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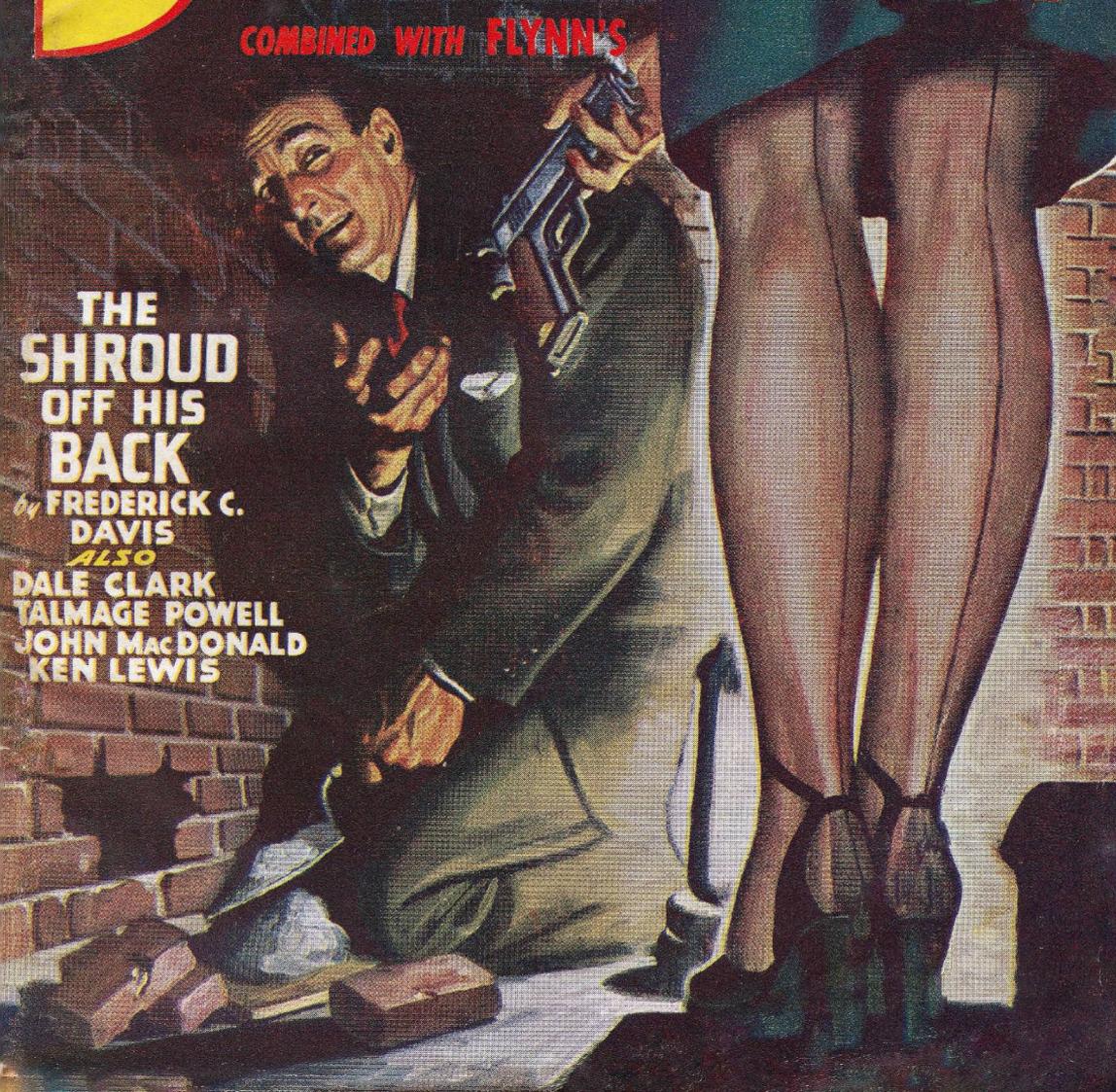
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1—DRAMATIC DETECTIVE-ACTION NOVEL—1

It takes a cool ghoul to snatch—

- The Shroud Off His Back**-----**Frederick C. Davis 6**
 Hackett, cynical investigator for Headliner Files, had to excavate the past of a corpse-parade blonde.

3—EXCITING CRIME-ADVENTURE NOVELLETES—3

He crashed the slay-happy social set to become—

- Little Pal O' Murder**-----**Dale Clark 26**
 The vagabond kid thumbed a ride on the undertaker's special—with a classy lassie as chief mourner.

Allergic to life? Just try this—

- Design for Dying**-----**John D. MacDonald 56**
 Insurance Investigator McCray tailed the ex-millionaire embezzler to retrieve a hundred grand—and got a corpse instead.

For salt-water slaughter, there's nothing like the—

- Crime of the Ancient Mariner**-----**Talmage Powell 84**
 Old Sea-dog Olafsen turned landlubber to scuttle a blonde's pantry pastime—and a cold-blooded kill-scheme.

3—MURDER-MYSTERY SHORTS—3

Even a smart jockey might fall for the—

- Ruse of the Wicked Lady**-----**Ken Lewis 40**
 Jockey Fleming hoped to clock finis on a busted dream—and a murder rap.
What every D. A. should know—

- Redheads Prefer Murder**-----**Hank Napheys 48**
 This sorrel-topped lovely pleaded to be tossed into a murder case.

He bet his best neck that—

- Blackmailers Don't Kill**-----**Ted Stratton 69**
 The luscious client had everything—except discretion.

AND—

We want to know if you're

- Ready for the Rackets**-----**A Department 78**
 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 (Illustrated)**-----**25**
 Preview of "Death Gives a Permanent Wave" by Robert Martin.

- Secret Street**-----**Ejler Jakobsson 82**

- Cover Painted by Raphael DeSoto.**

The October issue will be out September 3rd

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The SHROUD off his BACK

CHAPTER ONE

Grandma Has Sharp Teeth

THE car came cruising up like a black yacht on white-walled wheels and docked majestically in front of our little building in midtown Manhattan.

That is, its crystal radiator ornament stopped at our address while its tail-lights hove into port two doors east. The swanky block bristled with No Parking warnings, but all these were coolly ignored by the uniformed chauffeur. Through my office window I watched the uniformed footman hop out, spread a huge silk umbrella like a monstrous black mushroom, then swing open a door as massive as that of a bank vault. A lady emerged. Recognizing her at once, I sat up startled and wondering.

She was Mrs. Florette Stoneleigh Farquar, the widow of the late Jefferson Stoneleigh Farquar, Jr., whose fabulous wealth came from the meat-packing industry. For generations the Farquar family had dominated Manhattan's nobility. If it could be said that today's metropolitan society was topped by a reigning queen, Mrs. Florette Stoneleigh Farquar was indis-

By **FREDERICK C.
DAVIS**



Thackeray Hackett Mystery Novel

Hackett, the cynical investigator of Headliner Files—diggers of dirt, data and details on celebrities—had to excavate the past of a blonde night-club entertainer who played guest star on the corpse-parade.

A black shape loomed up
between two parked cars.



putably it. And was she actually calling on us?

Indeed she was. She headed straight for the door bearing our unusual sign, which reads: *HEADLINER FILES, Incorporated—Suppliers of Information About Celebrities. Clarabelle Brown, Directress. New York—Hollywood.* Sailing regally into our entrance as the footman flung it wide open for her, she snapped over her chinchilla-draped shoulder, "Oh, do stop dawdling, Jay!"

Jason Jefferson Farquar III was just then unfolding himself from the moroccolined interior of the chariot. Mrs. Farquar's grandson was lanky, spare and casual in the bored-young-man manner. He ambled after his grandmother with a faint, wry smile of long suffering. They came into our reception room and I listened intently to the sounds funelling down the short corridor to my door.

Telephones were jingling in our main office, which bustles all day long like the city room of a small newspaper. With its banks of file cabinets, shelves packed with reference books and racks of pigeonholes stuffed with memos, however, it looks more like the index section of a large and remarkably busy library.

There was a constant rumbling in the heavy metal file drawers rolling in and out. Our pretty file clerks were tripping about, digging details out of our treasury of personal data and chattering it over the phones to various customers of ours whose fees (fifteen dollars a month, and we'll be glad to send you an application blank upon request) entitled them to just this peculiar sort of service.

It's never a really quiet task, this slightly wacky business of garnering, storing up and distributing particulars both important and trivial concerning celebrities of all kinds—but I had no trouble hearing the shrill voice of Mrs. Farquar above the refined hubbub.

Polly Digby, our capable secretary-general, tried to cope with our visitor. Within one minute by the clock Polly was routed. She appeared in my doorway with her face screwed up tearfully.

"Mr. Preston, she keeps insisting on seeing Miss Brown even after I've told her Miss Brown hasn't come back from lunch yet—" my strap-watch indicated 3:40—

"and I just don't know what to do with her, Mr. Preston."

"Never mind, Polly, my dear," I answered with excessive self-assurance. "I'll take her on."

I headed toward the counter separating the reception room from our file section, where callers normally stop and transact their business. Ordinary riffraff callers, that is—not Mrs. Florette Stoneleigh Farquar. She had brushed through the gate and was now bearing down on me under full sail.

I backtracked to my desk. Mrs. Farquar paused just long enough to twitch her nose at the legend painted on my door: *C. Walter Preston, Business Manager.* With fine hauteur she next marched into my office and by the simple act of seating herself took full possession of it.

"NOW, Mr. Preston, if that's who you are," she announced, "I wish a full, complete report on a young woman calling herself Iris Fiske. What's more, I want it right here and right now."

I gazed at her poker face. It would have been a pleasure to invite her to go to hell.

Jay Farquar III appeared, having followed in his grandmother's wake, and propped himself in the doorway. He gave me a languid smile, saying:

"Offensive old witch, isn't she?"

"Pay no attention to Jay; he was born dim-witted, like his father," the lady said, entirely unperturbed by his comment. "Well, young man? As a personal friend of Clarabelle Brown's I feel quite certain she wouldn't dream of wasting my time like this. I've engagements. Must I report you?"

Jay Third said: "You're scaring the bejeepers out of him, Grandma. Look at him shaking in his shoes."

"Do shut up, Jason!" Grandma's rebuke was sharp. Then, to me: "Mr. Preston, to judge from the look on your face you're about to remind me that there's a charge for your service. I'm aware of that. Here, take whatever you may require, and get a move on." Having poked a gem-studded claw into her handbag, she sprinkled banknotes on my blotter.

I plucked up enough of them to pay for a month's subscription, the minimum, and returned the rest. "Now, the young wom-

an you're interested in—?" I prodded. "Bleached hussy," Mrs. Farquar asserted unequivocally. "Scheming ninx out to get herself a rich husband by hook or crook. Claims to be some sort of actress and singer. Jay, the simpleton, swallows every pretty lie she tells him. He's infatuated with her. She's making an utter fool of him."

It had happened before. In fact it was general knowledge that a strain of foolishness on the grand scale ran in the Farquar family, although as I recalled it the folly of Jason, Jr., Jay's dad, had run to gambling rather than women.

Jay Third amended Mrs. Farquar's remarks in an easy but weary manner. "As you can plainly see, Mr. Preston, my precious grandmother is an unreasonably jealous old witch and a hopelessly outdated snob. Actually, Iris is a clever, talented girl who's earning a name for herself in show business on merit. Right now she's featuring her own songs at a top-flight supper club. In my considered opinion she's a honey, and I'm going to marry her if she'll have me."

"Over my dead body!" Mrs. Farquar vowed. "I've brought Jay here to get his eyes opened, Mr. Preston. I want the truth about this common little chit. Get a hustle on. Give me the facts."

"And this young woman's name—"

"She calls herself Iris Fiske."

I'd never heard of Iris Fiske. "Iris Fiske—certainly, Mrs. Farquar," I said. "Please wait here."

I went out to our bank of file cabinets for a quick dig. The result was nil, as I'd expected. Then going back to Mrs. Farquar in my office, I said, "I'm having a special report written for you with every detail double-checked. We can't undertake to investigate this girl's character, naturally—that's outside our field—but within a few hours we should have a complete list of Miss Fiske's professional engagements as well as—"

At this point came a vociferous interruption. Clarabelle Brown, having returned finally from lunch, screeched delightedly from her doorway across the hall, "Florette, baby!" Mrs. Farquar leaped up all a-glitter, screaming, "Clarabelle, dearest!" They flew into a frantic embrace, chattering shrilly like old crones, al-

though Clarabelle is much younger than her highborn friend, being only fiftyish and a far more attractive woman.

It was not at all surprising that Clarabelle knew Florette Farquar so well, for Clarabelle is pals with fully a million people and calls them all by their first names. As the founder and sole owner of Headliner Files Clarabelle appreciates the value of social contacts and makes the most of hers. She goes to at least one party every night, which she is invariably the life of, and the parties she throws herself become legends among café habitués. Somewhere in this dizzy social whirl she had become a favorite of Mrs. Farquar.

I was delighted to see Florette disappearing, still gabbling, into the boss' sanctum. Jay lingered, giving me a calculating eye.

"Look, Preston. If Iris' story about herself is really dressed up a bit, I don't give a damn. To me she's really something special. No matter how big a stink Grandma may raise about it, she can't stop me. Give me a break, will you?" Then he committed a tactical error by adding, "I'll make it worth your while."

My smile dropped off. "I'm a push-over for romance, but you haven't enough money to buy falsified information from us. Mrs. Farquar will get exactly what she's buying, the facts." That was telling off one of the richest lads in the country.

He gave me a challenging look and a stubborn scowl, then ambled off toward the reception room to await his harridan of a grandma.

I went in search of Thackeray Hackett.

CHAPTER TWO

No Corpses Wanted

THACKERAY HACKETT sat in a remote corner behind the rows of file cabinets, reading a book entitled, *Etude Psychologique et Médico-Légale*. He looked as if he'd been comfortably wallowing in French criminology for hours.

I complained: "This is a fine one-horse news bureau we're running here. We're supposed to know all about whoever's who, but there's not a line on the premises about an actress named Iris Fiske. Get busy on it, Thack. Find out, among other things,

whether she's actually appearing these nights at some supper club or other. Somehow I doubt it."

"Why do you, Pres?" Hackett answered quietly. "She really is."

Thackeray Hackett is a hard guy to get to know and an even harder guy to handle. He'd been working for Headliner Files for several months now, as a sort of researcher, and I still couldn't claim we'd become buddies. Trying to get palsy with Hackett is a special sort of experience, like taking a cactus plant to your bosom, and it's just as discouraging.

Drawing a telephone close, he consulted the Manhattan directory, then dialed a number. Annoyed, I looked in the book but didn't find Iris there—in fact, Hackett had looked into the S's. Mystified, I scooped up another phone off the next desk and instructed Eunice, our switchboard operator, to cut me in on Hackett's call. I heard a distant bell purring, then a man's voice answer.

"Shangri-La Club, good afternoon."

"Thackeray Hackett calling from Headliner Files. Are you Milo Bogue, master among major-domos?"

The scope of Hackett's acquaintances, particularly in the realms of night life, had already amazed me more than once, so I wasn't too astonished when the answer came, "Ah, Mr. Hackett, hello, my friend, hello! How are you? How is my special friend Mr. Preston? How is my special sweetheart, Miss Clarabelle Brown? May I reserve a specially choice table for you tonight?"

"We're all in perfectly lovely health, Milo," Hackett assured him with unnatural sweetness. "No table, thank you. Information, instead. You have a girl named Iris Fiske singing for you?"

"Charming girl, charming," Milo Bogue answered. "Charming voice. You should hear her. Really charming."

"Her home address and telephone number please, Milo," Hackett asked.

"Certainly, Mr. Hackett. It's seven hundred four East Fifty-Fifth, Eldorado seven-seventy twenty-two." After that Hackett merely thanked him and Bogue said he was specially welcome, and they both hung up.

I took a harder look at our young Mr. Hackett. He possessed rare skill as an operative. Not much more than a year

ago, in fact, he had operated a really plush private detective agency of his own on Park Avenue. He was operating it no longer, but, instead, working for us for peanuts—because his high-handed and convenient interpretation of the law had cost him his license.

He had skidded from affluence to poverty—and wasn't giving a damn—when Clarabelle, warm-hearted to an extreme, had rescued him from hunger with his present job with Headliner Files.

"The Shangri-La is the newest and most chi-chi night spot in town," I said. "I haven't even been inside it yet. I wouldn't know where to find it. How'd you know Iris Fiske is warbling there?"

Hackett opened a swank fashion magazine to a page devoted to the richest strata of Gotham's pump rooms. A tiny ad there read with elegant simplicity, *Shangri-La Club—Iris Fiske's Songs*—and in much smaller type, *Ross Grover's Sextette*, with an address in the East Sixties added. I reminded myself I ought to catch up on my reading.

"So far so good, Thack. See this girl personally. Tell her we need a sketch of her life for our files. Actually we want it for Mrs. Farquar, no less, but of course you won't mention that. No matter how tricked up this babe's story may sound, take it just as she spills it. Then, if she's faking any fancy claims for herself, we'll spike 'em, but good."

HACKETT eyed me with distaste as I turned away. He had, I'd learned, an odd but powerful aversion for celebrities. Clarabelle, in fact, couldn't have hired anyone less suited temperamentally to dealing with public figures.

Hastening into my office and catching up my phone, I said to Eunice again, "Cut me back in on Hackett's line." Again I heard a man's voice, but a different one this time.

"Yeah?" In that one word he sounded sore.

"Headliner Files calling," Hackett, in contrast sounded unnaturally genial. I had learned that when Hackett seemed his most affable his attitude was least to be trusted. "Iris Fiske's apartment? May I speak with Miss Fiske, please?"

"She's not here." After this short an-

swer the guy went on in a thoughtful drawl, "Headliner Files, hey? Want a little info about our little Iris, do you? Say, we might do business."

The insinuating tone aroused Hackett's alertness. "That so? In what way?"

"I've just picked up a little hot news about our Iris, see? I've been sitting here wondering which columnist to give it to—but you'll fill the bill, brother. You'll do fine."

"We'd want to verify it, of course," Hackett said smoothly.

The voice grated on the wire. "Not so fast there, brother. I got certain plans. This stuff is juicy, with big names in it, the kind that'll make every front page in town, see? I'm not dealing myself out of this game just yet. I'm making one last play to get cut in on the big dough. If you don't hear from me again, and soon, you'll know I hit the jackpot."

"Good luck, brother," Hackett said laconically. "You seem pretty sure about this deal."

"Listen, I know what's cooking here. I heard 'em talking, cueing this little lass how to tease the guy into it, see? It's the sweetest little mantrap you ever heard of, like baiting a hophead with a sniff of snow. That's all for now, pal. Just sit tight and if the news about Iris comes up, it'll be a sizzler—a real sizzler."

"In case your luck turns bad, ask for Mr. Hackett when you call back," our Mr. Hackett suggested blandly. "How-come you're inside Iris's apartment when she's not around, pal?"

"Oh, I just wandered in—" the guy answered—"using a key she gave me in chummier days." Then he hung up.

Just at that moment the crescendo of gibberish in Clarabelle's office reached its climax. Mrs. Farquar swept forth trailing chinchilla, pearls and Clarabelle, who saw her patrician friend to the door. Just outside Mrs. Farquar and Jay Third clashed in another brief altercation. It ended when Jay made a gesture signifying, "Aw, nuts to you, Grandma," and trudged away. Mrs. Farquar flounced into her car, and it cruised off soundlessly.

Clarabelle came rushing to me. "Walter, doll, we must do our very best. So terribly much depends on it, Walter. Really, pleasing Florette can mean a lot of money in the

bank for us. And on the other hand displeasing her—" Clarabelle shuddered. "We've just got to be terribly careful of our facts."

"I know, Clarabelle. I'm going to look into this, personally."

"Bless your heart, Walter, I have every faith in you," Clarabelle said. "But keep Thack busy on it too, won't you, Walter, baby?"

"Thack?" I frowned. "He gives me the jitters, Clarabelle. Lord only knows what tangent he may go off on. I'd be wiser to take this one solo."

"But Thack's such a dear, sweet boy, and he does so want to be helpful. I just feel he might come in handy some way."

CLARABELLE is a native of Texas and the product of a long line of frontier marshals, which means she's nobody's fool, but she does have a strange blind spot about Hackett. Still, she was boss. The discussion ended anyhow as she rushed to answer her phone.

I gazed over at the "dear, sweet boy." Thack Hackett approached with a sour smile. He had already put on his hat and trench-coat and brought his cane.

The cane, thin as a pencil, sleekly tapered and flexible, was an incongruous note in Hackett's appearance. Seedy, down-at-heel and worn at the edges, he sported no other dandified accouterments—just that delicate walking stick. I'd never seen him sally forth without it.

"Ready, Pres?" he inquired sardonically, well aware how unwelcome he was this trip. "First on our itinerary, Miss Fiske's apartment, of course?"

"For me, yes," I answered pointedly. "For you, back to the phone and begin dragging the theatrical district for any stray bits of Fiske history. Report when I come back, Thack."

It had begun to rain. I quickly put on my raincoat and Homburg and hurried into the wet outside world. I signaled a cab—and suddenly discovered Hackett standing on the wet sidewalk beside me.

"Clarabelle suggested I catch up with you, Pres," he said, grinning tauntingly as I glared at him.

I saved my breath. In the cab Hackett thoughtfully tapped his cane on the mat as we rode toward Iris Fiske's address on

the fringe of Sutton Place. The cab dropped us at a spot off First Avenue. The two-story brick building on the corner had a passageway in the rear that led to a series of doors. One of these bore the name of Iris Fiske. It was unlocked. Pointedly taking the lead I let Hackett trail me into a small vestibule and then up a single flight of worn, thickly painted stairs to another door that had Miss Fiske's name on it. I heard voices inside—low, tense voices which ceased the instant I knocked.

After an empty moment Hackett said softly, "Hear that?"

I nodded. "Certainly. Somebody's in there, all right."

He shook his head. "I meant the moan."
"Moan?"

"Just then," he murmured. "I've heard dying men moan like that."

I frowned. Hackett rippled his fingers on his cane, still listening to something I couldn't hear. I knocked again, loudly.

There were more quick whispers, then the click of a latch. The door opened on a safety chain and a lovely gray-green eye looked out. It was enhanced by a streamlined eyebrow, by a fluff of blonde hair glimmering above it, and a luscious red mouth below. Iris Fiske had obviously returned home since Hackett's phone call. Her honey-colored hair was mussed and there was a quiver in her pretty chin.

"Miss Fiske?" I began briskly. "We're from Headliner Files and we'd like—"

"Please, not now!" She said this breathlessly, in a singer's expressive voice. "I—I've a horrible headache. Any other time—please, won't you?" Then, with a little choking sob, she shut the door in my face.

I could think of nothing to do but go away. Shrugging, I went back down the stairs. In the vestibule I felt a tug at my sleeve and looked across my shoulder to see Hackett vanishing into the gloomy depths of the hallway. As he signaled me to follow him the upstairs door suddenly opened.

Iris Fiske's whisper was audible from the hallway above: "Are they gone?"

A man's whisper answered, "Think so—can't hear 'em."

"Then get out of here fast, and be careful!"

"I'm a louse, leaving you in this mess, Iris!"

The girl said desperately, "Stop being a noble fool about it! I know what to do. Go on, get missing!"

Hackett was furiously gesturing me to duck for cover. I eased toward him, into a little hollow space as big as a phone booth under the stairs. We heard the man running down and glimpsed him as he dodged out.

Jason Jefferson Farquar III.

Upstairs Iris Fiske quickly closed and chained her door.

I frowned at Hackett. He said softly, "Did you notice her fingers on the edge of the door? A red smear. Lipstick maybe? Or nail polish? Or blood."

He eased into the passage. Jay Third had, of course, vanished. Nor was he visible in the street. I was about to make the most of his example when Hackett plucked at my arm again. He was peering across the intersection at a private sedan heading our way.

He urged sibilantly, "Stay out of sight!" The one way we could do this was to retreat. The car, a deluxe model but not nearly so super as the Farquar tumbrel, was slowing at the mouth of the passage when we sidled back into Miss Fiske's vestibule. Then we were back in the gloomy niche under the stairs. A man hustled in and was tramping upward overhead.

He knocked at Miss Fiske's door. She opened it and blurted, "Thank heavens you're here!"

He grumbled, "I started over the very second you phoned me." The chain rattled as he went in. Several minutes of mixed noises followed, then the door opened again.

The footfalls descending the stairs were stumbling, slow. Peering out of our hole, we saw the blonde girl, hatless but in a snugly belted-raincoat—and the heavy-set driver of the car. Between them they supported a second man whose head lolled heavily. Both his feet hung loose, the toes dragging. His hat had been clamped on askew and his dark curly hair seemed matted in the back.

Maybe this was the guy who had talked of a juicy scandal.

As the girl and the other man jockeyed him into the passageway she said, too loudly, "You're a bad boy, drinking too much

like this. That's what you are, a bad, bad boy."

They passed from sight. Hackett held me still. After another moment light, rapid footfalls returned—the girl running. She came back breathlessly fast, not stopping until she'd slammed herself into her apartment upstairs.

Hackett went along the passage to the drenched street. The car, its driver and its passenger were all gone. Nothing was left but a dark spot on the pavement, a spot thinning to pinkness in the rain.

"That was Milo Bogue piloting, Pres," Hackett said softly. "We'll have to wait a little to find out whose corpse it is he's carting to the dump."

CHAPTER THREE

Nobody Knows . . .

BY MAIN force I pulled Hackett out of there. The rain, swept by gusting wind, battered us while we hunted a taxi. After too many moist minutes we snaffled one and fell into it, dripping. Before I could direct the driver back to Headliner Files, Hackett gave him an address in the East Sixties—one I recognized.

I warned him: "Let me remind you, Thack. An unlicensed dick who snoops too much is likely to get put into the pokey, particularly when a fateful hunk of police detective named Lieutenant Blackley is keeping an eye on him."

"Why, Pres, I haven't the slightest interest in murder," Hackett answered with a straight face. "This is just a small job of reporting which I'm doing under Clarabelle's explicit orders, and the Shangri-La Club seems the logical place to go next."

When the cab veered cureward, the fact dawned on me that the Shangri-La Club was located in a neighborhood of aristocratic homes where I'd never have thought to look for a bistro. The houses elegantly situated in this small section beside the park were those wherein various top-ranking tycoons resided. Among them the Farquar family were the oldest settlers.

I wondered that a nightery had managed to sneak past the zoning restrictions. There wasn't, however, the slightest external hint that such an establishment was

to be found here, except the well-known street number carved in the keystone above the imposing portal.

We stopped a few yards beyond our destination, Hackett having murmured instructions to our driver. Meanwhile he peered out and upward at something on the opposite side of the street. Up there was a window behind which a young man and an older woman were angrily gesticulating at each other.

Florette Stoneleigh Farquar and Jay Third!

"Be damned," I muttered. "Didn't realize the Shangri-La practically faces the Farquar homestead."

"Fascinating juxtaposition, isn't it?" Hackett remarked, grinning on the bias.

