sucker out of Haggerty once, but not twice. He didn't stay rattled. They haven't been able to get Mrs. Latimer out of the hotel."

"But we've known that all along!"

"Don't be dumb," said Moran. "They worked on a Swiss-watch timetable up to the moment Mrs. Latimer was removed from the dining-room. A perfect blitz! But they didn't get her away, so they're no longer operating on the basis of that plan. They're improvising. That means we're fighting them on an even footing from here in. I like that better. Much better!" He swung around to face Lorch, who looked as though the sight of blood had thoroughly unhorsed him. "Well, Mr. Lorch?"

"Well, what?" said Lorch. "I—I don't see how you're so sure. Maybe—"

"Who shut the window?" Moran asked. "Not Lewis after he'd jumped. I suppose there are a million passkeys to this room?"

Lorch made an effort to collect himself. "Of course the regular maid has one, and the bath maid, and the housekeeper, and there are extra keys at the desk. I—"

"Getting in was no problem," said Moran, gloomily. "We'll have to check, but it probably won't get us anywhere."

DONOVAN had gone to the window. "Mr. Lewis put up quite a battle before he was polished off," he said pointing to the sill and then to the bloodstains. "Yeah," said Moran. "And there's another thing. How did they happen to pick Lewis for the fall guy?"

"That's a bad pun, Moran!"

"Nuts," said Moran. "The fact that Lewis had his call from the Army was known to them. It was mentioned in the suicide note they wrote."

"He probably made friends with somebody in the bar," Donovan said.

Their conversation was cut short by the sound of running feet along the corridor. It was Benson, badly out of breath.

"Inspector!" He stopped in the doorway to give the room a blank stare.

"Well, what is it, man? Have you got a lead to Mrs. Latimer?"

"No," said Benson, slowly, "but we've added to our collection of stiff!"

"How?"

"We found another dead guy," Benson said. "In the linen closet on the fifth floor. He's been dead quite a while."

"Damn it, who is it?" Moran demanded.

"Dunno. But somebody didn't like him. He was strangled with the cord from a vacuum cleaner."

Outside the linen closet on the fifth floor stood a couple of detectives and one of the desk clerks. The clerk looked as if he was going to be sick any minute.

Moran pushed past them. Hidden by the open closet door, Dr. Berger, the house physician, was just rising from examining the body of an elderly man. His expression was one of scientific interest. He glanced at the inspector through his thick-lensed spectacles.

"It's unquestionably murder," he said calmly.

The body lay on its back, knees drawn up. The congested face and swollen tongue did not make a pretty picture. Moran turned sharply to the detectives in the hall.

"You mean he was lying right here?"

The detectives looked unhappy. "Fraid not, sir. He was stuffed in the back of the closet, well out of sight. We thought there might still be some life in him, so we moved him."

"How long has he been dead?" Moran asked Dr. Berger.

"I'm not as expert at such things as your medical examiner will be, Inspector. But, roughly, from twelve to fourteen hours."

"Who is he?" Moran looked at the pallid clerk.

"I—I'm not sure, sir. But I—I think he's the man in 511. Name of John Smith."

"John Smith!" Moran snorted. He bent down and turned back the dead man's coat. "John Smith!" The tailor's label had been ripped from the pocket. Moran found no wallet, no letters, no handkerchief with monogram. "Laundry marks are our only bet," Moran muttered. He straightened up. "Benson! Have Mr. Latimer take a look at the body. He might just possibly recognize John Smith or have seen him before."

The light from the unshaded bulb in the closet glittered against Dr. Berger's spectacles.

"You connect this death with the Latimer affair, Inspector?" he said.

"Your guess is as good as mine," said Moran.

THE facts about the alleged John Smith were not fruitful. Two of the desk clerks positively identified him as a man who had taken one of the less expensive rooms with bath on the fifth floor about seven o'clock on the morning of this day. It was an unusual time for a check-in, but they'd assumed he'd arrived from out of town. They had his signature, "John Smith, Chicago," on the register.

They said he was about sixty, they thought. He had gone directly to his room and nobody remembered having seen him again. The girl at the switchboard had no telephone calls to report. There would have been no occasion for the maid to go to his room until the next morning, unless she was sent for.

"He didn't have time to do much sending," Moran said. "According to Berger and the medical examiner he must have been killed no later than eight thirty A. M. He's spent the day in that linen closet."

A phone call to Latimer's suite brought the word that neither Latimer nor Saunders had ever seen the dead man before.

As a last resort Mr. John Smith's fingerprints were rushed to local headquarters and a copy telephoto'd to the F.B.I. in Washington.

Meanwhile time passed. Moran's men were methodically and efficiently searching every room, every closet, every inch of space in the hotel. Shortly after midnight, without any further light on either murder or the abduction, Moran and Donovan went up to Latimer's suite.

The old man sat in an armchair, his eyes half closed, his skin gray with fatigue. Saunders was pacing up and down by the window. The ashtrays around the room showed he had been chain smoking.

"No phone calls?" Moran asked.

"None," said Saunders. "You got any new dope?"

Moran shook his head. "In about an hour we'll have picked this place clean."

"There must have been a slip," Latimer said wearily. "They must have gotten her out of the hotel."

"No," said Moran, stubbornly. "She's here—somewhere. She has to be!"

It wasn't much comfort, despite the positiveness of Moran's voice. Latimer

shifted restlessly about in his chair.

"I haven't been able to do much but think in the last few hours, Inspector," he said. "I've even considered a theory that may sound fantastic to you, but—"

"I'll listen to anything!" Moran said.

The old man pressed his fingertips against his eyelids for a moment. "There's one thing that's been bothering me," he said. "The smoothness, the speed, with which this was engineered. It seems almost impossible that a person who was prepared to struggle could have been so easily removed."

Moran scowled. "I don't get it."

"And again—it's one thing to hide a person who has to be forcibly restrained and another to hide someone who is willing to be hid."

"Mr. Latimer!" Donovan said. "Do you realize what you're saying?"

"I do," said Latimer. "I'm saying that what strikes us as a difficult problem would not be difficult at all if—if Grace were cooperating with the people we believe abducted her."

"Cooperating!" Saunders looked as though he thought the old man had lost his mind. "Why in the name of God should she do that?"

LATIMER moistened his lips. "Gentlemen, I told you this afternoon on the way to the Clipper that I had never seen Grace before, not even a photograph. I am not suggesting that my son's wife is in cahoots with Nazi agents. I *am* suggesting that perhaps the woman we met this afternoon *is not my son's wife!*"

Moran, Donovan, and Saunders just stared at him.

"Grace had to travel from somewhere in Yugoslavia to Portugal," Latimer said. "Suppose something happened to her en route? Suppose this other woman took her papers? It could be that this whole thing has been a scheme to get an efficient Nazi agent into this country."

Moran opened his mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. "But why this elaborate machinery for escape?"

"She couldn't have slipped away with you and Mr. Donovan watching her."

"But she didn't have to escape now,"

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Donovan protested. "She could have managed it later—from your Connecticut place. You had no reason to suspect her, till this happened?"

"No," said Latimer, "but there was a reason why she had to get away at once, if my theory is correct. Graves, the man from the State Department, who is to see her in the morning, *knows the real Grace!* He was on the embassy staff in London. That's why he was picked to meet her here."

"Holy smoke!" said Moran.

"Don't forget," said Latimer, "it was she who insisted on having dinner in the dining-room."

"It fits!" said Moran. He sounded stunned. "It fits perfectly."

"Of course her friends were here to help her," Latimer concluded.

The heavy silence that followed was interrupted by a thunderous knock at the door. Saunders opened it. A massive figure blocked the entire entryway. It was Coyle.

He lumbered into the room. As the doorway was vacated it was seen that Haggerty was behind the gambler.

"Well, gentlemen!" said Coyle, and sank, somewhat breathless, into an arm-chair. "I met Haggerty in the hall. He tells me his search is complete and the lady is still missing."

Haggerty nodded confirmation to Moran. "She just ain't anywhere, Inspector," he said.

"That's that," said Moran. "By George, Mr. Latimer, I begin to go for your theory. She's playing hide-and-seek with us."

"What theory? Who's playing hide-and-seek?" Coyle asked.

"You can go home and sleep easy, Danny," Moran said. "It looks like the bet's off. Mrs. Latimer never got here." He outlined Latimer's case.

Coyle listened, his eyes hooded, expressionless. When Moran had finished, he stirred his huge bulk in the chair. "Rubbish!" he said.

Moran's voice grated with impatience. "Just like that, you don't go for it, eh?"

"Just like that," said Coyle. "You can put your mind at rest, Latimer. There's no doubt it was your daughter-in-law who arrived on the Clipper."

"That's great," said Moran. "So what? She isn't in the hotel. We've covered every inch of it. Yet she didn't leave. I suppose you've got ideas where she's being held."

"Yes," said Coyle placidly. "I hate to step in at the last minute and take the applause, Moran. You've done the groundwork. It's been efficient, excellent."

Moran's blood pressure rose. "Are you trying to tell me—"

"I don't like to take advantage of you, Moran," Coyle said, "but would you like to make a little bet, even money, that I can't produce Mrs. Latimer, safe and sound, in—say, thirty minutes?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Coyle Collects

MORAN was both frustrated and tired. "Why wait thirty minutes!" he snapped. "Oh, I'll take your bet. A week's pay, even money. But why stall, if you know where she is?"

Coyle was fundamentally a showman, and for a minute that side of his character had got the best of him. Donovan had seen it happen before. But now, as Coyle heaved himself up out of his chair, the good-humored amusement had gone from his eyes and they were cold as two dimes. He dropped a huge paw on Moran's shoulder.

"Sorry," he said. "I was showing off. It's no bet, Moran. It's no bet because I can't lose. But there's just a little reconnoitering left to do before we put our hands on Mrs. Latimer." He looked around at the others, and then his eyes rested on Donovan. "What time did you get here from the Clipper landing?"

"Just before six," Donovan said.

"You all went to the desk and registered?"

"I had registered in advance, Mr. Coyle," Latimer said. "We came straight upstairs."

"Then?" Coyle never used two words where one would do.

"Benson was here," Donovan said.

"But before Mrs. Latimer came into the suite, I went over it myself from one end to the other."

"Good," said Coyle.

"Mr. Latimer went into his bedroom, there on the left. Mrs. Latimer went into the other one. I stayed here, smoking, and trying to figure things. Mrs. Latimer came back and asked if we couldn't have a cocktail. I ordered a shaker of martinis from the bar."

"Then?"

"Mrs. Latimer and I sat here, talking. She said she'd like to go downstairs for dinner."

"She suggested that herself?" Coyle asked.

"Yes. I rang you, as you may remember. You said it was O.K. Mrs. Latimer went to dress. Then the bellhop arrived with the cocktails."

"You were alone?"

"Yes. I poured a cocktail for Mrs. Latimer and took it to her room. When I got back Mr. Latimer had come from his bedroom. We had a drink together. I told him our plans. I called Haggerty to fix us up with a table."

Coyle frowned. "You haven't missed anything, Harvard? Think!"

"I haven't missed anything," Donovan said. "While we were waiting for Mrs. Latimer, Dr. Berger, the house physician, and his nurse came to the suite."

"Ah!" said Coyle, softly.

"Mr. Latimer had arranged for their call. But we had no use for them. Mr. Latimer said we were dining downstairs and Grace—Mrs. Latimer—was feeling O.K."

"Splendid," said Coyle. "Then you went to dinner?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to look at the dining-room," Coyle said. He moved to the door, with all the others trailing him. In the foyer he paused to speak to Moran.

"Somewhere in the city—I'd have thought in this hotel, but you'd have found him—" he said, "is another man who is either being held prisoner or has been murdered. Don't be surprised when he turns up."

MORAN'S jaw dropped. He and Donovan exchanged glances. They realized that no one had told Coyle about 'John Smith.'

"How did you know?" Moran said. Coyle's mouth was a thin slit. "You

mean that you've already found him?"

"A man named John Smith was murdered here in the hotel some time early this morning. The name's obviously a phoney. We haven't been able to identify him yet." The inspector gave the details.

Coyle looked grim. "These rats have run up quite a score for themselves," he said.

"You got a hunch who Smith is?"

"I can make a good guess," Coyle said.

"For God's sake, Mr. Coyle," Latimer broke in, "if you know where Grace is, aren't we wasting time?"

"Everything in its proper place, Mr. Latimer." That was all he would say till they reached the lobby. There, instead of going to the dining-room, he went to the desk, Moran, Donovan, Latimer, and Saunders following him. The frazzled Mr. Lorch was summoned from his office.

"I want a list of your registrations for the day," said Coyle, "with the times people checked in."

Lorch was too done in to protest to anyone about anything. He went to his office and came back with the registration cards. Coyle thumbed through them, tossed two of them down on the desk. One was "John Smith's," showing that he had checked in at seven. The other was Latimer's, with a check-in at ten. Coyle turned to the old man.

"Mr. Latimer, did anyone know you planned to take a suite here?"

"Why, yes. Saunders and the other guards at my place. As soon as I got in I phoned Inspector Moran. I had been told he was to be responsible for Grace's safety."

"That's right," Moran said. "I came over about noon. We discussed our plans and after lunch we came to your place to kill a couple of hours."

"There was plenty of time for them to set up their machinery here, if that's what you're getting at," Donovan said.

Coyle just looked at him, and then started for the dining-room.

Mr. Lorch had done quite a job under the circumstances. A tarpaulin had been thrown over the broken glass roof. New lights had been strung up, and the dance floor cleared. Guests of the hotel had made the best of their enforced detention, and the place was crowded. The orchestra

was playing a conga as Coyle and his troop stopped in the doorway. Quickly Paul was beside them with a little bow.

"You don't need to disturb anyone," Coyle said. "But will you point out the table at which Mrs. Latimer was sitting when the crash occurred?"

"Certainly," Paul said. He indicated a table at which two young couples were now seated. "There has been a slight re-arrangement of things to accommodate this crowd, sir."

"Show me how they were before."

Paul obligingly drew a rough diagram on the back of a menu. Coyle studied it for a moment and then glanced at Donovan. Donovan nodded. The diagram was accurate.

"That's all," Coyle said. He stepped nearer Moran and jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. "Arrest the headwaiter," he said.

"For Pete's sake, Danny!" Moran said.

"Have one of your men take him to Latimer's suite. We'll talk to him later." Coyle walked away from Moran toward the bar.

Shaking his head, Moran signaled Haggerty in the lobby. Then he too made for the bar.

THERE were three white-coated bartenders working behind the long strip of polished mahogany. Coyle beckoned the head man.

"How long has this shift been on?" he asked.

"Since six o'clock, sir."

"Do you deal with room service from this bar?"

"Yes, sir. That is, we prepare the drinks. The orders are brought to us from the bell captain."

"You make out a check for each order?"

"Yes, sir. The boy who delivers the drinks brings back the check, either signed, or with the money. At the end of our shift we turn them over with our cash box to the main office."

"Can you tell from the slips which bell-boy delivered each order?"

"Oh, yes, sir. His number goes on the check."

"Good. I want to locate the boy who took a shaker of martinis to suite 26C

shortly after six o'clock this evening."

"That's easy, sir." The bartender got a pile of restaurant checks from beside the cash register. He returned to Coyle. "Boy Number 17, sir."

"Moran," Coyle said, "find that boy and have him brought to Latimer's rooms."

Moran had gone too far to backtrack. "O.K.," he said.

"Wait," Coyle said. "Mrs. Latimer may need medical attention. Better have Dr. Berger and his nurse, if she's still on duty." Then he faced about to the bartender. "A double brandy with a raw egg in it," he said and he sounded quite cheerful again. "Join me in something, gentlemen?"

Coyle seemed to have them all mesmerized. They each had a drink. They stood in a little circle around him.

"Have you studied this chart?" Coyle asked. He took the diagram Paul had made from his pocket. "There were just three tables, in that area, from which Mrs. Latimer could have been removed swiftly through the coatroom. And Mrs. Latimer sat on one of them. Accident? There have been no accidents."

"But one!" said Moran. "Haggerty didn't rattle. They couldn't get her out of the hotel."

"They never meant to," said Coyle and sipped his brandy. When Moran remained silent he went on. "One of your men did fail, Moran. His failure was excusable. It was even lucky. But he *did* make a slip."

"Who?" Moran asked.

"Benson."

"Benson?"

"He left his post," Coyle said.

Moran's exasperation returned. "Benson did *not* leave his post! He was stationed on the twenty-sixth floor outside Latimer's suite. Nothing happened there."

"Didn't it?" said Coyle, looking over the rim of his glass.

THE next move took place so quickly Donovan was almost caught off guard—almost, but not quite. The glass in Coyle's hand shot straight at Saunders' face. The fat man's fist followed it, cracking against Saunders' jaw.

"Harvard!" Coyle said.

Saunders had gone down on his back, but even as he fell his gun came out of its shoulder holster. Donovan kicked it out of his hand, fifteen feet away across the rubber-tiled floor. He yanked Saunders up and fastened an armlock on him.

"Put the handcuffs on him, Moran," Coyle said. "You'll be wanting him for murder."

Moran locked Saunders' hands behind his back. "So he's the rat who threw poor Lewis out the window."

"No," said Coyle, "he handled Smith. Let's go upstairs, Moran. It's time we put an end to this business."

Upstairs they found a gathering waiting for them. Haggerty had rounded up Dr. Berger and Miss O'Dowd. Paul was there, smoldering. And Benson had produced a redhaired bellboy with a bad case of jitters. Instant protests were silenced by the sight of Saunders in handcuffs, a little trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth where Coyle had hit him.

"You! Benson!" Moran said. The detective came forward. "Coyle says you left your post here tonight."

Benson looked bewildered. "But I didn't, Inspector!"

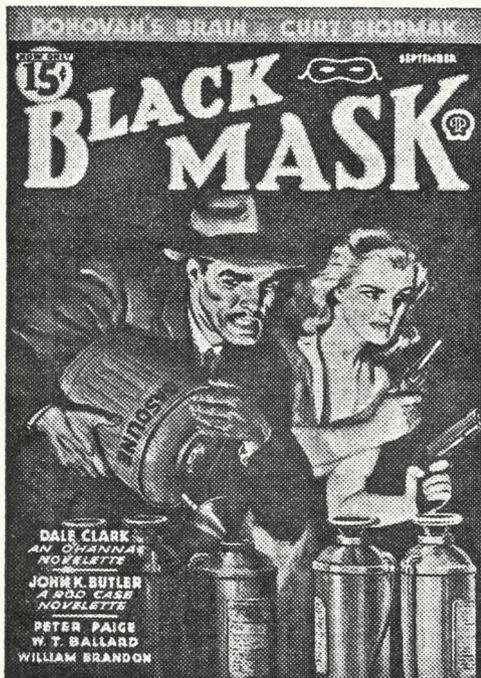
"Take it easy," Coyle said. "What about *after* Mrs. Latimer went down to dinner?"

"Oh!" Benson said. "Sure. I left for a few minutes. There wasn't anything to watch. Mrs. Latimer was in the dining-room and Saunders was—" He looked at Saunders and faltered.

"It was the bellboy, wasn't it?" Coyle asked.

"Why, yes, sir," Benson said. "He came along with a tray he'd collected—some bottles of liquor and some sandwiches. I'd talked to him when he brought the cocktails up earlier. He asked me if I wanted a drink. I said not on duty, but I could go for a sandwich. I'd missed my supper. He said he'd get in trouble if anyone saw him, so we went into a serving pantry at the end of the hall. I must have been there about five minutes."

"That's all," said Coyle. "That's what I meant. You were lucky, Benson. If you hadn't gone, you might not be here to tell us about it."



It wasn't so much what Patrick Cory did to Donovan's brain as what the brain did to Cory—and to his wife—and to his assistant, Doctor Schratt. The whole ghastly business began, appropriately enough, on Friday the 13th. That was the day the Mexican organ grinder passed through Washington Junction with the tubercular Capuchin. Cory bought the flea-ridden monk even after the beast had bitten him. Ten months later he realized what a madman he'd been ever to make the purchase. Schratt called it *invading God's own hemisphere* and he was probably right. CURT SIODMAK has edited Cory's diary—the whole grisly sequence—and given it the title—

DONOVAN'S BRAIN

You can read it in *Black Mask* and decide for yourself whether or not Schratt was correct in his assertion.

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HE CROSSED over and sat down wearily in the biggest armchair. He looked at Moran. "I think there were two plans for abducting Mrs. Latimer. One was to be used if she dined here in the suite. The other, if she dined downstairs. Here it is.

"Paul, this bellboy, Dr. Berger, and Miss O'Dowd each played a part in the scheme. Paul had to plant you at the right table. The bellboy had to get rid of Benson for a few minutes. Dr. Berger, who had access to all the passkeys in the place, took care of Lewis. He knew what to do when he was told you were dining downstairs."

"That's an outrageous lie!" Berger said. "You can't prove it. You—" Coyle's stare was so forbidding the doctor was suddenly quiet.

"It was Miss O'Dowd," Coyle said, "who did the abduction from the dining-room. I don't know whether she forced Mrs. Latimer by some jiu-jitsu hold, or whether she persuaded her she was in danger. In any event, she got her in an empty elevator. She brought her to this floor. Benson was eating sandwiches. And she took Mrs. Latimer—to her own room!"

"What!" Moran shouted.

"Have you searched this suite, Moran? You said you'd searched everywhere. What you meant was you'd searched everywhere she could possibly be. Her own room was not one of the places you considered possible. Not with Benson and Saunders guarding it."

Moran made a dive for Grace Latimer's bedroom. Donovan was at his heels, old man Latimer behind him. The room was empty. Moran looked in the bathroom. Donovan wrenched open the closet door.

"Moran!"

Grace Latimer lay on the floor of the closet. She was unconscious.

"Drugged!" Moran said. "Here, help me lift her onto the bed."

Coyle stood in the doorway, confronting Donovan, Moran, and Latimer. "She had to be here," he said. "It was the only way it could be done. Saunders let Miss O'Dowd and Mrs. Latimer into the suite. I suspect Miss O'Dowd used a hypodermic, with Saunders doing the strong-arm job of holding her."

Moran acted dazed. "But Danny, you said downstairs that Saunders had killed this John Smith. I simply don't get it."

"Don't you, Moran?" Coyle's voice was steely. "Haven't you guessed that this gentleman, who calls himself George Latimer, is no more Bruce Latimer's father than I am! Harvard!"

Donovan collared Latimer as he reached for his gun.

"There's your master mind, Moran," Coyle said. "The Nazi rat who paid the bills and gave the orders. John Smith, of course, was the real Latimer."

THE prisoners had been taken away. A doctor from outside had seen Grace Latimer and announced that in a few hours she would be herself. Coyle, Moran, and Donovan were in the living-room, waiting for her to regain consciousness.

"Nazis have a passion for organization," Coyle said. "They handled this thing like the invasion of a country. They had their paid agents already on the ground—right here in the hotel. And once Mrs. Latimer was in the suite, all they had to do was sit tight till you'd completed your search and failed to find her. It was a thousand to one you'd never look in her own room."

"And 'Smith'?"

"When you put the heat on them at headquarters, Moran," Coyle said, "you'll find out how they got the real Latimer to come to the Clevedon. But I'll lay odds they telephoned him in the country, just before he was about to leave for New York, and represented themselves as being either the State Department man or you, Inspector. They told him to go to the Clevedon and to register under a false name to keep off reporters."

"Like shooting fish in a barrel," Donovan said.

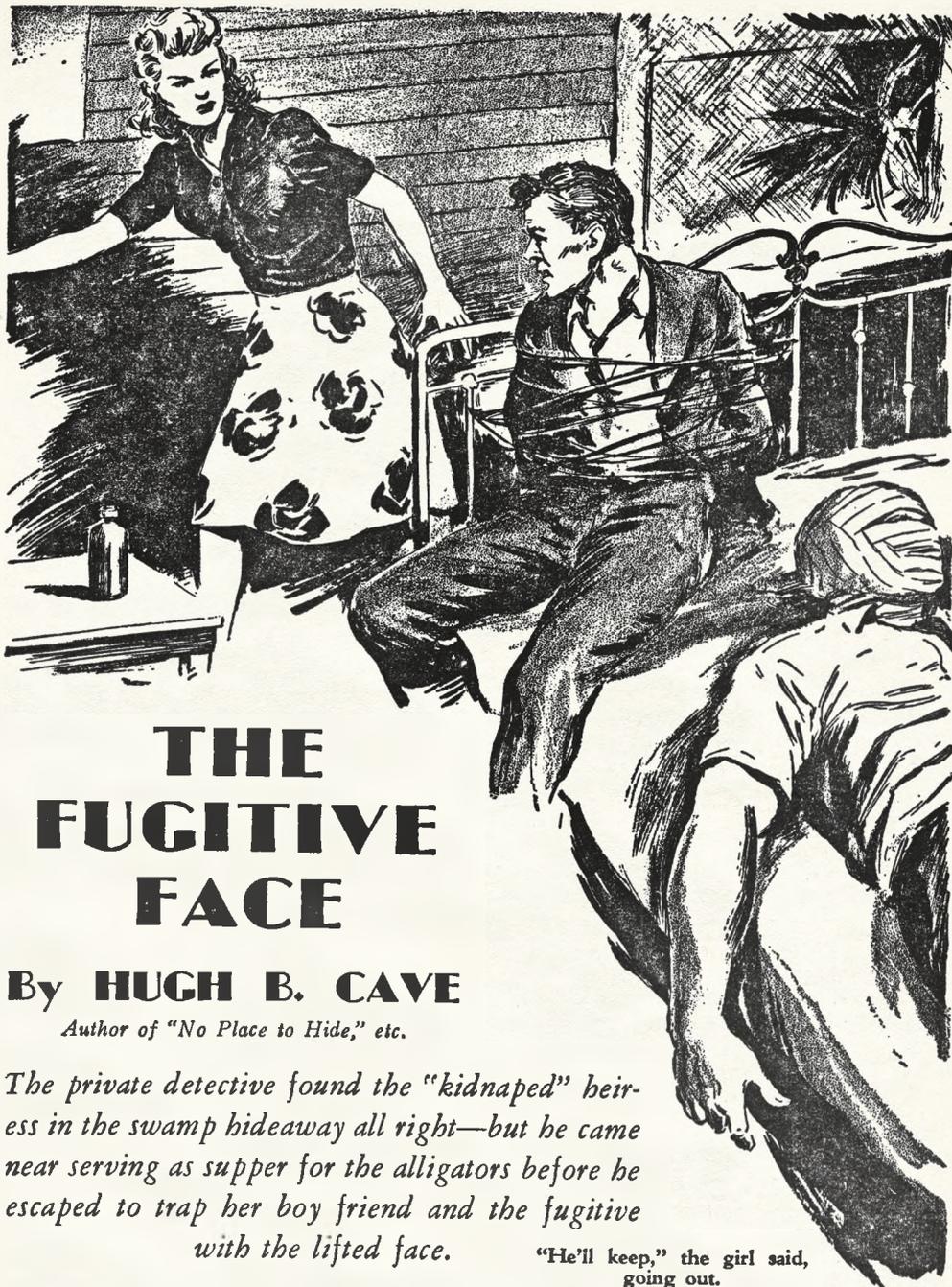
"But the substitute Latimer did make one mistake, Inspector."

"What was that?"

Coyle's face relaxed in a grin. "He let you bring him to me."

"Oh yeah?" But Moran was grinning too. "It's too bad you won't be able to collect your bet."

Coyle glanced toward the door of the bedroom where Grace Latimer slept. "I have collected," he said. "With interest."



THE FUGITIVE FACE

By **HUGH B. CAVE**

Author of "No Place to Hide," etc.

The private detective found the "kidnaped" heiress in the swamp hideaway all right—but he came near serving as supper for the alligators before he escaped to trap her boy friend and the fugitive with the lifted face.

"He'll keep," the girl said,
going out.

THE road, if you could call it that, ran black as a mine shaft through a stretch of the 'glades that was God's gloomiest creation. Nick Sydney was in a mood to match it. Mosquitoes droned a hunger-dirge around his face, and every step that took him farther from

his car, hidden and locked on the edge of the bean-farm half a mile to the rear, was taken with reluctance and profanity.

The job was full of holes. The swamp was full of invisible things that slithered and splashed and derisively grunted at the agency dick's discomfort. He snapped

his cigarette away and it hissed in a pool of stagnant water. About now, unless the kid at the bean-farm had lied to him, the road should end.

It ended so abruptly that he was knee deep in ooze before he realized it. He scrambled back, waving his arms, and fell over a boat that was tied up there.

The kid had told him there would be a boat. The kid had screwed his brown little face into a scowl and said: "I dunno who's *in* that shack on the island, mister. There shouldn't ought to be no one, 'cause old Jeff Lally, who used to live there, died a year ago September from snake-bite. But I seen smoke from the shack's chimney for more'n two weeks now, and I seen at least two fellers sneakin' around there. And lately a girl."

Nick Sydney stepped gingerly into the rowboat and gathered up the oars. The mosquitoes fed on his wrists as he rowed. The black water gurgled murkily under the boat's blunt bottom, and frogs croaked in the dusk on all sides of him.

There most always was a light on the island at night, the kid had said. Nick looked for it. Live-oaks and the skeleton limbs of dead cypresses loomed in the shadows. A 'gator splashed, and birds rose squawking from a grassy hummock that seemed to float past, timelessly, against the deeper dark of the swamp. He saw the light the kid had promised him. He rowed slowly toward it. The island took shape.

There was another boat drawn up on shore, on a carpet of vegetation that evidently served as a point of arrival and departure for the island's inhabitants. Nick thrust an oar into the mud and sent his craft slithering up beside it. He stepped out and palmed his automatic from his pocket. Feeling his way along, he advanced over a tangle of cypress roots.

It was less dark in the clearing. The crown of the island was higher than the swamp's gloom; the sky was closer, gray-ing into night but still not black. Nick was surprised at the shack's bigness. He spat a mosquito out of his mouth and moved in a crouch toward the glowing window. What he saw put a curl of satisfaction on his lip. Wary strides carried him to the door, and his left hand reached for the latch.

The door opened with a gentle screech of its hinges. Nick stepped in and pulled it shut behind him, with an eye on the once elegant purple-plush divan in the corner. He went toward the divan and gazed down at the man asleep on it.

"Wake up, Beautiful," Nick said.

The man stirred. He wore clothes too good for this place: expensive slippers, gabardine slacks and a yellow silk sport shirt. He was clean shaven and swarthily handsome, about thirty years old, with the build of a runner. Nick nudged him and he opened his eyes. Nick's automatic stared him in the face as he snapped to his feet.

"What the hell!" he said.

Nick said gently: "It's all right, Clark. We'll skip the preliminaries and you tell me where Myra Donelson is."

King Clark put a hand up to push the automatic out of his face, changed his mind about the wisdom of that, and leaned back against the wall. After a moment he shrugged his slim shoulders. "I've seen you around. You're Sydney. You're an agency dick."

"I said we'll skip the preliminaries."

"That's right, you did. You said I'd tell you where Myra Donelson is. I wouldn't know, Sydney."

"You'd better."

"All I do here, Sydney, is fish. This is a fishing camp. Take it easy, will you? I'm ticklish!"

NICK finished patting the pockets of the gabardine slacks and stepped back, scowling. The next move was his, but he felt the need for caution. Pretty-boy King Clark was no run of the mill bad man—he was big time. He was a slick, smart, soft-spoken New Yorker with a record that included no fewer than three murder charges which had failed to stick. Big game for a Miami agency dick. The risk was big in proportion.

The girl wasn't worth that risk, Nick realized. She was a pampered smarty with a penchant for hunting out trouble. But her old man owned a string of Florida hotels and had money to burn. He'd pay plenty for her safety. And with the Sydney Detective Service in a slump, Nick could use a piece of that money, along with a few gobs of good publicity.

"We'll wait, Clark," he said. "Myra Donelson may not be here at the moment, but I've a hunch—"

He paused, listening. Two quick steps backed him to the wall, from where he could cover both the divan and the door. The door opened and a girl came in, carrying an armful of exotic white flowers half as tall and half as pretty as herself. She didn't see Nick Sydney. The flowers blocked her view.

"Darling," she cooed, "look what I—"

"Good evening, Miss Donelson," Nick interrupted.

The girl stood frozen. A couple of flowers fluttered to the floor at her feet; the stems of the others squeaked like mice as her fingers convulsively tightened. She gasped, "Oh!" and looked frantically at the man on the divan.

"Sit down," Nick ordered.

The girl sat, trembling. King Clark got off the couch, picked up one of the fallen flowers, snapped the stem off short and thrust the blossom into a button-hole of his yellow shirt. "Well, Sydney?"

"So you were kidnaped, Miss Donelson," Nick said sarcastically.

Clark sniffed his flower. "You ought to know I never go in for kidnaping, Sydney."

"I did know it. That's how I happened on the hunch this whole business was phoney—and why Papa's fifty grand wasn't delivered as you ordered."

The girl flashed a frightened look at Clark. "I told you Daddy would never have let me down unless he suspected something!" she wailed. "Now you see what—"

"Suppose we go now," Nick interrupted, gesturing toward the door. "My job is to return this poor abducted little darling to her pater. You two can fight later."

He herded them to the door and out. The girl clung to Clark's arm and Clark walked along slowly, steadily, looking straight ahead. He slipped once on a cypress root and pulled up short, muttering, then paced on again.

"You can row, pal," Nick ordered. "Myra, you get up front and—"

He paused, took in a breath.

"Row what?" Clark retorted.

Nick stared at the patch of sawgrass where he'd left his boat. The boat was

gone. So was the one which had been there when he arrived. A chill crawled up his back.

"Row what?" King Clark asked again, slyly.

Nick let out his stored-up breath. "All right," he growled. "Get back to the shack! Fast!"

It couldn't be too fast for Nick. He recalled glumly that the beanfarm kid had warned him there were *two* men on the island. Sure. But Nick Sydney had blithely let his guard down, and now the boats were gone and he was marooned. Marooned in a snake-infested swamp, on a patch of land as potentially dangerous as a volcano.

Every step of the way back to the house, he half expected to hear the crack of a gun and feel a bullet biting his back. When the door creaked shut behind him at last, he was soaked with sweat.

He leaned against the door and wiped the moisture from his chin. "Who took the boats, Clark?"

"I wouldn't know, Gunshoe."

"You wouldn't know. All right, to hell with you." Nick walked to the other side of the room, aimed his automatic at the floor and twice squeezed the trigger. He tipped his head back and howled. When he stopped howling, the echoes of the yell and the shots were still rolling eerily through the swamp. Clark and the girl gaped at him as if they thought him crazy.

"Open the door, pal," Nick said then, "and call out to the guy who swiped those boats. Tell him the coast is clear. Tell him to come on in. Then step back but leave the door open."

"You're crazy," Clark muttered.

NICK aimed the automatic at him and he got up. He went to the door and opened it, stood framed in the doorway with his hands clenched. He yelled what Nick had told him to, then turned and walked back to the divan.

No one came. After waiting a while, Nick warily kicked the door shut. "All right, Clark. So he didn't come back to the island after making off with the boats. Or else he's too smart to walk into a trap. Get a rope and tie Miss Donelson to a chair."

Clark shrugged. He seemed relieved, though, and was smiling again, showing the white of his teeth between the pale parting of his lips. He got off the couch and headed for the doorway of the adjoining room. Nick Sydney hauled the girl off the divan and pushed her in front of him.

"Hold the lady's hand, Clark. I wouldn't want you two separated."

The room was a kitchen, and there was a coil of rope looped over a nail beside a leaning pair of oars, where King Clark had only to reach for it with no chance of trickery. Trickery was what Nick feared. This movie-faced killer had wormed out of some tight holes. Fabulous tales were told of his slickness.

With the girl tied in a chair and her bonds inspected, Nick breathed easier. He said gently, "Turn around now, Clark," and brought his gun down on the man's skull. King Clark slid face first to the floor and lay still. The girl said, "Oh!" and began sobbing.

Nick used the rest of the rope to tie Clark to the kitchen table. Then he went through the front room to the door, opened it and slipped out.

It was an ugly job, touring the island in the dark. The place was small but full of sink holes and creepers. The automatic worked up a sweat in his palm, and every sound in the night, every whisper in the swamp, added to the number of cold little legs that promenaded his spine.

With visibility non-existent, he did more listening than looking. Frogs croaked in the water-lanes. The plaintive night-music of the birds was like a chorus of mewling cats. Once he heard a prodigious splash that was either a 'gator's tail or a monster bass night-feeding in the weeds. But nothing human, nothing to heighten his suspicion that Clark's pal, the stealer of the boats, was on the island.

After half an hour of it he could stand the insects no longer and returned to the shack.

The night passed slowly, uneventful except for the blazing hate that colored King Clark's eyes when he regained consciousness. With daylight Nick turned the man loose and prodded him to the door.

"We'd be fools to wait for your friend to bring a boat," Nick said. "You're

going to get busy and build us a raft."

Clark snarled a reply that indicated he had lost his reserve of confidence, but gathered up hammer and nails as Nick directed. He swore bitterly when Nick ordered him, at the water's edge, to forage for logs. With an eye peeled for snakes, Clark sweated at his task while Nick sat on a windfall and watched him.

It was slow work. The sun came up out of the swamp and sucked hordes of winged insects from the steaming vegetation. The logs the toiling man found were heavy. The morning was half gone by the time he had dragged enough of them to the landing place.

"Listen," he said savagely. "If you've got to have a raft, why not use the kitchen table for the floor of it? Or do I have to whittle some boards out with a jack-knife to satisfy you?"

"You have to build a raft that will hold the three of us. I don't care how you do it."

CLARK walked to the shack, Nick following. The girl, still tied to her chair, looked at Nick with burning, red-rimmed eyes and fluently cursed him. Clark tipped over the kitchen table, kicked the top off it and carried the boards to the swamp.

He knelt on the logs and hammered the boards viciously into place. The echoes of the hammering rolled out through the swamp, bouncing off the dead trees. It was a racket so loud that no other sound could compete with it. For ten, fifteen minutes it continued.

Nick was unaware of danger. He was sitting on the windfall, perfectly at ease, when a gun jabbed the base of his neck and the voice of Myra Donelson, taut with pent-up rage, screeched hysterically in his ear, "Put your hands up, damn you! Put them up!"

The voice was as much a surprise to Clark as to Nick. He lurched up from his knees and whirled around, his mouth open. Nick Sydney stiffened, let go his automatic and slowly hoisted his arms.

He suffered then. As soon as Clark had snatched up the automatic and covered him, the girl turned into a tigress. Her nails tore at Nick's hair. Her hands flailed his face and she behaved like a

spoiled brat having a temper fit. King Clark looked on and smiled.

When the girl was through, Clark put a foot on Nick Sydney's face and pressed it into the muck, turned his weight on it for good measure. Then he said: "Get up, Sydney. Go in the shack."

Nick walked unsteadily to the door. On the floor in there, beside the chair the girl had been bound in, lay a short, dumpy little man with a badge of some sort on his shirt. The girl explained his presence in a hysterical outburst that was half laughter, half sobbing.