Another taxi was stopping behind us. Its passenger alighted in a hurry—Iris Fiske. She paused a second for an anxious glance at the Farquar windows, then hurried into Shangri-La.

Now Hackett ducked from our cab, gesturing me to pay the fare, and headed in after Miss Fiske.

A doorman admitted us to a gold-and-green foyer. A pretty girl wearing a bell-hop's uniform and a page boy bob took our hats, but not Hackett's cane, for he never surrendered it to anyone. A headwaiter in a tuxedo bowed, murmuring, "Zentlemen, you are memberz of the Shangri-La Club, of course?"

This was my chance to show Hackett I'd also been around a bit. I recognized this guy. My acquaintance with him dated back to prohibition days, when he was selling varnish remover at a dollar a jigger. I said:

"You should know we're not members, Rhame. Back at the old grind, are you?"

Lee Rhame put on the kind of smile that appears pleasant until you get too close. He had black, peaked Mephistophelian eyebrows and a mouth as prim as a spinster's.

"Mr. Prezton, zo nize zeeing you again." He almost cooed it, meanwhile flicking cryptic glances at Hackett, who smiled back at him thinly. "Oh, no, Zir, thiz iz a very different zort of pozition, Zir. You may zay, Zir, I'm a reformed character."

"What, not even a pair of dice in the house?" I asked. Lee Rhame's slight Satanic frown told me he wasn't going for that kind of comedy. So I said: "We'd

like an audience with Milo Bogue, strictly business."

"But of course, Zentlemen, certainly."

Still tossing those inscrutable glances at Hackett, he led us into the inner recesses of Shangri-La. It was decorated in heavenly blue and misty white so that it seemed to be floating among a better class of clouds. Although other high-grade bars might be packing them in three deep at this hour, this bar was so exclusive as to be practically deserted. The handful of customers were being titillated by a sextette which just now consisted of five men and an accordion which nobody was playing. Lee Rhame conducted us past the bandstand to a tiny elevator of filagree ironwork, also enamelled white. He bowed us into it, closed a grille on us, punched push-buttons and remained below, smiling up at us with his old-maidish smile while Hackett and I slowly ascended.

"This must be quite a loss of face for Lee Rhame. A few years ago he'd worked himself up to a very lush spot financially running a series of plushy gambling dens," I informed Hackett. "Then the law caught up with him. I hear he made the return trip from Sing Sing only a few months ago."

"I know, Pres," Hackett answered patiently. "I helped to send him up the river."

I frowned at Hackett. "You mean Rhame's case was one you handled when you still had your snazzy private agency on Park Avenue?"

He nodded. "My client, whose name doesn't matter now, wanted him nailed because his games were crooked. I stacked up the proof, then let the police put him through the works. I always felt Rhame had a backer, but he never sang a note—took it without a murmur."

I vowed never again to try to impress Hackett. And now understanding those ominous glances which Lee Rhame had peppered on him, I wondered that Hackett had dared venture near the guy.

"Jay Farquar used to wander into Rhame's rooms in those days," he added. "The story is that Jay gets dizzy at the sight of a spinning roulette wheel—and he'll clean himself out for good, just as his old man did . . . unless Florette watches him like a hawk."

WHEN the cage stopped climbing we found Milo Bogue waiting for us, having been promptly warned of our approach over the inter-phone. A paunchy, cherubic man, he had a few gold teeth and the automatically effusive manner of a professional welcomer who flatters you pink, makes you feel you're his most priceless customer, then does exactly the same slaving over the creeps at the next table. In this deferent manner he ushered us into an office that looked like a rich man's library, complete with unread books. In a too-servile way asked us what he could do for us.

"Milo, have you finally learned how to make a supper club pay?" I inquired. "After establishing a remarkable reputation as the man whose nighteries fold as fast as they open, are you raking in the coin with this setup—which is so veddy, veddy exclusive it hardly even has any customers?"

Bogue's smile became strained. "In this private club our membership fees cover the nut, so all the checks are velvet, Mr. Preston." Then he changed the subject from sordid financial matters. "You were asking about Miss Fiske. Charming girl, charming. You must meet her."

He opened a door and called, "Iris, darling."

And Iris darling immediately appeared, cool as a tea-rose fresh out of a florist's ice-box. So far as lusciousness went, Jay Third's taste was fully vindicated. She looked to be a genuine honey, just as he'd claimed. Her topography merited detailed study, but unfortunately this wasn't the time to do it justice. She had composed herself. Sitting down, she also composed her nylons prettily and smiled at me. She even smiled at Hackett.

Hackett said in edged tones, "Before you two go into your act, Milo, would you mind mentioning where you dropped the carcass?"

About to muzzle him, or try to, I was astonished to hear Iris give out with a ripple of laughter and Bogue with an indulgent chuckle.

"It's funny, is it," Hackett inquired, "my asking you who your dead friend is and who killed him, Miss Fiske, you or Jay?"

Bogue chuckled again. "Saw me, did

you, boys? You must be speaking of a certain casual acquaintage of Iris's who happened to stumble in on her with a load of Scotch, so I took him home to bed."

"About that red stuff dripping out of him—that wasn't Scotch, was it?" Hackett asked.

Iris was getting jittery. Bogue expelled a long trailer of expensive cigar smoke while eying Hackett. Then a buzzing came from the inter-com box on the desk and Lee Rhame's voice twanged out:

"Beg pardon, Mizter Bogue, but Lieutenant Detective Blackley iz on hiz way up."

We all tightened. Lieutenant Blackley, ranking member of the police commissioner's own special squad, had made himself famous enough to earn a folder in Headliner Files. In gathering information for it I'd become acquainted with him personally. Being a vain man he'd supplied all the data I'd requested, but also being a suspicious one he figured that Headliner Files might be fronting for some new kind of shakedown racket. Finding Hackett and me here wouldn't lull those suspicions any.

Milo Bogue hustled to the elevator to receive Blackley. Iris shivered under Hackett's mildly mocking smile until the two of them returned. The lieutenant floated in like the great blimp of a man he was, and at sight of Thackeray Hackett he eased to a standstill.

A remarkable figure, Lieutenant Blackley. With his enormous circumference, his derby, his slicked-down gray-black hair parted in the middle and his luxuriant black mustache, he's a gentleman of the 1890s to the very life. There is nothing out of date about Blackley's working methods, however. He's as smart as a whole pack of foxes—with the single exception of his unthinking obsession as to the low moral state of private detectives as a class . . . and especially an *ex-dick* like Thackeray Hackett.

"Ah," Blackley said quietly, with a bow. "Good afternoon, Mr. Preston." Pointedly he ignored the vermin named Hackett, who turned an irreverent grin on him. "I hope I'm not interrupting," Blackley went on, speaking in his habitually meticulous way. "I'm here on a purely routine visit to inquire concerning—ah—the late Ross Grover."

IRIS and Bogue pegged up their nerves another notch. Hackett listened, smiling derisively. Ross Grover? After groping a moment, I recalled the name as that of the leader of the sextette—I also recalled the abandoned accordion downstairs.

Blackley continued courteously: "Mr. Grover's dead body was found in a side-street off the East River Drive not many minutes ago. I will spare you the unsavory details—except to say he'd been shot in the back of the head."

"Shocking!" Milo Bogue blurted, trying to sound surprised, and avoiding Hackett's eyes. "I can't believe it! This is certainly shocking news to us, Lieutenant."

"No doubt," the lieutenant said softly. "Mr. Grover's musician's union card was in his billfold and the union headquarters informed me he was playing an engagement here." Blackley made it sound so easy, yet he'd moved with spine-chilling dispatch. He added almost casually, "Can you suggest a cause behind his murder?"

The girl shook her pretty head, swallowing hard in her secret anguish. Milo Bogue wagged his head negatively. Hackett continued to grin cynically at them.

Blackley resumed: "We found two flat keys in Mr. Grover's pocket. One fits the lock of his own apartment undoubtedly, and the other—this establishment, perhaps?"

"No—my apartment," Iris Fiske blurted this out, and added in a flurry of embarrassment, "You see, Ross was my accompanist too. We rehearsed in my apartment and often he liked to—practise on my piano. I gave him a key so he could—use it while I was out, the piano, I mean. But he was just a friend like any other, and I—I don't know what else to say." She peered at us big-eyed, pleadingly.

Blackley said, "I see." Then he turned to me. "I trust, Mr. Preston, you've no special interest in this homicide? I trust especially your assistant here is entirely dissociated from it."

"Of course, Lieutenant!"

"How fortunate," Blackley murmured, his icy eyes upon Hackett's grin. "How very fortunate for—him."

On that ominous note I made haste to add, "In fact, we're just leaving. Good-by, good-by."

Milo Bogue and Iris Fiske were at least

as happy to see us go as I was to pull Hackett out of here. He kept grinning faintly in that unnerving way of his as the elevator carried us down.

"Blackley hasn't felt any real love for me since the Rhame case," Hackett remarked. "The commissioner had assigned Blackley to sniff into it, you see, but the good lieutenant had developed a bad head cold or something. Deplorable, the way the Rhame case earned me so much ill will. Some nights I lie awake brooding over it."

Lee Rhame awaited us at the landing, poker-faced. Enigmatically lashing Hackett with his glances again, he conducted us forward. When he arrived at the entrance, however, I found that Hackett was no longer with us.

Having detoured to the orchestra's dais, Hackett was speaking to the bass violist, who bent an ear low while plucking his strings. Going back to collar Hackett, I heard him saying, "—From Headliner Files. Is it true, as rumored, that Iris Fiske is going to marry Ross Grover?"

"Couldn't be," the guy answered while plunk-plunking. "Not since Jay Farquar cut in."

This time I succeeded in dragging Hackett all the way out. Rhame peered after us with Mephistophelian inscrutability. Hackett remained thoughtfully taciturn while I found another cab in the continuing rain and convoyed him back to Headliner Files. Quiet filled the place now, all our staff having called it a day, but Clarabelle was still waiting for us in her office.

"Walter, doll, have you something to report to Florette?" she asked quickly. "Florette's been wearing out my phone, just terribly anxious to have the news because something seems to be upsetting Jay and he won't tell her what it is."

"Have I something to report to Florette! Something's upsetting Jay, is it?" I laughed hollowly. "So, Clarabelle, you thought Thack might be helpful. Well, he's been helpful to the extent of getting us tangled up in a homicide. At the very least we saw Jay Third fleeing the scene of the crime, and both Iris Fiske and Milo Bogue making themselves guilty of concealing evidence and illegally transporting a dead body and God knows what else." As I quickly added details Clarabelle looked increasingly scared. "We might

have side-stepped all this, but instead we're squarely in the middle of it—thanks entirely to this dear, sweet, helpful boy, Thackeray Hackett."

Clarabelle asked with a squeak, "But Thack, doll, what happened?"

"It's this way, Clarabelle," Hackett answered matter-of-factly. "Ross Grover was sweet on Iris but jealous in a nasty way since Jay began beating his time. Grover tumbled to some sort of chicanery which Iris seems to be sucking Jay into, so Grover decided on a bit of vengeful blackmail. Next, he was suddenly dead—right there in Iris's apartment. So take your choice. Did Iris shoot him to shut him to up, or did Jay gallantly kill him for her?"

Clarabelle just stared, looking almost dead herself.

"Grandma may not like this way of doing it," Hackett added wryly, "but one good way to keep Jay out of this chick's clutches is to send him to the electric chair for murder."

"Omigawd!" Clarabelle exclaimed. Thinking of Florette Farquar, she began rapidly plucking diamond rings off her one hand and redistributing them among the fingers of her other—a sure sign she was really frantic. "Gawd help us!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Corpse in the Closet

PERCHED at our switchboard, I plugged in a series of out-going calls for Clarabelle, Hackett and some of my own. Our questions disturbed many important people at dinner-time while we forgot about dinner for ourselves. We needed information urgently now.

Finally I carried a handful of notes into Clarabelle's front office. She and I gazed at each other with the mutually fatalistic fellow-feeling of a pair of tight-rope artists in mid-span. As for Hackett, he just seemed amused by the whole thing.

"Since you're enjoying yourself so nicely, Thack," I suggested sourly, "please give out with the cheerful news, if any."

"Fascinating family, the Farquars," Hackett commented. "Jay's grandfather—Florette's husband—labored hard to pile up the original Farquar fortune, then turned into a devil-may-care old goat. His

money kept snowing him under no matter how ardently he tried to fritter it away at Monte Carlo and other casinos. But his son, Jay's father, developed a real genius for squandering his substance. In Palm Beach, he lost nine hundred grand in just one roulette session. He built up a really solid reputation as society's all-time, heaviest gambler—then swallowed a wine-glass full of rare-vintage, aged-in-the-wood cyanide." Hackett added ironically, "But you no doubt already know all this."

I yelled: "Mrs. Farquar didn't retain us to look up the Farquars!"

"A provident woman, Florette," Hackett resumed, seeming not to have heard me, "The Farquar men left her very little but she's done all right by herself. Investments, maybe. As for Jay Third, she'd have no problem if she had some control over his dough—but she hasn't. Jay's money was bequeathed directly to him, with no strings attached, by his late Uncle Humbert, of the canned soup Farquars of Chicago. Jay Third could bet the works on a turn of a card, if he so wished."

"Of course, Thack, doll, Jay's independence and unruliness are just what Florette's in such a tizzy about." Clarabelle continued to me, "And as for what kind of girl Iris really is, I'm afraid, Walter, she's just a bare-faced little liar. Her New York stage experience was a temporary vacancy in the chorus for a week or so last year."

I added, "She once shuffled around in the mob in *Androcles and the Lion*. Same way with the rest of her list. Small wonder we'd never heard of her, Clarabelle!"

"Walter, honey, this will tickle Florette half to death because she was perfectly right about the way the little phony is baiting Jay with fancy exaggerations," Clarabelle said with a sigh of relief. "Write up the whole story right now, citing your authority for every single statement, and take it right over to Florette personally the minute you've finished. Then we can wash our hands of the whole affair."

"Except for a minor detail," Hackett commented. "I mean Iris's intimate association with Jay Third in one small homicide."

"Thack, dear, we don't know a single thing about that part—absolutely not a single thing, doll!" Clarabelle rapidly patted all the gray-golden ringlets on her head.

"Not even if Lieutenant Blackley should remind us of it, Clarabelle?" Hackett asked pointedly. "You don't really feel that wealthy celebrities are privileged to commit murder and receive our help in getting away with it, do you?"

She looked straight at him, "Listen to me, Thack, dear. If ever we had to give incriminating evidence against Jay in a murder trial it would ruin us. It would wreck us utterly and horribly. Headliner Files is my very own baby, Thack, and if ever I find anybody really hurting us, why, I—I'll hit the trail after 'em with a brace of the old Brown sixguns and—drill the varmint fuller o' holes 'n a pepper can!"

That was Clarabelle's Texan blood asserting itself. She bounced up, pinned ninety dollars' worth of whimsy on her head and slipped inside a two-thousand buck platinum fox. On her way out she blithely recommended that we "keep 'em rootin' tootin', dolls," which left the problem in my lap and Hackett in a mood of black silence.

I began typing a formal detailed report for Florette while Hackett toyed with his dainty cane and looked increasingly rebellious. He bothered me, sitting there narrow-eyed in thought. The mere sight of Hackett thinking, always managed to unnerve me.

"Call it a day, Thack," I said. "I won't need your help in delivering this compendium to Florette. Please, be Clarabelle's dear, sweet, helpful boy and go on home now."

Hackett's compliance caused more misgivings to grow on me; it wasn't natural. He rose with no argument at all. He said simply, "Good night, Pres." The entrance clicked as he went out. His footfalls passed my venetian-blinded window and faded toward Park.

Relieved to be rid of him anyhow, I spent ten more minutes compiling our outline of Iris Fiske's deception, finally stapling it inside one of our pretty imprinted covers. Then I wearily put on my raincoat and Homburg, stepped out and found the rain still leaking through the dark roof of the night.

I got as far as the curb. There I was sharply stopped by a black shape looming up between two parked cars. It looked like

the Statue of Liberty in silhouette. Its uplifted arm instantly swiped down with vicious force that struck my face from the bridge of my nose to the cleft of my chin.

THE savagery in the blow propelled me backward, tottering to the doorstep of Headliner Files. There I thumped down on the base of my spine, legs spread out on cement flowing with cold rain. Too stunned to stir, I saw, in a blur of shadows and wet glimmering reflections, the figure springing at me. Its hands darted from one to another of my pockets and paper rattled.

Then a breathy voice warned: "Stay away from the old lady! Spilling it will get you a coffin for yourself. Don't be a chump—the old dame won't even pay your funeral expenses."

Suddenly there was a flat slapping sound.

My attacker gasped, whirled about, then jumped backward away from the slight young man who had soundlessly reappeared from nowhere.

Hackett was there, complete with cane, poised in a strange stance. He held the cane gripped horizontally in a fist, six inches above his forehead.

The instant my assailant moved his gun Hackett flicked his cane in a swift whipping movement. Within a split-second he'd slashed it three times—slapping the revolver aside, whacking the gunnie's wrist into a condition of limp paralysis, and sending a segment of something flying through the air. I thought this might be an ear, but no, it was only a crescent from his target's hat-brim.

For a second both were motionless; Hackett set to lash out again, his victim overwhelmed by nightmarish uncertainties. Hackett would never again have a pistol permit, so his stick was the only weapon he could legally carry; but definitely it was no more to be scorned than a king cobra on the warpath.

My assailant burst into a frantic run toward Madison Avenue. Instead of giving chase, Hackett let him go and turned to give me the help I needed. Hackett lifted me, steered me back inside Headliner Files, draped me in a chair and brought me a wet towel to wipe my bloody face with.

"How many stitches will I need, Thank?" I inquired weakly.

"Just a scratch, Pres—it's stopped bleeding already." Hackett lifted his eyebrows. "Didn't you see the guy? I didn't either. Too dark. When I left here I knew somebody was casing the place, so I hung around." He made a clucking noise. "Your nice report's gone, too."

I said, "That's silly. Stealing the report didn't destroy the information. I can tell Florette all the facts. Let's go."

Hackett's smile was cynical. "Just a sec and I'll trail along. Meanwhile you might reserve a couple of sunny cemetery lots for us."

He stepped into the washroom and after a moment was back. I made no move to get rid of him this trip. Looking at his cane for reassurance, I saw uneasily that it wasn't his usual rapier-thin hickory but a darker, thicker one of malacca.

"What's the matter with the cane?" I asked quickly.

"I like to keep a spare handy, Pres," was all Hackett had to say on the subject. "Let's roll."

We hustled out into more rain and, after a moment, another cab. Our destination was, of course, the block wherein both the Shangri-La Club and the Farquar home sat. As we turned into it, however, Hackett whispered our driver to a sudden halt.

Hackett slipped out, leaving me to pay the fare again. When I caught up with him he was on the Farquar side of the street, moving unobtrusively from door to door. Then he paused, gazing across the steps of a marble stoop at the white-wheeled land-yacht parked directly in front of the Farquar cottage.

Hackett eased closer to the parked car. I drifted after him. From within the car came Jay's voice, sounding alcoholically merry. Peeking in, we could see him fondling two fists' full of banknotes.

"I'll be back there a little later, Honey-pie, I'll be back! There's no keeping me away from those wheels any longer. Why, the first time I wandered near, it paid off with eight thousand in folding money. And that's only the beginning." He laughed jubilantly.

"Jay, please, darling." This was Iris. "It's dangerous, playing it this way. You've got to be careful, Jay. Please, darling, listen—"

Her voice fell to an earnest whisper.

Hackett, smiling cynically, moved quietly away. I tugged at his arm and thumbed him back toward the Farquar plantation, but he shook his head. Instead, he crossed toward the Shangri-La.

Florette Farquar would have to wait a little longer for my report. Near the pearly gates of Shangri-La, Hackett paused. "An elaborately planned coup, Pres. This costly Shangri-La setup is tempting bait—put out especially for Jay Third."

"You mean the Shangri-La was deliberately spotted right under Jay's nose?"

Hackett nodded. "A big golden trap designed especially to snare Jay Farquar, Third. Ross Grover practically told us as much over the phone—but he isn't talking, anymore."

I said, "Iris' part is to lure Jay in—but subtle. So far, she's been tantalizing him by keeping him out. And tonight—in the traditional manner of leading a sucker on—they let him win. Pretty soon they'll take him for all he's worth, down to his last pair of shorts."

"That's been the high purpose of this operation from the beginning," Hackett agreed.

"Rhame!" I explained softly. "Lee Rhame's an expert at game-rigging. He has Milo Bogue running the supper club end just as a front. Rhame pretends to be just a meek headwaiter while he's pushing his old racket with Jason's golden fleece his main objective."

AS HACKETT turned to the Shangri-La's entrance I hooked onto his arm. "But hold it. This is one for the cops and Florette. All we need to do is report it. We'll become her blue-eyed boys."

"Unless Jay's love for the Fiske babe led him to do a tiny bit of murdering," Hackett reminded me laconically.

I followed him in, uneasily. The pretty hat-check girl greeted us in Lee Rhame's absence. The place was as lively as a haunted house. The sextette-less-one seemed to be taking the night off, out of respect for their late leader. The waiters wandering about out-numbered the few dinner guests. Nobody questioned us as we quietly went to the white grille of the elevator.

Hackett's touch on a button brought the empty cage floating down from upstairs.

Next we were inside it, ascending. We entered Mile Bogue's office to find it empty. Promptly Hackett skirted behind Bogue's desk and began snooping into its drawers.

With mounting misgivings I said, "Good Lord. Thack, we're not detectives. And Rhame's a killer. We can lose our health, mixing in this sort of thing too—"

The words congealed in my mouth. I saw a doorknob turning. With frost settling on my spine, I watched the door slowly swinging open. It wasn't the Mephistophelian Rhame who eased in, or the cherubic Bogue either. I couldn't know whether we should feel relieved that it was Iris Fiske.

She closed the door and stood backed against it, breathing fast, her lovely eyes wide, and said huskily, "You just want a little information for your files, that's all, isn't it, boys?"

Hackett gave her a thin smile. "Naturally we'll have a world of inquiries from all the papers when you and Jay elope. For example, Miss Fiske, when was your first romantic meeting with him staged?"

She lifted her pretty chin. "I met Jay at a backstage cocktail party. It was neither prearranged nor romantic. I thought at first he was just a foolish pup, the way he trailed me around when I had no use for him."

"But you soon found a really special use for him," Hackett said, "when Lee made you his come-on girl?"

"I felt sort of sorry for Jay, the way he seemed to gobble it down," Iris said, amazing me with her show of brass. "I didn't need to give him a glamorous picture of myself as an actress. I'd never gotten to first base in the theatre, and I told him that, to arouse his sympathy. One thing I didn't tell him, that I'd taken a hand in Lee's game because I was really desperately broke. It was Jay who built me up with that phony past to impress Grandma. Then he had to stick with it or make himself out a chump."

"Speaking of making him a chump, Miss Fiske," Hackett inquired with a leer, "what was your cut to be?"

"Five per cent of his losses." Her candor staggered me. "Lee promised it would add up to plenty but so far it adds up to zero."

"Zero plus murder totals something," I

reminded her. "Let me repeat a question you've heard once before. Did you kill Ross Grover to keep him from wrecking the works or did Jay do it for you?"

Noises came from the elevator—gears quietly whirring as the empty cage sank toward the main floor below. Iris came to the desk and gazed with fearful intensity at Hackett.

"When Jay and I went into my apartment we found Ross on the floor. He'd been practising on my piano. Someone had come in and shot him. He wasn't dead then. What would you have done in my place, with Grandma itching to put me through the wringer? Jay insisted I had to protect myself so I phoned Milo, asking him to help. He said he'd get Ross right over to a hospital in his car and tell the police some sort of story that would leave us all in the clear."

We listened both to Iris's earnest voice and the humming of the elevator. Having stopped a moment downstairs, it was now climbing again with a passenger. Iris went on:

"But Milo didn't have to cook up a fairy tale after all. Before he got there Ross died. That made it murder. First of all I had to get Jay out, no matter what kind of jam it might leave me in. When Milo came I was too upset to do anything except agree the body had better be found somewhere else." She straightened, looking me squarely in the eye. "That answers your question. Neither Jay nor I killed Ross. Just what kind of stupes do you take us for, anyway?"

Easy footfalls came along the hall to the office door. Again it was neither Lee Rhame nor Milo Bogue who appeared. Gangling Jay Farquar stood there eyeing us as Iris went quickly to his side.

"You boys are really getting in the way a little too much, aren't you?" he said.

Iris told him quickly, "They think they know all about it, darling, but like everybody else, especially Grandma, they've made the mistake of thinking you're a sap-head." She turned a twisted smile on us. "Iris the irresistible temptress—the greatest role of my career, and I flopped in it. Jay saw through me at the very start. That's the kind of booby he is, boys. He laughed his head off at me and told me exactly how I was trying to slick him up."

Jay said, smiling, "I went right on liking her, though. We've been pals ever since, sort of playing it along together, working things out our own way."

Hackett snapped a hard look at them. "Your own way! You actually mean you've figured on out-smarting the big shots?" He eased closer. "You'll never do it."

"Won't I?" Jay laughed quietly at him. "The usual procedure is to let the sucker win at first, then suddenly clean him out. This time it goes no further than the end of the first stage. When I stop winning, I'll immediately stop playing—with a loud horse-laugh."

I gazed at him in amazement and admiration.

"Hah!" Hackett responded sharply. "You can play it too smart for your own good. Don't forget you're playing with a two-time killer."

Jay leaned forward. "I figure it was Rhame who killed Ross, sure. But two-time? Who else has he—?"

As Jay's question faded off in ominous uncertainties Hackett answered, "I don't know that—quite yet."

He turned to a closed door in the rear of the office—not the one Iris had entered through, but another. He peered down at its sill—at a round spot of thick dark stuff that had leaked out through the bottom crack. While we watched, all still, he slowly turned the latch free, then stepped back, flashing it wide open.

It was a closet. On its floor, beside a pair of man's rubbers and an umbrella leaning in one corner, was a wide dark puddle. It had collected at the feet of a man who hung against the wall, supported by a hook caught in the back of his coat-collar. His head drooped and his face was streaked by the dark flow from the bullet hole in his forehead. And the face was Lee Rhame's.

CHAPTER FIVE

Suckers' Pay Day

WE STOOD there, staring at the dead face that made all our ingenious speculations a mockery. Hackett cocked his head, held his malacca stick alertly and listened to more noises of motion from the elevator. Somebody else was coming up.

Hackett next stepped into the closet and did a fast job of picking the corpse's pockets. He turned back with a white envelope containing a neat pack of banknotes. He fanned them out, smiling.

I said: "Ghoul!"

Hackett put the money in his own coat, ignoring me. Then he spoke sarcastically to Jay. "See what I mean? This sort of thing can happen to you too, or to Iris." Why was he leaving out Preston and Hackett? "Also, you might have a tough time making a jury believe your clever tactics didn't cause Grover and Rhame to come after your hide—Grover first because you snagged Iris away from him; Rhame because you wouldn't play his way. In that event you can hope to cop a plea of self-defense."

He brushed past them to the door and added bitterly, "Damn it all, Jay, you're an amateur at this sort of thing. Why the hell didn't you simply grab Iris, rush her off to the Little Church Around the Corner and fix yourself up for a trip to Niagara Falls instead of Woodlawn?"

He left them silent and jittery. I trailed him to the elevator shaft. The hoisting machinery was creaking under an overload. In a moment we saw the huge round shape of Lieutenant Detective Blackley looming up inside it like doom itself. Hackett's tight smile stayed on his face while the cage groaned to a stop and Blackley ponderously alighted. At sight of Hackett the lieutenant had ceased looking pleasant. His gaze grew icy.

"Your visits here, at a place where a murder victim was employed, may not much longer be dismissed as coincidences," he said in his chillingly precise way. "I

trust this call of yours will not complicate my case. Otherwise I should feel required to charge you with violating Article Seven of the General Business Law of New York State—with which I believe you are familiar?"

"Oh, quite, Lieutenant, quite," Hackett answered in taunting tones. "Article Seven of the General Business Law, last amended by Chapter 890, Laws of 1941, is issued by the Division of Licenses of the Department of State and deals with the regulation of private investigators. Very reasonably, too. Good day."

Blackley proceeded under full sail toward the office wherein inevitably he would find Jason Farquar III, Iris Fiske and all that remained of Lee Rhame.

Signaling me quickly, Hackett dodged into the elevator. Short seconds later we were in motion behind the closed grille, not downward, but upward. Below us we heard Blackley boom, "What! What's this?" Jay and Iris began telling him excitedly what it was. Their voices were fading when our cage stopped automatically at a white sliding panel on the top floor.

I anxiously eyed Hackett. He explained quietly, "When we came in, this elevator was somewhere in these high regions, where Rhame's killer left it."

He opened the panel cautiously. I followed him into a dark room. The only light came from the little bulbs inside the cage, and that vague glow vanished as Hackett let the panel slide shut again.

Muted voices came up out of the darkness. One said, "An alarmingly high mortality rate in your place of employment, Miss Fiske." This was Blackley, of course, not sounding deep-toned now, but nasal.



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER



Iris's and Jay's scared answers also twanged. Then Blackley added portentously, "Ah, well, I fancy my real interest lies in that insolent little ex-shamus who just stepped out to enjoy his last moments of freedom."

Hackett had been feeling his way and now he found wall-switches beside the shaft. A fluorescent glow filled the room like a rosy cloud. In its ornamented richness it looked like something out of a movie-set palace. It was empty except for us and the minor gaming boards spaced around the really magnificent roulette wheel in the center.

The voices, piped up from the open intercom box on Bogue's desk, had issued from a doorway behind the elevator. Blackley's voice was saying, "This sort of thing is what occurs when a criminal of Hackett's ilk takes over—" Then a click sounded in the darkness beyond the doorway—the intercom being switched off. Next Milo Bogue appeared in the light. His manner of welcoming us had changed from genial to grim. His round face was puckered with desperate tension. He had a handful of glittering gun pointed at us.

At that moment, responding to buttons punched below, the elevator cage went into another slow, humming descent.

"You boys don't want to die alone, do you?" Bogue asked in a husky purr. "Okay, you're getting company. Don't discourage 'em."

THE elevator went back to work under a heavy strain, indicating Blackley was about to join us. We kept mum and stood still. Bogue was playing this for keeps. The corpse in the closet downstairs left him no choice; it had cropped up too soon.

This beautiful room might soon look like that garage in Chicago on Valentine's Day, but the massacre would at least give Bogue a head start on a getaway. Meanwhile he intended Blackley to phone no alarms to headquarters. If done not too noisily it might be quite a while before somebody stumbled on our ripened bodies here.

The elevator stopped creaking again and Iris Fiske emerged. Close after her Jay Farquar appeared. Bringing up the rear came Blackley. They paused to peer strangely at us, unaware of Milo Bogue

standing silently in the opposite corner behind them.

Blackley at once slipped a plump hand inside his coat. From the shoulder-holster that nestled undetectably among his other bulges he brought his police revolver.

"It's impolite to point, Lieutenant," Hackett reminded him caustically. "Anyway, you're off your target by a mere matter of one hundred and eighty-odd degrees."

Iris and Jay looked across their shoulders, gasped and about-faced. Blackley revolved through a half turn ponderously. The lieutenant and Milo Bogue stood there aiming guns at each other over a distance of twenty feet.

"I'm watching you, Copper," Bogue said. "I'm a little tired of killing guys but I got to do it to you sooner or later. First, Hackett, I take the money. Not like you, I'm superstitious about robbing corpses."

Under one of Blackley's glacial glances Hackett shrugged, fished up the envelope he'd purloined from the late Lee and tossed it to the downy rug near Bogue's shiny shoes. Bogue stooped, keeping his eyes and his gun fixed on us. Fumbling the banknotes out, he pocketed them and left the envelope lying there.

"As for the rest of the scratch in the place tonight, I've already scraped the bottom of the safe. Until you people came I was planning to stay and run the place without Lee's help," Bogue explained, "but now I'm planning a long trip, instead. Next, your cane, Hackett."

Hackett echoed it softly. "My cane?"

"Your cane, yes. Toss it over this way, please."

Appalled, I watched Hackett. As a measure of defense I valued Hackett's cane more highly than Blackley's gun. I would far rather see the lieutenant disarmed than Hackett separated from his cane.

Hackett shrugged fatalistically and with care sent it skidding across the rug to Bogue's feet. Smiling smugly, Bogue picked it up and slashed it against the door-frame. The first whack split it and the second cracked it in two. Bogue let the pieces lay where they fell. Hackett was chuckling.

"Guilty knowledge, Milo. You seem to have a grudge against my cane—which makes you the guy who slugged Pres. And

you're holding the gun in your left hand. Does your right still hurt a little where I smashed it?"

Bogue narrowed his eyes.

I wanted Hackett to shut up. With no cane in his hands I felt doomed.

But Hackett went blithely on:

"As for the two murders, pinning them on you will be just a matter of routine, Milo."

Blackley moved a little, his gun still pointed at Bogue, and Bogue's pointed at him.

Hackett said casually to the taut-nerved Bogue:

"Grover must have put the bite on you via the phone from Iris's apartment. He thought you were running the works, instead of Lee Rhame. Rhame wouldn't have rushed over Iris's apartment and shot Grover. Rhame would have avoided murder somehow. Murder seems to get people into trouble."

Then Hackett deliberately went on steaming up Bogue: "Everything you did was stupid. You rushed out to build yourself an alibi, meaning to sneak back and smuggle out the body before Iris found it. But she and Jay walked in on it too soon. So—you were in the soup again."

Hackett's smile was maddening. He was relaxed, perfectly at ease and seemed to be enjoying himself. "Then came your stroke of luck—you thought! You must have busted your arm patting yourself on your back. Iris sent you an S.O.S. So you hot-footed it back to her apartment—and ditched the corpse.

"Since then you've been going to pieces, Milo, along with the whole Shangri-La set-up. Rhame told you off for the dumb cluck you are. He must have laid it on thick for you to chill him. And then, stupid, you learned that Jay wasn't the sucker you thought he was. Fun, isn't it?"

Blackley said with cold dignity, "I hardly needed an *ex-shamus'* prompting to recognize this as another case of dog-eat-dog. . . . Discard your gun if you please, Mr. Bogue. I'm about to take you into custody for both murders."

He moved massively toward Bogue like a battleship confident of its armor-plate. He steamed directly at Bogue and, as the inches shrank between them, the tension increased to the point of explosion.

BOGUE'S gun banged. Blackley's revolver, unfired, twirled from his fat hand. Bogue's bullet had smashed it out of his grasp. The lieutenant stood there gazing at his numbed, bleeding fingers. Then he started for Bogue again.

Bogue's gun turned now full upon Blackley's paunch. He couldn't miss—not that target.

At that point Hackett had executed a startling movement like one of the three musketeers drawing his rapier. His hand had swung from inside his coat gripping the head of his hickory cane.

Back in our washroom he'd simply tucked his cane inside his pants and had carried it unseen, its head under his armpit, its tip halfway down his thigh, his belt holding it in place. I was never happier to see anything than that slender little cane.

He sprang forward, executing the *moulinet*, while Bogue still concentrated on murdering Blackley. A split second more and Bogue's gun-hand was slapped aside, spurting blood from an opened vein. Hackett shuffled his feet in a strange little dance and—the gun flew ceilingward. Hackett's stick sang, flicked, stabbed, and terrific things happened to Bogue so swiftly that he could only stand there stunned helpless.

Bogue let out a sudden roar of rage and suffering. He lurched toward Hackett.

Letting him come, Hackett went into the single-sticker's most effective and most devastating maneuver. He held his stick vertical in both hands, point upward. With neat accuracy he drove it to its target, the soft V of Bogue's underchin. It pierced upward like a skewer and met the roof of Bogue's mouth, where bones crackled. Bogue rose off the floor, soared over Hackett's shoulder like a gaffed tuna, hit the roulette table, skidded across it scattering chips, then thumped to the floor six feet beyond—to stay there a while.

Blackley peered at Hackett. Hackett grinned at Blackley. The lieutenant said softly, what must have hurt him mightily: "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Hackett answered happily. "You don't need us here, do you? As you said, Lieutenant, it's just another case of crooks preying on one another. Our part in it is really incidental, don't you think?"

Without waiting for an answer Hackett signaled us to the elevator. He detoured to pick up that envelope before joining us in the cage. We hustled out of the Shangri-La and across to the Farquar villa.

* * *

Grinning with the anticipation of a showdown with Grandma, Jay used his key and steered Iris in first with one arm around her waist. Frightened but game, she went with him up a broad staircase. We followed them into a drawing room suitable for all-Chopin musicales.

Mrs. Farquar rose from her wingback chair, dropping a magazine, and stood at her full regal height. "Jay! How dare you? Really, how can you have the effrontery to bring that girl—"

Hackett had strolled to face her. "Come off it, Florrie," he said acridly. "After all, we know you were just a tenement brat when you had the good luck to marry a young butcher-man with ambition and a fancy name."

With a queenly sniff she retorted, "The butler will show you the way out. Never step foot in my house again."

"Not any of them, including the one across the street?" Hackett said quietly.

If this was a shot in the dark it banged squarely into the bull's-eye. Mrs. Farquar turned paler than whitewash.

"You're the oldest resident in this noble block. No supper club could have squeezed in here over your objections. But on the other hand, it could stay if you over-ruled your aristocratic neighbors. Don't look so righteous, Florrie. After all, it won't be too tough a job to trace the ownership of that building through a dummy or two to you."

Jay and Iris stared flabbergasted at Mrs. Farquar. I have seen gayer women at funerals. Hackett moved quietly to a desk, plucked an envelope from a pigeonhole, compared it with the one he'd brought from the Shangri-La and shook his head.

"Identical. Same costly paper, same watermark, same style. Careless of you to put Lee's pay inside such distinctive stationery, even if it isn't imprinted."

Jay gasped, "*She*—the Shangri-La?"

"She has to live, doesn't she?" Hackett said with rich irony. "After all, your father and grandfather didn't leave her with much. The inclination of the Farquar

men to lose their shirts at gambling must have made Florette decide gambling was a good racket for her to get into."

He eyed Mrs. Farquar irreverently. "When Lee Rhame was sent up the river he kept his mouth shut about you being his backer. So when he got out you rewarded him with a share in your crowning endeavor—stripping your own grandson."

Mrs. Farquar snapped, "And why not? He'd only fritter it away. Someone else would get it if I didn't!"

"Milo may be afraid to accuse her, Jay," Hackett commented, "but she has admitted it. Still, it's a thousand to one the D.A. won't dare move against her."

Mrs. Farquar sounded an imploring note. "Jay, Jay dear, believe me, I was doing it for your own good—to keep your money in the family."

Jay said, not unkindly: "To keep me under your thumb, you old witch."

Hackett agreed, "Quite a schemer, this old lass, all right—even to the extent of making a show of opposing your romance so that in the traditional way of lovers you'd go for her bait all the harder. She'd have gotten away with it, too—except for Iris's honesty, your good sense, Grover's jealousy and Milo's cupidity."

And Thackeray Hackett's acumen.

"You and Iris had better stick together, Jay," Hackett suggested, "just to protect yourselves from this predatory grandmother of yours."

"Grandma," Jay said, "you really are a stinker."

Mrs. Farquar fell into her thronelike chair, sobbing. Jay and Iris just stared at her. Hackett smiled faintly, swinging his cane. I went dizzily to the phone and without a by-your-leave phoned Clarabelle.

"Clarabelle," I said when she answered, "you may relax. There has been a sudden change for the better. Florette has decided to give Jay and Iris her blessing—and Florette can also be counted on to put in a good word for us—thanks to Thack."

"Why, isn't that lovely, Walter, doll?" Clarabelle chirped. "Just as I've always said, Thack is just the dearest, sweetest boy in all the—"

I held the instrument away from my ear, and pretended not to see Hackett's satirical grin.

THRILL

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

CONTAINS WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

DOCKET



When Private Detective Jim Bennett phoned the police, he said: "Murder. Armand's Beauty Salon. Somebody gave Armand a cold wave. . . ." Bennett figured that one of Armand's singed lovelies must have resented having her hair burned. For a beauty saboteur was systematically scorching the crowning glory of Armand's patrons.



Armand's widow, Marianne, told Jim Bennett that a year ago Armand's drunken driving had horribly scarred her face. . . . Marianne turned her back to Bennett. Her yellow hair fell in a shining cascade over her shoulders. "The rest of me is the same as before," Marianne said. "It's just—my face!"



Bennett didn't have to be coaxed to find the murderer for her, whether or not the killer was "a he—or she." And Bennett's agreement made him a target for snipers. . . . As Bennett started to cross the street a bullet grooved his shoulder. He reached for his clip-holstered gun. . . .



Joyce, Armand's secretary, made a play for Bennett—which amused him. When she tried to slap him, he roughly twisted her wrist. . . . The complete story of the burned beauties and Tough-Dick Bennett will be told in Robert Martin's novel—"Death Gives a Permanent Wave"—in Oct. DIME DETECTIVE, out Sept. 3rd.

LITTLE PAL

By DALE CLARK



The bushy-haired man
twisted the kid's arm.
"Spill it straight, Kid
—or we'll get messy."



*When the vagabond kid thumbed a ride
in the nifty convertible, he didn't know
it was the undertaker's special—with a
classy lassie as chief mourner.*

O' MURDER

Thrill-Packed Crime-Adventure Novelette



CHAPTER ONE

Kid of the Road

CALIFORNIA law forbids hitchhiking. Not enforced, really. And yet a cop might take it into his head to enforce this law, just because he didn't like the looks of the kid.

So, out of the night, the kid drifted up to the filling station. Sometimes it's easy to bum a ride out of a gas station. It depends on the attendant. The method is this: You get to chinning with the guy,

pretty soon you're hosing air into a tire to help him out, and then quietly you're hitting a motorist. "Headed south? Say, how about a ride?" And the motorist figures you must be known to the gas station fellow, therefore you must be all right.

It depends on who's working the gas pumps, and the best bet is another young kid or else a talkative old grandpa. This one here was middle aged.

The middle-aged man watched the kid's shuffling approach.

The kid grinned. "Kind of cold night, huh?"

"Keep moving, you'll keep warm."

The surly, cold-eyed so-and-so! The cold eyes looking the kid up and down like a sub-human species, like vermin. And that "keep moving" talk, like he thought he was a cop or county sheriff or something.

The kid plodded along, through the semi-circle of the gas station light, down the sloping driveway to the sidewalk and the darkness. Here, for a moment, he hesitated. Behind him, a car rolled into the station and a bell device said *ching*, loudly. He looked back. It was a woman driving, though.

No good. No chance of a woman, alone in a car, picking up the kid.

He jammed his hands into his pockets and walked on. The street bent around this filling station, and ahead there weren't any more stations with their bright aprons of lights and their neon haloes. He came to a stop under what seemed to be the last street lamp. Now the woman driver turned out of the station, and her headbeam went past the kid and brightened a highway marker: END 20 MILE ZONE. It was the end of the line, all right.

The kid turned around. He had to; he knew once the cars hit the country highway, they wouldn't stop for anything less than the Angel Gabriel with his brightest robe on.

This time the filling-station man, leaning against a gas pump, stared very hard at the kid. Like he thought the kid was casing the station and intending a stick-up. So the kid didn't try that shortcut across the yard, he followed the sidewalk the long way around.

Ching.

Even the man beside the pump was taken

by surprise, not hearing this car roll up behind him. This was a *car*. This was one of the luxury convertibles they're making with the station-wagon flanks. And not just a stock model of its highly expensive breed, either. It glittered with the extras, fog lamps and a vast chromium egg of spotlight.

The kid came to an involuntary stop, eyes drinking in all of this gleaming wood, lacquered steel, chromium, canvas, and glass.

Imagine what it'd be driving around in all that splendor.

"Fill 'er up, Joe."

"You bet. Ethyl?"

The station guy hopped, and the driver got out and stretched his tan-gabardine-suited, stocky body. He had a dented nose. He might have been a fighter. Only he was a little old for a fighter. Well, maybe he'd made his million and had retired from the ring.

The kid stood on one foot, and next on the other foot, and practically of their own accord his feet made steps closer to the shining convertible.

"He can't more'n say no," the kid thought. And so what? Any guy in any rattletrap jalopy could say no. And plenty of them did.

Anyway, he had to ask; nobody was going to ask *him*.

The kid said huskily, "Headed south. Mister? To L.A.?"

"That's right," the man with the dented nose said. He took quick, cat steps past the kid and looked at the front tires.

"I'd be mighty obliged for a lift."

"I bet you would." The man's face broke up into laughter. Where'd the kid get the idea it couldn't be worse than saying no? The laughter was a million times worse. The color must have exploded all through his face, but all he could do was swallow and turn away.

Then the man said, "All right. Hell, hop in."

Just like that! And the kid was inside, plunked down into the genuine leather upholstery, on an eye-level with the glittering sweep of the convertible's instrument panel. It had everything, this panel, except maybe television.

"Check the oil, Mr. Polly?"

He wasn't a fighter, unless he used some

other ring name. Polly would never do.

"No. Here, break a twenty, Joe?"

Polly got inside with the kid. Joe stood there at the car window and made change. Polly's was a shiny yellow billfold, fat with money, so fat more bills could hardly be crammed into it.

The kid looked at the money, and then he noticed Joe looking at *him*, and he turned his eyes hastily to the instrument panel clock. The clock said thirteen minutes past midnight.

THE convertible rolled down the driveway and into the street, and right away the street was country highway. The car slid down the concrete bole of the road, making fifty-eight miles an hour silently, like the motor under the hood was an electric sewing machine stitching away the miles.

Polly said softly, "What's your name, Son?"

"Singer, Jim Singer." The kid made that one up, from thinking about sewing machines.

"Where you hail from?"

"The Rouge River, Oregon. My brother down in L. A., he's got a job lined up for me."

Polly's square hand left the wheel and punched a button, and night-owl radio music flooded through the car. The headlights picked up trees along the highway, discarded tires on the road shoulders, and of course they passed one Diesel after another. They passed stretches where the fences and even the telephone wires had dirty white beards. That was cotton that had been blown during the picking season.

Then there were miles of almond ranch, all one ranch on both sides of the road. All this was Valley, and the highway was as straight as a yardstick, and as level as a breakfast table. Insects died on the windshield, and Polly touched a different button, and twin fountains jetted against the glass and the wipers mopped everything clear as new.

"Golly!" the kid said. "That's *something*."

"You still awake? What say we throw in some coffee when we get to Famoso?"

"That was Famoso ten miles ago," the kid said.

The man turned his broad, dent-nosed face; his eyes were shiny in the darkness. "You know this stretch better than I do."

A swallow traveled down the kid's throat. "There was a road sign."

"I missed it. I'm getting sleepy. We'll coffee up in Bakersfield."

The place on the edge of Bakersfield was an all-night truck stop. The fat tires crunched gravel, and Mr. Polly set the handbrake. "Come on."

"Well, I dunno if I'm hungry, very."

"Broke, huh?"

It was that, and it was that somebody in the place might recognize the kid.

"Hell," said the broken-nosed man, "come on, I'll pay."

They went into this long, narrow, low-ceilinged place, down to the end of the counter. "*Que tal, Rosie?*" said Mr. Polly to the Mexican waitress.

"*Asi, asi. ¿E usted?*"

"Hungry for chili," said Polly, reverting to English. "Singer?"

The kid, glancing along the counter, saw no familiar face.

Polly said, "Your name's Singer, ain't it?"

"Oh, me. Well, a hamburger. Onion."

"Coffee?" asked the girl.

"*Si, cafe solo,*" said Polly. But the kid decided to have a glass of milk. Milk cost the same, and it was nourishing.

They didn't spend long at the counter; not over ten minutes. "Change for the phone, Rosie," said Polly, pushing aside his chili bowl. "*Gracias.* Wait in the car, Singer?"

The kid couldn't figure him. A traveling salesman would know the gas station Joes and the truck stop Rosies, but this one wasn't any salesman's car. Nor did Mr. Polly's Spanish have quite the swing you heard when the fruit pickers talked their lingo.

Mr. Polly came out, whistling. The car gathered speed. The kid thought maybe Polly was a fight manager. Say he had club fighters scrapping in places like Fresno and Bakersfield. Say he'd picked up his Spanish from having a Mexican boxer in his string that didn't understand English so good.

Milk and hamburger made the kid drowsy. His chin dropped to his chest. He dozed. Once he woke up, and the car was

gliding up a long mountain grade past a big red Diesel that was stalled with its flares flickering. The kid slept, and woke up shivering in time to see the lights at Gorman. After that, he turned up his jacket and slept fitfully. The darkness helped, but the kid's head kept falling too far over his chest and then jerking back again.

You can't sleep too well in a moving car. The kid knew when the wheels passed over a bumpy stretch of road. The car stopped later on, and the kid's head half-lifted, and dropped again to its chin-on-chest rest. Then it wasn't a moving car, and the muscles that'd been automatically braced against swaying motion could relax, and the kid sprawled down deeper in the seat. He snored.

It was gray half-light when he sat up, started rubbing a hand over his aching neck. The physical sensations inside the kid claimed his attention first. He was stiff, lame, cold. Next, he noticed the absence of physical sensations—the lack of motion, the lack of the motor's smooth, sewing-machine hum.

He was alone in the car.

His eyes flew open and he stared down the road, and it wasn't the big Bakersfield-Los Angeles slab. Sometime in the night, the car had got off onto this smaller, oiled strip, and stopped here, all the while the kid was sleeping.

What looked like a large, tan bundle lay at the edge of the oiled road, maybe fifty feet in front of where the convertible was parked.

The kid got it turned, though. Fence-open, and scrambled out. He slipped on the road's shoulder, caught himself from falling, and ran to the bundle—stiffly, feeling the oiled surface sting his soles. He ran ten paces, and he saw the tarry red-brown of blood, and he slowed to a stiff-kneed walk, but he couldn't prevent his feet from stumbling closer and closer to the tan bundle.

Mr. Polly's tan gabardine coat had been pulled over his head. The kid raised the coat, and peeked in—and he sprang back breathing hard.

It was horrible.

It was so horrible the kid couldn't look twice. He stumbled back to the car and sat in the car, shaking like a leaf and chewing his lips.

CHAPTER TWO

Into the Frypan . . .

FOR these first few minutes, it was entirely physical sensation with the kid. For one thing, his life up to this crisis had been guided almost altogether by sheer physical drives. The kid was cold and hungry much of the time. Or else he was hot and thirsty. His thinking was geared to sensations like cold and hunger and thirst.

And for another thing, there's a side to murder nobody gets from seeing a mystery movie or reading a newspaper. A coroner would say Mr. Polly suffered fractures of the orbital plates and consequent hematomata of the eyelids. The way the kid saw this, Mr. Polly had two of the boggiest black eyes imaginable. Mr. Polly was a mess of contusions, lacerations, and hemorrhages. A stomach could turn over from looking at him.

The kid's stomach turned, and the kid's legs wanted to run away, but then he thought: How could he?

Joe was going to remember, for one. "Sure," Joe would say, "I couldn't forget that car." Or the kid, or the billfold stuffed with twenties.

The kid jumped out of the car. It wasn't a pleasant job, and it turned his stomach some more, but he had to look in the coat's pockets.

He found some silver and a keyring in the pants, finally, but the shiny yellow billfold was gone.

The kid straightened, and now for the first time he noticed the convertible's headlights burning yellowly.

Mr. Polly had stopped the car on this lonely side road, had gotten out, had walked fifty feet along the road, and in the full glare of the headlamps he had been beaten to death. While the kid slept through it all!

The cops wouldn't ever believe *that*, the kid thought. On account of Joe, for one, and Rosie for another. The Mexican girl knew about all that money, too. And, "Yes," she'd say, "there was this young guy with him. Name of Singer."

It built up fast in the kid's brain.

"Your name ain't Singer. Why'd you tell him it was? *Why?*"

"Afraid your real name might mean

something to the guy? You ever been arrested before? What for?"

"Vagrancy, huh? Remember we can check this. We're going to."

They could check it, easy.

"Now, look, we know your real name. And if you ever did any time besides this thirty days road camp, we're gonna find that out, too."

"What was you running away for in Sacramento? Just because you heard a woman holler she was robbed?"

"Why'd you say it was just vagrancy? It was suspicion of purse-stealing, too, wasn't it? They vagged you because they couldn't prove the other, didn't they?"

They'd dig it up, hash it all over, the way cops always did. Only this time it'd be worse:

"What'd you hit him with? Where is it? Where'd you hide the money? Like hell you slept! You took a couple of hours and hid the money! Where? Where? Where?"

And there wasn't any answer, just the incredible assertion he'd managed to sleep through a murder fifty feet away.

The kid trudged back to the convertible, and this time he opened the other door, the one on the driver's side. He slid in under the wheel, and studied the instrument panel. This button punched off the lights. The key went in a hole here. That button actuated the starter.

He could drive the car, all right. Only he wasn't used to automobiles that jumped from under you at the barest touch of gas, that braked cold at the tiniest foot pressure. He all but ran into one ditch, and then all but backed into the other. The convertible had a lot of wheelbase, and it took seesawing to twist it around on such a narrow road.

The kid got it turned, though. Fence-posts slid past, the shape of bare hills slid past, and when he looked into the rear-view mirror Mr. Polly's body wasn't even a visible speck in the road.

It was like a knot untied in the pit of his stomach. His breathing came easier, much easier.

The kid was used to running away from things.

HE DROVE a mile, and the oiled road went dipping and bumping down a little valley and joined the big slab highway.

The big slab curved and fell, and then instead of hills the kid was driving through orange ranch country. And pretty soon instead of orange trees, auto courts and gas stations and drive-ins lined the highway. In no time at all, the highway was actually a city street.