"He's the local sheriff!" she cried. "He said he investigated because some youngster told him about a man who asked a lot of questions. He found a car hidden off the road from the bean-farm and rowed over here to look around. He didn't see you and Sydney because he came the other way, but when he found me tied up, and recognized me from the pictures they've been printing in the papers, he turned me loose. I—I conked him with a bottle. Then I took his gun and—"

She sat down, suddenly overcome by reaction. "Gee," she whispered. "Gee, this is getting us in deeper and deeper, King. I—I'm scared!"

Clark's laugh was soft and deadly. He opened a door and motioned Nick Sydney toward the girl's bedroom, a two-by-four with one small window. "Clear your stuff out of here, Myra," he said. "We need a cell."

The girl dazedly obeyed. Then at Clark's command she tied Nick to the end of the bed. It was a small iron bed that used up most of the room. A table stood beside it, close to the window. Insects droned hungrily at a dirty strip of cheese-cloth covering the aperture.

The girl bound Nick's arms, then Clark finished the job. He was thorough. "You'll keep, Gumshoe," he said. "Myra, you fix me up some hot water so I can wash this damned slime off. And see what's to drink."

They went out, but Clark left the door ajar. Nick watched them moving around. He envied them the tall brown bottle Myra put on the table.

The girl looked down at the unconscious cop and said fearfully: "What are we going to do with this man, King? He

can't stay here. Even *we* can't stay much longer."

"We can stay until your daddy delivers the fifty grand as he was told to," Clark said. "As for this guy, don't worry about him. I'll row him over to the mainland soon' as Dirk gets here."

"To—to the mainland, King?"

"To a pal of mine, for safe keeping until all this blows over. Don't get the jitters now. He'll be O.K."

Sure, Nick Sydney thought. *He'll be O.K. He'll never make any trouble for you, Clark. This swamp is deep.*

"What the hell is keeping Dirk anyway?" Clark demanded irritably.

"He's coming now," the girl said.

CLARK turned to stare out the window. A moment later the door opened and Nick Sydney stared, too—and wondered if he were losing his mind. Even in such a setting the man who entered was grotesque.

He was bigger, heavier than King Clark, and his weight drooped from hips and shoulders as though softened by too much heat. From the neck up he was cocooned in bandages that hid all of his face—if he had any—except for a slit that bared his lips and a pair of matched apertures for his eyes.

"You never hurry, do you?" Clark said dourly.

Dirk slouched his weight to a chair and lowered himself into it. "I was fishin'," he said. His voice, Nick noted, was as murky as his eyes, and neither advertised any great intelligence. "I was sittin' on that big blowdown a couple of hundred yards from where we keep the boats. I seen this guy"—he jabbed a finger at the half-open door of the girl's room, through which he could see Nick tied to the bed—"I seen him comin', but it was risky to make for the house to warn you. And I didn't have no gun to tackle him. So I done the next best thing. Soon as he got out of his boat I sneaked both the boats loose, to maroon him. I figured you'd be able to handle him O. K."

"Oh, sure," Clark said through thinned lips. "I can handle anything."

"Well, hell, I couldn't do no more. I couldn't get no gun anyplace with me lookin' like I was discovered in one of

them Egyptian tombs. I hid and waited. I seen the cop row out to the island here, but what could I do?"

"Be reasonable, King," the girl said. "There's no earthly use getting worked up over it. After all, he—"

"Oh, all right!" Clark snapped. "Stay here, you two, while I get rid"—he caught himself, and indulged in a trickle of soft laughter—"while I take the cop over to that friend of mine."

He put the unconscious sheriff over his shoulder and went out. It was the cop's last ride, Nick Sydney knew, but there was not a thing Nick could do about it. For the time being—and maybe for longer than that—someone else would have to handle the miracle department.

There was an easing of tension in the room when Clark departed. The girl sat down and sighed, leisurely poured herself another drink. Dirk poured one, too, and did his best to grin through his bandages.

"Here's to tomorrow," he said. "I can't hardly wait. You suppose my face will look the same?"

"No matter what you look like," the girl said lightly, "it will be a surprise to me."

"That's right. Geeze. You never seen me without these bandages, did you? You know what the doc told me? He says, 'Dirk, my boy, I'll do one thing for you, I'll give you a nose that the well known local sunshine won't peel the skin off of! I'll give you the fanciest physi—physog—'"

"Physiognomy," Myra supplied.

"Yeah. —the fanciest physiognomy this side of Flagler Street," he says. He's a card, the doc. You'd oughta meet him." Dirk filled his glass again. "Here's to my physi—my physog—yeah."

"Here's to it," the girl said. "When you take off the bandages, will it hurt?"

"Naw."

"I can help you."

"Won't need no help," Dirk grinned. "Just scissors."

He was pretty drunk by the time King Clark got back. Nick was amazed at the girl's capacity, for though she had matched Dirk drink for drink, she was apparently still sober.

Clark scowled at them both, then at the bottle. "Nice of you to save me some,"

he said. "Dirk, you want to watch out. You'll be so plastered by tomorrow you won't know your face when you see it."

"I'm celebratin'," Dirk crowed.

CLARK shrugged, walked into the bedroom and looked at Nick. "I want to know a few things, Sydney. For every question you don't answer, I'll cut another hole in that screen. These swamp mosquitoes will eat everything but your belt buckle."

Nick stared at him.

"How did you get here?" Clark demanded.

"By boat."

"You know what I mean. Answer me!"

"Well," Nick said, "I'll tell you. When Papa Donelson got the letter instructing him to deliver the fifty grand, I smelled a mouse. First place, Myra had been seen around the hot spots with you for quite a while, and none of the smart boys would be rash enough to snatch a girl you were sweet on. Second place, the set-up was too simple. That letter in Myra's handwriting, telling Papa to go to Homestead and leave fifty grand under a palm tree—"

"So?"

"So Papa gave me the job of delivering the dough, Clark, and I went out to Homestead to watch the palm tree. You drove up, looked for the money and left. I followed you. I'd have followed you clear to the island here, but got a flat on that damned road you turned into." Nick shifted his weight against the bed, to ease the torment of his bonds. "The rest was a matter of asking around, talking to people, until I bumped into that kid at the bean-farm."

Clark's gray eyes smoldered. "So Donelson hired you to deliver the money and you didn't. Damn you, Sydney! Where is the money?"

"At my office. In the safe. Afraid you'll have to write Papa another letter and wait a while longer." There was satisfaction for Nick in that. He had an idea King Clark was fed up with swamp life and ready to trade an arm or a leg for reprieve.

He had other ideas, too. In fact, he had what he thought was a fairly complete

picture of what was going on. First place, Clark and Myra Donelson had cooked this up together. The girl no doubt had fallen for Clark in a large way and was either married to him or planned to attend to that little detail at the first opportunity.

For Clark, of course, there was an out. After Papa paid the fifty grand and the girl returned home, she could describe some screwy snatch in which King Clark was in no way involved. The King might be taken for questioning, but unless Myra Donelson could be made to accuse him, the case would collapse—with Papa still out the fifty thousand. It was a neat and fairly simple way of getting a fat wedding present from a fond parent who otherwise wouldn't bestow even his blessing.

Only one thing was murky in Nick's mind—the reason for this miserable shack in the middle of the swamp, when a small hotel in some jerk town would have done just as well.

"I'm surprised you live in a dump like this," he said, to clear that up.

Clark slapped a mosquito. "It happens," he replied darkly, "I lined this dump up for Dirk."

"I get it. He's wanted and has to stay in hiding until he can show the world a new face."

"Something like that, Sydney. Something like that."

"What happened to his old face?"

"A mosquito bit it!" Clark snapped.

"Ah, well," Nick sighed. "I don't suppose it will ever interest me—much."

"I'm sure it won't."

Clark went out. This time he closed the door and it stayed closed for two hours. Nick Sydney worked every rope trick he knew, but was still stuck fast to the bed when the door opened again. It was Clark. He had an arm around Dirk, holding him up. "Sorry to bother you, Sydney," he said acidly, "but we're cramped for space in this palace." He guided Dirk to the bed and pushed him onto it, swung the man's feet up and left him.

"If he snores, you can divorce him," Clark snapped.

The girl stepped into the room and felt the rope on Nick's arms. "He'll keep,"

she said and followed Clark out of the room.

THE door was shut again. Nick turned his head to look at the bandaged man, and saw that Dirk was out cold. He braced his feet on the floor, hunched his back and jarred the bed. Dirk's mouth opened but his eyes stayed shut. The celebration had been too much for him. He was stinko.

Time crawled after that. After what seemed hours of it the cloth-covered window began to darken. There had been no sound from the other room in quite a while. Now Nick heard someone moving about, heard Clark's voice say sleepily: "This dump depresses me, Beautiful. You think you can stand the bugs long enough to watch the moon come up?"

Nick didn't hear the girl's reply. It probably didn't have to travel more than a few inches. But in a moment Clark opened the bedroom door and looked in, closed the door and locked it and went away. Nick heard the two of them go out.

"Now," he thought, "or never."

He'd been waiting for the chance, and moved with as much alacrity as the bed would permit. The bed was a handicap. He was tied fast to the end of it, and hours of squirming had resulted in nothing more than a slight freedom of movement in his wrists. Using his legs for levers, he inched the bed along the floor until, by straining forward from the waist, he could reach the table.

There was a bottle on the table. A whiskey bottle, empty. Nick got his teeth around its neck and by twisting his neck to the snapping point contrived to drop the bottle on the bed within reach of his fingers.

He wrapped a fold of the bedclothes around it and smacked it against the iron bedpost. The sound of the blow was neatly muffled. The neck of the bottle broke off.

He sawed industriously at his bonds with the broken edge. It was hard work and put a kink in his wrist, cramping his arm muscles to the elbow, but in five minutes he was free.

He went quietly to the window and looked out, but the cheese-cloth was thick with dirt and swarming with bugs. He

heard voices and placed them at the boat landing.

He tried the door. It was locked. Any attempt to open it would stir up a noise that might wreck all he had so far accomplished. Breathing heavily now, and acutely aware of the need for haste, he turned back to the bed.

Ten minutes later he corkscrewed through the bedroom window and dropped to the ground outside. Crouching there, listening, he heard voices at the boat landing and saw in the gathering dark the dim shapes of King Clark and the girl, standing there where the boats were tied up. To Nick's left, across a ten-foot strip of sawgrass that just might be a slumber-spot for snakes, lay the water. On hands and knees he made for it.

He slid into the swamp head first and, with arms and feet low in the water, began swimming. With him went thoughts of 'gators and moccasins and a resolution that, once out of this mess, he would turn the Sydney Detective Service over to the bill collectors and go in for raising papayas. *If he got out!*

The water was deep. It was ink-black and populated with things that slithered, splashed and crawled. The impulse to lash out with all possible speed was enormous, but King Clark was there on the island and a rain of bullets from the killer's gun would only add to Nick's woe.

He swam until his feet hit mud, then waded to a hummock, pulled himself out on a snarl of cypress roots and looked back. There was a light in the room he had left. The door of the shack opened and King Clark poured out of it, racing to the boats.

Nick sighed. He had hoped to reach the road and his car before his absence was discovered. His pockets were clean, but a spare key was taped under the car's fender. Now he couldn't use it. Clark would reach the road ahead of him.

He slid from the hummock into knee-deep water and began wading again—in a safer direction. For half an hour he floundered through mud and sawgrass, while mosquitoes fed on him in hordes and frogs by the thousands croaked desirively at his misery.

He came out on the edge of a farm

and trudged on through clinging muck to a road. He walked the road for three miles, softly but savagely cursing his feet, his wet clothes, and the blackness of Florida night. Finally he got to a place of habitation.

Nick didn't go back to the island with the lawmen. They knew the location of the place; they didn't need him.

"Besides," he said wearily, "the shack will be abandoned when you get there. Me, I'm going home. I can read about it in the papers tomorrow."

It was in the papers, too. Not all of it, not the complete details, but enough to let Nick know that King Clark, Dirk and the girl had escaped. Nick put the papers aside with a sigh and stared out his office window at the blue waters of Biscayne Bay. He was a little weary from talking to the Miami police.

He turned now to stare at the man sitting in the easy chair beside his desk—a slim, frowning plainclothes dick whom the police after much hedging had at last, unwillingly, assigned to assist him.

"We'd better roll, Hollins," Nick said.

Hollins stood up. He had a personality as gray as the clothes he wore, and had not spoken a dozen times since arriving in Nick's office. He grunted now—loquaciously, for him—and followed Nick out. They drove a mile or so, parked the car and walked.

"Mind you," Nick said, "I can be wrong about this. There may be a Flagler Street in Bitterberry, Kansas, for all I know."

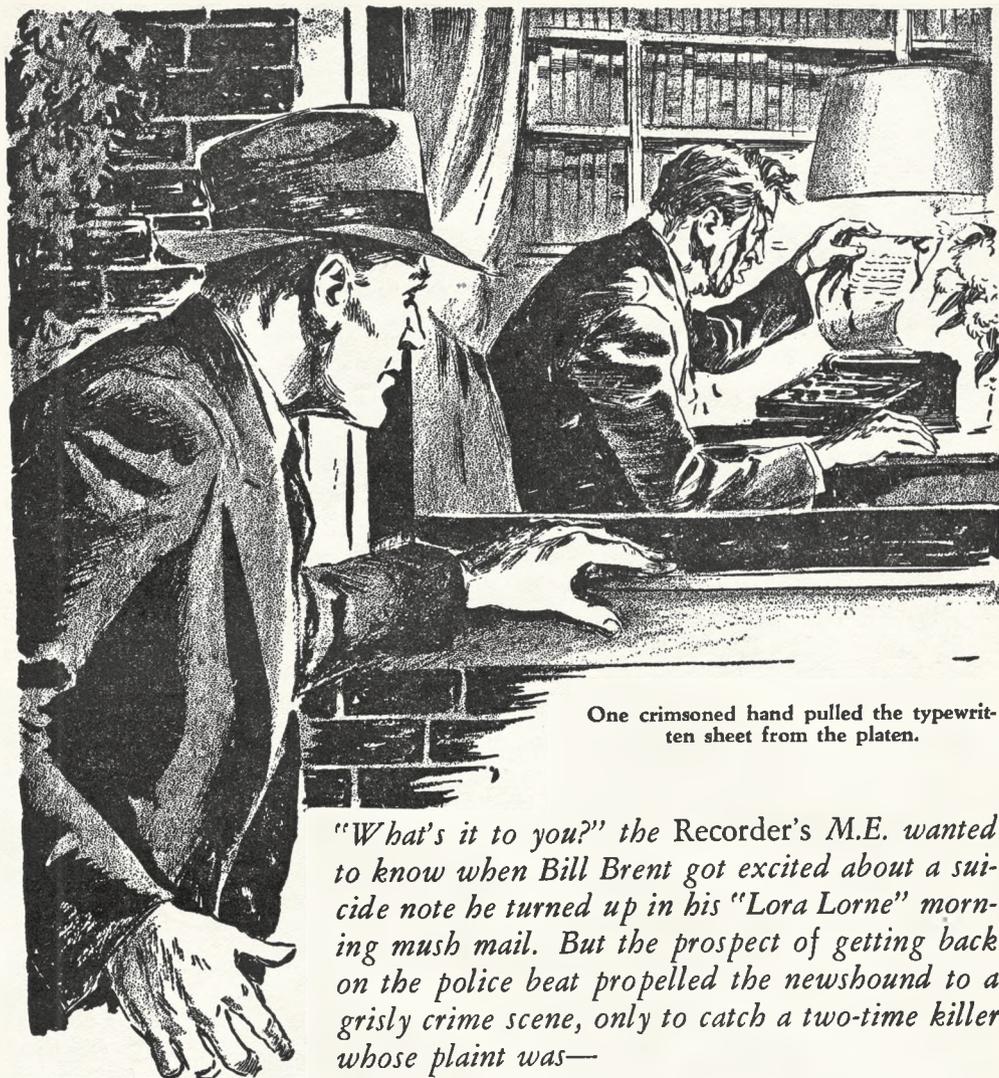
Hollins grunted through a wad of gum.

"The fanciest physiognomy this side of Flagler Street.' That's what the doc told him. That ought to mean Miami."

"One-eight-three," Hollins said, "is across the street." He jerked his head.

The building was a collection of doctors' offices occupying a not too respectable corner. It had two entrances and was flanked closely on one side by a structure of the same size and shape. In short order Nick Sydney learned that from the second floor hallway of house number two, he could look across the court into the waiting-room of Dr. Rudolph Wanilek—and from the same hallway he could keep an eye on the street.

(Continued on page 113)



One crimsoned hand pulled the typewritten sheet from the platen.

"What's it to you?" the Recorder's M.E. wanted to know when Bill Brent got excited about a suicide note he turned up in his "Lora Lorne" morning mush mail. But the prospect of getting back on the police beat propelled the newshound to a grisly crime scene, only to catch a two-time killer whose plaint was—

GIVE A MAN A CORPSE HE CAN HIDE

A Bill Brent Novelette

By **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

Author of "You Slay Me, Baby," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

Whose Suicide?

THE telephone rang insistently inside the studio apartment as Lewis Warren unlocked the door. He thrust in, carrying a sword in both hands.

It was a Japanese ceremonial sword, long and heavy and ancient, with a banded steel scabbard and a white sharkskin grip. Placing it on the couch, he thumbed a wall-switch and stood a moment, admiring it, while the telephone continued to ring.

The light of two brilliant floor-lamps

turned his attention to a letter lying on the rug just inside the sill. It had been slipped under the door during Lewis Warren's absence. Picking it up, he noted that the envelope was a delicate sky-blue and that his name was written in a stylish feminine script which was vaguely familiar, but only vaguely. He moved toward the desk placed against the broad casement windows on the opposite side of the room where the telephone sat, still ringing.

Lewis Warren carried himself with an air of confident boldness, the sky-blue letter unopened in his hand, and in order to reach the telephone he had to squeeze past a drawing-board. Thumb-tacked to the board was a half completed full-page "comic" cartoon bearing the heading, *Captain Kerry, U. S. Marines*. The low tables surrounding it were cluttered with bottled colors, carbon inks, fine-pointed brushes and pens—and also with a collection of revolvers, automatics, dirks, a kris, a scimitar and a bamboo blowgun complete with darts. Seated among these materials and model weapons, Lewis Warren still didn't have the appearance of an artist. He looked more like a cocky prize-fighter or a perversely good-natured gangster. He was still trying to recognize the over-styled handwriting on the sky-blue envelope when he lifted the receiver.

"Lew, old boy," a voice said over the wire without preamble—a man's voice, jaunty yet grave. "See here now. The jig's up."

Lifting his dark eyes from the letter, Lew Warren asked quickly: "Chaunce? What's wrong?"

"Everything, I'm afraid, old boy—everything," Chaunce said. He sounded breathless. "Better hop right over here to The Willows, chop-chop. There's hell to pay. There really is."

Tightened, Lew Warren asked next: "Is Gloria all right?"

"Gloria is knocked out, old boy," Chaunce said.

"Knocked—"

"Out cold, you know, really. A devilish nasty trick, I must say. You'll understand that when you get here. There's no time to explain now. Besides, he might see me at this phone. I shouldn't want that. Can you hear him out there?"

"Hear him?"

"Digging," Chaunce said. "He's out there digging."

Lew Warren sat tensely straight, his flat face blanched, his hand clenching the receiver to his ear. "Who's digging, Chaunce? *Who?*"

"Really, old boy, I don't know," Chaunce answered. "I haven't seen him so far, but he's really there in the dark, digging for dear life—or perhaps I should say for dear death."

"For God's sake, Chaunce!"

"Thought I'd better warn you, you're needed here. Meanwhile I'll jolly well have to try to stop him somehow. I say, Lew. If something should happen to me—if you shouldn't find me anywhere around—look for a message."

"Chaunce!" Lew Warren blurted again. "Are you trying to tell me—"

"Yes, old boy, I really am trying to tell you it's finally happening," Chaunce broke in. "It looks bad, really desperately bad. I'll do everything I can, of course. Shouldn't like to see you and Gloria get hooked for murder, shouldn't like it at all. Well, cheerio."

"Murder!" Lew Warren exclaimed. "Chaunce! . . . Chaunce!"

The connection had broken. His hand hovering over the dial, Lew Warren felt impelled to call Chaunce back—but he checked himself, squeezed away from the drawing-board and swung to the door. Reaching for the knob, he discovered he still had the sky-blue letter in his hand. He turned it over as he anxiously paused and saw the writing on the flap—the words *The Willows* followed by the name of the city and the state—and ripped it open. He read no further than the salutation: *Dear Lora Lorne*—

Confused, Lew Warren quickly checked the name on the envelope. Yes, it was his own. This envelope was really addressed to him. But there was something wrong about the enclosure—this letter beginning *Dear Lora Lorne* and ending with—he skipped to the last of it—the cryptic signature, *Heartsick*.

"What the hell!" Lew Warren mumbled. "Who's sent me a letter meant for a lousy lovelorn column?"

He jerked open the door and strode out, thrusting the unread letter into his coat pocket—a letter already crowded from his

mind by Chauncey's urgent mention of murder.

IN THE basement of the *Recorder* plant the cylinder presses had been silent for twenty-odd minutes, and now they began to roll again. Their deep growl reverberated throughout the building, signaling that another home edition had been put to bed on schedule.

To the city-room the continuous rumble meant a welcome release. Seven newsmen had already trudged out, leaving only one desk occupied—that of Valerie Randall, unquestionably the loveliest brunette ever to attempt to be a female police reporter. She was busy at the moment rouging her luscious lips. Garrett, the city editor, freed at last from the pressure of the last deadline, clipped galleys for tomorrow's follow-ups while waiting to perform his final duty, the pleasant one of escorting Miss Randall to her apartment. All the staff had finished another long night's work—except the bull-shouldered, weary-eyed young man still sweating in a crowded office in the remotest corner.

Bill Brent sat there staring at a letter, as usual. At almost any moment of the day or night Bill Brent could be found wedged inside his cubbyhole, his forehead corrugated with worry while reading a letter. Letters were the curse of his life. They streamed on him by the score and the hundred in every mail, all written by perturbed readers of the *Recorder*—an unrelenting flood. The job of reading and answering them consumed all Brent's waking hours. And because he was a conscientious young man, the problems they posed never lifted their weight off his harried mind.

A few minutes ago, despairing of keeping the letters arranged in the order of their receipt, he had wearily picked one at random off the top of the heap. The fact that it was on the top meant it had come in the latest delivery, but Brent was past caring, too surfeited with letters to think that the older ones on the bottom should have precedence. Vehemently he had slit it open—an envelope of sky-blue paper addressed by a young woman who had evidently cultivated a style of penmanship over which her envious friends could exclaim: "How distinctive, my dear!"

Reading the letter the first time, Brent had sat up. On his second reading he had begun to stare. It was a remarkable letter, not merely because it was full of young emotional pain, but chiefly because—unlike the countless other letters hedging Brent all about—it plainly wasn't intended for him at all.

Alarmed and puzzled, he fumbled in the wastebasket for the discarded envelope. There was no mistake there. It bore the name of Lora Lorne, addressed in care of the *Recorder*. But the letter itself began—unlike the myriad others which usually saluted the oracular Miss Lorne with gushing affection: *Dearest Lew*—

Turning from it, Brent snatched up the freshest copy of the *Recorder* available. He pored over every column, then heaved out of his chair and tramped from his cubicle with the rumpled paper in one hand and the sky-blue letter in the other. At the city editor's desk he asked an urgent question in an anxious voice.

"Who's dead?"

"Lincoln," Garrett suggested with a severely straight face and a trace of sarcasm, lifting his eyebrows at Brent. "Napoleon and Caesar. Many millions of others. People keep right on dying all the time, though I understand sulfanilamide has recently cut down the mortality rate in—"

"I mean, who died today!" Brent was sincerely concerned and in no mood for levity. "Tonight, maybe within the past hour or so—too late to make the final, because there's no mention of it so far. I mean"—he drew breath—"a suicide."

Garrett's eyebrows lowered a little, ominously. "You think somebody's just killed himself, or herself? Why?"

"This." Brent frowned over the letter. "It wasn't intended for me, I got it by mistake—but never mind that. It was mailed in the city early this morning. It lay around for hours until I opened it a few minutes ago. I've got to know, Garrett. *Has* there been a suicide tonight? If so—" Garrett let him grope. "If not—"

"In either case," Garrett inquired dourly, "what's it to you?"

BRENT stared into his city editor's flinty eyes. "What's it to me when a screwy little lovelorn kid threatens to rub

herself out and apparently means it? Unlike you, Garrett, I'm human. I look upon a suicide as something more than a stick of type."

"Who's threatening to—"

"I don't know who sent this letter. There's part of a name signed to it—Gret, probably short for Gretchen—but that's practically all I can tell. If she hasn't already done it—*Have* you had any report so far that a girl named Gretchen—"

Garrett broke in. "I ask again, what's it to you? This town could be cluttered up with self-made corpses of all descriptions and it still would be no concern of yours—not so far as this paper is concerned. You're not working the police trick any more—remember?"

Exasperatedly Brent pushed the letter under Garrett's nose. "Read it!" And when Garrett impatiently brushed it aside, he went on earnestly: "I'm not trying to snag a yarn away from your darling Val. I'm hoping there *isn't* any yarn, there *isn't* any suicide to cover. Don't you realize a few minutes may mean the difference between life and death for this poor kid?"

Still unimpressed, Garrett leveled an obdurate finger. "Listen to sense, Brent. You know neither this girl's full name nor where she's to be found, so what can you do about it? I'll tell you what you can do. Turn the letter over to the cops and forget it."

Brent was shocked. "At this very moment she may be swallowing poison or aiming a gun at her temple, and you ask me to put it out of my mind! I'm damned if I can do it. Thanks to you, I can't, Garrett."

Garrett scowled.

"When you assigned me to the love column," Brent went on, highly incensed, "you exposed me to all the tribulations of womankind. You made me the confidant and the adviser of thousands of people up to their necks in trouble. You can't expect me to wallow in woe day after day, month in and month out, and not be affected by it. God knows I'm affected! When I find that a heartbroken young girl has promised to bump herself off, I can't sit around and let her go through with it simply because my hard-headed, rock-ribbed, stony-hearted city editor thinks it's none of my business. To you, Garrett, nuts!"

"Brent!" Garrett snapped. "Give me that letter. It's the property of this paper, no matter how it happened to land here, and the business of the police department . . . Brent!"

Brent was tramping angrily away, the blue letter still in his possession. As he reached the door of his office he saw that Valerie Randall was making a telephone call. He detoured to her desk—it had been his own in happier days—still ignoring Garrett's forbidding stare, frowning down.

Val was gorgeous. In Brent's opinion she was the most delectable, fully grown, vine-ripened woman he had ever disliked. He detested her because she was now holding down the police run that properly belonged to him, and holding it down competently enough, though with an air of unwarranted superiority. She jealously guarded her domain from any encroachment on Brent's part, but at times she could find a spark of compassion in her heart for him, and he was hoping this was one of those rare moments.

"No report?" Brent asked.

She shook her lovely head. "Captain Russo says not."

"No dead young female named Gretchen. Anything?"

"Not so far. Relieved, Bill?"

"No!"

BRENT was decidedly not relieved. On the contrary, his anxiety zoomed. If no girl named Gretchen had yet killed herself, that fact didn't signify she'd changed her intentions. Assuming she was sincere, she still meant to do it, and she might do it at any minute. The possibility chilled Brent—and his not knowing her full name, or her whereabouts, made him squirm with a sense of guilty frustration.

"If I could only get to her in time, Val!" Full of urgency that could find no immediate outlet, he headed again for his cubicle. "But thanks for that much, anyway."

Never before had Brent regretted so keenly the circumstances that had prompted Garrett to assign him to the passion column. Almost a year before, Garrett had lured Brent from New York under contract as a special reporter, and at that time he had been distinctly a life-loving young man. Though police reporting was

rich in his blood, it had seemed entirely reasonable to him that bars and boudoirs could be, upon occasion, more fun than deadlines. Garrett, however, had felt differently about the twenty or thirty editions which Brent had missed due to having been pleasantly detained elsewhere. As a punitive measure, enforced with mentions of the blacklist and a lawsuit in case Brent should prefer to break his contract by quitting, Garrett had ordered him forthwith to become Lora Lorne.

Until that dreadful day, the *Recorder's* mentor in matters of *Famour* had always been, properly enough, a woman. There had been a long line of them, none actually named Lora Lorne. That euphonious name was an artificially contrived one which had appeared atop the agony column regularly every day for the past twenty-two years, together with a copyrighted portrait—a portrait falsely representing the non-existent Miss Lorne to be a super-wise, super-sweet old soul with snowy hair and a smug smile of superhuman understanding.

Bill Brent, who wore size eleven brogans and a nose permanently put awry by a Princeton goal-post, resembled her in no particular whatever. The look habitually stamped on his own rugged face was one of dread—dread that he might lose control of his humiliating secret, might become notorious as the first male wearer of Lora Lorne's pantalettes.

Until such time as Garrett might relent—and since Garrett pressed his disciplinary measures to the point of sadism, that day was not yet—Brent was doomed to continue advising the *Recorder's* readers concerning their faithless spouses, their unrequited ardors, the care of their hair, the housebreaking of their offspring and the evils of promiscuous petting in parked automobiles—a task which, properly executed, would have overtaxed the combined capacities of Doctor Dafoe, Elizabeth Arden and the Messrs. Jung, Freud and Adler.

Brent lived in hell, a hell paved with written supplications to a wisdom far profounder than he could ever possess. Snowed under by the letters that crushed his conscience, killed his appetite and gave him nightmares, he had come to feel at times that God, in creating Eve, had de-

plorably misused a perfectly good rib. And not since the day he had donned Lora Lorne's saccharine false-face had he become so agitated over any letter as he had this one—this sky-blue vow of an unhappy girl to kill herself at some unknown place in this very city, at some undetermined moment which even now must be approaching closer and closer—if it hadn't already passed.

It was a sentence in the middle of the letter that had really gotten under Brent's skin.

Dearest Lew—

I realize at last that you'll never love me. I've loved you desperately for years now, but all you've ever done is ignore me—and once, when I broke down and told you sincerely how terribly much you mean to me, you just laughed, as if I were just a silly little kid. I'm not a child, Lew darling, not any more. I'm a woman now, a woman deeply in love. But what's wrong with me? I'm young and better-looking and more intelligent than lots of other girls, so why don't you want me? I've tried so hard to find out what more I could offer you, darling. I'm not ashamed to confess I even wrote to Lora Lorne about you, over and over again, but her advice didn't help. Nothing can help any more. I just can't make you love me, so now I've stopped trying, now I'm going away. You'll never see me again, Lew darling. Life isn't worth living without you. Good-bye, dearest, forever.

Gret.

THOSE last lines had a corny, soap-opera flavor, and Brent hoped to heaven that Gret didn't really mean them, but despite all that they got him. Gret had written them because Lora Lorne had failed her. Her despair seemed all the more real because Brent was getting an unintended taste of it.

This letter had blundered its way to him. The explanation was easy. Gret had written two letters at one sitting, one to Lew Somebody, and the second to Lora Lorne—and with her eyes blurred by tears, no doubt, she had sealed them inside the wrong envelopes. To Lew had gone a message meant for Miss Lorne, the gist of which Brent could not guess—and to Brent had come the message bidding Lew "good-bye forever."

Squirming again in his chair because his failure to aid this girl made him feel responsible for her hopeless despondency,

Brent again fumbled for the envelope. Again, carrying it, he strode from his cluttered office. At that moment Garrett was escorting Valerie Randall to the swinging doors. Brent stopped them there with another pressing question.

"Where's there a place called The Willows?" He indicated the name penned on the envelope's flap. "It might be anything from an insane asylum to an owl wagon, but what is it, Val?"

Garrett scowled and the cagy expression that settled on Val's face warned Brent her moment of helpfulness had passed. Somehow he had gone too far, had trod on her jealous repertorial toes. She eyed him narrowly as Garrett snapped an answer.

"Lay off the Meacham case, Grandma. It's police. It belongs strictly to Val. Understand, Miss Lorne? Good-night, Miss Lorne."

They disappeared, the doors flapped and Brent's eyes gleamed with enlightenment. He hastened into the morgue, an adjoining room filled with file cabinets, which in turn were filled with fat clasp-envelopes. He pounced upon a particularly plump one bearing the notation, *Meacham, Palmer, Disappearance*. Plucking out the sheaves of clippings it contained, several featuring banner headlines, he at once found information which might prove a direct lead to Gret.

The uppermost clipping was almost two years old.

That Palmer Meacham, prominent local manufacturer of machine tools, has vanished mysteriously from his residence was reported to the police this morning by Gloria Meacham, his bride of a year and the owner of Gloria Frocks, Inc. Since Meacham's disappearance three nights ago, according to his wife, no word from him has been received either at his office, 1090 Main Street, or at The Willows, the Meacham family estate, located four miles north of the city on Route 101. When last seen—

Elatedly Brent resorted to the nearest telephone directory. He dialed the number of the Meacham country home and hopefully heard the distant bell purring. It was his intention to get Gret on the wire, if she was still capable of speech, and to distract her with an urgent request to await his arrival.

But the shine of expectancy faded quickly from Brent's eyes. Gret didn't an-

swer. In fact, nobody answered at all.

The total lack of response spurred Brent to more energetic measures. His misgivings whetted, he left the city-room doors wagging violently behind him and ran down the stairs, bound for his car. Too vividly he could picture a lovely young girl lying dead by her own hand in a silent, deserted mansion.

CHAPTER TWO

"Pardon My Blood"

BRENT'S brakes stopped him short at the gate of The Willows. His way was barred. In the glare of his headlamps the gate loomed as two massive stone posts, with a heavy chain slung between them. Two strong padlocks fastened the chain to two securely anchored iron rings. Nearby sat a coupé, empty, which had been unable to enter.

Leaving the wheel, Brent saw fresh scratches in the rust on the rings. The chain had been strung up recently, very probably tonight, by someone who preferred that no visitors should call.

The barricaded driveway curved deep through a landscaped lawn fully twenty acres in extent. Willows grew everywhere, their lacy, drooping foliage screening the estate from the highway. A privet hedge higher than Brent's head completely enclosed it. The place had an aspect of formidable privacy, but it was penetrable. After cutting his ignition and headlight switches, Brent ducked under the chain and came in view of the Meacham home—an enormous house, all dark except for the windows of a single room on the lowest floor.

Moving toward it, Brent paused to listen. The willows sighed in the wafting night air, and beyond their gentle sound Brent heard another—a noise floating through the gloom from somewhere beyond the house. He couldn't identify it. Having a peculiar soft, crunching quality, it continued for only five seconds or so, then stopped and started again, as if someone were doggedly slicing stale bread from a monster loaf with a huge knife.

Brent thought too that he could distinguish slow, labored footfalls. He shifted quietly across the grass—the slight rustling his feet made was quite different

—and tried to locate it, but the next moment the sound ceased, and he could find nothing in the darkness reaching deep behind the house.

Whatever someone was doing back there in the night, it seemed disconnected with Brent's concern over a possible suicide. The lighted windows drew him. Six of them were evenly divided by a broad, strap-hinged door, forming a row behind the flagstone terrace. Stooping at the nearest, Brent peered into a spacious living-room lighted by brown-shaded lamps—and instantly he was struck cold.

Lying on the floor in front of the unlighted fireplace was a young woman, her pale face turned toward him, her eyes closed, her whole body limp.

A grateful breath burst from Brent when the big door responded to his push. He hurried in and knelt beside the still figure. He pressed his fingers to one of the young woman's wrists. Her blue-black hair was shiny as a raven's wing, her lips vividly red in contrast to her wan cheeks. Slightly older than Brent had expected—in her late twenties—she had a crisp, intelligent, efficient look that made her seem not quite the sort who'd wind up a suicide. After a jittery moment Brent discovered, with a surge of relief, that she was not one. Though her pulse was slow, her heart was definitely ticking.

Then he smelled the pungency in the air and saw the note pinned to her blouse. The note was a sheet of the same sky-blue stationery Gret had used, but the lines written on it were typed. Having never before come upon an unconscious woman tagged in this manner, Brent read the message with amazement.

Lew, Old Boy—

Don't call a doctor. Gloria's perfectly all right. She'll wake up soon. He did this to her so she couldn't see or interrupt him. I'm going out after him now—must stop him if I can. In case I'm not around when you read this, as I said over the phone, look for another message somewhere.

Chaunce

HERE was another mention of Lew, and though Brent hadn't the faintest idea who Chaunce was, he now realized this inert young woman wasn't Gret after all. Undoubtedly she was Gloria Meacham, proprietor of the local women's tai-

loring establishment called Gloria Frocks, Inc., and the wife of the man who had mysteriously disappeared two years before.

Drawing a deep breath, Brent recognized the pungency in the air as ether. On the hearth lay a table napkin, still damp and reeking with the stuff. Gloria Meacham was obviously the victim of someone who had sneaked upon her unawares and clamped the saturated napkin over her face until she had inhaled an overpowering dose of the stupefying fumes. A spot on the rug indicated that her assailant had left it lying within an inch of her attractive nose, where it would continue to drug her, after which someone else, evidently Chaunce, had found her slumbering here and removed it.

Chaunce, whoever he was, had given Lew, whoever *he* was, the straight dope—Gloria would probably revive at any minute now, none the worse for her enforced nap.

Brent listened again and heard no sound in all the house, but from outside there came again, so faintly it was almost inaudible, that same strange gritty noise.

Returning quickly to the entrance, Brent spied another bit of sky-blue paper. This one lay on the open leaf of a desk, a bit rumpled, as if agitated hands had gripped it, and it was another written by the despondent girl for whom Brent was hunting.

Sister, Dear—

I've gone away. Don't try to find me. I'm too wretchedly lonely to want to live another day. If Lew can be happier with you, I wish you both all the joy in the world.

Gret

Feeling that Gret was making it a bit thick, but persistently wondering whether she still remained somewhere among the living, Brent prowled hopefully in search of the noise.

He stood under a mournful willow while his pupils adjusted themselves. Faint starlight made the darkness behind the house seem smoky. A few faint outlines were discernible as Brent crept on—nodding shrubbery, a group of white lawn chairs, then a line of high metal posts. Attempting to move between two of the posts, Brent's whole length met an invis-

ble obstruction. Something pushed stubbornly against his face, his knees and his forward shoulder all at the same time, bouncing him back a step, and he heard a metallic hum, like that of loose harp-strings.

He had walked squarely into the wire-mesh backstop of a tennis court.

The vibration of the screen produced a startled exclamation from a point nearby. It had betrayed Brent's approach to someone thirty or forty feet ahead of him. At the same instant the gritty sound stopped—the sound which Brent was trying to locate and identify.

He saw, vaguely, a man standing still in almost the center of the tennis court—a chunky man gripping the handle of something which appeared to be an enormous lawn-mower. Now staring at Brent, his face indistinguishable in the gloom, the man began pushing it off the court.

"Chance?" he asked breathlessly. "Where have you been?"

Brent said, "Hold it!"

His voice, evidently not resembling Chance's, alarmed the man. With desperate and laborious haste, the man advanced a few feet farther, still pushing with all his strength. Then, as Brent groped in an attempt to get himself clear of the backstop, the man stooped, picked up something and suddenly ran off with it—ran swiftly into the confusion of shadows lying thick under the shaggy willows.