Suppose he just pulled the car over to the curb here and walked away?

He swung the car up to the curb and, letting the motor idle, he thought.

They might never find him. If all they had to work on was a description and a phony name.

Or suppose they found him. "I don't know," the kid could say. "Sure, the guy gave me a lift into L. A. What happened after that, I wouldn't know."

That was better, but it could be improved. The kid bent over, twisting his neck, so he could read the data on the California registration in its steering-post, cel-luloid, wrap-around holder.

Mr. Polly's name, he found out now, wasn't Polly at all, but *Frank R. Pauley*. The address was Highland Avenue, Hollywood.

The kid drove on, by way of the Pass into Hollywood and Highland Avenue. The number he wanted wasn't hard to find, being emblazoned on an apartment hotel awning in letters that could be read a block away. He even had the incredible luck to find a parking place practically at the front door.

He saw, as he swung into the vacancy, a fire hydrant which explained why no other car had taken this place. He thought, well, he wouldn't be around to worry about the ticket. He braked, hesitated, and finally left the keys hanging from the ignition lock.

He jumped out, and he was up onto the sidewalk before he remembered. *Finger-prints!*

The kid didn't own a handkerchief. He was in the habit of helping himself to an extra paper napkin from lunchroom counters. He dug into his jacket-front pocket, and spread a paper napkin over his fingers, and with that he proceeded to polish the steering wheel all around, the dash-board buttons, the inside door latches. He was thorough about it. He didn't forget his hand might have rested on the leather upholstery while he slept.

Now the outside door latch here. And

the one on the other side. He stepped back. He hadn't forgotten anything, had he?

A voice from the curb said: "Come here, Punk."

A cop?

The kid spun around.

It wasn't a cop—no uniform. But a gun. Yes, in broad morning daylight, a gun pointed at the kid!

The gun's owner looked like a pool-hall shark, dressed up gaudy for the big Saturday night. A ratty type wearing plenty of shoulder padding in the gray suit with the chalk stripes.

He stepped down from the curb and grabbed the kid's arm. "Inside! Get going!"

The kid went along numbly. He let himself be shoved up onto the curb, pushed across the sidewalk, up two concrete steps, into the apartment building. At the top of more steps, carpeted ones, an older man with bushy, iron-gray hair held open an inner door.

This man grasped the kid by his jacket collar, stepped behind him, and raised a knee hard into the seat of the kid's pants.

After that, the kid was thrust through a third doorway, and now he was inside an apartment whose front window overlooked the street.

At this front window stood a man—and not such a bad-looking man, either. He wasn't any pool shark or roughneck, at least.

On a sofa across the room, a blonde girl with enormous blue eyes sat, legs crossed.

The knee bunted the base of the kid's spine, the hand at his collar pushed, and the kid sprawled in the middle of the room.

He got up slowly, trembling.

"What are you doing in Frank's car?" the bushy-haired man twisted his arm behind him. "Spill it straight, Kid—or we'll get messy."

The kid didn't answer.

So the bush-top hit him. The kid fell backward, onto the sofa. His nose hurt a lot, and blood ran warm over his lip. He lay as he landed, eyes wonderingly open. The girl's face was the closest—huge blue eyes and scarlet lips, framed in ripples of bright yellow hair.

The bush-topped man loomed over the kid. He had bushy eyebrows of the same iron-grayness. His eyes were muddy. His

thick face was brownish and pockmarked. He wore a leather jacket, unbuttoned.

The dressed-up pool shark was a pallid-skinned, sharp-featured wise guy.

THE kid's eyes sought the third man. Out of experience with humanity, he'd never have panhandled the third man for coffee money; this man was more the kind you'd hit for a job. His clothes placed him in the business class. He had just such a clean-shaven, spare, tightly sober and calculating face as the kid associated with employers.

You could expect no charity from this man. But, the way the kid sized things up, you could maybe do business with him.

"Spit it out! What you doing with Frank's car?"

Stupidly, the kid blinked at his bushy-haired tormentor. "Who's Frank?"

"Frank Pauley! The guy whose car you drove up in."

Using his sleeve, the kid wiped blood from his face. The situation was absolutely fantastic, if you stopped to think about it. He didn't. He was looking for a quick way out.

The kid said, "Well, this car came into the filling station, and the guy got out," and it must have sounded true enough. That far he was telling the truth. But then a variation occurred to him.

"He was *drunk*," the kid said. "He got out, asked where could he wash up, and he started staggering all over the place. So Joe—that's the guy runs the station—he said, 'Mister, you shouldn't be driving. You'd get thirty days in a road camp if the cops should catch you,' Joe said. 'You'd better go home in a cab,' Joe told him. So the drunk guy, he said he'd give me a dollar to take this car home for him."

He thought it sounded pretty good. Bushy-Hair thought so, too, or at any rate he was stumped.

Number Three came over; asked quietly, "If that's true, why didn't Frank ride home with you? Why would he need a cab? Why couldn't he ride in his own car?"

That stumped the kid. He used the sleeve and rubbed more blood from his lip. He said, "Well, there's a chili place next door. He was going to get a chili bowl and some black coffee. Maybe he didn't want to go home without he sobered up first. I didn't

ask. I couldn't see where it was any of my business."

"Where is this filling station?"

"Out on the edge of town. Out on Sepulvada."

"You work there?"

"Yeah."

"What's your name?"

"Groves," the kid said. He got that from thinking orange groves.

"Look in his pockets," the third man directed.

There was nothing in the kid's pockets; but the time it took to look was time to think, too.

He said, "I must have left my pocket-book in those white coveralls I wear in the station. I'm on nights, so as soon as Joe comes in the morning I change clothes. I was changing when the drunk guy drove up. Generally I go in the chili place and have a hamburger and a glass of milk, and a couple of times before I've left my pocket-book in the coveralls, but this morning I drove off without noticing."

"What's the telephone number out there?"

"It hasn't got a phone. It's just a little shack of a place."

"What do you do, use the phone next door in the chili joint?"

"It hasn't got any phone, either. It's run by Mexicans; they don't bother."

The pool-hall shark butted in: "Tell us what he looked like, Punk—this drunk driving the car."

"He had on tan colored clothes. Good clothes. He could have been a fighter. He had a broken nose."

That stumped them again. The kid's piecemeal story, half remembered and half made up, contained enough truth to perplex the third man.

This man said, "Where is the place? Where on Sepulvada?"

"Ninety-nine eighty."

The man said, "Well, Harry, you and Augie had better drive out to ninety-nine eighty Sepulvada and see if anything like this happened. Talk to this man Joe, if there is such a man. And call me back."

Bushy-Hair nodded. "Oke."

The other, Augie, asked, "And supposing Frank's still in this chili joint?"

"Call me back whichever way it turns out."

Harry and Augie went out. The kid was to be left here with the third man and the girl. He hadn't succeeded in lying his way out of this scrape at all.

CHAPTER THREE

. . . and Into the Fire

"**F**ETCH him a handkerchief, Dixie," the man said. The girl silently went into another room and returned with a folded oblong of linen, which she gave to the kid.

"Clean yourself up," the man said, "and listen to me." He drew a chair close to the sofa, sat down facing the kid. In a not unfriendly voice he asked, "Did you know that car isn't paid for?"

"No, Sir."

"It isn't paid for. It's being repossessed."

"Yes, Sir."

"There's a bad check angle involved, too," the man said. "It's nothing for you to worry about—that is, if you're telling the truth. But if it turns out you're lying to me—trying to shield Frank Pauley—you're going to be in the damndest trouble you ever dreamed of."

"Yes, Sir," said the kid numbly. He wasn't interested. He'd supposed at first these queer people were Pauley's friends. But, with no mental wrench, he could as readily think of them as the dead man's enemies.

And as for this man's alternate friendliness and his threats, the kid just didn't listen to all that. It wasn't going to last; it amounted to a few minutes' truce, and that's all.

"So, Sonny, if you left something out of your story, now's the time to straighten it out."

The speaker was wasting his breath. He might just as well have walked up to some trapped, wild animal and attempted to lure it into conversation.

The kid sat there, and his thoughts ran: *Suppose I took a running jump right through that front window, how far would it be down to the sidewalk?*

"Well?" the man asked.

"I didn't do nothing," the kid said.

"What were you wiping off the car for? I stood at the window and watched you."

The kid said, "Working around a gas station, you're always liable to have oil or grease on you. Wiping inside customers' cars, that's a habit."

Actually, he wasn't a dumb kid. He could keep this up all day—if it weren't for the non-existent Joe's filling station at that imaginary address. He was going to be through, though, when the phone rang.

And, after a while, the phone rang.

The kid waited for the man to get up. But the man didn't. He said, "You take it, Dixie," and stayed put on his chair, not a yard away from the sofa.

There was no chance for the kid to go for the door or the window, or even to get his legs under him in a position to lunge suddenly at his captor.

"Hello?" the girl said, off in a corner of the room. "You did? All right, Augie. I'll tell Gooler."

It was like waiting for the judge to say thirty days, or ninety, or a year.

Dixie put the phone down, and she said flatly, "Okay. They checked it."

The man said, "You mean it's on the level?"

"Yes. Frank was in this place drunk as a skunk. He went off somewhere in a cab, God knows where."

The kid was staring at her face. The big blue eyes were enormously expressionless. The scarlet lips neither smiled nor frowned. What a dead-pan *she* was!

Gooler's chair scraped. He looked a little worried and uncertain. "That probably means he's headed here," Gooler said.

The kid went on staring at the girl and wondering what made her lie for him. And what kind of a jam was she in herself, now?

Gooler said, "Well, Sonny, I guess that lets you out." More than that, he opened his billfold. "Here's for your trouble. It's too bad we treated you so rough, but there you were, riding around in what was practically a stolen car."

The kid's fingers closed on the money, a five-dollar bill. His eyes followed the girl's lithe steps to the door she opened.

"Forget it," Dixie advised. "Just remember it'd been worse if the police picked you up, in somebody else's car, and not even a driver's license on you."

"Yeah, it could have been worse. I know that."

"Well, then, beat it."

THE kid went out through the opened door, and the next two doors to the sidewalk. Dazed, that's how he felt. Dazed, so he hardly noticed that it was late enough now so the sidewalk had begun to run a trickle of humankind. More heads than a few turned to watch this kid plodding along Highland Avenue with blood smeared on his face, a reddened handkerchief in one hand, and a five dollar bill protruding from the other fist.

He wasn't aware of being watched. Actually, the kid was stunned into an unseeing dream state. From panhandling the stems he knew, sure, dames were easy touched sometimes. Especially the older, motherly ones could be good for as much as two-bits coffee money. But they didn't hand out their last two-bits; it didn't really hurt them to give up a quarter when they had more.

Imagine this Dixie lying for the kid! Turning him loose and getting herself into the scrape instead! Because she was going to be in *bad* when those men found out what she'd pulled, wasn't she?

What made her do it?

Thinking like this, for the kid, was almost like trying to think in a foreign language. Using his imagination to penetrate other people's actions and motives amounted to a new kind of experience. He had vague memories of a mother, and definite memories of a drunken, brutal stepfather. That was on a farm in Minnesota, and he'd run away from it a long while ago, and he'd learned since about cops and yard bulls and straw bosses and cheap crooks and the motherly women good for two-bit donations. But what went on inside these people, what made them tick, the kid didn't know. He'd never stayed around any one person or place long enough to find out. . . .

The kid stumbled, stepping off a high curb. He'd have fallen if a hand hadn't caught his arm.

"You damned little rat!"

The hand belonged to Harry, the bushy-haired big fellow. Harry twisted the arm, and pushed mightily, and the kid was propelled in a series of staggering steps into the street.

"Get in, you stinker!"

The kid was back inside the big convertible. He was in the seat, wedged between pool-shark Augie at the wheel and Harry's apish form.

Harry's hand grasped the nape of the kid's neck, and shoved down, so the kid's head went down to the dashboard's level.

"One yap outa you, and I'll bust your neck!"

The convertible swung off Highland Avenue. It followed side streets, it braked for boulevards, and after blocks and blocks it finally stopped up an alley.

The kid got just a glimpse of the alley while Augie was unlocking a paint-blistered, narrow door. There was a hallway inside, and another door, and wooden steps descending into a dank, dark, cement-walled basement. A drop-cord light shone dully through a festoon of cobwebs. The light showed a work-bench, a rusty iron sink, a row of some kind of plank bins with padlock-hung doors.

"Now say where you got that car!"

The kid hung his head, silent.

Harry lashed out, knocked him down, kicked him.

"Say, damn you!"

The kid moaned. "All right, I stole it. I saw the keys left in it—"

"You stole it and brung it home where it belonged?"

"Well, I got scared."

"You're gonna get scared."

They beat him up, but good. They slapped, slugged, choked, and booted the kid. They got him to that red borderland, semi-consciousness, in which a reeling brain can't think up any lies. That's the psychology of the third degree—if the victim talks.

The kid wouldn't talk.

Harry hauled off and hit him, and the next thing the kid knew he was sprawled on cold concrete behind one of those padlocked doors.

He was in terrible shape, bleeding, swollen, aching. The arm that had been twisted hung stiffened, useless. With a vast expenditure of effort, the kid managed to feed the other hand inside the lining of his jacket. Pockets are no good to anyone leading the kid's kind of life. Pockets are too easy, and shoes almost as bad.

What the kid had was a ripped place in the armhole lining, and under that, a hide-

away. Hidden away, he had a few dollars tightly tied in a Bull Durham bag—and he had a knife.

The door of his prison was of inch-board, dressed, soft wood.

It was easy, too easy. The minute he groped to the door and started working at it, he heard footsteps.

Augie opened the door.

Augie threw up his arm. The knife sank into the arm and stayed there. Sobbing, the kid ran for the stairs. The kid's legs were, compared to the rest of him, in good working order. He got the doors open and was through them, out into the alley.

HE RAN down the alley a dozen yards, saw a narrow walk that fed between two brick buildings, and darted along this walk. It brought him out onto a street. He crossed the street, fairly flying, and crossed a vacant alley, and that brought him to another alley. The kid started up this alley, and suddenly he wasn't flying.

He slowed down to a staggering, winded dog trot. He'd come this far out of sheer fear, more by nerve than muscle—and now the reaction set in. He was in the plight of a deer that's gut-shot by the hunter's rifle, goes down for a spell, and then leaps up and runs off—runs almost as if uninjured. But the deer doesn't run any great distance.

Neither did the kid. Within a hundred yards of the basement where he'd been held, across the street but in the same block, was a boneyard of wheelless, rusting jaloppies. The kid twisted open the door of a decrepit sedan body and, gasping leadenly, fell inside onto the ragged seat cushions.

* * *

At first, he lay here resting and regaining his breath; then it dawned upon him he'd found as safe a place as any; and he fell asleep. The kid was used to sleeping on a catch-as-catch-can basis—on the floors of boxcars with only a sheet of newspaper under him, in jolting trucks, in haystacks and ditches and doorways.

The ragged cushions of this rusting jalopy really made a much better bed than any park bench. He was exhausted from last night and this morning, and, further-

more, he had no prospect of a roof over him and a mattress underneath.

He slept, and woke up, and he felt better. Being young, he could snap back fast. He sat up and gingerly stretched his lamed muscles and looked around. He caught a glimpse of himself in the jalopy's cracked, rear-view mirror.

It scared him. His face was a mess. He had bruises and lumps, with blood smears on his face. His clothes, too, were splattered with blood.

Any cop would have grabbed him on sight, at any time, just for looking like this. That would have been true even if it wasn't morally certain Frank Pauley's body by now had been found. Lying on a public road, it *must* have.

It'd take them awhile to find out he was Frank Pauley, but from fingerprints or laundry marks they'd do that fast enough. And they'd have the kid's description almost as fast. He was hot, all right.

Huddled in the wreck of a car, the kid realized that he couldn't clean himself up enough—no amount of water would scrub away the lumps and bruises. He simply couldn't hope to thumb a ride, or hop a freight, or even so much as walk down a street in his freshly tattered and blood-stained condition.

The kid's brain brooded over this problem awhile, and presently he struck upon an answer. He crept out of his hiding place, and when he came back, it was with two fistfulls of tarry lubricant scraped from car hubs about the wrecking yard. In front of the mirror, he started at the hair-line and worked down, making up his face. And next, daubing over the bloodstains on his jacket.

When he headed up the alley, he was carrying on his shoulder a piece of rust-eaten fender. From appearances, he'd dived into a pool of axle grease to retrieve this treasure. He was a mess, but no longer obviously a bloody one. He followed the alley, and crossed the streets as he came to them, and once a cop shouted at him for jaywalking—but no worse than shouted.

Possibly he could have trudged through the entire city and its suburbs, into the open country.

He struck Highland Avenue.

He took an alley at right angles to the

one he'd been trudging, and it brought him to within a half-block of the apartment building. He thought he saw a movement of something inside a window. Half a block was too far away—he couldn't be sure.

He walked closer, trying to shift the fender into such a position that it shielded his face. He stood on the corner, just across the street.

The movement inside the window must have been imagined, or at least it wasn't repeated now.

The kid stood there, staring, and his heart slogged heavily in his chest. Hiking up alleys was one thing, standing here on a busy thoroughfare intersection something else. Pedestrians had to detour wide of the kid, and that made him the focus of unpleasant attention.

Maybe *she* wasn't in that apartment. Or if she was there, maybe she wasn't alone.

He could have stood there awhile, looking hopeless, and finally have wandered away—or he could have worked up the nerve to tackle the apartment. It might have turned out either way.

It turned out the door across the street opened, and the girl came down the two steps—slowly, looking in her handbag for keys.

CHAPTER FOUR

Debt of Honor

THE kid let the fender slip from his shoulder and ran across the street. It was risky; he could have been killed in the traffic, but there was no time to waste. She was unlocking a brown coupe at the curb.

"Miss Dixie!" the kid cried.

She looked around over one slim shoulder. Then she turned, her blue eyes enormously wide and watchful. She said nothing, but then the kid didn't give her much time.

"Miss Dixie, say, thanks for what you did! That was swell of you. Nobody," the kid said, "ever helped me like that before. Look, I want to pay you back."

"I don't get it. What are you talking about?" she demanded.

"He's *dead*," the kid blurted. "Pauley's dead."

The girl's blue eyes were as large as poker chips, and almost as blank.

"I wanted you to know first," the kid said. "So you know where you're at. It seemed like I owed you that much for helping me."

"We'd better go inside," Dixie said. She tugged her keys from the coupe and went up the steps ahead of the kid. She had to unlock the inner lobby door, and then the door into the apartment. Inside, facing him, she asked:

"Now, what's all this?"

"I hitchhiked a ride with him last night. He must have turned off on a side road while I was asleep. I woke up about daylight, and he wasn't in the car. He was up the road a little ways, as dead as a mackerel!"

"You haven't told anyone else?"

"No, I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Well," the kid said, "they might think I did it."

Dixie's blonde head slowly nodded. "I guess they would, at that. What are you planning to do about it?"

"Go east somewheres. As far as I can get."

The girl crossed the room, opened a small copper box, selected a cigarette. Lighting up, she inhaled. "Uh-huh? And what do you expect me to do about it?"

"Nothing. You gave me a break, and I figured I should tell you—"

"What do you mean, I gave you a break?"

"The phone call," the kid explained. "Fixing it so Gooler let me go."

"You thought I—" She swallowed, flushing, then coughed behind her hand. It was a moment before she found her voice again.

"Yes, it was my idea you'd go straight to Frank Pauley. I hoped you'd warn him. You see, one of Gooler's friends was arrested last week. Gooler and Harry and Augie suspect that Frank told the police about the—the place to look. They think he was paid a reward. So that's why they were here this morning, waiting to grab Frank when he came in. Do you understand?"

The kid said, "Sure, I wondered why Pauley was carrying all that money. He must have had a thousand dollars."

Dixie pulled at her cigarette deeply. "Well, I suppose it's up to me. I'll have to help you out of town. That's what you really want, isn't it?"

Embarrassed, the kid hung his head. "No, I wasn't figuring to make you any more trouble."

His shyness made her laugh. "Oh, I'm looking out for myself. Suppose you were picked up by the police? What'd you tell them, I'm wondering?"

The kid hesitated; then he blurted out how he'd been picked up by Harry and Augie a second time. He didn't talk so easily, the kid insisted.

"I'll get you out of town, anyway. But you'll have to clean up. We can't go anywhere together until you've scraped an inch of grease off your face."

"I wouldn't look so good without it, either."

Dixie said, "We have to take the car. You'll have to look at least halfway clean and decent, if you're going to travel with me."

She showed the kid the the bathroom, pointing out the box of tissues he was to use as a first step, followed by plenty of soap and hot water. The grease came off a lot more slowly than it'd gone on. Long before he was finished, she'd tapped on the door and handed in a folded stack of garments arranged on a newspaper. "Here, roll your dirty clothes in the paper. These maybe won't fit, but at least they're respectable."

He emerged a different kid, wearing a white shirt, a sport coat only a little too long at the wrists, and trousers that wadded under the belt but fell to a nice ankle length.

"Gosh, where'd you dig up the duds?" They weren't Frank Pauley's; Pauley's shoulders would have burst this coat's seams.

"Jose's," she answered absently, frowning at the kid's contused face. She went and fetched a towel, arranged this under his chin, and brought it up to be safety-pinned over his head. "There! Now if we're stopped for speeding or anything, I'll say we're rushing you to the dentist with an impacted tooth."

ONE thing nagged at the kid's mind. He brooded about it all the way across the sidewalk into the brown coupe, and

then for blocks as the coupe tooled along.

"Who's Jo'se?"

"He's just a friend of Frank's. He stays in the apartment when he's in town. That's how his clothes happened to be there."

"He sounds like a Mexican."

"Cuban."

"Is he—well, in with Gooler, too?"

"Not that I ever heard of," Dixie said.

So the kid buried the thought.

Anyway, the girl was saying, "It probably isn't a good idea for you to even try to travel, with the face you've got on you. You'll have to lay low for a few days and let that heal up." She drove through the Pass, and through North Hollywood on Lankersham, and then west on another road. "I know just the place, you'll even find a complete supply of canned food already there."

After all that driving around, she came out finally on the big slab to Bakersfield. Pretty soon she arm-signaled, and the coupe crossed the lanes, *bump-bump-bump*, up an oiled road.

"Hey!" the kid whispered.

"What's the matter with you?"

"This is it. The road I told you about."

Dixie said, "I'm not surprised. When you said Frank took a sideroad, I thought maybe he was going to this place. He might have been going to hide all that money you were talking about."

The coupe purred on, and the kid could see where he'd left tire tracks backing the convertible around. But the body was gone. Dixie drove another mile, swung into a rutted lane which led away into a clump of trees. The trees concealed a little one-room, paper-roofed cabin from sight of the road. A padlock hung on the door, but Dixie knew where to look for its key: Under a strip of left-over roofing paper that rotted on the ground.

They went inside. "What'd I tell you? Canned everything," Dixie said. The kid looked at the shelf of canned foods, the woodstove, the card table and its folding chairs, the cot with its blankets. Somebody had left a coat dangling from a spike in the wall.

"Whose place is it?" the kid asked.

"A guy in the Army. He's in Japan, so you don't have to worry about him."

All the same, worry gnawed inside the kid. He tried to put a name to it.

"Gooler?" he asked Dixie, hesitating a bit.

"Gooler doesn't know about this. Don't you see, that's why Frank Pauley would have picked this place to hide the money. The others don't know there is such a place."

The kid stood there, scowling, not at the girl, but at a thought he dug up from burial.

"This Cuban? This Jo'se?"

"He doesn't know about it, either." Her scarlet lips grinned at the kid. "So quit looking like you've got a real toothache. This man in the Army, he was a friend, and he told Frank to keep an eye on the place while he was away and use it if he ever wanted to. So one Sunday, oh, two years ago, Frank and I drove out here, and that's how I happened to remember."

The kid sighed.

Her hand patted his arm. "I'm only leaving you here because I'm so *sure* it's the one safe place. And look, here's what I'll do. I'll get you some clothes, and what's more, a bus ticket east. Maybe tomorrow when I come back with the new suit, your face will already be so you can travel."

"Well . . ."

"You're wondering if the clothes will be the right size. They will be, because you're practically a twin of my own brother." The blue eyes opened to their widest at the kid. "He was just your build, and he looked so much like you—that's when he went away, when the war started. He never came back from it. And, well, I keep having a feeling, I'm doing this for him."

The kid flushed. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"Promise?" Dixie urged. "Promise you won't do anything crazy, like leaving here and probably getting arrested?"

She ran out and jumped into her coupe and drove away. The kid stood in the cabin doorway a long while, until the dust from the car's wheels had settled.

If he had a sister like that, he wouldn't want her mixed up with guys like Gooler and Harry and Augie and Frank Pauley. And this Jo'se, whoever he was. Living right there in that apartment of Pauley's, where Jo'se came to visit when he was in town. A frown deepened across the kid's forehead. That Jo'se business was funny.

He thought, "Pauley was coming here, and somebody knew he was, and killed him down the road." It couldn't have been Gooler, Harry, or Augie. Because if they'd killed Pauley, they'd know it. "They wouldn't have to lay for me, and beat me up to find out if I knew where he was," the kid thought.

None of this stuff had entered his brain before. He'd not been interested in other people; his only concern had been to stay clear of them. He'd got interested in the girl, and it tangled him up in all those lives around hers.

"Pauley phoned from Bakersfield," he thought. "Suppose he was to meet somebody here? Suppose the somebody flagged him down the road instead? He'd stop, he'd get out to talk to them, whoever it was."

The kid turned into the cabin, started studying the setup. One of the first things he noticed was a cigarette that had been snubbed out on the stove top, and from there accidentally brushed onto the floor. The tobacco inside was still moist—not too dry, shrunken shreds of two-year-old tobacco at all.

Dixie had it all wrong. This cabin had been used *recently*.

The kid jerked the coat from its spike. All that'd been left in it was a handkerchief. It turned out that that was enough—the handkerchief bore a laundry mark.

The kid whirled, yanked his jacket out of its newspaper wrapping, examined the bloodied handkerchief he'd used this morning. It bore the same mark.

The next step took longer. He had to stop and think. The idea of peeling off the sports coat and the borrowed shirt underneath was a later arrival, but it thundered when it came. The shirt was marked the same.

So all this stuff belonged to Jose.

So Jose knew about this cabin, had used it not so very long ago.

So?

It looked like a good place to get away from. Only there are some things you can't run away from; not unless you want to spend the rest of your life wondering. . . .

THE kid went to work, using all those canned things off the shelf. He peeled the top blanket from the bed, built the tin

cans into the shape of legs, stacked the cans into the shape of hips and torso, and patted the top blanket over all this. The coffee pot was white enamel in the dark, it could look a little like a face peeping from the blanket.

There was enough canned stuff left to make a meal.

As soon as it got dark, the kid slipped out to park himself under the trees. It turned into a cold night. It grew so cold that every once in a while he had to jump up and stamp his feet and swing his arms across his chest.

An occasional headlight slipped past along the road. That was up to midnight, when the trickle of traffic stopped. Two hours later, a pair of headlights came that didn't pass, that blotted out down at the foot of the lane.

The kid stretched himself, an ear to the ground. Presently he heard footfalls, hurrying ones. The footsteps scurried past, and grew slow, a tip-toeing sound.

The kid tip-toed, too, just as slowly.

Ahead of him, the cabin's door faintly creaked. More faintly, a board groaned. Five breaths later, another board.

The smashing of the coffee pot made a terrible noise.

The kid jumped, almost jumped out of his skin. He heard a panting sound inside, a mixture of a sob and a shriek.

He slammed the door shut, dropped the padlock into its hasp.

"Miss Dixie," the kid said. "That's you in there, isn't it?"

No one answered. The silence inside was as terrible as the crashing of the coffee pot had been.

The kid said, "Miss Dixie,, the reward was for Jose, wasn't it? He was hiding here, and you and Frank told the police where to look. Then you got scared because of Mr. Gooler. He might beat up Pauley and make him tell on you."

No answer came out of the darkened cabin.

The kid said, "Or else you wanted the reward money, all of it for yourself. So when Pauley phoned last night, you said you'd meet him here. You stopped down the road, and he stopped. He probably thought you had a flat tire. He got out to look and you hit him with a jack handle

(Please continue on page 98)

RUSE OF THE WICKED LADY

You can snap a girl's neck in three seconds, with hands like these . . .



By **KEN LEWIS**

THE setting was perfect — just the way I'd always pictured it in those crazy impossible dreams about Jenny and me. The living room drapes were tightly drawn, the three-way lamp turned to its lowest stop. A couple of drinks sparkled on the table, and soft music came from the radio.

When jockey Fleming reined home a twenty-grand filly, he hoped to clock finis on a busted dream — and an impending rap for murder.

Jenny herself was out of this world. Her blue hostess gown molded her perfectly, and her taffy hair was tousled across the cushion. Her eyes were closed, her face slightly tilted; and bending over her, I realized that our lips were closer now than ever before.

But I didn't kiss her. The setting was right, but the rest of the picture was wrong. The way her head was twisted on the cushion, for instance. The dark bruises marking her throat.

I looked down at my spread fingers, tough and corded from reining home a thousand winners, and I thought: *It's easy. There's nothing to it. You can snap a girl's neck in three seconds, with hands like these. . . .*

Then some of the hate and bitterness hardened in me, leaving my mind fairly clear again, and I saw what I had to do next. The door had been locked when I got here; she hadn't answered my knock. But I was certain that she was in there, and I was so mad that I wasn't going to let a little thing like a locked door keep me out. So I'd smashed the cheap bolt with one good kick.

But now I saw that there was a second lock. One that hadn't been closed when I broke in. I used my handkerchief to set it and pull the door to behind me as I slipped out into the hall.

I hardly glanced at the phone on the wall as I passed it. If I called the cops now, claimed she was already dead when I walked in, there still might be a chance to scrape through okay. But I couldn't afford to take that chance. I wasn't ready for the cops. Not yet. . . . I found the rear door, used the handkerchief again, moved down darkened steps to the alley out back.

Five blocks south, on Sunset, I flagged a cab and gave the driver Jinks Neeley's address. He turned to me with a wide-mouthed grin.

"Hey! Ain't you Burke Fleming, the jockey?"

I froze, remembering that my picture had been on all the Coast sports pages five days ago. "Eastern Stake-Rider Arrives for Winter Meet—" I wondered if the cabby who'd picked me up at my hotel and dropped me off at her door fifteen minutes ago, had recognized me, too.

Well, it didn't matter, as long as she

stayed undiscovered behind that locked door. I made myself grin.

"You're the fourth guy that's made that same mistake this week, Pal," I said.

He grunted and turned back to his driving, while my mind ran over the maze of events leading up to the murder of the only girl I'd ever loved. . . .

* * *

Jinks Neeley had met me at the airport. He was a little guy, even smaller than me, with a wizened face and a tuft of wind-blown grey hair. His nose was bent and one of his knees was twisted, and he'd ridden his last race long ago. But he still kept track of me through the papers, and now he almost pulled my arm off, pumping it.

"Burke!" he said. "You doggone ice-man. . . . Are you a sight for sore eyes!"

Then, for a minute, neither of us said anything. We just stood there, grinning like fools at each other. He was a track hanger-on now, a broken down railbird, with scarcely the price of a two-dollar ticket half the time. But he'd been right at the top once, like me, and he'd taught me almost everything I knew.

"You old saddle monkey!" I said at last. "What's this about some gimpy class C fleabag you want me to ride in the third next Thursday?"

"Lady Mae ain't no fleabag," he said. "You'd know that, if you knew Rafe Gonzales, her trainer. He never trained a cheap hide in his life. Come on, I want you to meet her owner. She's workin' this week, couldn't get off to come to the airport. But she ought to be home again by the time we get there."

The press boys finished snapping my picture, and he led me to his jalopy. All the way through the pass to Hollywood, he was full of the story of this horse. How she'd hurt her leg as a two-year-old and been sold to a saltwater farmer up the coast, who wanted a pet for his kids. How one of the kids, a grown girl named Jenny Lee, had adopted Lady Mae and nursed her along and worked out through the surf till her bad leg healed and strengthened again.

How the rest of the family thought Jenny was crazy, wanting to race a horse that hadn't seen a track in two years. But how the girl loved Lady Mae and believed in her and had finally come south and found work as a movie extra, to raise the money

for fees and stable rent and all the rest.

Jinks had met her through Gonzales, her trainer, and when he learned I was flying west to ride in the 'cap next week anyway, he thought maybe I wouldn't mind getting here a few days early and giving Lady Mae her first comeback ride. So he'd wired me right away.

"All because you like the horse," I needed.

He looked away. "She'll go off at better'n fifty to one," he said. "None o' the handicappers gives her a chance. But Gonzales says her best time ain't been clocked yet, and with you aboard her, she's bound to come in."

WE REACHED the cheap East Hollywood apartment house where Jenny Lee lived then, and he beached the jalopy and led me back through the hall to her door. You could tell she'd been expecting us from the quick way she answered his knock. Her taffy hair was pulled back and tied with a little blue ribbon, and she was wearing a blue wool sweater and pleated skirt. She was so well-built that you wouldn't realize how small she was, if you didn't notice the size of the doorway that framed her.

"Jenny," Jinks said, "this is Burke Fleming."

I just stood there, staring. I don't know, it's kind of hard to explain. I guess every guy at one time or another carries around a girl's picture in his mind. Not a picture of a girl he ever really expects to meet—just one he wishes he might meet sometime, because he knows if he did she'd be just right for him.

I guess when a guy falls in love, the picture changes without him realizing it till it conforms to the girl he can actually see. But me, I'd never been in love. Not really. It's hard to find the right girl when you're only five feet two yourself. So all I'd ever had was the picture.

Till now. But this girl *was* the picture! I knew it the second she opened the door. Of course, her hair was light, and the girl's in the picture had always been dark. But I wasn't going to quibble over a thing like that!

She spoke, and her voice was as nice as her smile. "I was just opening up a few cans for dinner. Won't you both join me?"

We stayed. Mostly, I guess, I just sat around looking at her. It seemed to amuse her, and she didn't go out of her way to make me talk. She didn't even get around to asking me if I'd ride her horse till we were leaving.

I wondered if she knew what a silly question that was. I'd ridden nothing but the best for two years now. My agent saw to that. But I wouldn't have cared if this nag of hers was twenty years old, blind in both eyes and with one leg sawed off at the knee. I'd have ridden a milk horse in the Derby, for her!

The next day was Sunday, and we spent it pushing a couple rented hides over the bridle path in Griffith Park. She brought along a picnic lunch. "Kind of a busman's holiday for you," she smiled. "But Sunday's the only day I have for riding."

I grinned. I was in heaven. I'd have straddled bangtails twenty-four hours a day, to be with her. . . .

I didn't see her again for two days. She had to be at the studio by six every morning—they'd given her a couple lines in the film she was working on now—and she said she didn't have time for anything but work during the week. But she let me call her, and her voice sounded wonderful over the phone.

Wednesday evening Jinks picked me up, and we drove over to the track to see this Lady Mae. The afternoon program had ended an hour before, but there was still enough light to make out the palms in the infield and the purple wall of mountains to the north. He beached his jalopy behind shed row, and we skirted the stables to Lady Mae's stall.

Jinks introduced me to Gonzales, her handler, and Freddy Green, the exercise boy. Gonzales was a tall dark skinny guy with a Spanish mustache, who had spent the past three seasons below the border, training ponies for the chili circuits down there. He suited up Lady Mae and led her out.

She was a small bay filly with springs in her legs, but other than that she looked a long way from sensational. But the minute he gave me a leg up and I felt her beneath me, I knew he'd picked a winner. When you've straddled as many gee-gees as I have, sometimes—just sometimes—you can tell.

I breezed her once around the exercise track, not pushing her. I didn't have to push her to know she had the moxie. Jinks was grinning like a fox when I came back.

"How long's she been down here?" I demanded.

"Just since last night. Jenny didn't have much dough for stable rent, so Rafe's been trainin' her up at the farm."

I nodded. That explained it. She'd probably only had one track workout, and Green must've kept her under double wraps all the way. Otherwise, she'd never be fifty to one in any man's book.

"Jenny hasn't been down to see her yet, herself," Jinks said. "Guess she won't be, till after the race tomorrow, the way she's tied up on that picture."

I grinned. "That's what you think. She's playing hooky from the studio tomorrow. She told me when I called her up today."

"She can't do that, Burke—they'll black-list her!"

"She doesn't care about that. She only took the work in the first place to pay Lady Mae's way till she got back on her feet again."

Back in the stable Gonzales dropped the saddle on his foot and cussed, and Freddy Green ran over to help him pick it up. . . .

THE little guy with the purple shirt and the scar on his nose was waiting for me when I got back to my hotel. He said he wanted to see me privately, but he smelled of tout and I wasn't taking my chances.

"Anything you've got to say to me," I said, "you can say right here in the lobby."

"Okay, Fleming, if that's how you want it. But I hear you're gonna be up on a sure thing tomorrow, and I thought you might wanna slip me something to put on her nose."

"Nuts. Why should I back your pitch?"

His voice dropped to a husky purr. "Because I happened to be out at a certain airport in the sticks last night, when they unloaded a certain hoss from a certain plane. I was out there tryin' to sell a guy a tip. I didn't expect to see what I saw. But I saw it—and that's what counts."

I studied him. "That still doesn't buy you a thing with me."

He grinned, and the scar made his nose lopsided. "The hoss's name was Wicked Lady," he said. "I seen her run a dozen

times, on the tracks below the border."

"So what? The only horse I'm up on tomorrow is Lady Mae."

"Yeah, I heard that was gonna be her name on the program. That's why I stopped by tonight."

I grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him toward the door. "The horse's name is Lady Mae," I hissed. "She's never been to Mexico in her life."

His voice was ugly now. He was beginning to wonder if he'd made a mistake. "Okay! Okay, Fleming! Maybe we'll let the track commish decide that!"

I turned him loose and took the elevator up to my room. I hoped he hadn't noticed the look in my eyes—the way my finger shook, pressing the button. Upstairs, I dug yesterday's copy of the *Daily Track Reporter* out of my wastebasket, scanned it till I found an item in the small print datelined Mexico City.

According to the item, a four-year-old mare named Wicked Lady had been scratched from a Class A stakerace down there the day before. Her weight was too high, but otherwise she'd been given a good chance to cop.

I thought about that, and then I thought about a gimpy mare that hadn't raced for two years, and tried to make that picture jibe with the ready stepper I'd tried out at the track tonight, and somehow I just couldn't do it.

Then I thought of Jenny Lee, and the way she had of seeming to promise me things with her eyes, and the future I'd built up for us in my mind, and I began to shake all over. Because I knew now just what it was those eyes had been promising me.

First, a chance to ride a phony horse, so she could clean up big at the mutuels; and second, if the least little thing went wrong, a chance to lose my license and be barred from all tracks for life! If the rat downstairs really did go to the racing board, or if he spread the word around and somebody else complained, I knew Wicked Lady would be the last mount I'd ever ride.

I was still shaking when I caught the cab outside my hotel. And when the cab let me out at her stash half an hour later, I was mad enough to choke her with my bare hands.

BUT I hadn't. Someone else had beat me to it. And now, here in this second cab, speeding back toward Jinks Neeley's cheap flop in Pasadena, I knew I wasn't mad at her any more. I just felt sick. Maybe because I realized, now she was dead, that I was still as crazy about her as ever. And maybe just because a picture I'd carried with me a long time had dropped and broken, and there was no way to put it back together again. . . .

I left the cab on Fair Oaks and walked over three blocks. If the cops did pick up my trail, there was no point in bringing them down on Jinks. I had to find somebody else to feed them, in place of me.

I got Jinks out of bed. He sat on the edge of it, rubbing his eyes and blinking, and trying to find out what it was all about.

"Ever see Lady Mae race as a two-year-old?" I asked.

He shook his head. "She hurt her leg in her second race. Why, Burke? You worried about her leg?"

"And you never went up to the farm to see her, either?"

"No, Burke. For Pete's sake, why?"

"This Freddy Green," I said. "This exercise boy—was he up on the farm with her, too?"

"No. Gonzales picked him up last night. What in hell is the matter, Burke?"

"Then Gonzales and the girl were the only ones who ever saw Lady Mae. Before she was shipped down here, I mean. How'd she come down here—truck or train?"

"Truck. Gonzales drove her down himself. It's only two hundred miles. Though why in hell I'm telling you all this, when you won't tell me a thing, I don't know—"

I brushed it off. My thoughts were beginning to mesh. "Where does this Gonzales live?"

"He's savin' money," Jinks grunted. "He sleeps in the stable. . . . My God, has something happened to the horse?"

"Yes," I said. "Though not in the way you mean. We've got to get there right away!"

The night was damp and moonless, with no hint of stars. The stable area was dark and silent except for the occasional stir of a horse in its stall. The barns were wired with electricity, but Jinks struck a match and held it cupped in his palm so as not to disturb the horse in Lady Mae's stall too

much. Both cots to the left of her box were rumped, but only Freddy Green's was occupied now.

I put a hand on his shoulder and shook him, and he rolled over, blinking his eyes. They had the old-young look of too many kids you see around the track, and they gleamed hard and sullen in the match glow.

"Where's Gonzales?" I asked.

"How would I know? Out gettin' a skinful, I suppose. He disappeared right after you left here the first time tonight. Now get the hell outa here and let me sleep!"

I wrote my hotel phone number on the wall and handed him a ten dollar bill. "If he comes back," I said, "find some way to slip out and call me."

Back at the Ford, Jinks refused to step on the starter. "Not till you tell me what this is all about," he growled.

I thought fast. "I had a visit from a syndicate hood tonight," I lied. "How does this Gonzales stand with the bookies?"

He eyed me bewilderedly. "Lord, Burke, he hates the lice. Won't even lay a bet with one. One of 'em welched on him once, so now he shoves his dough through lite mutuels, or not at all."

"You're sure? No exceptions?"

"I tell you I know the guy! He don't trust nobody further than he can spit."

I thought about that, and slowly the picture formed in my mind. At last I nodded. "Okay, Jinks. I'm going to level with you. Somebody broke Jenny Lee's neck tonight. I went over there and found her dead in her apartment."

His eyes bulged and he had trouble swallowing. "My Lord, Burke! . . . My Lord! . . . You called the cops?"

"The cops!" I said. "The cops! What could the cops do about it? You think he left a lot of fag butts and fingerprints lying around? He could go in there, do it, and be out again in thirty seconds. . . . When the body's found, I'll be number one boy myself. She'd only been dead a few minutes when I got there. The hacker that took me there will remember, later. And somebody else might have seen me go in, too."

He still seemed dazed. "But why? Why should anybody want to kill Jenny?"

"That's just it," I said. "It doesn't make sense—till you consider that the mare in Lady Mae's stall is really a Mexican stake horse named Wicked Lady."

I told him then about the little man with the scar on his nose. "At first I thought Jenny and Gonzales were in it together," I said. "That he planned the details, while her job was to con me into riding for them—into making positive that their ringer paid off. But now I'm not so sure. Now I think he arranged it all himself—"

I don't know why that made me feel so much better. She was dead, and nothing could bring her back to me, guilty or innocent. But it did do a lot for that picture of her in my mind.

"He knew Lady Mae wasn't known at the track," I went on. "That it was a perfect spot for a ringer. So he got in touch with his pals below the border, and had Wicked Lady flown to some small outlying airport here by chartered plane. Then last night on his way from the barn, he took Lady Mae down to some lonely beach and shot her, and picked up Wicked Lady in her place.

"The only one who might discover the switch and spoil his plans was Jenny. And he figured she'd go along with it, too, when she found out how much dough she stood to make by betting on a sure thing like Wicked Lady. He went up there tonight to talk her into it. But she wouldn't play. She loved Lady Mae and believed in her, and she probably threatened to expose him. So he killed her to shut her up, knowing that if her body wasn't found till after the race, he could still make his scheme pay off.

"That's why he's hiding out now. He's waiting to see if there's anything about her death in the morning papers. If there isn't, and Lady Mae's name isn't scratched from the race, he'll try to sneak back to the track tomorrow just long enough to make his bet and collect. And that's when we'll nab him!"

"We'll nab him? My Lord, Burke, hadn't we ought to go to the cops? Have 'em put out a call on him right away?"

"Nuts," I said. "What could the cops do? Make him for switching horses, maybe. But convict him of murder on what we've got to go on so far? Never! I'd still be number one boy for that. Our only hope's to get a confession out of him. A confession that can be substantiated later. And I'll take care of that, after we grab him. Just give me half an hour alone with him, that's all!"

He was staring at me strangely now. "But how can we hope to find him, in the crowd that'll be here tomorrow?"

"Pick me up at my hotel about noon," I said. "We'll find him okay—if you're right about him never betting through bookies."

I DROPPED off to sleep about dawn and dreamed of Jenny Lee. We were having dinner together in her apartment, just as we'd done on that night when Jinks first introduced us. Only her hair was dark, and we were alone. Afterwards, we didn't do anything; just talked. And everything she said was exactly right—exactly what I'd always known she would say; though I couldn't remember a word of it when I woke up. . . .

Jinks and I reached the track about one p.m. It was a clear blue day, with a crisp breeze stirring the palm fronds in the infield and those snow-capped mountains looming up white to the east. Freddy Green said Gonzales still hadn't showed up.

We sat around the stable till the start of the second race. Then, while Freddy took Wicked Lady to the receiving barn, I led Jinks over to the row of betting windows near the exit and told him to stay out of sight as much as possible, but keep an eye on the hundred dollar win window.

"That's where he'll show up," I said. "He'll use the big window in order to put his dough down fast and get away again, and if he's as careful as you say he is, I don't think he'll trust anybody else to make the bet for him. But watch for anybody that buys a flock of wins on her here. There's always a chance that he might send a messenger, and if so, we may have to let the patsy lead us to him—"

Her probable odds were listed as ninety to one, and I figured nobody but a cinch better like Gonzales would be willing to risk any real dough on her. The little man with the scarred nose might if he could, but from what I'd seen of him I doubted that he had that kind of gettus.

"When he shows up," I went on, "find some way to keep him around till I can meet you here after the race. If you can't think of anything else, call a guard and claim he tried to pick your pocket or something."

He nodded glumly. "Okay, if you say so, Burke. But I still think we ought to turn it over to the cops."

I went back to the paddock to mount Wicked Lady and trot her out for the post parade. I caught a look at the tote board as we passed it, and saw that her odds hadn't dropped much — they were still eighty to one. Then the bell sounded and we were off.

It was a breeze. The track was fast and Wicked Lady was full of moxie and the rest of the pigs in that race were just that — pigs. I could have turned her loose right out of the chute and let her steal the grind from wire to wire. But I didn't want it to look that easy, so I kept the brakes on till we reached the stretch. Then I shook her loose and let her coast in by two lengths.

Cantering back to the winner's circle, I kept waiting for the red flag to go up, meaning we'd been disqualified. But I guess Scar-nose wanted to collect his bets before he blew the whistle, because they put the wreath around her neck just like she deserved it.

I turned her over to Freddy at the paddock, and beat it back to where I'd left Jinks. He was slumped glumly against the wall there, and he shook his head when he saw me.

"Nobody showed, Burke," he said. "Not with that kind of dough to put on her."

I felt sick. I felt all gone in the stomach. So I'd made the ride for nothing, after all. Gonzales was still as free as ever, and any minute now a man from the racing board would be tapping me on the shoulder, if Scar-nose went ahead with his threat to tip off the switch.

And just then there was a commotion to the left, and I saw Freddy Green pelting through the crowd there. His face was white and his lips were working and his eyes were the sickest eyes I've ever seen.

"Gonzales!" he babbled. "In the stable . . ."

I broke for shed row on the run, Jinks panting behind me.

GONZALES was sprawled on his cot beside the stall. His eyes were glazed and his sallow cheeks were gray and he wore a widening scarf of blood from the gash in his throat. The blanket beneath his

head was soggy with it, and one of his trailing hands still held the old straight-edge razor.

Wicked Lady was shying and snorting in Lady Mae's box, and beside me I could hear Jinks cussing under his breath.

Freddy Green slunk through the door behind us. He still looked like he was going to be sick. "That's just how I found him when I brought her back here," he said dazedly. "And him with a fistful of tickets on her nose—"

I whirled and grabbed him by the shirt front. "How do you know that?"

"I seen him counting them when he come back here after the race was called. Then I went out to the fence to watch her run, and I didn't see him again till I brought her back after it was all over. Forty to one, and he does a thing like that—"

I stared at him hollowly, my thoughts churning. *Forty to one?* But she'd still been *eighty to one* when I passed the tote board, piloting Wicked Lady to the post. That meant a lot of dough had been dumped on her just as the windows closed. A big wad of dough, all in one lump sum. Nothing else could have forced her odds down that far, at the last minute.

I knew then that Jinks had been lying when he said no one bought hundred-dollar tickets on her. I turned, and he was already edging toward the door.

I made a flying leap and brought him down, bounced his head on the floor till the fight drained out of him. Then I went through his pockets and found the twenty grand worth of uncashed stubs.

"You couldn't leave them on him, could you?" I said. "That would spoil the suicide gag. A guy planning to pull a Dutch act, doesn't go out and buy a fistful of tickets on a winning horse, first. Besides, the dough would come in handy later, if everything worked okay. You could cash them in any time before the end of the meet."

"I—I don't know what you're talking about," he groaned.

"Sure you do. When you found out I was planning to nail him and beat the truth out of him, you knew you had to kill him first, to keep him from spilling your part in the play. So you followed him back here after he bought those tickets, and when Freddy left to watch the race up front, you sneaked in and slit his throat. You must've

had the razor with you the whole time.”

“No,” Freddy said dully. “It was Gonzales’. He kept it there on that shelf.”

I nodded. “That made the suicide pitch a natural.”

Jinks closed his eyes. “He was trying to double-cross me,” he said weakly. “He promised me five C’s to bet on her nose, and then he hid out last night so I couldn’t find him and pick it up. So he wouldn’t have to share in the take—”

“I should have known,” I said. “I felt right away that he must have had an accomplice, only I thought then that it was Jenny Lee. I should have known it was you. You’re the one that had a big-time jockey as a friend, a guy who would be sure to give his ringer a good ride and bring her in if anyone could. So, in return for your getting me to ride for him, he let you in on the fix.

“Then, when you learned Jenny was coming out here today, you knew she’d tumble to the switch and spoil everything. So you killed her to shut her up. You didn’t know I’d break in and find her body a few minutes later. You thought she’d lay there undiscovered till after the race was run and you’d lammed with your stake—”

His head shook bleakly. “I didn’t mean to kill her, Burke,” he said. “I just went up there to explain the setup to her, and point out how much she stood to make by keeping still. But she wouldn’t listen. And then I thought of those five C’s Gonzales had promised me, and the little breeding farm I was going to buy with my winnings, and I—I guess I lost my head.”

I didn’t hit him any more. He was through, and I guess we all knew it. I just sent Freddy to bring the cops. . . . The little

guy with the scar on his nose—the little guy who’d accidentally seen Wicked Lady being unloaded from the plane, and whose blackmailing tongue had sent me plunging head-on into a murder frame—never did blow a whistle. I guess he realized it wouldn’t buy him anything now.

But of course the truth about Lady Mae had to come out in court, even though Jinks did plead guilty. Gonzales hadn’t killed her, after all—just sold her to a Mexican truck farmer up the coast. Some enterprising reporter found her and brought her back, but she wasn’t the horse Wicked Lady was.

It was six two and even at my hearing before the racing commission, whether they’d ever let me ride a horse again or not. But at last they decided I’d acted in the interest of justice, and they gave me my license back.

I didn’t care much, one way or the other. Nothing seemed to have much meaning any more, without Jenny Lee to share it with me. But after the hearing Larry Lathrop, the track manager, called me into his office:

“Jenny Lee’s sister is here,” he said. “She wants to thank you for what you did in helping to solve Jenny’s murder. . . . Come in, Miss Lee.”

I don’t know what I expected. Some little kid in pigtails, I guess. I didn’t much care. I didn’t want to meet Jenny’s sister or anyone else right then. But she came in and put out her hand, and finally I had to look up.

Then, for a minute, I just stood there staring again, like I had the first time I saw Jenny. He hadn’t said *twin* sister. But that’s what she was; she was Jenny all over again.

Except that her hair was dark. . . .

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**DETECTIVE
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REDHEADS PREFER MURDER

Lee Diamond said: "With your permission, Mr. District Attorney. . . ."



By HANK NAPHEYS

Private Detective Lee Diamond had met plenty of whacky redheads—but never one like Lustette . . . who wanted to be deliberately tossed into a murder case.

“**E**VERYTHING is set,” Lee Diamond told the redheaded honey, “for you to toss your fancy panties into the Conklin case.” Diamond spoke in his usual low, clipped manner; as there was no need for whispering in their sound-proofed, air-conditioned private booth. He

added: "You're my first client who has wanted to get involved in a murder case."

Lustette Moore nodded her glossy, red-gold head in silent approval of Lee Diamond. He was cold, ruthless; a handsomely built, perfectly controlled mechanism. He was precisely the type of man to guide her voluntary sortee into a sensational murder case. Lustette unconsciously sat straighter, making her silk dress appear to have been waxed onto her young proud flesh. She asked matter-of-factly:

"When did you bribe the murder witness to sully my reputation?"

"The less you know about the details, the better for you," said Diamond. "Before the afternoon is out, you'll be face to face with the district attorney. He'll never suspect that anyone in her right mind would deliberately involve herself in a murder—but don't get careless. He's good."

Lustette said: "You've never said whether you approve or disapprove of my crashing into the Conklin case."

"I don't."

"You don't—what?"