He was gone when Brent again found himself in the clear. Brent paused at the contrivance abandoned at the edge of the court. It wasn't a lawn-mower after all, but a roller, a steel, water-filled cylinder two feet in diameter, weighing three or four hundred pounds. The noise that had puzzled Brent was now explained. The roller had caused it when propelled back and forth across the packed clay surface. But Brent was still confused. He wondered why anyone should so earnestly busy himself with the task of rolling a tennis court smooth in the middle of the night without any illumination.

ALL this was not only wacky as hell, but also somehow ominous, and Brent was still apprehensive because he still hadn't encountered a girl called Gret, either alive or dead.

Scouting after the man who had fled, Brent stopped again. Another noise had broken out of the hush. It was coming from behind Brent—a threshing among a clump of bushes near the rear of the house. Though Brent couldn't immediately guess its meaning, he was sure it wasn't being made by the man whose strange labors he had just interrupted. It was too far in the opposite direction. A second person was abroad, hitherto unheard and still unseen, but now apparently wading through the thick of a garden plot.

He remained unseen for only half a minute. Brent glimpsed him fighting free of the bush, then stumbling toward a rear door. Light shafted out as the door swung. The man who hung there a second, a tottering silhouette, was remarkably tall and spare. Leaving the door wide open, he staggered into the house as if carrying a full cargo of Scotch, and lurched from sight.

Running to the door, Brent found it gave into a hallway. The entire house was again secretively silent. Wherever the tall man had turned, he was being completely quiet. But Brent needed no new noises to guide him. On the waxed floor he found a series of dark wet spots.

Blood had dripped from the tall man at almost every step. The spots formed a wavering line along the full length of the hallway, then turned to the right. The bleeding man had crossed a corner of the living-room without approaching Gloria—who, Brent noticed, was now breathing more deeply and rolling her head a little. He had staggered to another door. The blood-trail proved he had passed through, and now the door was closed.

It was also locked.

Brent stood gripping the knob, still hearing nothing.

"Open up!" he said. He slapped his palm against the panels and insisted, "Open up!"

Not a sound came from the locked room until, as Brent looked about for something suitable for breaking the door down, the clicking started. At first it was a slow, irregular but sharp tapping. Then it speeded up. Brent banged on the door again and demanded entrance, but the clicking continued rapidly, as if the man inside hadn't heard.

Grimly exasperated, Brent went tramping out of the living-room. On the terrace he found that two more windows were now lighted—windows looking into the study from which the swift clicking issued. He peered through the panes and remained there, back bent, frozen.

The tall man was seated before a portable typewriter at a desk, striking the keys with stiff force—a man almost blinded with running blood, whose face was smeared with glistening red.

Brent tried the sashes, found them latched and stared again. The man's hands, bobbing over the keyboard, were as ghastly as his face. His sparse sandy hair was matted with blood and earth, and more dirt clung to the back of his tweed suit.

Holding himself rigidly erect in the chair, he was forcing himself to write by sheer will-power. Brent sensed that he might drop at any moment. His face and forehead were brutally cut by eight or ten criss-crossing gashes—gashes that might have been inflicted by the repeated blows of a dull meat cleaver.

Brent was poised to smash his heel through the pane when the tall man dragged himself to a standing position. One crimsoned hand pulled the typewritten sheet from the platen. The other found a fountain pen and scrawled a signature. The dirt-caked shoes turned back toward the locked door. While the cruelly wounded man balanced himself precariously at each step, his strength rapidly failing, Brent skirted back along the terrace and into the living-room. Without a glance at Gloria, he reached the study door as the latch clicked free, as it opened.

The tall man saw Brent somehow with his blood-filmed eyes, and proffered the written page and said something—something that sounded like, of all things, "Beg pardon."

Dazed, taking the paper, Brent blurted, "What?"

In a barely distinguishable mumble the tall man answered: "Please pardon my—my messy appearance, old boy."

Then he fell—fell with an almost polite thump at Brent's feet just inside the door, but with such sudden looseness, in such a manner of utterly final surrender, that Brent couldn't doubt he was dead.

CHAPTER THREE

Homicide—Keep Out

BRENT made certain of it. His own pulse raced, but the tall man's was permanently stalled. Then, sensing movements in the living-room which suggested that Gloria was reviving, he quietly swung the study door, shutting himself in with the apologetic corpse.

The paper in Brent's hand bore several bloody fingerprints. It began:

To the Police—

I herewith confess to the murder of Palmer Meacham. While alone with Palmer Meacham in the offices of Gloria Frocks, Inc., this city, on the night of June 6, 1940, I deliberately shot him dead. . . .

And it ended:

I make this confession freely, wishing it clearly understood that no one aided me in committing these crimes. Single-handed I killed Palmer Meacham and concealed his dead body.

(Signed) Chauncey Seymore.

Grim elation filled Brent. This letter aroused the long-dormant news instinct in him. It had a convincing come-clean flavor. It seemed complete except for one important detail. Chauncey Seymore asserted he had concealed Palmer Meacham's remains securely against a prolonged police search, but, in writing while suffering almost unendurable pain, he had omitted to mention specifically where he had stored them.

Brent didn't consider this oversight a matter for regret. He saw in it, instead, an opportunity to play up the case to even more spectacular proportions, with Bill Brent as the stellar figure. Chauncey Seymore's confession was evidently not only the key to a sensational disappearance case that had remained unsolved for almost two baffling years—it also appeared to be the answer to an ex-communicated police reporter's prayers. If, somehow, Brent could personally manage to uncover the long-absent cadaver of Palmer Meacham, he could ask for no brighter prospects of releasing himself once and for all from the loathsome apron-strings of Lora Lorne.

The thought sent him eagerly to the telephone sitting beside the typewriter

with the bloodied keys. He dialed the number of Valerie Randall's apartment. When Val answered he brushed her off with an impatient request to speak directly to the *Recorder's* city editor.

"Forgive the interruption, Garrett, whatever I may have interrupted, but business before pleasure, you know," Brent said wryly. "The proposition is that I'm to go back on the police trick as a reward for cracking the Meacham case for you, complete with the elusive body of the missing man, plus a murdered murderer."

Garrett snapped: "Say that again!"

"Right here at The Willows I already have the slain slayer and his written confession," Brent explained. "I'll produce Meacham's body later, just in time for any deadline you may select. I can string it out for a week, two weeks, three—under my old by-line, of course."

"I'll swallow no such horse-trade!" Garrett growled. "The Meacham case is not your private property. I've already warned you to keep hands off. If you've stumbled onto something, Val will handle the break through the regular channels. We're coming over and you're moving out—back to your rapture department, Grandma!"

The connection was severed with a clang, and Brent frowned—but he spun the dial again, doggedly. A new voice said, "Police headquarters," and Brent asked quickly for Homicide. "Bill Brent calling. Give me Captain Russo."

"Russo's out," he was told. "Left fifteen minutes ago. Official business."

"Reach him!" Brent insisted. "Have him call me at The Willows and I'll startle his ear off. He'll prefer this particular corpse to any other—"

"The Willows? Why, that's where Russo's heading right now. Sure, he got another tip to come to The Willows, and by this time he must be practically there."

Brent said, without gratitude, "Thanks." Though unable to guess the purpose of Captain Russo's impending visit, he felt it made Chauncey Seymore's confession doubly important. He tucked the document carefully into his inside pocket, and heard movements beyond the study door. He stepped out, closing the door snugly behind him, just as a young man entered

the opposite side of the living-room from the terrace.

THE young man was not Captain Russo, but Brent surmised that it was he who had maneuvered the lawn-roller about in the dark. Chunky, with a flat, square, tough-looking face, he wore oxfords suspiciously covered with a claylike dust. Staring across at Brent with open hostility, he said, "Who the hell are you?" and without waiting for an answer he asked quickly, "Gloria, are you all right now?"

Gloria Meacham, having recovered consciousness, had pulled herself into a deep easy chair and, Brent saw, had detached the note from herself. She was frightened, still pale and still groggy. Extending a trembling hand, she said: "Lew, what is it, what's happened? Who is this?"

Both she and Lew regarded Brent warily as he came forward. Gloria, he was sure, could not be aware that the corpse of Chauncey Seymore lay in the next room—but would it be news to Lew? Preferring to play his cards close to the chest, Brent watched him.

"I'm from the *Recorder*. I've come here—the name's Brent—at the request of Lora Lorne to inquire about a letter. She received it today from a girl named Gretchen—your younger sister, I believe, Mrs. Meacham—and it implied she was contemplating suicide. Miss Lorne is naturally much concerned. Where is Gretchen?"

"Suicide!" Lew exclaimed, and Gloria Meacham, passing one hand dizzily across her face, answered: "I—I don't know! I haven't seen Gret since she went to bed last night. I've been terribly worried about her all day."

"Because you also found a note from her?" Brent asked.

"Yes, on my plate at breakfast." Gloria Meacham, though still shaken, was getting a grip on herself. "I can't—can't believe Gret really meant it. All day I've been hoping she'd come back."

"But you haven't notified the police she's missing?" Brent went on. "Aren't you going to notify them, either, that somebody sneaked up on you tonight and soaked you full of anesthetic? Don't you feel the police will be interested, Mrs.

Meacham, in learning these things?"

Alarm flickered in Gloria's eyes, and the young man called Lew swung upon Brent belligerently.

"Take it easy!" he said in a threatening tone. "Gloria's gone through hell for the past two years. She's had about all she can stand. A little more of this and her nerves will crack. This thing about Gret, whatever it means, is practically the last straw. Let Gloria alone or I'll knock your damned nose back in shape!"

"Rearranging my features won't help you out of the mess you're in here," Brent answered. "It's worse than you think, I hope. I'm not an interloper. As one of Lora Lorne's field men I'm a sort of trouble-shooter. Her interests are here. She would commend your chivalry, I'm sure. Who are you?"

"I'm Lewis Warren," Brent was told, still pugnaciously. "I draw a comic strip. Once I was a contender for the light heavyweight championship. I keep in training and being chivalrous toward Gloria is one of the best things I do. We want no help from Lora Lorne. Would you rather leave now or get bounced out?"

"Later, please," Brent said evenly. "I've things to say. For example, are you wondering where Chance is—or needn't you?"

"What about Chance? . . . Well, what about him? Where is he?"

BRENT withheld his information—if it really was information to Lew Warren—and listened to voices mingling in the dark beyond the open entrance. Several men were talking together in low tones as they approached along the gravel path. Three of them materialized in the light. As they hurried in Brent saw they resembled each other to an unusual degree. Each of the three was carrying an opened telegram.

"Gloria!" the foremost said, anxiously, giving Brent only a glance. "What does this mean?"

Gloria shrank from them a little. Lew, turning upon the trio, deliberately blocked their path, preventing them from descending on her in full force. They faced her at close range regardless. She gazed apprehensively at Brent, saw that he intended to extend his visit until physical violence

was really necessary to remove him, and gestured in her confusion.

"Mr. Brent, these—these are my brothers-in-law. This is Mr. Jerome Meacham."

Jerome Meacham was distinguished from the others by a particularly blunt, out-thrust chin.

"Mr. Malcolm Meacham—"

Malcolm Meacham had shrewd, deep-set eyes and shaggy eyebrows, so that he seemed to peer at Brent from an ambush.

"And Mr. Simon Meacham."

The oldest of the three brothers, Simon Meacham was sharp-nosed and salty-tempered.

"I think they've come to see me about a—a private matter, Mr. Brent," Gloria added faintly.

Jerome Meacham, the square-chinned one, said in a tone equally blunt: "It never was a private matter, Gloria. The whole country knows about Palmer's disappearance. So long as it remains unexplained it can never be hushed up, as you apparently wish it could be. Certainly not when we continue to receive these anonymous hints of foul play! Look at this wire, Gloria, and tell me, what can it possibly mean?"

Protectively, Lewis Warren snatched away Jerome Meacham's telegram. He read it frowning, then plucked the two other telegrams from the hands of Gloria's two other brothers-in-law. Quietly maneuvering to a spot behind him, Brent saw that the three wires were identical except for the addresses. Their origin was local. All three had been sent at the same time and signed *A Friend*. The message in triplicate was: *ASK HER WHERE SHE HID HIM*.

Warren snapped: "We've told you before, these phoney tips must be a crank's work. Every time you get another one from this malicious screwball, whoever he is, you come running in here to grill Gloria again. You're making her a nervous wreck. You've got to cut it out!"

Obdurately the three brothers frowned at Warren. Jerome Meacham retained his position as spokesman.

"We've agreed these messages can no longer be ignored. There've been too many of them. They're too persistent. Even though the sender prefers to remain anonymous for some reason, that person

seems to know what really lies behind this affair. The last previous one, Gloria—the one received by the three of us last week—”

Jerome Meacham produced still another telegram from his wallet, this one dog-eared, and read impressively: “‘She knows where it really happened. Find out why she lied about that. Seek and ye shall find not only him but also a pot of gold.’ Last week, Gloria, you protested that this was an unjust and baseless innuendo, but protests are no longer enough.”

GLORIA MEACHAM shuddered. “I’ve told you over and over—”

“We know what you’ve told us, but we can’t be put off again.” Brusquely Jerome Meacham continued to speak for Simon and Malcolm as well as for himself. “Surely you realize the construction we must put on these messages we’ve received, and on the others sent to the police. The gist of them all, Gloria, is that Palmer’s disappearance has never really been a mystery to you — that you’ve known from the very beginning what happened to him and what became of him, and *where he is now.*”

Gloria sobbed, “I don’t, I don’t!” and Lew Warren stepped forward with both big fists clenched.

“Why don’t you come right out with it? You’re trying to make out that Gloria murdered Palmer and hid his body somewhere, and the reason you believe that is because you’re all broke. By pinning it on Gloria you’re trying to keep her from inheriting Palmer’s money when the seven years are up, so you’ll get it for yourselves instead. Well, for my part, I think you three guys are three dirty rats. I think I’ll beat the bejeezes out of all three of you!”

Warren was fully prepared to undertake this triple attack, but an interruption prevented. More footfalls were crossing the terrace. A man appeared in the light of the open entrance—the man whose arrival Brent had momentarily expected.

His face was sallow and gaunt. His eyes, dark as a tomb at midnight, were glassily bright and penetratingly keen. His expression was sad, as if he never ceased mourning the dead, which was actually the case. His official business involved in-

vestigating the causes and conditions of the city’s crop of cadavers, which never went into a slump—and it made him a melancholy man. He was Captain Russo, chief of the Homicide Squad.

As he entered a hush fell in the room, for Russo’s appearance uncannily suggested that he was one of his own specimens that had neglected to lie down. He had called without his squad, but not alone. Behind him came Garrett, grimly eager for a major news break, and Valerie Randall, jittery with the thought that it might turn out to be too major for her feminine nerves. They paused, Garrett’s forbidding frown turned on Brent, as Captain Russo peered into one corner after another.

“Where’s the corpse?” the captain inquired.

Gloria Meacham wilted in her chair, the three Meacham brothers exchanged startled glances and Lewis Warren took umbrage.

“This is too damned much for one night!” Warren snapped. “I told you the last time, Captain Russo, I’d chuck you out on the seat of your pants if you ever came back. You want me to prove I meant it?”

Captain Russo’s funereal presence was unshaken. “I was informed by telephone about half an hour ago,” he said in his peculiarly hollow tone, which sounded like a voice speaking from the grave, “that I would find a corpse here at The Willows.”

Jerome Meacham asked in a gasp: “Do you mean the corpse of our brother, Palmer Meacham?”

“No,” Russo answered. “I mean the corpse of a close friend of the family—a close friend of Mrs. Meacham, that is to say—named Chauncey Seymore.”

“Chauncey!” Gloria cried out, and she sprang terrified to her feet. “Chauncey? It—it can’t be true!”

Brent observed quietly: “It’s true as death and taxes, Mrs. Meacham.” And to Russo he added: “It’s there, just inside that door.”

Lew Warren’s jaw clenched hard as Captain Russo crossed to the indicated door, his joints seeming to creak like those of a dried-out skeleton. He stepped through, and while he remained out of sight in the study the big house was tensely still. Presently he reappeared with the

quietness of a specter, looking even more sorrowful than before.

"Murdered," he announced in a tone of regret. "By means of a dull-edged weapon repeatedly applied. I'll have a great many questions to ask." He turned to Brent with the first. "Have you solved the case for me already? If not, what've you been doing with your time here?"

BRENT saw official disapproval in Russo's eyes, an even sterner disciplinary glint in Garrett's, and resolved to keep his inside track on the case if possible.

"I came about a letter Lora Lorne received from a member of the family who isn't present tonight, that's all. I just happened to see Chauncey Seymore come staggering into the house, all cut up, and when I got to him in there he was dead, that's all. Otherwise I don't know any more about it than you do, Russo."

"Somehow, Brent," Russo intoned, "I hear everything you say with a vast feeling of doubt."

"Damned small wonder!" Garrett snapped, striding toward them. "Brent's holding out, Captain. He seems to feel he's better qualified to administer the law than the judiciary, the prosecutor's office and the police combined, but damned if I do. For purely personal reasons he's keeping a choice bit of evidence under wraps. Ask him for the confession he found."

"Confession?" Russo echoed dolefully. "Is it possible I have to make a few remarks concerning the heavy penalties provided by the statutes for removing and concealing evidence, Brent?"

"Garrett," Brent said vehemently, "in your futile attempts to turn an unqualified young wench into a police reporter, for purely personal reasons, you've made yourself a traitor to the Fourth Estate, including your own misled sheet!"

Cornered, he perforce produced the confession from his pocket, keenly regretting his overzealous mention of it to Garrett over the phone. He put it into Russo's bony fingers and heard the captain say: "Since you'll undoubtedly answer all my questions with evasions, Brent, you may go now, without my blessings."

Brent had avidly seized upon this big

break in the Meacham case as being properly his own, by right of discovery, but now he felt himself completely shut out. Disconsolately, having no other immediate choice, Brent turned toward the big front door—but he paused.

"Who tipped you off to the current corpse, Russo?"

"A guy named Anonymous," the captain answered. "He's been furnishing me with an abundance of tips ever since the Meacham case broke. As it happens, this is the first one that's paid off."

Brent's eyes shifted hopefully to Lew Warren. "By any chance, have you received a misdirected letter intended for Lora Lorne?"

Still bellicosely concerned for Gloria, Warren produced a sky-blue envelope from his coat pocket. Brent took it and read it as he trudged across the terrace, leaving the Meacham case, as well as the Seymore murder, behind him. The letter was unique in that it displayed none of the reverence with which Lora Lorne was usually addressed.

Dear Miss Lorne,

You ought to stop printing that terrible column of yours. I've appealed to you again and again, asking your help because I needed it desperately, because the man I love won't pay the slightest attention to me, and it hasn't done the slightest bit of good. I've done every single thing you've advised, and what happened? He treated me like a child, actually laughed at me! That's how well you've solved my problem for me, Miss Lorne! You've wrecked all my highest, dearest hopes, that's what you've done. And what's more, Miss Lorne, I think you're an old fake.

Heartsick.

Brent winced. He trudged off into the darkness beneath the willows, a sense of guilt rankling within him, reminded even more trenchantly that he still hadn't found a suicide-bent girl named Gret—a would-be suicide or perhaps by now an all-too-real one.

CHAPTER FOUR

One Husband Too Many

BRENT doggedly climbed the iron stairs to the *Recorder's* city-room. It was deserted, though a light still burned in Lora Lorne's atelier of misery. Turning

with a shudder from the piles of letters waiting there, Brent moved into the morgue. His discouragement was yielding to a determination to keep his grip on the case despite Garrett and Russo. Again he pored over the sheaves of clippings concerning the two-years-cold disappearance of Palmer Meacham.