"Approve or disapprove." Diamond's smile was a quick glint of strong white teeth. "You wanted in. All right, now you're in. You're old enough to know—" His swift, impersonal glance flicked over her. "You're eighteen, and look a bit younger. No one would guess at the cool brain behind those bedroom eyes. It's all in your favor."

Lustette decided that she liked that expression about bedroom eyes, although Diamond had said it as if mentioning the shade of her fingernails. And she decided that she liked his clothes, and his inevitable pearl-gray neckties with their small black-diamond design. Lustette found herself betting herself that his shorts carried out that diamond motif.

Lee Diamond said: "When you leave your advertising agency this afternoon, if you're not picked up there by the D. A.'s men, take your time about going to your apartment. Shop for groceries on your way home, make everything as natural as possible. Don't fence with the D. A. He'll tie you into knots. Just admit that you knew the murdered David Conklin. You've seen his picture, so you won't get trapped on that. If the going gets rough, say that you won't speak another word until you are

represented. Then telephone my office."

Lustette sat there with a beautiful and blank expression, soaking in every word Diamond was saying. When he finished, she said: "That will make me seem dumb enough to be convincing—phoning for a private detective, instead of a lawyer."

"The dumber the better," agreed Diamond. He finished his coffee and jabbed his cigarette into an ashtray. The gesture said that the luncheon was over.

Lustette toyed with her cigarette, wishing to prolong the luncheon. She knew that Diamond was watching her, waiting, politely impatient, for her to finish her cigarette. She asked:

"Well, Mr. Private Detective Diamond, aren't you the least bit curious as to why I am, to put it in your words, tossing my fancy panties into a murder case?"

"No," said Lee Diamond. "I'm not a psychiatrist. I'm a private dick; nothing more—and I hope, nothing less."

Lustette jabbed her cigarette into the tray beside Diamond's. She gathered her gloves and bag. "Anyway, thanks for a very clever job of bribing the key witness. I've sunk every nickel I have in the world into this, and it's comforting to know that you're helping me."

Diamond rose and pulled back her chair as she sinously rose to his side. He looked down at her a moment before saying: "You are a cold-blooded little animal."

Lustette moved close to Diamond, some parts of her touching him. Her laughter tinkled up into his face. "Look who's talking."

AT five thirty that afternoon Lee Diamond was ushered into the august presence of District Attorney Baird. Diamond was tall, crisp and immaculate as he leisurely crossed the office. He swung his pearl-gray Homburg indolently at his side. He nodded to the D. A., saying:

"You wanted to see me?"

District Attorney Baird leaned back in his swivel chair. He was a well-built man with pure-white hair and a reddish-brown mustache. He had heavy bags under his sullen brown eyes. He didn't bother to get up or offer his hand. His eyes narrowed ever so slightly as Diamond, unbidden, slid easily into the visitor's chair. The D. A. said:

"What do you know about the Conklin case?"

"I've been following it in the papers."

The D. A. shook his white head. "I want to know what you have assimilated, Mr. Diamond—in your own words."

Diamond gave the D. A. a tight grin. "If you are going to play teacher, you'll have to make a pinch."

"The People of this State," said District Attorney Baird, "are about to prosecute a murderess. We have reason to believe that you may be able to help us. Will you answer my questions as a friend of the People, so to speak?"

Diamond nodded. "Good enough. Here's what my feeble brain has assimilated: Mrs. Carolette Conklin went to her husband's office one morning last week. David Conklin, *the* song writer, let her into his private office. They were alone—as Blake Lawton, Conklin's stooge, was out on an errand."

Baird leaned farther back in his swivel chair. His eyes were glowering coals under their half-closed lids. "Thank you, Mr. Diamond. Please continue."

"Lawton, the stooge, returned to find that a lively row was in progress in the private office. He could hear the rumble of their voices but said, because of the soundproofed walls, he couldn't make out what was being said. But he did hear the two gun shots."

Baird clasped his hands behind his head. "Mr. Diamond, do you interest yourself to this extent in every homicide case?"

Diamond eased back more comfortably in the chair and crossed his long legs. "Nothing much else to read. The series are over. Football gives me a pain. Hockey won't get started for a while. . . . Where were we? Oh, yes. Lawton went into the private office. David Conklin was on the rug dying. One bullet grazed his scalp, the other was in his chest. Carolette Conklin had fainted on the rug. The gun was still in her hand. The bullets and rifling checked. The paraffin test showed gunpowder on Mrs. Conklin's hand—and none on Lawton's. He seems to be in the clear. She admits the killing. Is class dismissed?"

"Just three more questions," said Baird. "What were the Conklins fighting about?"

"Her extravagance, it seems."

"Did you read anywhere, Mr. Diamond, of Conklin's dying words to Blake Lawton?"

Diamond nodded, said: "Conklin said that he was sorry he struck his wife, then he died."

"Exactly," agreed the D. A. "Did you swallow it?"

"Why not?" asked Diamond. "Dying people say strange things. I've heard many dying declarations."

The D. A.'s eyes got sullen. "This office is well aware of your marksmanship, Mr. Diamond."

Lee Diamond said nothing.

"I didn't swallow it," said Baird. "I knew that Blake Lawton was lying, withholding information and obstructing justice. I had him held as an accessory after the fact." Baird sat forward in his chair, placed his hands flat on the desk in front of him. "This afternoon Lawton changed his story."

Diamond managed to look politely curious.

"Lawton," went on the D. A., "claims that he stuck to his first story out of deference to Mrs. Conklin's feelings—as David Conklin's dying words were about another woman. Touching, isn't it, Mr. Diamond?"

Lee Diamond restrained the impulse to reach for cigarettes. He shrugged.

Baird continued: "It now appears that Conklin's dying words to Blake Lawton were, 'Blake, take good care of Lustette Moore.' Ever hear of her, Mr. Diamond?"

Diamond looked thoughtfully at the ceiling, said evenly: "No. I would have remembered that name."

The D. A. was moodily regarding Diamond. "Strange. She said that she wanted you to represent her."

"Nice of you to relay the message," said Diamond offhandedly. "Who is she?"

Baird's baggy eyes got sultry. "Don't get flip around this office, Mr. Diamond. Just tell me why a murdered man's mistress would ask to be represented by you."

"I wouldn't be knowing," said Diamond.

The district attorney flicked a cam on an inter-office communicator, saying: "Bring in Lustette Moore." He picked up a paper from his desk and started reading it, completely ignoring the private detective.

Lee Diamond gazed absently out the window, whistling soundlessly. Then the door opened. As Diamond turned his head he was conscious of the district attorney's watchful stare. Diamond let his eyes linger a second

longer than necessary on Lustette's beautiful legs. Then his appreciative glance slowly rose to her glossy red hair. He lifted himself easily to his feet and awaited an introduction.

Baird rocked back in his swivel chair and said nothing.

Lustette spoke quietly. "You must be Mr. Diamond?"

LEE DIAMOND breathed a little easier when he saw that Lustette wasn't going to ham it. Before he could say anything, the D. A. demanded of Lustette: "What makes you think that he is Mr. Diamond?"

Lustette stiffened at the sharp tone. "I told you, Mr. District Attorney, of the story I read about Mr. Diamond in the Sunday supplement. There was a picture, too."

Diamond gestured Lustette toward the chair he had vacated. "Please sit down." When she had perched herself on the edge of the chair, Diamond said with a straight face: "I don't understand your need for my services."

The D. A.'s wary eyes shuttled back and forth between Lustette and Diamond. His hand was poised near the inter-office communicator.

Lustette told Diamond: "Since I've been dragged into a murder case, I want a man like you on my side. That's all."

"Not quite—all," said Diamond. "My fees are exceptionally high—"

"I'll pay whatever you ask, Mr. Diamond."

Diamond looked at the D. A. and spread his hands. "What more can a man ask?"

Baird's hand depressed the cam. "Bring in Blake Lawton." His face showed sour amusement.

Lustette's fingers twitched. Diamond had casually placed himself between Lustette and the D. A. He stood there until Lustette controlled her twitches.

Blake Lawton was ushered into the room. Then the door softly closed, and the four of them were together in the big silent office.

Lawton was a pink-cheeked, curly-headed fellow of thirty-five. He had a small, pointed nose and large, soft eyes. He bowed slightly to Lustette, half-smiled at Diamond, and the half-smile fled his face when he looked at the district attorney.

The D. A. snapped at Lawton: "Why

the smile for this man? Do you know him?"

Lee Diamond felt the sweat oozing out of his palms. Lawton wasn't too bright.

Blake Lawton put the half-smile back on his cherub-like face. "What law have I broken now, Mr. District Attorney? When I walked into this office, the big fellow looked at me—and he had a pleasant expression on his face. It's the first pleasant expression I've seen since I've been in the dump. Why shouldn't I smile at him?"

The D. A. jerked his thumb at Lustette. "Know her?"

"Sure," said Lawton. "She's the babe the boss was playing. Her name is Lustette. Every time Dave Conklin said her name, he did handsprings."

Lustette kept her eyes demurely on the carpet.

"So—?" prompted the D. A.

Blake Lawton needed little encouragement. "It's her name—Lustette. Dave Conklin's first big success was the musical 'Dawnette.' There was a real Dawnette, but the boss soon tired of her. Several years later he met Carolette, the present Mrs. Conklin. You know what a smash hit 'Carolette' was. And now, three years later, along comes—Lustette. Zing! Dave was dreaming up another musical when—when he was shot."

"Yes," said District Attorney Baird. "And you heard the shot."

"Two shots," said Lawton.

Diamond glanced at Baird, saw him nod. Then the D. A. spoke to Lawton.

"In other words, this is the woman David Conklin asked you to take good care of? His last words on this earth?"

"Yes," said Lawton. Then he flapped his arms at his sides. "But there's nothing I can do about it. I'm now out of a job."

Lustette looked up pertly. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, thank you."

District Attorney Baird spoke into his inter-office box. "You may send in the press."

The press photographers had a field day with Lustette, and she obliged them with some plain and fancy cheesecake.

Lustette's leggiest picture was with Lee Diamond. Perched on the D. A.'s desk, she hugged Diamond's arm, gazed trustfully into his eyes, and whispered: "Smile, damn it. Think of my legs—or something."

Diamond whispered back: "I'll think of the five thousand dollars you paid me." And he gave her a big smile—as flashbulbs went off.

District Attorney Baird made a grand statement, ending with: "Mrs. Carolette Conklin murdered her husband in cold, calculated jealousy—over her husband's association with Lustette Moore. This office will prosecute to the full extent of the law."

One reporter called out: "Where does Lee Diamond fit into this?"

Lustette was flushed with excitement and success. She had wormed her way into the sensational murder case. She said clearly:

"I don't think that Carolette Conklin murdered her husband at all. And I have retained Mr. Diamond—to find the real murderer of David Conklin."

In the stunned silence Lee Diamond bit clear through the end of his cigarette.

LUSTETTE MOORE curled up cozily on the divan in her one-room apartment and slid a sidewise glance up at Lee Diamond standing in front of her. She was silently amused at Diamond's cold anger. Lustette said lightly:

"You've got to admit that right now I'm the most talked-of girl in New York, if not the whole country. And you've got to admit, Lee, that you got yourself a million dollars' worth of publicity. You're the most talked-of private detective in these United States."

"And I'll be the most talked-of damned fool—if I don't frame this murder on someone." He stared speculatively at Lustette.

She pushed out both of her palms in a warding-off gesture. "Don't look at me. I'm the one who's paying you—remember?"

"In the first place, I should never have gotten mixed up with a whacky babe like you. You came to me and said that you wanted to be the mystery woman, your own words, in this Conklin case."

Lustette said sweetly: "You took my whacky case because the challenge to your cleverness appealed to you; my money appealed to you; maybe I appealed to you. So you pulled some wires, greased some palms and got Blake Lawton to change his story."

"Fine," said Diamond. "Up to there, everything was fine. You pulled a fairly good act in front of the D. A. Lawton did

all right, for him. Then the whole thing went to your head."

Lustette stretched slowly, luxuriously. "You sound as if you don't like my head."

Diamond sliced the air with his hand. "Lay off the boudoir build-up, Red. Papa Diamond's little boy Lee never messes with female clients. Strictly business, Baby. . . . Now, look: Carolette Conklin has confessed to murdering her husband. So, all you want me to do is to toss the confession out the window—and fasten the murder on someone else."

"I don't like Blake Lawton," said Lustette. "And to begin with we know for certain that he is a liar."

A thin smile showed the edges of Diamond's teeth. "That makes three of us. I don't like Lawton, either. He looks like the sort of a jerk who'd cheat with Conklin's wife every time Conklin turned his back. Not that I object to a little discreet cheating."

"Tell me more," encouraged Lustette.

Diamond looked at her thoughtfully before saying: "Get down on the floor, Red."

"Why, Mr. Diamond!"

"At ease, Red. You're just a big, beautiful, five-grand check to me. Now, get down on the floor. You are going to be Carolette Conklin."

Lustette's eyes sparkled as she slid off the divan. "And who are you going to be?"

"Me—I'm the corpse." Diamond glanced swiftly about the room, then he pulled the divan out from the wall. "I saw the police photographs of Conklin's office. Your divan is now Conklin's desk. Stretch yourself out as if you fell forward." When she arranged herself, Diamond placed her right arm out in front of her. "Make like a gun." Obediently, Lustette straightened her forefinger and cocked her thumb. Diamond walked about twelve feet from her and lowered himself flat on the floor, facing her.

Lustette said: "All we need is a bag of marbles."

Diamond wagged his head. "Maybe you haven't got all your buttons." He stared at her for several seconds; then asked: "Where did you get the dough to finance this whacky idea of yours?"

"My father left it to me—back in 'Twenty-nine. He was a broker."

"Now I understand where you got your plunging."

Lustette asked: "What do you want me to do now?"

"Stay exactly as you are. Take a snooze, if you like. I'm not getting anywhere being a corpse." Climbing to his feet, he crossed the room and leaned against the closed bathroom door. His eyes ranged from Lustette to where he had sprawled on the floor and back to the girl. He frowned.

Lustette glanced up from her spread-eagled position. "You at least might look as if you are enjoying yourself."

Ignoring her, Diamond said: "In the D.A.'s office, Blake Lawton said something which may give us an idea to bat around."

"He said that I was the babe the boss was playing."

"He also corrected the D. A.—when the D. A. mentioned that Lawton had heard the shot."

With a flash of nylons Lustette came alertly to a sitting position. "You have something!" Her eyes were fairly glittering. "I know you've found a loophole!"

"Do you know what Lawton said?" Diamond asked.

Lustette impatiently shook her red head. "What?"

"Lawton said: 'Two shots.'"

WHILE Lustette digested that, Diamond took three pillows from the divan and placed them on the floor where he had sprawled opposite Lustette. Then Diamond walked back and again leaned against the bathroom door. He said: "Spread-eagle again, Red."

"Wait a minute, Lee. I'm trying to figure what—"

"I'll do the figuring. We haven't much time. Get down there."

When Lustette was flat on the rug, Diamond stood beside her and looked down at her. Lustette's eyes were level with Diamond's shiny black shoes. She could see that his socks were pearl gray and dotted with black diamonds. She thought again of that bet she had made with herself.

The doorbell rang.

Lustette looked up. "Who could that be?"

"One gets you fifty that it's the D. A.'s boys to pinch us," said Diamond. He lowered this voice: "And another one gets you another fifty that Blake Lawton has ratted on us."

Lustette's voice was a hoarse whisper:

"You mean he's spilled the beans about the bribe?"

A fist pounded on the door. "It's the Law. Open up."

Diamond helped Lustette to her feet, saying: "Just act as dumb as you know how."

Her arms slid up around his neck and she pulled his head down to hers. She whispered against his mouth: "If I'm going to jail—I want to take this with me."

The door shuddered under another fist pounding.

Lee Diamond lifted her snugly against him and kissed her carefully, expertly. Then he gently released her and walked to the door. When he threw open the door a flashbulb went off

A cameraman chuckled. "Why, Lee Diamond—with a lipstick mustache."

The brittle, sour voice of District Attorney Baird cut in: "I want that picture for evidence." Then he eyed Diamond sullenly. "So you just met the little lady this afternoon."

Diamond made a welcoming sweep with his hand. "Why, if it isn't the district attorney, himself. Some important development must have brought you here personally—?"

District Attorney Baird stalked into the apartment and stared from Diamond to Lustette. He said: "You both are under arrest for obstructing justice, falsifying evidence, bribing a State's witness—and everything else I can find on the statutes to prosecute you for."

Lee Diamond casually wiped the lipstick off his mouth, then said to the D. A.: "So Lawton squawked."

The district attorney was visibly taken aback. "You freely admit bribing Lawton—?"

"I'll admit nothing—till I talk to Lawton . . . and Mrs. Carolette Conklin."

* * *

They were back again in the district attorney's office: Lustette, Diamond, Lawton, the D. A.—and also Mrs. Carolette Conklin.

Lee Diamond walked slowly across the office till he stood at the side of Carolette Conklin. She was brunette, shapely and, even without makeup, a strikingly beautiful woman. She turned slightly in her chair and looked at Diamond. Vital awareness of her

disturbingly stirred Diamond. Her voice was a quiet question: "Yes—?"

"Mrs. Conklin," he said, "I'm Lee Diamond, a private investigator. I'd like you to consider me on your side."

"Thank you."

District Attorney Baird was leaning back in his swivel chair, his hands clasped behind his head, and his baggy eyes twinkling with cynical amusement as he looked from one to the other. He took a white-gold waifer of a watch from his vest pocket, and said to Lee Diamond:

"You have ten minutes to explain your malicious conduct, before I, to put it inelegantly, slap you into the can."

"Good enough," said Diamond. "I'll spot you two minutes."

He took a notebook and pencil from his pocket, leaned on the D. A.'s desk and drew a rough sketch. "This represents the murder scene. May I ask Mrs. Conklin to verify it?"

The D. A. nodded.

Diamond took the notebook over to Carolette Conklin. By the time he reached her chair he had flipped over the leaf to a blank page. He handed her the book, lowered his head to her silky black hair and whispered softly: "I can save you from the chair. . . ."

Carolette's brown eyes flashed up at him for the fleetingest of seconds. Then she lowered her head over the blank page, and her whisper was barely audible: "Any price—on any terms. . . ." She handed him the book, saying aloud, "Yes," and her fingers pressed lightly against his.

Perhaps it was in the way Diamond walked or the way he swung his arms, but redheaded Lustette detected a faint trace of cockiness in his manner. She watched him suspiciously as he left the side of the lovely brunette and re-crossed the office.

Diamond stopped in front of Blake Lawton, said: "Hello, Rat."

The district attorney raised his voice: "There will be no name calling in this office, Mr. Diamond."

"Okay," agreed Diamond. "And now, Mr. District Attorney, will you ask Mrs. Conklin what she and her husband were fighting about. I'm sure that she will tell you the truth."

Carolette Conklin looked squarely at the district attorney. "David and I were arguing about—Blake."

"What was the substance of the argument?"

"David accused me of being unfaithful to him—with Blake."

Blake Lawton started to say something, changed his mind and sat back in his chair.

The D. A. asked: "Were you?"

"Yes."

Blake Lawton cried: "Carlotte, you don't have to blacken your name like this!"

"Of course she doesn't—" said Diamond—"and she'll go straight to the electric chair."

Carolette looked at Blake Lawton for a long time; then she raised her eyes to Diamond and talked to him: "David Conklin had no right to accuse me of anything. He stayed away from home for a week at a time. Yet he flew into a rage, threatened to kill Blake—"

The district attorney cut in: "Did you hear this alleged threat, Mr. Lawton?"

"No," said Blake Lawton.

Carolette continued: "Then David began beating me, punching me. He knocked me behind his desk. I pulled myself to my feet. A drawer was open—and I had his gun in my hand. Then I shot him."

District Attorney Baird leveled a finger at Diamond. "Now, what the devil else do you want to know?"

"Nothing," said Diamond. "You heard her as well as I did. She said that she shot him—not twice, three times or six times. She just said that she shot him. The inference is that she shot him—once. Ask her yourself, Mr. D.A."

Redheaded Lustette figured that she was being left out of things. She called out: "Lee's right! When Carolette regained consciousness—Blake Lawton *told* her she had fired *twice!*"

Diamond looked around at Lustette and winked. "You catch on quick, Red."

Raven-haired Carolette sat stunned in her chair, staring at Blake Lawton.

THE district attorney raised his hands for silence. "We are all letting our emotions run away with us. The fact still remains that Mrs. Conklin had gunpowder on her hand—and Mr. Lawton did not."

"I was just getting around to that, Mr. D. A.," said Diamond. He glanced at Lustette. "Let's show 'em your spread-eagle stunt, Red."

"Before all these people?" she asked. "You'll find them an appreciative audience, Red."

Lustette promptly sprawled on the rug, letting nylon show where it showed.

Diamond swiftly drew his .38 bulldogged Colt from his armpit clip, saying to the D. A.: "With your permission, Mr. District Attorney." Diamond flicked out the cylinder and ejected the shells. He dropped them into his pocket, flipped back the cylinder and handed the revolver down to Lustette.

When she was in position, Diamond looked over at Carolette who was watching with fascinated eyes. Diamond asked her: "Is the position about right?"

Carolette nodded without speaking.

Diamond said to the D. A., "There were no powder marks on Lawton's hands, but—" Diamond lightly placed the toe of his left shoe over Lustette's hand wrapped around the butt of the Colt. The pressure of his toe held her hand firmly against the rug. Diamond then pressed his right toe against her forefinger curled on the trigger. The snap of the hammer seemed as loud as a gunshot in the taut silence of the office.

Diamond finished: "But Blake Lawton's shoes and the rug on David Conklin's office will show gunpowder marks."

Lustette cried: "Lee! You're marvelous! You've done it!"

Blake Lawton made no effort to run; he didn't damn Diamond to hell; he just sat in his chair, crying.

Carolette Conklin pushed herself out of her chair. She walked stiffly over to Blake Lawton and looked down at him. Her hand flashed to his cheek, nearly knocking him out of the chair. Blake Lawton began to bawl. Carolette turned her back on him, took two steps and fainted.

District Attorney Baird caught her and easily lifted her into his arms. On his way across the office to the settee, he said to Diamond: "We still have much to discuss, Mr. Diamond. Perhaps tomorrow morn-

ing. And the People thank you for the service you've rendered them."

Lustette fairly pulled Diamond out of the office. She used the first door she came to—and they found themselves in a dark clothes closet.

Diamond laughed, saying: "This is like a two-reel comedy." He chuckled till he felt Lustette's arms sliding around his neck. He said quietly: "You've been reading too many love novels, Red."

"Nuts to you, Lee. You're not as cold and strictly business as you'd like people to think."

"Look, Red, just for the record so I can close my case: What was your reason for crashing this murder setup?"

"So now you're asking."

"Now I'm asking."

Her laughter tinkled up into his face. "I wanted the publicity, Lee. You see, I just finished a novel—and I wanted to launch it with the most sensational stunt I could think of."

"Ohmigod!" groaned Diamond.

"Because of you," said Lustette, "I'll be the sensation of years. I saved a woman from going to the electric chair. Think of the publicity—"

"An author," groaned Diamond.

"In other words," said Lustette huskily, "I want to show my appreciation." She moved closer to him. "Kiss me, Lee."

"You're only a kid, Red."

"I was a kid when you kissed me in my apartment."

"Look, Red, I'd be poison to a kid like you. . . . I kissed you in your apartment to keep you quiet."

Brunette Carolette's words ran excitingly through Diamond's mind: *Any price—on any terms. . . .*

Lustette's lips pressed against his. Diamond tried to think of raven-black hair and deep-brown eyes, but the only picture that came to his mind was of blue eyes and glossy red hair. He put his arms around Lustette, drew her tightly to him.

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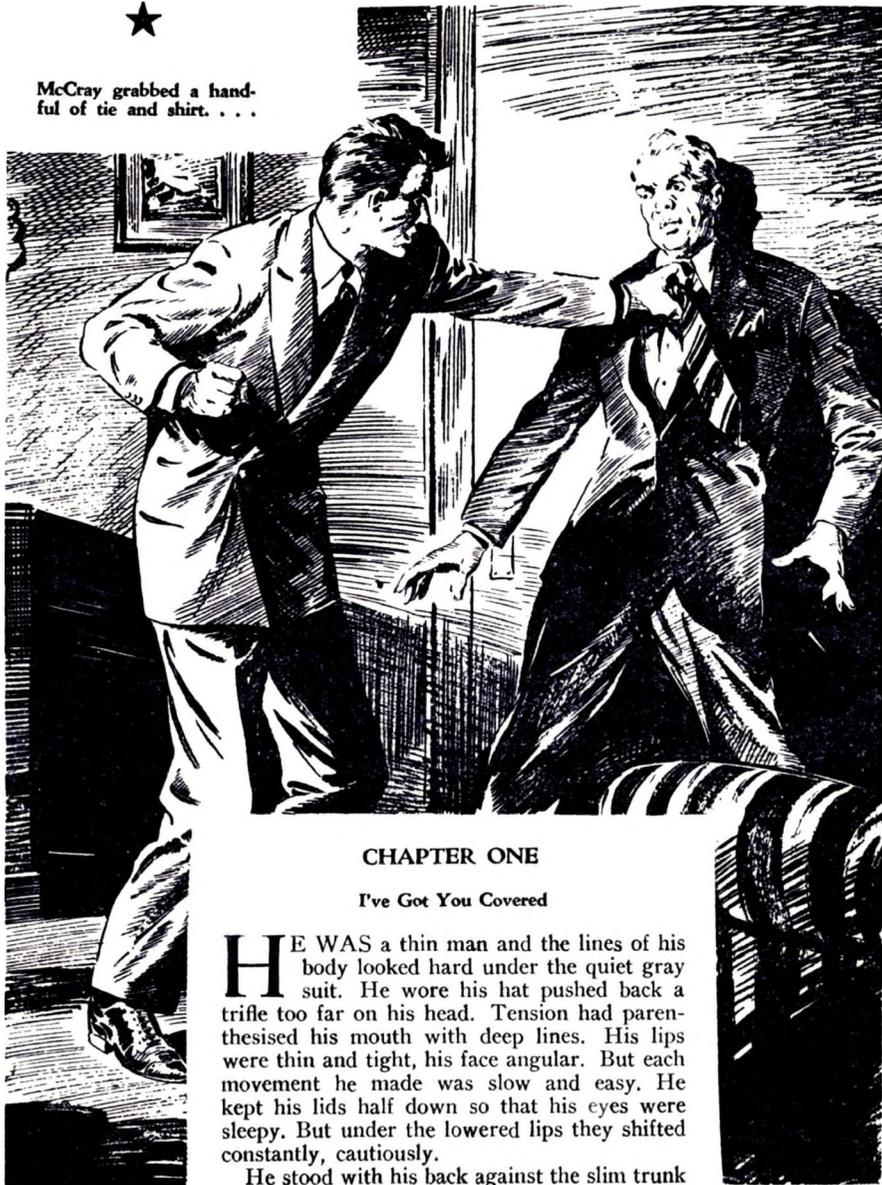


By
**JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

Until ex-millionaire, ex-convict Blair forked over the embezzled hundred grand, Insurance Investigator McCray would stick like a leech—even with Blair's scrappy daughter going all-out to spike his guns.



McCray grabbed a handful of tie and shirt. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

I've Got You Covered

HE WAS a thin man and the lines of his body looked hard under the quiet gray suit. He wore his hat pushed back a trifle too far on his head. Tension had parenthesised his mouth with deep lines. His lips were thin and tight, his face angular. But each movement he made was slow and easy. He kept his lids half down so that his eyes were sleepy. But under the lowered lips they shifted constantly, cautiously.

He stood with his back against the slim trunk

of a young maple. The heavy rain plopped onto the green leaves. Under the low branches it was dry. He smoked with the butt of his cigarette cupped in his hand to protect it from the occasional drop that would find its way through the leaves.

He watched the main gate of Allen Prison.

When the long black sedan pulled up and stopped fifty feet from the gate, he didn't move for twenty seconds. He flipped the cigarette away and walked through the rain with long strides. The chauffeur heard the scrape of shoe leather on the wet concrete and turned his head just as McCray opened the rear door of the sedan and slipped in.

The girl in the rear seat was young, striking. Straight hair—the texture of smoke and the color of flame. A smooth scrubbed face with the eyes set oddly, the lips too abundant, the cheekbones too high. The gray suit wasn't noticeable—until it was noticed.

He glanced at her and looked away, settled back in the seat and reached in his side pocket for the almost empty pack of cigarettes. He could feel her eyes on him, sense her guesses and her concealed confusion.

She said, "I haven't had the pleasure." Her voice bit at the word. She put feeling into it.

"McCray," he said, "I'm waiting for Mr. Blair also. Cigarette?"

The inside of the big car was a blend of plastic and fabric in shades of brown and deep green. It smelled clean and new. She glanced down at the cigarette which poked a wrinkled nose out of the torn package and said, "Thank you, no. If you don't mind, I'd prefer to be alone when Mr. Blair comes out."

"You're Martha, the daughter, aren't you?"

"Please get out of this car!"

The chauffeur turned half around in the front seat and said, "Shall I insist, Miss Blair?"

She nodded and the chauffeur climbed out into the road. McCray noticed that the man was fortyish, with a bull neck and heavy hands. As soon as the door was opened, McCray climbed out.

He turned and touched the brim of his hat. "Nice to meet you, Miss Blair. You'll probably see a good deal of me. After

you've talked with your father, you point me out over there under that tree and tell him that I'm from Orion Casualty. Tell him that I want a ride back to the city."

He turned to the chauffeur and said, "Thanks for holding the door. Cigarette?"

The man shook his head and McCray walked back to the tree. He leaned against the trunk and drew on the cupped cigarette. He thought, "A very special little item. Very special. They told me she couldn't possibly be in on it. I wonder. For my money, she could be in on anything. Perfect control. No excitement. I like it. I like it very much."

It was a good fifteen minutes before a guard opened the gate and Mr. Ellis A. Blair, ex-owner of a seat on the exchange, ex-treasurer of Hopperson Products, ex-gardener of Allen Prison, walked out in clothes cut in the style of six years before. He was stocky, tanned, distinguished looking. He walked quickly to the car with a firm step, getting there just as the chauffeur managed to scramble out and get the rear door open on the prison side.

McCray saw the movement in the back of the car as Blair's arms went around the girl. They were motionless for long seconds. They parted. Once he heard her laugh, only a shade too high, too shrill.

Blair peered out the window toward the small tree. The chauffeur jumped out and held the rear door open. McCray hurried across through the rain and climbed in. Blair sat in the middle, with Martha on one side of him and McCray on the other.

Blair said, "You people are certainly fighting a lost cause, aren't you?"

McCray shrugged. "It's a small gamble. The company paid out a hundred thousand on your bond to Hopperson. They pay me in peanuts. They can afford a whole year of my time, or maybe two, as long as they think there's a chance of partial recovery."

The big car started smoothly, the twin wipers clicking in rhythm, the tires purring on the wet road. The chauffeur drove fast and well.

"What is it you want, McCray? Is that your name?"

"Right. It's like this. My orders are to stick with you until you give us the tip on where the money is hidden. With a normal mug, we'd have watched from under cover. But you're a smart man, Mr. Blair, an

executive. You'd know we'd be watching. So they let me cover you openly."

The girl sat up so that she could look directly at McCray. "Are you happy in your work?" she asked with bland and nasty innocence.

"If I was sensitive I'd be in some other line," he answered.

"Touché," Mr. Blair said softly. He turned to Martha and said, "Did you get over the hump on inventory?"

Martha said, "We'd better save it until we have some privacy."

MCCRAY said, "Don't clam up on my account. I know most of the facts. When they put you away for a ten-year stretch, Mr. Blair, everything was in your wife's name, and it wasn't much. By the time your daughter got out of college the cash was gone. Mrs. Blair managed to set Martha up in a small dress shop before she died. Your daughter has a knack for designing clothes. Last year Martha over-expanded the business. But she wasn't in any real trouble until two weeks ago—when she got to the end of her credit.

"Now I can answer your question, Mr. Blair. She sold the Westchester house at enough over the mortgage to bail herself out for a time, but she may go right back into the soup. She thinks that if she can hang on for six months, the business will come out of it and she'll be set to make some big dough. Still, she's not what you call a good business risk at the moment, and part of the trouble is that she's living way over her head. Her apartment is too big and she shouldn't be paying the wages of a maid and a chauffeur."

Martha gasped and said, "Do I have a mole on my left hip?"

"I don't know, Miss Blair, but speaking of blemishes, I got a hunch that clunk you got for a shop manager, Miss LeReign, is tapping the till a little."

Suddenly earnest, Martha said, "Could you prove that?"

"None of my business, but maybe you could."

"Thank you very mu—" She stopped and he saw by her expression that she had realized that she was thanking a man for prying into her affairs.

Mr. Blair said, "I guess we can talk free-

ly, Martha. Mr. McCray seems to have all the facts well in hand."

"All but one," McCray said. "Where did you stash the dough?"

Blair sighed. "My boy, it is impossible to hide something you have never seen. I never touched the money. Why can't you look at it from my point of view?"

"I've tried, Mr. Blair. All I can see is a setup where somebody made out a bunch of purchase orders to a fake supply company. Bills came in from this fake supply company. You paid the bills by checks totaling one hundred and fifteen thousand dollars. Somebody cashed those checks. When we looked up the back file of purchase orders, the ones you approved didn't even have the purchasing agent's signature on them. You claimed that the signature had appeared.

"Blair, we found fifteen thousand bucks in your bank account that you couldn't account for. We found some of the blank bill forms from the fake outfit in your study in the Westchester house. You were identified as the guy who opened up the account in the name of the fake company through which the checks were cashed. Air tight. Besides, who am I? I'm just a guy who's been told to find out what you did with the other hundred thousand."

Blair lifted his hands in a gesture of resignation and slapped them down on his knees. He managed to smile at Martha. "See what it's like, my dear?" he said.

She placed her hand over his. "There's one guy on your side. Me," she said gently.

McCray turned and looked out the car window, suddenly realizing that the job was going to be even more unpleasant than he had imagined. Something about the sincerity in Blair's voice. . . . Hell! Blair was a smooth article. He'd fooled a lot of people, but he wasn't going to fool Michael McCray. Not for a minute.

He turned back quickly and saw Blair looking at him. The gray eyes behind the rimless glasses were very cold, very speculative. The look only lasted for a second.

Blair said heartily, "Mr. McCray. Believe me. If I had the money, I'd turn it over to you. I'm an old man and I'm tired." He chuckled. "I have visions of retiring and living off my daughter, if she'll let me."

"Somehow you don't strike me like the type, Mr. Blair. What are your plans?"

"I don't know why I should tell you this, McCray, but I've been planning on starting a service facility, to take care of the accounting and report and tax problems of small businesses. I'm certain that some of my friends who have been writing to me while I've been away will advance the money. You see, a few of them believe that I was framed."

Martha snapped, "Mr. McCray wouldn't understand, Dad."

Again McCray looked out the window. He extracted the last cigarette from the pack, crumpled the pack and tossed it out. He made a careful mental review of his plans. They still seemed good. You couldn't handle this Blair like one of the ordinary crowd. As he thought, he listened with half his attention to Martha telling her father about the apartment.

". . . and I had your things brought down from the Westchester house, the desk and all. You will like the room, I think. There are windows on two sides with a private bath and a private entrance to the hall. Here's the key. Some of your old friends will be around tonight. I invited them. And there's a case of scotch. Coming out party, Dad."

McCray saw him take her hand and hold it so tightly that his fingernails turned white. He glanced at her face and saw her blink away the quick tears and lift her chin proudly.

McCray said, "I don't want to be a wet blanket, Mr. Blair, but all this seems a little odd to me. There's two choices in this deal. Either you were guilty, which I think you were, and you come out after six years with a plan to recover the dough you hid away, or you were framed and you come out with a fat plan to nail the party that framed you. You claim you weren't guilty, and yet you act so relaxed. You don't act like a man who has been injured."

Blair sighed. "You're young, McCray. I had a lot of time to think. For two years I thought of revenge during every waking moment and dreamed of it at night. Then I stopped. Life is too short. There isn't enough time left to me to waste it in trying to extract an eye for an eye. I want to be busy and useful. I want a full life from here on in. There's no room for revenge in a full life, McCray, so I'm afraid you're in for rather a dull session. There's not even

room in my mind for annoyance and irritation with you. In fact, I'm trying to like you."

Martha laughed shortly. "I read about a man once who had a pet cobra."

Blair said, "That wasn't necessary, my dear."

"I told you before, I'm not sensitive," McCray said.

IN TWENTY minutes they were inside the city. The chauffeur angled across town, making eight or nine blocks on each green light, turning left at the last minute and then right again when the lights changed back to green. They pulled up in front of the apartment house and the chauffeur held the door.

A small man with a gray, neutral face pushed himself away from the wall of the apartment house and ambled over. McCray said, "Mr. Blair, this is Tommy. There's another one too, on the other shift, called Nick. Wherever you go, they go. They have their orders not to bother you, or try to talk to you, and to keep inconspicuous enough so that other people won't know you're being tailed."

He smiled frankly at Blair and added, "When you're ready to give up, Mr. Blair, I'll be around and you can tell me where I can find the dough." He tipped his hat to Martha. "Nice to meet the two of you. See you later."

After they went into the lobby, McCray said to Tommy, "Let's grab some coffee across the street. He won't run out in two minutes."

They sat on stools at the counter with the steaming coffee in front of them. The rain had stopped, but the streets were still wet. McCray peeled a new pack of cigarettes and gave one to Tommy.

The little man said, "This is the screwiest deal, Mike! Telling a guy you're tailing him! You embarrassed me, you know."

"Don't heckle me, Tommy. I got it all figured out. I figure that after he got the dough, six years ago, he rented a deposit box under a false name and paid maybe as much as fifteen years rent in advance for it. But we couldn't locate the key, so he must have hid it. Now he's got to get that key somehow. He won't try to get it himself. We fixed that. He'll send either one of the people that come to the party tonight

after it, or else he'll send his daughter. Once he gets the key, he'll try to slip away from the tail, from you or Nick, whoever is on at the time. But he won't get away from the tail he doesn't know about."

Tommy sipped his coffee and muttered, "Sounds screwy to me."

"Nuts. We're playing with a smart apple, Tommy. I got to figure one step ahead of him. I'd say that he's smart enough not to go after that dough for a couple of years, if it wasn't for his kid being in a jam with her Martha Shops."

Tommy set the empty cup down and wiped his lips. "See you later, Mike."

McCray nodded absently as the small man left. He sat for a long time over the dregs of the coffee, his lips compressed, his eyes sleepy. Suppose Blair was playing it straight? Suppose it had been a frame? No. It couldn't be. The evidence was too clear. Besides, careful investigation of all the other remote possibilities had shown that no one at Hopperson Products had become suddenly flush after Blair had been sent up. He relaxed. It would have to be a game of wits. Besides, he was already committed to the plan.

He tossed a dime on the counter, slid off the stool and walked out, a lean, slow man with an air of controlled tension.

CHAPTER TWO

Coming-Out Party

THE bedside phone started to ring. At the first sound, McCray was wide awake. He clicked on the bed lamp and grabbed the phone, reaching with his other hand for cigarettes and matches.

"McCray speaking."

A girl's voice. Tense. Close to tears. "Mr. McCray, this is Martha Blair. Dad—he's gone. He didn't say anything. I didn't know who to call. I don't know what to think."

"How did you get my number?"

"I went down and talked to that little man you called Tommy."

"Blair is gone and Tommy is still there!"

"Yes, and that's why I got so worried. When I found out he had gone without saying a word to me, I remembered the little man and went down, thinking that if he was gone too, my father would at

least have someone following him and—"

"I'll be right over. Sit tight." He slammed the phone back in the cradle and bounded out of the bed. Five minutes later he was in a cab headed toward the Blair apartment. The main door buzzed open as soon as he touched the apartment bell, and the apartment door opened with his first knock.

She was wearing a long, green strapless dress, the exact gray-green of her eyes. Her face was absolutely expressionless. Tommy sat in a chair in the background, his hat still on. The main room of the apartment looked like a decorator's ad in technicolor. Tommy stood up and said, "Mike, I didn't know that—"

"Shut up. How did he get out?"

"There are two ground floor apartments on the left rear. Blair walked down, knocked on one, told the people that he was from Police Headquarters and would they mind if he checked on the possible means of egress from the building. I guess that means ways out. He walked through, unbuttoned their bedroom window and dropped into the alley. He thanked them and went on down an alley that makes a right angle turn and comes out a block over. We weren't even watching it."

McCray dropped into a chair and crossed his legs. He hung his hat on his knee and glared at Tommy. "You're off duty, Chump. Go to bed."

Tommy said, "Sure." He backed to the door, opened it and left. McCray decided to leave Marco, the second tail, on duty until further notice.

Martha Blair sat opposite McCray, erect and tense, her face expressionless.

He said gently, "Okay, Miss Blair, give me the angles."

"Angles? I don't know what you mean. Dad just left."

"Why did you get hold of me, Miss Blair? You didn't show any great love for me on the way down here today. Your reaction should be to dance in the streets, hugging yourself because your father out-smarted me. You've got to come clean."

"There's nothing else to tell."

"Come off it, Sister. I'm not stupid. You should be glad that your father sneaked away. He'll take this chance to recover the dough he hid and then he can bail you out of the hole you're in with your business."

She dropped the mask and leaned toward him, her eyes direct and intense, her face mobile. He suddenly saw the force and drive of her, the pure, naked energy. She said, "My father did not take that money! I know that he didn't. You've got to take my word for it and start from there. Otherwise, you'll be looking in the wrong direction. If you'll agree to start with that idea as a basic premise, I'll tell you a few things."

McCray shrugged. "Okay, so he didn't take the dough. Start talking."

"Not good enough, my friend. You've got to mean it. You've got to take my word."

He looked at her, looked into her eyes. "All right, Miss Blair. He didn't take the money. What next?"

"When he was sent to prison it nearly killed him, and it nearly drove him mad. He had worked most of his life building up a deserved reputation for honesty and integrity. He was publicly accused and publicly convicted. Try to imagine yourself in his shoes, Mr. McCray. What would be your reaction?"

"Why, I guess to spend the time trying to figure out who put the fix on me and decide on a way to get back at him or them."

"Certainly. And that's what my father did. He thought about it for months, remembering little, half-forgotten things. And at last he knew who had done it to him."

"Who was it?"

"He wouldn't tell me. But I'm sure he knew."

"But look, Miss Blair, your father said today that he didn't have time for revenge."

"My father is a good business man. And a good poker player."

He gave her a cigarette, watching her for signs of nervousness. He said, "It still isn't enough."

She looked at him coldly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that your calling me still seems a pretty strange thing. Your control is too good. You're not letting yourself go. I get the feeling that you're all tied up inside—and frightened. What is it, Miss Blair?"

There was silence in the room, and the gray threads of smoke curled up in the still air. She looked away from him and said,

"My gun is missing. It was there yesterday. Now it's gone."

He settled back in the chair with a half-smile. "Make?"

"A Belgian gun, Browning patent .32 automatic with a shortened barrel and a hand-made front sight. My—an escort of mine took it away from a man who tried to commandeer a cab from us one night. He gave it to me and I got a license on the basis of having to carry the shop's receipts up here to the apartment to put in my safe."

Her tone had been very low, very quiet. He noticed that her hands were trembling, her shoulders slumped, as though some internal self-control had snapped.

"Who was the Joe Muscles who took this gun away from the stranger?"

"Bradford Hand, the son of—"

"Yeah, of the guy who is now president of Hopperson Products. The elder Hand did all the testifying to try to save your father from the stretch."

She stood up suddenly, easily, impressing him with her quick grace. She walked to the fireplace and turned, her arms folded tightly as though she were cold. "Are you just going to sit there?" she asked with shrill emphasis.

He shrugged. "What can I do? This is a fair-sized town. The police are the best bet."

"No! He's an ex-convict now. I trusted you with the information that he has a gun. If you told that to the police, they might—shoot on sight. They won't listen to him."

"Take it easy, Miss Blair. Now think for a minute. He told you that he knew who had put the fix on him. Did he ever ask for anything, or say anything when you visited him that might give us an angle on who it could be?"

She walked over and sat down again, lines of strain beginning to appear in her face. She stabbed out the cigarette in a massive glass ashtray. "I—I don't think so. He said once—well, that wouldn't have anything to do with it."

"What did he say?"

"Just that if he had signed the checks the same way the Purchase Orders were initialled, he'd be a free man. I asked him to explain, but he just smiled at me and said that was a problem for the head of the family."

McCray thought it over. At last he said, "If we assume that your father was innocent, it follows that one of four other men, or possibly two of them, were guilty. Bradford Hand, Ellis Aimbel, John Regan or Samuel Anderson. The President, Vice President, Treasurer and Purchasing Agent of the Hopperson Products Company. At the time of your father's arrest they were respectively the Purchasing Agent, Vice President, Assistant Treasurer and Assistant Purchasing Agent. Were they all here tonight at the party?"

"No. Just Bradford Hand and John Regan. Sam Anderson is in Cuba and—"

"Does your father know that?"

"Of course!"

"Then we can assume that Sam Anderson isn't the guy. He wouldn't go out hunting for a guy who's in Cuba. Why didn't Ellis Aimbel come to the party?"

She looked away from him and said, "Ellis Aimbel feels that my father was guilty. If it weren't for him, it might have been possible for my father to go back with the company, in some job where he wouldn't—have anything to do with handling money." She flushed as she said it.

"Then let's assume that Aimbel, if he were guilty, would be sucking along, making like Blair was a wronged guy, just as a smoke screen. That leaves Regan and Hand. Did you notice anything tonight? Did your father say anything that could be interpreted as a veiled threat or warning?"

"I don't think so. It seemed like a very gay little party, considering the strain that everybody was under. Dad helped a lot by waiting until everybody had arrived. He lifted his glass and toasted: 'The best damn flower garden in the state. They certainly gave me enough time to work on it—the Allen Prison Flower Garden.' Everybody gasped and then began to laugh as Dad looked at them with a funny little grin. After that, the party was swell—it really was."

"I understand you sold the Westchester house to a party named Regan. Was that the same Regan—John Regan?"

"Yes. He was very uncomfortable about buying it, but I told him I'd rather have a friend get it than a stranger. Mother and Dad put seventy-five thousand into the house alone. It had a fifty-five thousand dollar mortgage on it. Regan paid sixty-

seven thousand for it. That gave me twelve thousand."

"Cash?"

"Most of it. I got all cash. He paid off about thirty thousand of the mortgage, I understand."

"I haven't got Hand's address on me. Where do they live?"

"In a duplex on Central Park West."

"Then I'd guess that your father is either at Hand's or out at Regan's. And, if your father is innocent, on which you haven't sold me yet, either Hand or Regan took the dough. Mind if I use your phone?"

"Who are you going to call?"

"Look, Miss Blair, either you play along with me or you don't. It's nothing to me either way." He noticed a phone in an alcove by the front door to the apartment. He got up and ambled over to it. She sat quietly while he checked the book and dialed.

The phone rang once and someone on the other end picked it up, said cautiously, "Hello?"

"Mr. Hand, please."

"Who's this? Wait! Don't hang up. Who is it?"

McCray replaced the phone gently on the cradle. He turned and walked back to the girl.

She looked up at him with a puzzled expression. "Was he home?"

"I don't know. I got an official voice on the other end. I smell cops. Want to go over? It might not be nice."

She gasped, "Hand! Police! Then—" She couldn't say what she was thinking.

McCray said, dryly, "It's a possibility. Hand might have been the guy and your father went over to see him with a gun in his pocket."

She shuddered and covered her face with her hands.

McCray slouched in front of her, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. He nudged her leg with his knee and said,

"Break it off, Miss Blair. Get into a coat. Let's roll."

Without a word she jumped up and left the room. McCray whistled softly as he circled slowly around the room. She was back in a few minutes, wearing a short, brown cape over her gown. Her face was tense, her lips pale.

She didn't speak as they rode down in

the elevator. While they were waiting for a taxi, McCray said, quite loudly, "Marco!" A figure detached itself from a shadowed doorway a hundred feet away and walked over to them.

As he approached Marco said, "I saw Tommy when he left. I've been wondering how long I'd have to watch the empty coop."

"Take off, Marco. Phone you tomorrow."

As the man walked briskly off, Martha said, "Quite a Gestapo you people have."

"With tails for hire at twenty a day and with a hundred thousand at stake, we can afford the little luxuries. Here's a cab."

She didn't say another word until they rounded the corner and saw the front of the apartment building at Central Park West. Two police cars were parked beside the curb. She gasped and said, "Two of them!"

"Looks like something big and rough, Miss Blair." On an impulse he reached over and tapped her under the chin with his knuckles. "Chin up and give 'em the beady eye, Baby. Polite, firm and distant. That's the pitch."

She twisted away from his hand in quick irritation, and then glanced at him. He could feel her eyes on him, but he couldn't read her expression. She said, quietly, "Thanks, Mr. McCray. I needed that."

THE man in uniform stood over by the bank of elevators. When McCray asked the night clerk to be connected with the Hand apartment, the clerk beckoned to the policeman. He strolled over and said, "Names, please?"

He obviously expected some kind of protest, or question. He was braced for it. He looked startled when McCray said, "Mr. Michael McCray and Miss Martha Blair. I think the man in charge will want to see us."

The policeman phoned the names up to the Hand apartment. He hung up and said, "Go on right up. How'd you know about this? There aren't even any police reporters here yet."

McCray smiled grimly and said, as they got into the elevator, "I'm a telepath."

A stocky man with a soft, gray oval face and black mats of hair on the backs of his hands opened the apartment door. McCray

was knocked slightly to one side as Martha Blair pushed by him and ran to the side of her father. He was sitting on a chair, slumped over, staring at the floor in numbed apathy. He glanced at her almost without recognition. A purplish bruise discolored his left cheek.

The man who had opened the door said, "Don't I know you, McCray?"

"Yeah. Investigation Department, Orion Casualty. You're Archibold, aren't you? Walker case three years ago."

"Sure. I remember now. Orion had the bond on Blair, I suppose."

"What goes on?"

Archibold stepped to one side and McCray saw trousered legs protruding from behind a low coach set at right angles to the fireplace. The body was face down.

"That was Bradford Hand, senior," Archibold said. "Got it right through the teeth with a .32 automatic. Slug severed the spinal cord on its way out the back of his neck. Blair shot him." The quiet voice carried across the room.

Blair looked up, his face ashen under the tan. There was no confirmation or denial in his stare. Martha Blair dropped her cape on a chair and walked unsteadily over to the windows on the far side of the room, away from the body. It was obvious that she had heard Archibold.

The medical examiner got up from behind the couch which had concealed him. He said to Archibold, "Instantaneous. A maximum of sixty and a minimum of thirty minutes ago. The body hasn't been moved. From powder burns on the nose and lips. I'd say the shot was fired within a six-foot range. Later I'll send over to you the exact measurements of the burned area and you can make tests with the weapon and find that the exact distance. It's none of my business, but from where the slug hit the wall, I'd guess that Hand's head was inclined forward, as though he were talking to a shorter person. That would check with the path of the slug through his mouth and neck and check with it hitting that wall at an eight-foot level."

"How would a guy act, hit like that?"

"In this case, he went right over onto his face." The medical examiner smiled cheerfully and went on out.

McCray said to Archibold, "Where's the rest of the Hand family?"

"In the next room. The wife and the son. It's sort of a library. Rough on 'em."

McCray stood with his hands shoved deeply into his pockets, watching the photographer getting his flash shots of the body from various angles. He said to Archibold, "Mind if I hang around and listen to Blair's story?"

"Why not? You people never get in our way. But you'll have to wait for a while. Jordan's out in the kitchen with Hennessy getting John Regan's story. I want to talk in private with Jordan before I talk to Blair. It'll give me a line to go on."

"Regan was here?"

"Sure. He was the one phoned it in."

At that moment a slim man came from the back of the house and said, "Lieutenant, want to come out now?"

Archibold said, "Thanks, Jordan," and followed the man into the back of the apartment.

McCray walked over to Martha Blair. Something about her straight, tense figure knotted his throat. A gal with guts. He walked over and stood beside her. She seemed unconscious of his presence, even though his arm brushed hers. He looked out the windows. The late lights of Manhattan made a faint, pink glow against the overcast.

He said softly, "It's a big town, Martha." Her name had slipped out.

She turned, very slowly, so that she was facing him. Her eyes were wide, her stare fixed. "What can I do?" A child's question. The helpless, empty question of a hurt child.

"Go back and sit on the arm of his chair and keep your hand on his shoulder. Don't leave him alone." He saw her quick, grateful glance as she walked back into the room where her father sat.

CHAPTER THREE

Tight Grip On Murder

AFTER a few moments, Archibold came back and stood in front of Blair. McCray sauntered over and leaned an elbow on the mantel, a cigarette hanging from his long fingers. Archibold said, with deceptive gentleness, "Tell me exactly what happened, Mr. Blair."

Blair started and looked up, as though

wondering where Archibold could have come from. He said, "I don't know. I took Martha's gun out of her bureau and got out of the apartment house through a back alley. It was a bluff. I came over here to see Brad Hand. While I was in prison, I figured out how he had framed me.

"Brad and his wife and son and John Regan were by the fire here, having a night-cap. I had my hand in my jacket pocket, my finger on the trigger, but there wasn't a shell in the chamber. Just in the clip. I told them I wanted to talk to Brad and John alone. Mrs. Hand and young Brad went out of the room. I wanted John as a witness.

"When they were gone, I said it was Brad's signature on the Purchase Orders that I saw. When the police checked, his signature wasn't there any more. The disappearing ink he used faded after I had countersigned. Office detail moved swiftly—and the ink trick worked fine. Brad was the one who had the chance to plant the blank bills from the fake company in my desk at home—and open the false bank account. I wanted him to clear me. I took out the gun.