Gloria Meacham's account of her husband's last known hours was simple and brief. Three nights previous to the first news report—on the evening of June 3, 1940—she had worked late at Gloria Frocks, Inc., the downtown dress establishment recently organized with Palmer Meacham's backing. He had come in shortly before ten. Discussing a private matter, they had gone home together to The Willows. Meacham had presently bid her good-night and retired to his separate bedroom adjoining hers. In the morning, when it was long past his usual hour to reappear, she had discovered his absence, his bed unused, nothing missing except the attire he had worn the previous evening, and no note of explanation.

Since then not the slightest trace of Palmer Meacham had come to light, although the police had investigated every tip received, including two seeming particularly hot, which had prompted them first to search the storeroom loft of Gloria Frocks, then to open all the crypts in the small mausoleum of the Meacham family, both without result.

This had occurred prior to Brent's local advent, when another male reporter had covered the police run, and Garrett had managed him through a thorough job of it. A large halftone of a photograph taken from the air gave a bird's-eye view of The Willows. It showed the estate then being landscaped, the tennis court under construction and the garage being enlarged. His eyes taking on a gleam, Brent also studied a photograph of Palmer Meacham, a handsome though rather mean-faced man in his late thirties, printed alongside the grouped portraits of his brothers.

The item pointed up Lew Warren's comment that Jerome, Malcolm and Simon Meacham were all currently broke. They had become, in fact, business casualties of the war. Jerome was mentioned as an importer of art objects from Europe and the Orient, Simon as running an auto-

mobile sales agency and Malcolm as a tire distributor. A more unfortunate choice of occupations Brent couldn't imagine in one family, excepting that of Palmer, the tool manufacturer, who had evidently prospered more than his brothers even in peaceful days. While still young he had bought their equities in The Willows, which the four of them had inherited from their father, and he had made it exclusively his own home. A year ago he had carried across its doorstep a capable young business woman named Gloria Dennis, as his bride.

Brent found no mention of Lew Warren in any of the filed items, though Chauncey Seymore was interviewed as a close friend of the missing man. Seymore had money, lived the pleasant life of an amateur sportsman, was unmarried and "extremely popular among both sexes of his set." Although American, Seymore was strongly an Anglophile. Having visited Britain in his youth, he had decided it was a great mistake not to have been born an Englishman, and ever since then he had done his best to remedy the error. His opinion concerning his friend Palmer's disappearance was quoted: "I say, it's a rum thing, but I haven't the foggiest, really, you know, old boy."

FURTHER items confirmed the fact that Gret was Gretchen Dennis, Gloria Meacham's younger sister. She lived at The Willows, had been sixteen then and was eighteen now—though as to whether she would ever reach nineteen Brent was still unable to predict.

His concern for Gret nagged him while he absorbed every pertinent fact in the Meacham case. The most recent item, dated six months ago, revealed that Gloria had petitioned the court to declare her missing husband legally dead. This the court had declined to do. Undeniably Palmer Meacham was inexplicably absent, the judge had pointed out, but no evidence whatever indicated he was both absent and deceased. His estate could not be settled—Gloria could not take title to The Willows or to Meacham's now booming tool-making plant, nor collect his life insurance totalling one hundred thousand, nor assume the status of a widow—until seven years had passed, when the existing stat-

utes would automatically assume Palmer Meacham to be defunct. Meanwhile Gloria must support herself and The Willows on the profits earned by Gloria Frocks, which now operated comfortably in the black after a decidedly reddish start.

Finally Brent's worry over Gret prodded him out of the morgue. He headed again for The Willows.

Reaching it, he left his car dark at a far corner, squeezed through the hedge and cut diagonally across the grounds. Near the garage, which stood fifty yards from the house, his feet struck something lying in the grass. He muttered, picked it up and found it to be an ordinary garden spade. Brent took thought over it, left it leaning against a willow and prowled on.

Creeping upon the terrace, he heard Captain Russo's hollow voice still asking questions. Through the window he saw Gloria Meacham sobbing exhaustedly, Lew Warren snapping angry answers. Garrett and Valerie Randall were still present, as were the three Meacham brothers, who wore three righteous frowns as they listened—Jerome blunt-chinned, Malcolm shrewd-eyed, Simon sharp-nosed.

The corpse of Chauncey Seymore, however, Brent saw as he peered into the study, had departed. The coroner and the "meat wagon" had come and gone, taking it along for a post mortem. Russo's inquiry, Brent judged, was reaching a point where he would either have to call it a night or arrest a few of his suspects.

"I understand this is the servants' night off," Brent heard the captain saying lugubriously. "I also understand it's not unusual for you to call here in the evening, Mr. Warren, but tonight you appeared at a very late hour, when you claim to have walked in on this murder unawares. It's still more difficult for me to believe, Mrs. Meacham, that while you thought yourself alone here Mr. Seymore suffered a brutal assault outside this house, then stumbled inside to write a confession and die, all without your being aware of it. I regret to say I feel you're both holding something back, something vitally important."

Brent definitely knew they were. Gloria was concealing the fact that she had been etherized by an unknown assailant. Lew Warren had falsely stated the time of his

arrival, which precluded any mention of his maneuvers with the lawn-roller. Evidently they had also refrained from volunteering any information about Gret's ominous absence. This was the angle still weighing most heavily on Brent's mind. He was about to prowl off again, in blind search of a clue to her whereabouts and condition, when Russo rose.

"Most unsatisfactory," the captain complained. "If Mr. Seymore's violent death tonight is somehow connected with your husband's disappearance two years ago, Mrs. Meacham, your unwillingness to speak forces me to conclude that you wish neither crime to be solved. I should arrest you both—you and Mr. Warren—but I'd rather give you a chance to reconsider your attitudes. I must warn you, however, that all five or you—" he concluded the three Meacham brothers—"must remain available to me for further questioning on short notice."

RUSSO headed for the door, trailed by Garrett and Val, as Brent dodged into the darkness. He remained obscured until their two cars whirred off. Presently the three Meachams went the same way. Brent left Gloria and Lew to themselves in the living-room and scouted across the grounds.

The lawn-roller attracted him, and as he neared it a flutter of motion caught him by surprise. Stopping short, he heard quick, light footfalls rustling away through the grass. The sound wafted toward the garage, and Brent trailed it. He glimpsed a flicker of dim white disappearing against the dim white garage wall.

A door was there. It gave onto a flight of stairs reaching into the space above the stalls for the cars. Silence hung in the darkness of the room above as Brent toed up the flight, and as he reached the landing he saw a clearer movement.

A girl was standing against the low window on the opposite side of the room. Faint starlight outlined her. She sobbed and lifted something to her lips—a small bottle.

"Drop it!" Brent blurted.

He dove for her. She swung away as he reached her. He gripped a taut wrist, slid his hand upward and clenched the bottle. Something acrid sloshed from it

while the girl struggled like a little hellcat to tear away. She bit his thumb; she kicked at his shins with her high heels; her long nails of her free hand scratched across his cheeks.

"Let me go, Lew!" she gasped. "Please, please, Lew, let me go!"

Brent twisted her around and with one hearty slap sat her down on the floor. He made sure he had the bottle while she remained there in a heap, sobbing her heart out. He struck a paper match, saw a flashlight lying on a table, took it up. The beam cut across a storeroom containing discarded furniture, then settled on the girl. She raised her tear-streaked face, and Brent was gratified to see that though she looked rumped she was otherwise in good repair.

"Why didn't you let me do it, Lew?" she wailed. "Darling, I want to die!"

Brent said, "Hm," and turned the light on the bottle. "Iodine. A poor choice. It would take a rather long time to work and make you horribly sick to your little stomach. Didn't you have anything quicker in the place? For example, an overdose of ether fumes would be much pleasanter."

Gretchen Dennis stared at him furiously. "You're not Lew!"

"Sorry. Look here, Gret. You didn't really intend to kill yourself, but to put on an act for Lew's special benefit. You hoped your letter would make him frantic, he'd come searching for you and then, when he found you, you'd swallow a soupçon of iodine at the last minute. Then he'd save your life. It was supposed to make him realize how much he really loves you, in the manner of the washboard weepers on the radio. It really wasn't a bad show you put on, Gret. For a minute there you had the living hell scared out of me."

"Whoever you are," Gretchen said hotly, "I hate you!"

"Naturally," Brent agreed. "You've decided Lora Lorne is an old fake, and as one of her field men I'm a beastly old meddler. Besides, your disposition is suffering because you must be pretty damned hungry. You've hidden yourself up here in this stuffy storeroom all day, waiting for Lew to find you. Too bad, but don't blame him. You sent him the wrong letter, and, besides, he's now very busy being a prime suspect in the murder of Chauncey Sey-

more, along with your sister Gloria."

"Wrong letter!" Gretchen gasped. "Murder! Chaunce!" Breathlessly silent a moment, she startled Brent again, speaking with the intense bitterness of blighted young love. "It'll serve him right! He should've chosen me in the first place and let Chaunce have Gloria. I always knew they'd slit each other's throats over her some day!"

BRENT eyed her. "You don't actually think Lew killed Chaunce over Gloria, do you?"

"Why not?" Gretchen said indignantly. She could, Brent was deciding, say the most devastating things without realizing how terrifically hard she was hitting. "Some man or other's always been mad about Gloria. First Palmer, then Lew, then— If Lew hadn't been in the picture two years ago, you don't suppose Palmer would've disappeared, do you?"

Struck cold, Brent asked sharply, "What?"

"She's my own sister, and I'm desperately in love with Lew, and if they've got to have each other I hope they'll be very happy," Gretchen rushed on, all unaware of her own maliciousness, "but they didn't really have to kill Palmer, did they? She could've gotten a divorce, couldn't she? Of course she wouldn't've stood to get so much of Palmer's money that way, but—"

"What?" Brent blurted again.

"If you only knew what really happened!" Gretchen said, her teary little eyes narrowed. "I was there in the office that night with Gloria when Palmer came in. They started having a frightful row. It was all about Lew. Palmer had just found out about Lew and Gloria, and they screamed at each other, really screamed."

"In those days," Brent said, "I don't suppose you'd yet fallen for Lew?"

"I've *always* loved him."

"And it couldn't have been you, of course, who'd tipped off Palmer that something amorous was up between his wife and Lew?"

"Why, I'd *never* do such a thing!" Gretchen protested with enormous innocence. "Gloria really wasn't happy with Palmer any more, and he knew it, and she really *had* fallen in love with Lew, and she

brazened it right out to Palmer, too. I heard her. While they shrieked at each other there in the office, Gloria said, 'Palmer, I'll settle this in my own way.' It was so terrible I had to leave. That was the last time I ever saw Palmer. It's the last time *anyone's* ever seen him."

"Wait a minute," Brent said. "From the office he came here to The Willows with Gloria. He went into his bedroom—"

"That's only what Gloria *says*," Gretchen interrupted scornfully. "But did anyone *see* Palmer leave there with her? Did anyone *see* him arrive here? Who can prove Palmer *ever* left Gloria's office alive? Nobody!"

Carefully Brent inquired: "Can you prove he didn't?"

"Yes, I can—almost. I was just getting into bed when Gloria got home that night, and I *knew* she came alone. Of course I didn't think much of it at the time, because they'd had such terrible spats before, so I fell asleep, but—" Gretchen pretended to be appalled. "I shouldn't be telling you all this! It's a ghastly thing to say about my own sister. Please, please forget I mentioned it, won't you?"

"Of course," Brent said wryly. "After all, this thing's merely a case of multiple murder. But look here, Gret. Have you ever mentioned this to anyone else? I mean the fact that Palmer was never actually seen leaving Gloria's office that night, and that contrary to the statements she made to the police Gloria actually came home alone?"

"Of course I didn't mention it. I couldn't let anyone think *Lew* helped Gloria do it to Palmer!"

IN THE glow of the flashlight Brent grimly studied Gretchen's pinched face. "But now you'd just as soon see *Lew* nailed for murder. Then you'd demonstrate how loyally you can stand by him—much more loyally than Gloria, of course—and in the very nick of time you'd rescue him from the chair and he'd fall gratefully into your arms. My God, what kind of books do you read, anyway? Never mind—tell me something else. While you were hiding up here tonight, what did you see out there on the grounds?"

Gretchen stood at the window looking out, her breath catching in her throat.

"*Something* happened, but it was so dark! I think two men had a fight. I heard Chaunce's voice, then somebody else's snarling, and next the sound of blows. I didn't dare go down, of course, but I couldn't help thinking that—well, that Chaunce had finally found out what *Lew* did to Palmer two years ago, and now Chaunce could prove it on *Lew* somehow, and *Lew* was so desperate to shut him up—I really shouldn't talk to you like this! It might get somebody into trouble."

She astounded Brent. Her inconsistencies, self-contradictions and spitefully tossed-off accusations dismayed him. Before he could undertake to winnow her fancies from her facts, she gasped and stiffened and stared.

"Why, look! Look! How perfectly shameful!"

From behind her Brent saw she was gazing wide-eyed and scandalized at the house. All the lights downstairs were turned out. The windows of two rooms upstairs shone instead. One was Gloria's bedroom. Brent could see her seated at a vanity dresser, brushing her hair, clad only in a nightgown. The other, next to it, was also a bedroom, and in it Brent saw a man buttoning the tops of his pajamas. And the door connecting these two rooms stood wide open.

"They can't!" Gretchen cried out. "It's too horribly evil!"

Looking upon the situation in the house with the moral eyes of Lora Lorne, Brent was likewise shocked. Gretchen sped from him before he could stop her. She flew down the stairs and ran wildly, outracing him to the rear door, again possessed with unthinking impulses more vindictive than she herself knew. Still beyond Brent's reach, she sped through the house, up the stairs and into Gloria Meacham's bedroom.

"You—you hussy!" Gretchen shrieked.

Sweating with embarrassment, Brent stepped aside, into a dark door, concealing his presence. Gloria stood still in her nightgown, stunned and horrified. Behind her *Lew* Warren turned as white as the sheets on the bed.

"How unspeakably vile of you!" Gretchen flung at them both. "How utterly sinful! It's too despicable! You deserve to suffer for this! The whole world should

know just how wicked you both are!"

"Gret!" Warren snapped.

"I'll tell—I'll tell everybody—and don't you dare try to stop me!"

WARREN almost leaped at her. His face flushed with anger, he gripped both her arms. Even in his bare feet and his pajamas he was a powerful figure. Gretchen was frightened. He shook her and she sobbed.

"Come to your senses, Gret! You'd have realized this long ago if you weren't such a blind little kid. But you're going to keep it under your hat, understand? Because there's nothing wrong here. Gloria and I are married."

In the dark doorway, Brent blinked.

"Married!" Gretchen wailed. "You and Gloria—"

"Now you realize why I've shrugged off all the passes you've made at me, don't you?" Warren went on, hotly. "Gloria and I were married secretly in a town a hundred miles from here, four months ago. I shouldn't be staying with her tonight, but she's too upset to be left alone. You've got to keep strictly quiet about this, Gret!"

"But—but Gloria can't be married to you when she's already married to Palmer!" Gretchen whimpered. "She can't be your wife, really, when she already has a husband somewhere! I don't understand. Married! Oh, I can't bear it, I can't endure any more!"

Gretchen detached herself from Warren's grip, sobbing uncontrollably, and flung herself from the room. She dashed past Brent and down the stairs. Brent faded deeper into the darkness while Warren padded after her, calling, "Come back, Gret, come back!" Her wail carried up, "I'm never coming back now, never!" A door slammed and the noise of her was suddenly gone.

Warren muttered, prevented by his pajamas and his unshod feet from pursuing her further, and a distressed sound from Gloria's bedroom called him back. He hurried in, shutting the door, and Brent seized the chance to escape unseen.

Still rocked with amazement, he hurried into the storeroom above the garage, but Gretchen was no longer hiding there. He circled the grounds for minutes, searching

for her without result. This time, he was sure, she had fled from The Willows. This time, in her frantic agitation and again out of reach, she might really get hold of something more efficacious than iodine.

Brent paused near the gate, frowning up at the bedroom windows that were now blacked out by drawn curtains. This, he felt, was a very choice case. It involved not only a disappearance which was probably explicable as a case of homicide and body-hiding; it also included the violent death of Chauncey Seymore, which was definitely a murder. It might still produce a young female suicide, and besides other comparatively minor infractions of the law, it concealed a case of bigamy. All in all, Brent felt, it added up to the choicest catalogue of criminality he had ever encountered in one spot.

CHAPTER FIVE

SOS for Gretchen

BRENT couldn't keep his mind on Lora Lorne's work. From behind her revolting heaps of letters he enviously watched the excited hustle in the city room. The murder of Chauncey Seymore, with its mysterious ramifications reaching back into the Meacham disappearance case, was calling forth Garrett's boldest and blackest headlines. In an almost hysterical dither, Valerie Randall was striving to prove herself equal to its magnitude. Brent regarded her attempts with disdain and his old desk with longing, feeling unmercifully excluded from his rightful place.

As each new edition poured off the presses he scanned a fresh copy with apprehension. In his judgment the biggest sensation of the double mystery had not yet broken. He felt he exclusively knew just how to break it, but he also feared that another message from the prolific anonymous tipster in the case might lead Captain Russo to it first. So far, however, there was no hint of the crucial revelation that would really blow the lid off the news. Keeping his fingers crossed and praying, Brent executed Lora Lorne's sibylline duties as best he could.

Val's account did not mention the latest

vanishing act in the case—Gretchen Dennis's. By means of a telephone call to The Willows, Brent had learned that Gretchen hadn't reappeared since her precipitate departure last night. Accordingly, he had attacked this angle in his own manner. Lora Lorne's column today featured a letter printed in boxed italics:

Dear Heartsick,

I have a helpful message for you which is so confidential and urgent that I cannot print it here. I must trust you to communicate with me at the soonest possible moment, my dear, so that the tragedies of your loved ones will not unjustly be made harder to bear. Believe me when I say that their whole lives may depend upon your willingness to help them now, when they need your understanding so desperately.

Lora Lorne.

Hoping Garrett was too busy to ponder over the significance of this cryptic plea, Brent eased out the swinging doors, police headquarters his destination.

Captain Russo's department was deserted. Even Russo's secretary's desk was momentarily vacant, leaving the inner office unguarded. Brent made the most of a rare opportunity to snoop through the papers on the captain's desk. His hands fastened on a folder tabbed *Meacham, Palmer: Statements*. The statements were the signed and sworn testimony of everyone involved, taken within a few days of Palmer Meacham's disappearance.

That bearing Gloria Meacham's signature tallied in every detail with the version published in the *Recorder*—a version which Brent now suspected was interlarded with falsehoods.

That of Chauncey Seymore could be summed up in his previously quoted words: "Really, old boy, I haven't the foggiest."

The servants at The Willows uniformly said that they had retired while the Meachams were still absent that night, and had slept undisturbed.

Gretchen Dennis's statement interested Brent with a new and possibly significant fact:

On the night of June 3, 1940, I stayed with my sister Gloria in her office on the second floor of Gloria Frocks. I heard a knock at the street door. Gloria was busy worrying over her ledgers, so I went down.

It was Palmer Meacham. I unlatched the door and he said, "Thank you, Gretchen, I'll come up in a minute." He held the door open slightly, so it couldn't catch again, and went on talking to somebody who was standing beside him. I couldn't see who the other man was, but I heard Palmer say, "You're asking me to lend you money when you have no prospect of paying it back within the next five years, if ever, and I'm damned if I'll do it, no matter how you may appeal to my loyalty." He sounded mad, but I wasn't interested in business talk, any anyway I'd been reading an exciting romantic book while Gloria worked and I wanted to get back to it. I was reading the book again in Gloria's office when Palmer came in. They started talking about a very personal matter, so I thought I'd better go home. On the way out I noticed Palmer had forgotten to latch the front door behind him. I made sure it was locked again, so nobody could sneak in and steal any dresses off the racks, and took a taxi home. I went right to bed and that's all I know.

The door opened and a plump-faced officer looked in. "Want Russo?" he inquired fraternally. "He's out. Confidentially, Bill, he's on his way to make a pinch in the Seymore killing."

THANKFUL that Russo's secretary, a peculiarly incurious guy for a cop, believed him still to be working the police trick, Brent slipped the folder under a stack of less confidential papers, nodded his thanks and ambled out.

The secretary's tip indicated either Lew Warren's or Gloria Meacham's imminent arrest. Gloria was the more newsworthy possibility, and Val had no wind of it so far. Brent increased his speed, went first into a telephone booth where he learned that Mrs. Meacham had "gone to business," then out.

Parking in front of Gloria Frocks, Inc., he entered a modernistic glass door. After an argument with a graciously firm head saleslady, then a less gracious but even firmer secretary, he managed to reach the second floor. He waited in a bookkeeper's office, one whole wall of which was taken up by the black face of a vault, until Gloria Meacham finally admitted him.

Pale and worn as she was, she retained her crisp, efficient look. She shut the door behind him and nervously refused a cigarette, preparing herself for Brent's opening thrust.

"It isn't possible for me to believe," he said, "that a highly intelligent woman would deliberately commit bigamy with her eyes as wide open as yours are."

"Mr. Brent!"

"But you did it. Palmer Meacham is still legally your husband, and as matters stand he'll continue to be legally your husband for five more years. But for the past four months Lewis Warren has also been your husband, secretly and illegally. Now, no one realizes better than I do that love is a powerful force, Mrs. Meacham, but I still can't understand this. Did you marry Warren because you're certain in your own mind that you're not really a bigamist, even though the law may technically insist you are? That is, are you—you alone—certain that Palmer Meacham is definitely dead?"

It struck home. Gloria Meacham's lips broke apart with horror; her eyes widened as if at a ghost and her whole face went pasty. While she sat there with her breath lost, the door opened, her secretary was waved aside and Lewis Warren strode in.

"It's all right, Gloria!" he said quickly. "Don't let this worry you. It's a crazy mistake, that's all!"

Captain Russo followed Warren, his face grave, carrying an object which astonished Brent. It was a sword, a long, heavy, antique sword of Oriental origin. Holding it in his two bony hands, he regarded it sorrowfully as he spoke to Warren's secret wife.

"I hate having to pin murders on people," he said, "but it's my job. In all fairness, Mrs. Meacham, I wanted you to be the first to know that Mr. Warren is about to be charged with the homicide of Chauncey Seymore. He insists this sword, like all the other deadly weapons he owns, is merely a model he uses in drawing his comic strip about an adventurous captain of the Marines. He insists he bought it only last evening from a pawnshop, but I wonder. I'm convinced it's the weapon he used to kill Mr. Seymore. That's all I have to say at the moment. Come along, Mr. Warren. Good-bye, Mrs. Meacham."

GLORIA sat still stunned as Warren strode out, his eyes warning her to be silent, Captain Russo sadly trailing him

with the Japanese ceremonial sword.

"Russo has a hard mind to change, Gloria," Brent said gently. "But you can change it, I think, by telling him the truth, as you've never told it before. Otherwise I'm afraid the law will automatically take care of that bigamy thing. You legally have two husbands now but, the way it looks, you'll soon have none."

Gloria dropped her head to the desk and both her hands covered her face. Whatever her true story might be, Brent saw, a desperate pressure was sealing her lips. He wagged his head, weighed down with a Lorne-like sympathy, and quietly left her there alone, sobbing with anguish . . .

Back in his cubicle, Brent waited and squirmed and learned that Gloria Meacham's unwillingness to talk was no greater than Gretchen's.

Lora Lorne's printed appeal to Gretchen had by this time penetrated throughout the city, but it remained unanswered hour after hour. Brent's hopes drooped as the cylinder presses in the basement finally stopped growling for the night. Again seven overworked reporters trudged out, leaving only Garrett and Val Randall in the city room with him.

Scanning a copy of the final edition, Brent found reassurance in the fact that the big break—the revelation he hoped to spring himself—was still impending. His eagerness sent him again to Garrett's desk, where he was received with a formidable scowl.

"Even before you begin, Grandma," Garrett grated, "the answer is definitely no!"

"Man to man," Brent insisted. "I've got the answer to a city editor's prayer, the inside track on Russo, on everybody. Tonight's the night. Picture the headline! 'Recorder Reporter Discovers—'"

"Man to man, no!" Garrett said. "Whatever it may be, Russo will shortly discover it for himself, and that's soon enough in a town where the *Recorder* has no competition. There's only one place where your services are needed. In the Lorne column, Grandma."

Brent's jaw hardened. "Damn it, Garrett, if I should pop up in the midst of the biggest flash yet, you won't be able to blue-pencil me! Go ahead, get as tough as

you please—I'll force you to credit me with the break, and you can't stop me."

Garrett growled. "I'm warning you for the last time, Brent. Stick to your knitting, or I'll let it slip out—in print—just who Lora Lorne actually is, and keep you there forever afterward. I might even announce that Miss Lorne in her failing years has confidently turned over her column to her only son, Larry Lorne."

Brent blanched. He believed Garrett was actually prepared to commit this reprehensible deed, even at the possible cost of detracting from the value of the Lorne column—which effect it probably wouldn't have anyway. Multitudes of the distressed turned hopefully to fortune tellers of both sexes, so why not to a male adviser like the several highly successful ones who extemporaneously rearranged human lives over the radio while millions of listeners nodded approval? The worst of it was that much publicity would internationally identify Brent with the type of work he most heartily loathed. Never afterward would he be able to return to straight reporting on any paper published anywhere. He would be eternally condemned to grapple with the pangs of the romantically blighted.

"No one can be so damned inhuman as you profess to be, Garrett!" he said bitterly. "God help me, I've got to gamble that there's a spark of mercy still glowing faintly somewhere in your makeup!"

HIS heels hit the floor forcefully and he slammed out of the swinging doors. With reckless directness he drove out Route 101. Coming within sight of The Willows, he parked at the side of the highway, lights out, and watched the house sitting among the lacy trees ahead.

Cars in the driveway and lighted windows downstairs indicated that Captain Russo was again grilling Gloria Meacham with sad consideration. Brent waited until the cars hummed away, until the lower windows went dark and others upstairs came alight. When, at last, the shine of these also vanished, he left his car and walked quietly until he reached the garage deep in the Meacham grounds.

In the storeroom under the garage roof

he found no sign that Gretchen had returned. Where she might be hiding now, whether she might be dead or alive, Brent couldn't guess. His manner anxiously wary, he took up the flashlight, then prowled across the grounds again until he found the tree against which he'd left the garden spade leaning last night. Carrying it, he moved to the tennis court. Reasonably sure no one in the house suspected his presence, he played the flashlight beam across the clay surface.

The light found scattered spots apparently fresher than the surrounding clay. Brent surmised that someone had here and there made trial excavations. A larger area near the net indicated a major operation had occurred there. It was, moreover, the very place where Lew Warren had maneuvered the roller in the dark twenty-four hours ago. Brent stood on it, bore his weight on the shovel, drove its blade as deep as the hard-packed clay would allow.

He dug rapidly in the dark, sweating, and saw the shovelfuls change color. They became a dirty white. The stuff was no longer clay, but a sort of crumbly mortar—more properly, lime.

He shuddered as the shovel struck something softly tough, something that resisted the blade. Dropping to his knees, he pawed loose lumps away from it. It took shape—the shape of a man's head and shoulders—a shrunken, dry, mummified head.

Brent groaned with dismay as a light suddenly appeared, needling through the night at him. It struck from behind, froze him. A second appeared, then a third, a fourth. Half a dozen thin shafts concentrated on him as he sprang up. Blinded, he heard footfalls as the six men holding the six flashlights converged on him. He was surrounded, and chilled with the thought that he was losing his exclusive break—particularly chilled when he discerned in the glow the cadaverous features of Captain Russo.

"Thank you, Brent, for saving us a bit of physical labor," the captain said mournfully. "I don't thank you, however, for attempting to confiscate my case. If you're the one who sent this to me, couldn't you

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wait for me to act on the suggestion?"

He held out a man's wrist-watch. It was in bad condition. The strap was dried and cracked, the case almost eaten away, the dial corroded beyond legibility. To it clung some of the white stuff that Brent had been digging from the hole in the tennis court.

"Palmer Meacham's?" Brent sighed.

"Of course."

"I didn't send it," Brent said thickly. "This is the first time I've ever dug up this particular cadaver. It was a theory, that's all—one that happened to be deadly correct. It—the thing in there—" He stared down into the beams now centering on the hollow. "It's Palmer Meacham's body."

"Of course, Brent," Captain Russo agreed in his uncanny funereal tone. "Of course the long-lost body of Palmer Meacham, undoubtedly two years in the moldering."

CHAPTER SIX

Sometimes Murder Won't Out

RUSSO asked, his glassy eyes unutterably morose: "That's all of it, Brent?"

Brent sagged in his chair, wrung by Russo's indefatigable grilling, his face blue with beard. After the endless, wearing night, the sunlight of a new day peeped through the headquarters windows, so cheerfully bright that it plunged Brent's spirits into deeper gloom. He had no secrets left. Russo had persistently extracted every one of them, leaving him feeling as limp as if he had had all his molars uprooted without benefit of novocaine.

"God knows that's all!" he mumbled.

"Continue to sit there, please," the captain advised sadly, "as decorously as you can manage."

Russo stepped into an adjoining office and returned with Lew Warren in tow. Warren's capacity for sustained indignation was not yet exhausted. Seeming constantly on the point of unleashing a haymaker, he glared at Russo. Russo went unfrightened into another office and this time returned with Gloria Meacham. Her face pictured complete hopelessness, yet

she still had a grip on herself, and she managed a faint smile for Warren. Warren's hand clasped hers as they faced the captain and Brent's sympathy for them grew warmer.

"Why have you dragged Gloria in here?" Warren demanded to know. "Chaunce Seymore confessed to shooting Gloria's husband. Isn't that enough?"

"Unfortunately, no," Russo answered.

"Why the hell not?"

"Because, according to the coroner's report, Palmer Meacham did not die as the result of a bullet wound. In fact, he wasn't shot at all."

Brent sat up and Warren looked irately confused, but Gloria Meacham's paleness betrayed that this startling revelation was not news to her.

Brent risked a question. "Then how *did* Palmer Meacham die?"

"Asphyxiation."

"What!" Light kindled in Brent's eyes when he saw that this too failed to surprise Gloria. He added, half to himself, "Ah!"

Russo's bony fingers played with the report submitted by the coroner, who had evidently devoted the whole night to a post mortem examination of Palmer Meacham's remains following their removal from The Willows.

"Amateur killers make the most amateurish mistakes," the captain droned on. "They persist in believing the fallacy that quicklime will destroy a dead body when the truth is just the reverse. Actually it desiccates the flesh and prevents putrefaction. After two years' interment, Palmer Meacham's corpse remains preserved in a condition which would arouse the envy of a mortician."

"Chaunce didn't actually kill Palmer, then?" Warren asked quickly. "His confession is no good?"

"Palmer Meacham's body itself answers your question," Russo said. "When he was killed the construction of the tennis court was nearing completion. The clay surface was still to be laid, and the exposed bed of subsoil was easy to dig. Lime was available among the materials to be used for mixing the cement for setting the various iron posts. If the lime hadn't prevented the decomposition of the body we might have accepted Chauncey Seymore's

confession as valid. I'm therefore forced to conclude that Seymore's false confession was a gallant attempt to shield the woman he loved—you, Mrs. Meacham."

THE captain's uncanny eyes burned at Gloria Meacham.

"As to your situation when your husband was murdered, we have a more complete picture than you think. Your marriage was no longer a happy one. You'd fallen out of love with Palmer Meacham—with good reason, no doubt, since I understand he could be an extremely mean-tempered and selfish man—and you'd fallen *in* love with Mr. Warren. I believe you and Mr. Warren had conducted yourselves irreproachably, but that night, when Palmer Meacham learned he'd been supplanted in your affections by Mr. Warren, he reacted with vindictive jealousy. He had a showdown with you about it in your office—a very serious quarrel."

Gloria's drawn face told Brent this much was undoubtedly the case.

"The result was a bitter break between you and your husband," Russo continued sorrowfully. "It placed you in a critical position, Mrs. Meacham. If he should sue you for divorce, naming Mr. Warren co-respondent, it would cost you plenty. As the defendant in a divorce action charging adultery, you would receive no cash settlement. You would lose the share of Mr. Meacham's estate which you would otherwise eventually receive, and you would cease to be the beneficiary named in his large insurance policies. Also, this loss would hit you at the worst possible time.

"Your recently established business, Gloria Frocks—the fulfillment of an ambition made possible by your husband's backing—would collapse the moment his support was removed. In those days, moreover, Mr. Warren had still to conceive his successful character of Captain Kerry of the U. S. Marines. He was practically starving, totally unable to help you to keep your shop, unable even to support you as his wife. I need not point out that Palmer Meacham's death, occurring so promptly as it did, completely solved your financial and emotional problems."

Russo's sigh deplored it.

"Once your husband had called it quits with you, Mrs. Meacham, you immediate-

ly warned Mr. Warren of serious trouble impending. I believe Warren prevented this trouble quickly and simply by killing Palmer Meacham. The district attorney will determine your own degree of complicity, but since that night I'm sure you've had no doubt at all that your husband was dead."

Russo would feel even more certain of that, Brent reflected, should he learn that Gloria had recently become Mrs. Lewis Warren.

"All that was two years ago," the captain continued. "Since then you've been a woman with a missing husband but two ardent admirers—Mr. Warren and Mr. Seymore. Their rivalry—"

"Chance was my best pal!" Warren interrupted. "He was nuts about Gloria, yes, but he knew how she felt and he took it like the swell sport he was."

Russo adhered to his own notion. "As a means of eliminating you, his rival, Seymore sent me from time to time anonymous tips concerning the fate of Palmer Meacham. Suspecting you'd killed him, Seymore undertook to prove it. Last night he finally succeeded in finding the concealed body. You surprised him at it, attacked him fatally with the sword you'd just bought and brought along in your car—"

"Wait," Brent dared interrupt. "Didn't the coroner find traces of lime in Seymore's wounds?"

Looking discomfited and pained, Russo continued: "After which you hastily covered over the corpse again, Mr. Warren. Mr. Seymore's confession need be considered nothing other than the irrationally chivalrous impulse of a dying man. His purpose was to save the woman he loved from implication in her husband's murder, and if she must love a two-time killer, he was willing, in his last agonized moments, to let her have—"

BRENT exploded. "Hold it, Russo! Seymore was not out of his head when he wrote that confession. He knew exactly what he was doing, and he had a better reason than that for doing it. The facts don't fit your theory. You're stretching some of them too far and leaving others out. For example, you've omitted to mention that somebody drugged Gloria in

order to conceal his operations from her while digging for the body. And who sent you Meacham's strap-watch, with instructions as to just where you could find the corpse it had just come off of? Not Seymore! He was too busy dying that night. Besides, you've got him wrong. He—"

"Yes!" Gloria Meacham interrupted, straining forward in her chair, before Russo could silence Brent. "You *have* got Chaunce all wrong! It wasn't at all as you make it out. I—I'll tell you what really happened. I've got to, now—at last I must—for Lew's sake. It will make you think I'm the one who killed Palmer after all, but—"

"Finally, Mrs. Meacham, the truth?" Russo said, sadly nodding her on.

She gripped the arms of her chair and her words came in a rush.

"It began— Palmer did come to my office in anger that night two years ago. We did discuss Lew. It actually was a complete blow-up. Palmer swore he'd divorce me, that I'd never get another cent from him, and stalked out of the office. You hear that? Palmer left me there at my desk. I was so upset I just sat there trying to straighten my wits. After fully an hour, I began to close up the shop. I took the ledgers back to the vault. I'd left the vault standing open, but now I found it closed and locked. It puzzled me. I didn't dream then what it really meant. I opened it again—and found Palmer lying on the floor inside it, dead."

Brent nodded and murmured, "Asphyxiation."

"Don't you understand?" Gloria implored Russo breathlessly. "All during that hour I'd thought I was alone in the shop. When Palmer left my office I thought he'd also left the building. But he hadn't. Actually he'd gone no farther than thirty feet from my desk. Then something had happened to him, something I didn't see because he'd closed the door behind him, something I didn't suspect at all. Somehow he'd gotten inside that vault, and its door had been closed on him and locked. Perhaps he'd called, shouted, trying to get out, but not a whisper had reached me. I was stunned, of course, when I found him there. I dragged him out of the vault and tried to revive

him, but it—it was hopeless by then."

Brent blurted: "He couldn't have done that to himself! Somebody did it to him, and the idea was murder."

Russo nodded. "The idea was murder. But why, Mrs. Meacham, didn't you notify the police at once?"

"Because I realized how the whole situation would incriminate me. My younger sister Gretchen had overheard part of my quarrel with Palmer. I couldn't be sure what sort of a story she'd tell the police. I couldn't know how much Palmer's brothers knew about me and Lew—he might have told them his intentions before coming to me. Everything pointed to my having killed Palmer—I seemed to have had a motive, a means and an opportunity. I'd been alone with Palmer in a locked store, and he was dead, and I had absolutely no way of disproving any of these utterly damning circumstances."

"But you soon thought of a way out, Mrs. Meacham," Russo said.

"Yes. I telephoned Chaunce—not Lew, because that would have made it look even blacker—and begged Chaunce to help me. By the time he arrived at the store I was so distracted I could scarcely speak. Chaunce said I mustn't tell him anything about what had happened—in case he was questioned, he didn't want to know the truth—and he didn't question me himself. Chaunce was like that—thoroughly a gallant gentleman. He sent me home in my car and promised he'd take care of everything. Not since that moment when I drove away—not until tonight—did I have any idea at all what he'd really done about—about Palmer's body."

RUSSO permitted his dry eyebrows to rise. "You soon learned Seymore had removed your husband's body from your store, but do you actually mean you weren't aware he'd transported it to The Willows and buried it under your own tennis court?"

Gloria said: "He never told me. When I asked him, he simply said everything was fixed and I shouldn't worry. After that he never permitted me to speak of it again. During these past two years Chaunce was the only one on earth who knew definitely what had become of Palmer."

Amazement held Brent. "Well, for God's sake!" he said. "Practically everything is clear now, Russo."

"Is it, Brent?" the captain said.

"Look here." Brent went so far as to leave his chair. "Ever since Palmer Meacham vanished, someone had been anxious for his body to be found. The reason? So that the fact of his death could be legally established right away and his estate settled. That's why the series of tips were sent to you and to the three Meacham brothers. For two years none of these tips paid off. But finally, two nights ago, that unknown person somehow came to the conclusion that Palmer Meacham's body must be buried beneath the tennis court. The things that happened then show how he went to work."

"Do they, Brent?" the captain said.

"The unknown person began by sneaking into The Willows. Gloria was alone in the house. He jumped her from behind, using a napkin soaked with ether. Why? Because he had some digging to do nearby and had to conceal his identity from her. Leaving her unconscious, he dug. He actually found Palmer Meacham's body. He detached the watch from the dead man's wrist to use as a final tip to you, Russo—a tip straight from the grave. At that point Chauncey Seymore complicated matters by making another of his frequent visits to the house.

"Seymore understood instantly what was up. He phoned a warning to Lew

Warren, left a note pinned on Gloria and went out unarmed to deal with the man digging in the dark. Discovered, that man struck back. Why so desperately? Because he was the man who shut Palmer Meacham inside the vault two years ago. He attacked Seymore not with a sword, Russo, but with his garden spade. As Seymore staggered off, he followed. He dropped Seymore in the midst of a garden plot, continued to chop at him with the shovel until he thought Seymore dead. Then, he hurried off."

Brent's eyes were afire, but Russo sadly wagged his head.

"Next Lew Warren entered The Willows, in response to Seymore's telephone message. Warren found Gloria still unconscious, but no sign of Seymore. Hunting for him outside, Warren came upon Palmer Meacham's body lying exposed in the hole in the tennis court. A nasty jolt for you, Lew, I'm sure. You feared that if the body should be found there Gloria would have a horrible mess of explaining to do, so you covered the body again, using the roller to smooth the clay. And at that point Seymore, who'd been lying unconscious in the garden beyond, recovered strength to stagger into the house.

"There he wrote his false confession. Believing Gloria was about to get nailed for a murder, Seymore made his last and greatest gesture of gallantry—he declared he'd committed the killing himself. He wouldn't have made the mistake he did—

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wouldn't have written the word 'shot'—if he hadn't been suffering intense pain."

Brent straightened, drawing a much needed breath. "There's the whole story, Russo. You can't continue to hold Gloria and Lew after this."

"Can't I?" the captain said gloomily. "Remove yourself, or I will have you removed to a cell from which further removal will be all but impossible."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hell on Wheels

BRENT paused in Russo's outer office. Seated in three chairs side by side, the three surviving Meacham brothers were waiting there—Jerome of the blunt chin, Malcolm of the deep-set eyes, Simon of the sharp nose and salty temples.

Brent passed them, frowning. Trudging down the front steps of headquarters, he encountered Garrett and Valerie Randall. Looking fresh and energetic after a sound night's sleep, they gave him only a brief glance, as they would any unnoteworthy object, and hurried in.

He drove wearily but rapidly to the *Recorder* plant. Pulling himself up the iron stairs, he crossed the deserted city room and wedged himself inside Lora Lorne's perfumed torture chamber. The first morning's mail had arrived, augmenting the accumulation of letters on his table. Brent pawed through the thirty-odd new ones and finished with a disappointed mutter. None was distinguished by Gretchen's cultivated penmanship. Still she had failed to respond to Lora Lorne's published plea.

Brent was stymied. Despondently tramping back to his car, he was reminded that he also lacked breakfast.

He slid under the steering wheel, and his nerves began to tighten. He sensed a presence. An alert hunch warned him that someone was crouched in the rear of his car, hiding behind the front seat. Straining his ears, he heard the faint sound of excited breathing. He took hold of his curiosity, determined to play his chances guardedly. Engine whirring, he started off.

In an outlying section he pulled into the yard of an elaborate roadside stand featuring curb service. He was approached

by a girl wearing a majorette costume so scanty that Brent felt positive she would sooner or later turn up in Lora Lorne's mail.

"Two hamburgers," Brent said. "Make it four. And four cups of coffee."

The majorette plainly considered him a dubious case, but relayed the order. Brent had placed his car strategically. The aroma of the frying hamburgers wafted into it accompanied by the mellow fragrance of the coffee urn. When the tray was hooked to his door he paid in full, thereby relieving the majorette's misgivings, and munched slowly, making gratified sounds in his throat. In response came a low, longing moan from the space behind his seat. "Have some, Gret," Brent said.

GRETCHEN rose, her face anguished, one hand reaching for a sandwich, the other for a coffee mug. Brent said nothing while she wolfed the food. She quickly followed the first serving with a second.

"Golly!" she gasped. "I was starving. I hadn't had a bite since night before last. I feel like a new woman. Thanks!"

"With the compliments of Lora Lorne," Brent said. "Where have you been, Gret?"

"Wandering around. Sitting in movie shows, seeing the same lousy picture over and over. Hiding in parked cars. Finally I decided I'd either drop dead soon or get picked up by the police, so I thought I'd better see why Miss Lorne wanted me. I was getting up nerve to go into the newspaper office when you came out, so I slipped into your car before you got to it—" She sighed. "I've had a lot of time to think things over, too."

"Lew and Gloria will appreciate that. They're under arrest now. Presently they'll be charged with murder. They need a little sympathy in the family."

Gretchen was alarmed. "It's perfectly dizzy to arrest them!" Her acute attack of good sense had the effect of making her highly attractive in Brent's eyes—his own, not Lora Lorne's. "I guess I've been pretty silly. I do wish I could make up for all the trouble I've caused."

"You can," Brent said, "because you know who really killed Palmer Meacham two years ago."

Gretchen squeaked her astonishment. "I know?"

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"You know," Brent repeated, "without knowing that you know. For two years you've been aware of it without being aware that you were aware of it, if you follow me."

"Holy cats!" Gretchen cried. "What do I know? Tell me!"

Brent twisted to face her. "Not yet. It would be of much greater benefit to Gloria and Lew if the truth should dawn on you when you're in the presence of witnesses, preferably an officer of the law."

Round-eyed, Gretchen said: "I could use another hamburger, but let's go. You mean for two years I've known who a murderer is without knowing who he is? I don't get it—but golly!"

Brent elatedly headed toward the city while Gretchen sat with a rapt expression, lost in puzzlement. Presently she climbed over the back of the seat to sit beside Brent, whereupon he decided her legs were beyond criticism.

Turning to the front of headquarters, Brent slowed, gazing thoughtfully at three men descending the steps. The Meacham brothers, Simon and Malcolm and Jerome, had been released by Russo. Talking together, they entered a waiting car. As it rolled away Brent adjusted his plans and followed it.

"Sit tight," he advised Gretchen. "This looks even better."

THE Meacham sedan sped along Route 101, bound for The Willows. Brent was half a mile behind when it turned through the stone gate, from which the chain had been removed. Following along the driveway, he found that the three men had gone to the tennis court. They gazed into the hole which had for so long concealed their dead brother's remains, and wagged their heads.

Braking near them, Brent said, "Stay here, Gret." He joined them despite their unfriendly frowns. Also wagging his head over the cavity, he inquired of all three of them, "Which of you killed him?"

The square-chinned Jerome resumed his role as spokesman. "See here! Your intrusion—your attitude of levity—"

"I happen to mean it," Brent broke in, his face set. "One of you three murdered your brother Palmer. The same one also



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attempted to frame Gloria for it and recently killed Chauncey Seymore. That much is certain. The only remaining question is, which?"

The three Meachams looked indignant. "You're going too far, young man!" the sharp-nosed Simon Meacham said.

"I suggest you listen to me a moment, gentlemen. Since one of you is unquestionably a murderer, the other two of you should welcome this chance to fix the guilt on him. That will be done very promptly now. You see Miss Gretchen Dennis sitting in my car? I'm taking her to police headquarters, where she will name the guilty man."

The three Meachams stared. "It has to be one of you," he went on. "Check back to the beginning. On the night of his disappearance Palmer Meacham went to Gloria Frocks accompanied by one of his brothers. This particular brother, pressed for money, implored Palmer for a loan. Palmer felt it was a bad risk and flatly refused. He then went into the store, leaving his brother outside the street door in a distressed financial situation—so distressed that this brother could not let the matter rest there. He held the front door of the shop open, after Palmer had gone in, and quietly followed him to the hallway of the office suite on the second floor."

The Meachams glanced at each other apprehensively, as Brent continued.

"Palmer's brother heard him quarreling with Gloria. He abandoned all hope of appealing to him for a loan. The brother's mind reverted to extreme measures. While listening, he avariciously seized upon a means of obtaining a good part of all Palmer's money—one-third, to be exact.

"He could accomplish this by murdering Palmer and pinning the murder on Gloria. The law would do the rest. It's a basic principle of the law, you know, that a criminal may not benefit by his crimes. She would be strictly excluded from his estate, and it would pass, instead, to Palmer's next-of-kin—to you three brothers, equally."

THE three brothers were equally speechless. "Killing Palmer would mean that the

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two non-participating brothers would benefit in like share," Brent pointed out, "but the all-important angle was that the guilty one would collect a sizable fortune along with them. The quarrel in the office between Palmer and Gloria was a rare homicidal opportunity. When Palmer emerged, his waiting brother promptly made the most of it. He slugged Palmer, using a paperweight or an ash-tray from one of the nearby desks. Making no noise to alarm Gloria, he dragged Palmer into the open vault. He closed the vault door, scattered the combination and left Palmer imprisoned within it, to die—which Palmer did immediately the oxygen inside it became exhausted.

"The murderer then left, evidently believing the body would be discovered when the vault was opened for business the next morning. He was due for a baffling surprise. The next day passed without any news whatever concerning the corpse of Palmer Meacham. The second and third days were also blank. On the morning of the fourth day, Gloria Meacham finally informed the police her husband was missing.

"The hunt for Palmer Meacham began and progressed without result. One of you three gentlemen had by then become a painfully puzzled man. You had committed a fratricide, had left your victim in a spot where he should have readily come to light, and yet he hadn't done so. Hour after hour, day after day, you were plagued with the black question of what had become of Palmer Meacham's body—and you, his murderer, didn't know!"

Again the three brothers exchanged apprehensive glances.

"The disappearance of Palmer Meacham's corpse threw a monkey-wrench into your scheme. As long as the fact of his death remained unestablished, his estate could not be settled—not for seven years. Worse, with no murder officially on record, Gloria couldn't be framed for it, and while she remained unconvicted you'd be left in the financial soup.

"Being unable to ask anyone's assistance on this problem, you had to reason it out alone, secretly. So you began sending anonymous tips to the police, and others to Gloria on the theory that her nerves

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would break and she would yammer out her dead husband's whereabouts."

Simon Meacham said: "But we all received those telegrams—all three of us!"

"Naturally, when the culprit sent the wires he included one for himself. In this way he effectively shielded himself from suspicion, though his attack on the central problem—the location of Palmer's corpse—was slow and bumbling. Neither of his two major guesses—the storerooms above Gloria Frocks and the family mausoleum—worked out. Finally, he hit upon the same solution that occurred to me when I saw a bird's-eye view of this estate showing the tennis court then under construction. Palmer had to be buried under that tennis court, and so, two nights ago, the murderer set out to disinter him.

"The rest is a matter of recent record—the etherizing of Gloria so that the bodyhunter could dig while concealing his identity, the interruption by Chauncey Seymore, whose interference, so sympathetic to Gloria, had to be eliminated. The plan to frame Gloria began functioning again after a long lapse. It looked highly promising—until now. Apparently no one has realized until now that Gretchen Dennis has held the key to the mystery from the very outset."

THE three brothers peered again at Gretchen, and Gretchen, shuddering a little, shrank lower in her seat.

"Opening the door of Gloria Frocks for Palmer that night, Gretchen saw the man to whom he was talking and heard what was said. Before leaving the store, she saw evidence that Palmer's murderously inclined brother had sneaked inside and was then lurking in the dark. She's now about to remind the police of the nature of this conclusive evidence, under my sponsorship. The case is practically closed, gentlemen. Just wait here patiently for about half an hour and you'll be duly placed under arrest for both murders. Good day, gentlemen. It's been nice knowing the other two of you, anyway."

The three Meachams continued to stare as Brent returned briskly to his car. He clashed the gears and started off.

"I'm scared!" Gretchen said. "I'm the

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only one who knows what I don't know! What if something should happen to me all of a sudden? Then what'll become of Gloria and Lew? What if the murderer should try to stop me from telling—"

"He's trying right now," Brent answered. "A minute ago a car drove out of The Willows hell-bent. It's following us."

Gretchen gazed back and wailed. In the rear-view mirror Brent saw the pursuing car reflected. It was the same sedan that had carried the three Meacham brothers to The Willows, but now, he was sure, only one of them was aboard. Neither he nor Gretchen could see the man at the wheel. The windshield was dusty; sunlight flickered across it. Brent could be sure of only one thing: the driver was coming after him under full power, recklessly determined that Gretchen should never reach Captain Russo.

Brent tightened as a red light loomed ahead. Watching the intersection but not diminishing his speed, he whizzed through it. It changed to green just in time to oblige the car behind. They were no longer in open country. The highway became a street. Traffic grew thicker.

COPS' whistles shrilled and pedestrians scattered. Headquarters stood only a few blocks away now, but at this point Gretchen began to squeak a warning. The pursuing car was creeping closer.

"He's coming at us!" Gretchen shrieked.

The other car veered, tires wailing, in a swift curve aimed broadside at Brent's. He jammed on the gas and surged ahead, but too slowly. A black, streamlined hood

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shot at him like an air-going torpedo. The noise stopped all at once and many voices blended into an excited babble. Brent lay with the back of his neck jammed against the dome-light. The car was upside down. The doors had jammed.

Cops came pouring out of headquarters to surround both wrecks. Watching like an ape in a circus cage, Brent saw Captain Russo, Valerie Randall and Garrett. Presently Brent discerned Gretchen skittering about out there, peering into the other car. Until then he hadn't realized she had squeezed out through a warped window too small to pass his hulking body. She dashed back to him, breathless.

“It—it's—”

“Certainly it is!” Brent complained. “It began two years ago, didn't it? New automobiles and tires were still being sold at that time. Simon and Malcolm Meacham were still making money. The business of importing art objects from Europe and the Orient would be the first to suffer because of the war. Certainly it was Jerome you heard trying to get a loan from Palmer that night, with no prospects of paying it back for the duration.”

Gretchen said: “He's awful dead.”

Garrett brushed her aside, peered in at Brent and gave Val a nudge. “Hop back to the news room and start writing this, Val! When the two cars collided, Miss Gretchen Dennis was being driven to police headquarters by an unidentified man. Got that? By an unidentified man!” And Garrett swung off, chuckling grimly.

Official attention was centered on the still-warm corpse of the two-time killer, Jerome Meacham, and only Gretchen had a thought for Brent.

“Somebody just said they thought somebody else might bring a hacksaw sometime soon,” she said. “I'm so surprised! If you hadn't opened my eyes, I never would have tumbled to what I didn't know I knew. I see everything now—how wrong I was about Lew and Gloria, and even about Lora Lorne. I hope I'll have a chance to tell her how sorry I am.”

“Stick around, Gret,” Brent sighed. “As soon as I get out of here we'll talk it over at the most glamorous soda-fountain in town.”

He did not add “as woman to woman.”

(Continued from page 80)

"I can cover one door from here and the inside of the place, unless someone draws the shades at Wanilek's windows," Nick said. "You take the street and cover the other entrance."

"Nuts," Hollins said. But he went out.

Nick leaned against the hall window-sill and waited. This was eleven A. M. He watched Wanilek's office and wondered glumly if the police were as diligently watching the offices, and residences, of the other plastic surgeons in the city directory, as they had agreed to.

Wanilek, of course, was the warmest lead. He was the one man of his calling whose background was hazy enough to make him a possibility. For that reason Nick Sydney had insisted on saving Wanilek for himself. So he waited.

He saw the man after a while. Saw a door open and Wanilek step into the waiting-room—a small man with spectacles and a wedge of bristling Van Dyke. The surgeon looked at some magazines on a table, selected one and went back into his sanctum with it. This was at one-thirty P. M.

At three, a client arrived. A woman. Wanilek talked to her in the waiting-room, ushered her into his office and was closeted there with her until she left half an hour later.

At four twenty Nick jerked to attention. The door of Wanilek's waiting-room had opened again. Two men entered. One of them was a walking mummy.

NICK took in a breath and made for the stairs. He was sore. The two men—King Clark and Dirk—had not entered the building by way of the entrance he'd been watching, therefore they must have come in the other way. Why hadn't Hollins flagged him?

There was no sign of Hollins. At top speed Nick barged into the building and made for the second floor. He took the stairs three at a time, with springs in his knees. When he paused by Wanilek's door he was tense, ready for action.

There was no sound inside. Nick pushed the door open. The waiting-room was empty, the door of the surgeon's office shut. That door had a glass panel. With knees bent and body hunched forward in

a crouch, Nick went toward it on his toes. His breath fogged the glass.

They had worked fast, those two. Dr. Rudolph Wanilek was hog-tied to a chair against the wall, his face a thundercloud, eyes ablaze with hate. King Clark stood quietly to one side, hands in pockets.

It was obviously Dirk's show. Dirk was running it. Bulging on a chair in front of a mirror, he slowly and viciously peeled the bandages from his face, his voice raw with rage as he talked to Wanilek's reflection in the glass.

One savage, conclusive tug pulled the last coil of bandage loose, and Dirk turned around. It wasn't a handsome face he showed the doctor. The mouth was anger-twisted, the eyes were smoking coals. And across that unlovely face were letters that stood out in livid contrast to its pallor—ugly, accusing letters that spelled the word KILLER!

Dirk's murderous snarl thinned into syllables and became intelligible. "You done it! You, Wanilek You sleazy double-crosser, you was paid plenty to work on me, but damn your soul, you marked me with acid or somethin' when you was operatin'! You won't never mark no one else!"

His hand came out of his coat pocket, clutching a gun. Nick Sydney slammed the door open and yelled, "Hold it!"

He could have bellowed the order in Chinese for all the difference it made. The man with the word KILLER on his face was oblivious to everything but Dr. Rudolph Wanilek. He cleared his gun and began shooting. Even after Nick's weapon had roared to halt him—even with a brace of slugs in his chest—Dirk continued to jerk his trigger finger. He fell off his chair without once turning to look at the doorway.

KING CLARK had more sense. He squeezed his slim body against the wall, elevated his hands and said in a whisper that reached thinly through the powder reek and noise: "All right, Sydney! All—right!"

Nick walked warily toward him. Into the waiting-room behind him stumbled Hollins, the plainclothes dick.

"I thought you'd quit for afternoon tea," Nick growled.

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Hollins was some help, at that. With his own two hands, unaided, he took a pair of bracelets from his pocket and snapped them shut on Clark's wrists. "Not tea," he mumbled. "Coffee. I was in a restaurant up the street, for a cup of coffee. I saw you tear into the building."

They marched Clark to the door. The others, Dirk and the doctor, would keep indefinitely. But Hollins could not resist an exclamation as he looked down at the livid letters on Dirk's face.

"Is *this* what you meant?" he gasped.

"That's it," Nick said with satisfaction. "A very neat job for an amateur, too, if I do say so. He thought it was done with acid. Ha!"

"It doesn't seem as if ordinary iodine would stand out like that, Sydney."

"Well," Nick said, "maybe it was strong iodine. I wouldn't know. I didn't have time to read any labels, Hollins. It just occurred to me to unwind a couple of yards of Dirk's bandages and use the bottle of iodine on the girl's dressing table. And for once I was right. When Dirk unwrapped his face and saw what I'd done to it, he thought it was done during the operation. He headed straight for here, to square with the doctor."

King Clark stared at Nick. "You put that brand on his face—to trap him?"

"With my lily-white finger," Nick grinned. He gave Clark a shove. "The fifty grand was on me all the time I was parked on your buggy little island, friend. All of it, intact—in my shoe. You should have looked."

They found Myra Donelson later, at an address Clark gave them.

Nick Sydney was at headquarters when the girl was brought in. Her father was there, too, with a face to sour milk. The police talked to her. Then Papa sat down, bent the girl over his knees, and administered a spanking that left her limp.

Papa Donelson wound it up with a resounding smack and looked at Nick. "All right, Sydney," he said. "You're next."

"I've been waiting," Nick said. He flexed his fingers and strode forward. "While I'm at it, somebody tell this crazy daisy that King Clark already has a wife, in Brooklyn."

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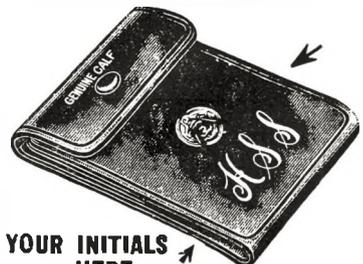
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