"I heard John gasp. He was standing near me. I woke up on the floor there by the fireplace. I—I must have shot him." He stopped and looked down at the floor.

Archibold said, "We got John Regan's story. He says that when you accused Mr. Hand, Mr. Hand was very angry. He stood up and walked toward you. You held the gun on him and backed away from him. He followed you around in back of the couch and you shot him. Then you came toward Regan and he hit you, knocking you out. He said you had a wild look on your face. He took the gun by the barrel and pulled it out of your hand and set it on that table over there. Mrs. Hand and her son came in. Regan called us."

A large man who had been working over the gun came over. "The prints on the gun, Lieutenant. Blair's prints were smudged, as usual, but there's one fair one alongside the frame right of the trigger guard. Regan left two clear prints on the barrel."

Martha looked helplessly up at McCray.

Blair muttered, "I've heard about things going black. . . . I guess I must have done it." He looked up at Archibold and tried to smile. It was a twisted grimace.

McCray had the vague feeling that something was wrong with the picture.

Archibold said, "We better be running along down to Headquarters, Blair."

The girl jumped up and said, "He didn't do it! He didn't do it! I tell you he couldn't shoot anyone! Never, never, never!"

McCray took her slim wrist and tightened his fingers around it until the note of hysteria left her voice and her lips twisted with the sharpness of the pain. He let her pull away from him when he was certain that she had herself fully under control again.

McCray said, "Lieutenant, would you mind if before you shoved off I asked a few questions. We got a hundred thousand bucks mixed up in this mess someplace. Only take me a few minutes."

Archibold shrugged. "Go ahead, McCray, but make it quick. Usually on a deal this big the Inspector drops around in person, and I wouldn't want him finding me using outside talent. Hell, it's open and shut anyway."

McCray felt their confused stares on him as he knelt and looked closely at Blair's shoes. They were crusted, along the edge of the sole, with drying black mud from the damp alley. Then he moved over to the couch and examined closely the smear of dirt high against the back. The couch was out of line a few inches, shoved back from what was apparently its usual position.

He touched the smear of dirt with a cautious finger and then straightened up. "Where were you standing, Blair, when things went black?"

Blair stared up out of his lethargy. "Oh! Over there, in front of that couch you were looking at. Hand sat over on the other couch. John Regan was standing at my left, by the fire."

Archibold looked puzzled. McCray stepped back and looked at the couch again. He said, "I want to ask Mrs. Hand one question. Okay?"

Archibold said, "Through that door over there. And take it easy. She's in bad shape. Her doctor's on the way over."

Mrs. Bradford Hand lay white and gasping on a long leather couch in the library. Her son, white and shrunken-looking, had pulled a chair up close to her. He sat stroking her hand while she looked blindly at the ceiling.

McCray stood looking down at her. He said, "Mrs. Hand, how did your husband react in emergencies? Was he a brave man?"

She turned toward him and said, hoarsely, "Of course. Bradford was as brave as anyone."

Her son said, "Dad was inclined to freeze a little if he was in a tough spot, but he had enough guts. He never lost his temper. It would be better if you didn't talk to Mother until the doctor sees her."

McCray muttered his apologies and went back out into the main room. The big man who had been working on the gun stood with his back against the wall, near the door. McCray walked over to him and said, "About those prints on the barrel. How were they headed—with the muzzle pointing toward him or away from him?"

Archibold listened, a puzzled frown between his eyebrows.

The big man said, "Wait a second. Let me see. Yeah. He grabbed the barrel with the grip toward him."

McCray turned toward Blair. "You said there was no shell in the chamber?"

"That's right," said Blair wearily.

McCray turned back toward the big man. "Any lint or threads caught in the slide grip?"

"No. Not a thing."

The gun was still on the small table. McCray stepped over and looked down at it. He said, "Hmmm. Knurled grips on the end of the slide. Were there any blurred prints on that knurled portion?"

The big man looked puzzled. Then he turned to Archibold and said, "Hey, that's funny! No prints at all on them knurls! How would that happen? A guy's got to pull the slide back some time. Why wipe off a spot like that?"

McCray said, "Get Regan in here."

Archibold nodded at the big man who hurried out toward the kitchen. Regan followed him back into the big room. McCray noticed that Regan was a chunky man, gray-haired, alert, with heavy shoulders and a tanned face. His clothes were neat, expensive. He looked expectantly at Archibold who said, "Mr. McCray here is asking a few questions."

Regan nodded agreement and then looked at Blair with obvious loathing.

McCray said, "I want to try a small re-

take, Mr. Regan." He snaked a .38 automatic from his shoulder holster. He clicked the clip out into his hand, pointed the gun at the floor and worked the slide, ejecting a shell onto the carpet. He said, "Now tell me where Mr. Blair was when he fell to the floor."

Regan moistened his lips and said, "On the floor in front of the fireplace. On his left side, with the gun in his right hand."

"Like this?" McCray asked, stretching out on the floor.

Regan pursed his lips and said, "A little nearer the fireplace."

McCray hitched over. He held the gun in his right hand, flat against the floor. He said, "Now you pull this gun out of my hand like you did with Mr. Blair."

REGAN bent over and took the gun, grasping the barrel much as a man would grasp the end of a golf club. He pulled the gun out of McCray's fingers. McCray got up and, flashing a warning look at Archibold, took the gun back out of Regan's hand. He slipped the clip home, pulled the slide back, poked the extra shell into the chamber and let the slide down easily. He shoved the gun back into the holster and patted his coat smooth over it.

He said, "Now I want to take a look at the other gun, Mr. Regan, could I have your handkerchief for a moment?"

Regan's hand started for his pocket, paused, and then continued. He handed McCray a balled white handkerchief. McCray shook it out and held it up. He located a dark stain and sniffed at it delicately. He handed the handkerchief to Archibold. Archibold folded the stain on the inside and slipped it into his pocket. His face was expressionless.

Regan glanced quickly from McCray to Archibold. He said, "By the way, Gentlemen, I used that handkerchief in handling the gun for a moment."

McCray said, "That seems a bit odd, Mr. Regan. Your prints were on the barrel and you said you merely pulled it out of his hand and laid it on the table. Why the handkerchief?"

Regan smiled easily. "I used my handkerchief to pull the slide back to see if it was still loaded."

"That seems a little odd, too. If you

pulled the slide back, you'd eject the next shell."

"I didn't pull the slide all the way back. Just far enough so that I could see the base of the cartridge."

"Then you couldn't tell if it was loaded or unloaded."

"Oh, yes. An empty case was ejected when Mr. Blair shot Mr. Hand."

"But if you were going to leave it loaded, if it was loaded, why even look?"

"You do odd things at a time like this, Mr.—ah—McCray, is it?"

McCray looked at him with a widening grin that seemed to make Regan uncomfortable. McCray said, "Of course, we could run a test. If young Hand was in the library and he heard a shot in here, I'm wondering if there would be time for Blair to come around the edge of the couch, for you to hit him, for Blair to fall, for you to grab the gun, take a handkerchief, pull the slide partially open, close it and put the gun on the table before young Hand could get in here. Or were you still fiddling with the gun when young Hand came in?"

Archibold said, "The gun was already on the table, according to your story, Mr. Regan."

Regan frowned. He said, "As a matter of fact, it wasn't. I believe that I had just taken it out of Blair's hand when young Hand came in."

McCray turned toward Archibold and said, in tones of wonder, "Doesn't it get you the way they always fry themselves?" He glanced at Martha. Her lips were parted and she was breathing rapidly.

Regan said, "I'm afraid I don't—"

McCray said, "I'm afraid you don't, too. Mr. Blair, could this Regan character have planted the forms you spoke of in your desk?"

Blair looked puzzled. "Of course. He was my assistant at that time. And my friend."

"And he could, if dressed right, give a pretty fair imitation of you, Mr. Blair. Same build and complexion. Just whiten his hair a little around the temples—you're grayer than he. Keep his hat on. Wear it the same way you do."

Blair began to nod his head slowly.

McCray continued, "And I imagine that he could give a good imitation of Bradford Hand's signature. At least good enough

to last until the ink he used faded away. Being your assistant he was right in or near your office where he could plant the fake purchase orders in your incoming office mail, supposedly from the office of the Purchasing Agent. You still got some of those old purchase orders on file on the Blair case, Lieutenant?" He turned to Archibold.

"That's not my department, but I imagine they're still around."

"If they are, the laboratory boys can bring out the invisible ink and the handwriting boys can prove that this Regan character did the forgery."

Regan said loudly, "Now you listen to me! There's nothing to compel me to stand here—"

"Just try walking out. I've got the picture, Regan. When Blair came in with the gun and told Hand how he'd figured it all out while he had time on his hands, you got scared. You were afraid the two of them would talk about it and come to some mighty quick answers.

"You did some quick thinking and put the slug on Blair. You're a husky guy. You hit Blair so hard, you knocked him over the couch—and that was before the shot was fired."

"Absurd!"

"Is it, now? Notice the guard of that Belgian gun is small and Blair has thick fingers. He already said that he had one finger on the trigger, but no shell in the chamber. When he toppled over the back of the couch, he left some of the dirt—alley dirt—from his shoes on the fabric of the couch, near the top of the back. I can't see any other way it could have gotten there.

"You both ran around the couch. The gun hadn't fallen from Blair's hand. Hand squatted on his heels by Blair's unconscious figure. You grasped the barrel of the gun, and used your handkerchief to pull the slide back. You jacked a shell into the empty firing chamber. Then you turned the barrel toward the wholly unexpected Hand—jammed Blair's limp finger against the trigger.

"A smart play—almost. You knew you only had seconds. You yanked the gun out of Blair's hand, put it on the table and heaved Blair back across the couch onto

the floor in front of the fireplace. Hand had quietly collapsed on his face. He never had a chance."

Regan flushed and crossed his arms. "Proving that mad story will be a little different, my friend. What makes you think you can?"

"Oh, we got enough. The forgery. The stain on your handkerchief. And the way you grabbed the gun.... Wouldn't you say we had enough in the way of proof, Lieutenant?"

Archibold, looking at Regan and then at McCray, said, "For my money you—" He didn't finish the sentence.

Regan hit him low with a very solid shoulder and plunged toward the door. He dumped the big man by the door and fought at the knob. McCray reached him in three long steps. He jolted Regan's shoulder turning him half around. With his left hand he grabbed a handful of Regan's tie and shirt. He yanked Regan violently toward him as he shot a right to the mouth. Martha's taut nerves found release in an unladylike shout of encouragement to McCray. Regan tottered but didn't fall. McCray yanked again with his left hand and this time he let go. Regan stumbled and fell heavily on the rug. He lay with his cheek against the rug, his eyes open, breathing heavily, making no effort to get up.

Archibold said, "That kills me! I was going to say that for my money your case against him stinks. Imagine that! The guy tried to make a break."

McCray sucked his knuckle and examined it carefully. He said, "I hurt my hand. I should have let you guys maul him. It's your job."

Blair still sat, looking with growing comprehension at the figure of Regan stretched out on the floor.

McCray looked at Martha. She had her chin up and her fine eyes looked deep into his. The hurt and the fear were gone. Her hand rested on her father's shoulder. There was something new in her eyes, and for the first time with her, McCray felt ill at ease. She said the words soundlessly, and he read it from her lips. "Thank you, Michael."

And somehow she had said a great deal more.

THE END

BLACKMAILERS DON'T KILL . . .

When a luscious client has everything except discretion, a private dick is likely to plunge to the rescue—and find himself over his head . . . in crime-hot water.



She leaned easily against me and casually held my right arm — my gun-arm. . . .

By TED STRATTON

ALL I knew about the Forstman Wetherholds, I had learned from the newspaper this morning when there had been a picture of a neat little man on the front page of the *Globe*. The caption read: MYSTERY MAN TESTIFIES MONDAY, and the rewrite went on to say that Wetherhold, sixty-year-old president of Rendex, Incorporated, was slated to reappear before a Congressional Committee that had been poking its nose into war profiteering.

The item hadn't meant a thing until

Mrs. Wetherhold phoned me an hour ago. Her voice made pleasant listening, and I gathered she was a lot younger than her wealthy husband.

"The Clipper license E-1-10," she told me, "will pick you up at five p.m., Mr. Gordon. You are to wait for Kennedy outside the building."

That's why I was leaning against the glass window of the Fornachon Towers Building as the Clipper purred in at two minutes before five. The driver cut into the curb opening and parked with the rear fender inches from a U-Drive-It truck, the grillwork three feet from a coupe.

I strolled forward and offered: "Nice parking, Fellow."

He slid across the seat and out. "I'm very good," he admitted. "Are you Mr. Sidney Gordon?"

"Yes."

"I'm Kennedy, Sir."

He was twenty-six or seven, the handsome blond type. He wore a short-peaked cap, black suede gloves, and a gray chauffeur's uniform with an Eisenhower jacket. He looked veddy, veddy natty.

"Gee," he said, "I'm fresh out of smokes."

I gave him one of mine, took one myself, and he held the match for both of us. "They sell cigs in the lobby store, Sir?" he asked.

"Sure, and safety pins, ice cream, and baby steam rollers."

He grinned, a nice friendly gesture without a worry or thought in it. "Mind waiting a moment, Mr. Gordon?"

"No hurry, Fellow."

I sank down on the soft front cushion. There was enough space up front to contain the annual Elk's smoker. About the only gadget the Clipper didn't have was a built-in bar. Kennedy returned and tossed two packs of cigarettes into the glove compartment. He must have been a chain smoker because there were two unopened cartons already there.

We left Newark on the wings of an angel. There were enough gadgets on the dashboard to pilot a Consolidated to Iran, but we were only going to South Orange. At the Lackawanna underpass, the Clipper stormed up the steep Wachung grade.

A right turn onto a broad avenue where millionaires roosted. The only thing free

was the air in this section, but I kept getting dollar signs stuck in my lungs. The car made a couple of imperceptible turns and that got us onto a driveway. Kennedy rested the Clipper alongside an austere Tudor mansion that had at least twenty rooms so that it wouldn't lose face with the neighbor's shacks. He opened the door, I got out, and he gestured toward the front entrance.

I pressed a button and chimes rang inside. A homely maid in a trim black dress opened the door. "Yes?"

"Mr. Gordon to see Mrs. Wetherhold."

"Along the flagstones to the sunken garden," she directed, and disappeared without waiting to see if I knew a sunken garden from a gargoyles.

I passed between rows of Lombardy poplars as lean and black as the devil's fingers at midnight. Down three steps and onto a court with stone benches, a bubbling fountain, and a dozen statues that had been chisled by a sculptor with a hangover.

A woman lounged on the blue pad of a chaise lounge. Perhaps interest flickered over her face, but it could have been the sound of a buzzing mosquito. "Mrs. Wetherhold?" I asked politely.

"Anne Wetherhold," she corrected.

She was about thirty years old, with dead-black hair drawn tight over the skull and parted in the middle. Cobalt blue eyes, tanned skin, and a wide mouth with full red lips. She had wide shoulders, would be tall when she stood up, and wore a checkered bra and brief matching skirt. Her toe nails were carmined on bare feet. With her, any sort of clothes would be accessories after the body.

She asked: "How did you acquire the cauliflower ear?"

"The guy was a light-heavy champ, but he didn't tell me about that until afterward."

She moved her legs so that I could sit on the pad. "Gabby Diekman," she began, "says you're competent. Is there anything else I should know before hiring you, Mr. Gordon?"

Gabby Diekman was a blue-blood whose husband liked chorus girls, and that was how she and I had met professionally. "I'm thirty-three," I said unwrapping my autobiography. "Six feet tall, a hundred-

eighty pounds, unmarried. I broke in with the Pinkertons, then operated my own agency until the Japs played dirty. I hope it isn't divorce, Mrs. Wetherhold, because I'm too tall to stoop at keyholes."

She smiled and said: "Why are you a bachelor?"

"Marriage is a wall."

"Don't you find it fun to scale walls?"

"More fun without walls. Anything else on your mind?"

She pulled a letter from the skirt's pocket. "I don't like my mail."

It was dime-story stationery, the envelope cancelled in Newark three days back. The sheet of paper contained no date, no signature, just printed words:

Like the snap, Anne? The photographer says it cost three thousand dollars, which makes it positively priceless! Leave your black comb—the one with the hammered silver back—in the stone jar by the pool. Positively no delay, Darling!

But there was no snapshot with the letter. "May I see the picture?" I asked.

"Unh-uh. Just get the negative back."

"For three thousand dollars?"

"For the price of your fee."

"How will I know when I have the correct negative?"

She patted my knee and the blood began to sing in my brain. "Because it shows me barefoot up to the chin."

THAT covered a lot of wonderful territory. She gave me a long, steady stare that turned my blood to mercury. "About two weeks ago," she said, mentioning a date that I filed in my mind, "Mr. Wetherhold was in Washington for a preliminary hearing before some Congressional Committee. I held a party for seven guests.

"About one a.m. someone suggested a dip because of the positively stifling heat. The men swam in the deep end of the pool, we girls in the shallow water. I had climbed from the water when a flash-bulb exploded. It was positively frightening, Mr. Gordon! We got into some clothes. Meanwhile, someone had run into the bathhouse and turned on the overhead lights."

"Dark that night, eh?"

"Black."

"One of the guests slipped from the

pool and took the snap and slipped away?"

"Oh, I doubt that very much."

"The men searched the grounds for the photographer?"

"Yes. I phoned Kennedy, the chauffeur, to come over and help."

"Find a discarded flash-bulb or any footprints?"

"No."

"How long before Kennedy came over, Mrs. Wetherhold?"

"Several minutes."

She could have been making it up as she talked, I realized. It could have happened as she explained it—darkness, gaiety, too much scotch with too little soda, the blinding flash and confusion.

"Who suggested the dip?"

"I've forgotten, but it's not important."

"Anyone else get a letter suggesting that snapshots are high-priced?"

"Not that I know about."

"Suppose we start with the guest list."

She thought that over a moment, then shook her head. "I don't want anyone to know the picture turned out so well, Mr. Gordon. I followed the letter's directions and left the comb in the stone jar. This morning I received an answer through the mails. I'm to put three thousand dollars in the jar at ten o'clock tonight and in return, I'm to receive the negative back."

"May I see the other letter?"

"I left it upstairs, but it's written in the same handwriting."

"Same type of stationery?"

"Yes."

"What is it you wish me to do?"

"Catch the man—or the woman—when he comes for the money."

She didn't understand the first principle of detective work. I'm an expert, or so I tell my clients. The idea is to let the expert, not the client, make the important decisions because the handling of blackmail calls for skill, experience, and quick decisions.

The blackmailer might be one of her male playmates who had seen an opportunity to raise night-clubbing money. Yet the letter suggested a woman, particularly the part about the silver-backed comb. It's a rare man who sees such details and remembers them. Certainly, however, no professional crook was mixed up in this. The method of operation stank.

"Is your husband broad-minded?" I wanted to know. "What I'm getting at is—would he be after divorce evidence?"

"Positively not." She swung her legs off the chaise and stood up. So did I. Her eyes were on a level with my mouth. "I'll show you the pool and the stone jar, Mr. Gordon."

I tried again. "Are the servants trustworthy?"

"They are servants—if that's what you mean. You brought a gun along, of course?"

"I didn't bring a gun along, of course," I said. "Is there anything to this business of your husband testifying before a Congressional Committee on Monday morning?"

"Do you mean a tie-in to the negative or is he in trouble, Mr. Gordon?"

"Either."

"Neither," she said cryptically.

She crossed the sunken garden toward the back. Her hips had been mounted on ball bearings to achieve such rhythm. The calves of her long legs rippled excitingly. We entered a path overgrown by laurel where fat cedars filled the background. We came on the pool as suddenly as a man steps into a hole at midnight.

The pool was twenty feet wide, maybe twice as long. It would be very difficult, I realized, to separate eight people in that small expanse of water, but that was their business. A strip of broomed white sand surrounded the green-tiled pool. Bushes and trees screened off any view of the Tudor mansion. I got the impression that the pool had been hacked out of jungle.

There was a bathhouse with a low projecting roof over the usual litter of chromium-tubed furniture. She was saying: "You are to stay in the second floor library until after ten o'clock, Mr. Gordon. The maid will show you there." She pushed a button.

"That night," I said. "Where did you leave the pool, where did the blackmailer hide?"

"That's important?"

"I don't know what's important."

I WADED through the sand, following those swaying hips. She indicated the green tile five feet from the end of the pool. "There was where I came out. Why,

do you see the wet prints my bathing suit made?"

"But you were barefoot to the chin, remember?"

She waggled a finger, murmured, "You men." She pointed at the path that disappeared into a bank of rhododendron higher than my head. "He must have been standing right there."

"Too dark to glimpse him?"

"Yes, and I wasn't expecting anything like that."

Five feet from the four corners of the pool were four stone jars made of some kind of sandstone. She pointed at the nearest one. "I'm to put the money in that jar."

I began a slow inventory of the place. She said: "Please don't turn, Mr. Gordon."

So I eyed the bathhouse. That night they had undressed at the bathhouse. To swim at the shallow end of the pool, they would have walked along the sand. Afterward, she'd left the pool, stood alone with the pool as a background and he had—

Splash.

Something shook the water mightily. It lapped at the tiles, spilled over to wet the clean sand. Where she had stood a moment before lay a bra, skirt, and blue panties. She surfaced at the far end of the pool.

I was wondering if she was going to invite me in.

Someone behind me said: "You rang, Sir?"

It was the homely maid, watching the swimmer shock the squirrels and one private detective. I asked: "Can we reach the second floor library without meeting everybody?"

"If you wish, Sir."

I figured if I went into that pool, the situation would be over my head. So I stepped briskly along the path, stopped where it forked. The right fork continued to a smooth lawn behind which the mansion sat. The left fork wound off amid laurels under pin oaks. The maid came along and I asked: "Does she always swim like that, Honey?"

She had eyes as somber as a forest pool and the unexpected "Honey" failed to shock her. "Like what?"

"Like that."

"You mean in the pool?"

She had dropped the "Sirs" as readily as an overworked busboy drops dishes. She led the way along the path and we entered the house through a side door. Along a dim hallway, up a flight of broad stairs, then into a cozy room lined with book shelves.

"How many persons work here, Honey?"

"Only the cook, a woman who comes in everyday to clean, and me. Then there's Kennedy, the chauffeur, who sleeps over the garage. Say, if you're staying long you want a bite to eat maybe?"

"Keep it between me and you, Honey."

"Can do."

She walked to the door, turned, and said: "A guy named Mahrer used to call me honey, Mister. He worked on the cops." Red spots fired her cheeks. "Him married all the time! You married, Mister?"

"I've got roving eyes."

"You got a roving tongue." She leered at me from the safety of the doorway. "Yeah, she always swims like that!"

Her feet made little running noises along the hallway.

I closed the door and dialed the girl who clerked in the lobby of the Fornachon Towers Building. She didn't know very much most of the time, but she remembered Kennedy and told me he'd bought two packs of cigarettes and had asked who Sidney Gordon was.

"You told him, Honey?" I asked.

"Sure, that you was a dick," she said, and I hung up.

So Kennedy had thought it necessary to go to a little trouble.

Maybe I should check on some other things. I found a copy of the World Almanac on the well-stocked shelves and checked a date. I didn't like what I discovered. About the only way I'd get any information from Anne Wetherhold would be to operate on her brain.

* * *

I wanted a cigarette badly, but smoking would reveal my hiding place behind the blue spruce just off the strip of white sand around the secluded pool. You can't

afford to tip off blackmailers. They don't shoot, but they run like hell.

This blackmailer seemed pretty cocky. Maybe *too* confident. Should I plug him with the .32 revolver that Mrs. Wetherhold had insisted that I take? Or should I run out and say, "Boo", and then duck him in the pool? Wait a second. Why a "he"? It could be a woman.

I had come out here about nine-thirty, and I was positive no one had seen me arrive. That wasn't according to instructions, but in blackmail cases it's wise to let the expert make up his own mind.

Leaves rustled overhead. The water gurgled against the sides of the pool that picked up a little light from the darkening sky. Not enough light to see by, but enough to know if anyone came into the clearing.

Steps crunched along the graveled path from the direction of the path. The cocky blackmailer? A figure clad in white emerged from the path. When a cigarette glowed at the lips, I saw the face of Mrs. Wetherhold. She hiked up her skirt, crossed the sand, and tossed something casually into the stone jar. It could have been three thousand dollars or a pack of cigarettes. She turned and was gone except for the diminishing sound of her steps.

NOW there were two sets of tracks across the white sand to the jar. Her tracks coming to the jar and returning. I'd played it smart. I'd remembered to smooth the sand over so that whoever approached that jar would leave footprints.

A car labored up the grade somewhere, and its throbbing filled the quiet night. Nearby someone turned up a radio. It could be Kennedy idling in his rooms over the garage.

Lingeringly the Mills Brothers chanted; "I had a dream, Dear, you had one, too. . . ." *Sure, we all have dreams. . . .* "Mine was the best dream, It was of you. . . ." *Strung out throbbingly, and a tanned body cutting through green water. . . .* "Come, Sweetheart, tell me, now is the time. . . ." *To hang my clothes on a hickory limb and dive into the water?* "You tell me your dream, and I will tell you mine."

The voices faded into strumming melo-

dy. Thought patterns. A disturbing woman. A guy can dream, can't he?

The wind had freshened in the last half hour and broomed the sky. Lightning scratched the dark. There was the sharp, quick rap of thunder. The water lapped hungrily at the lips of the pool. *Gurgle, gurgle*, the water whispered to the green tiles. *Gurgle, gurgle*—and I strained my eyes and peered across the pool.

There at the deep end under the extended diving board. Bobbing, bobbing, and bobbing. That darker splotch. Again the lightning ran its fingernails across the black. The surface of the water caught and held the light. No mistake this time. A face on the waters.

The long hour of waiting behind the blue spruce had cramped my leg muscles. I limped as I paralleled the pool to where the body floated and bobbed in the shadow. I knelt, grabbed an arm, and pulled steadily. The body slid out of the water.

I laid the body on its back and struck a match. He was a small man, clad only in shorts. Neat, small features, with the blank eyes seeing nothing. His mouth had opened a little. Maybe those were lines of worry carved deeply in his cheeks. The match burned my fingers and I could see no more.

I had seen enough, maybe too much. Maybe he had worried about facing that Congressional Committee on Monday. He didn't have to worry any longer. Fortsmann Wetherhold was dead.

Death is a sobering thought. We expect a man to die in his bed in his own good time. That is an uncontrovertible fact unclouded by mystery. But to die in dark waters, alone. . . . How had Fortsmann Wetherhold died? Drowning, eh? Where were his clothes?

I walked quickly to the bathhouse. If I hadn't been expecting the arrival of a blackmailer, I would have flicked on the overhead lights. Instead, I lit a second match.

His clothes were stacked neatly on top of a metal table, the coat folded at the bottom of the pile, then the pants, shirt and knitted tie. On the floor were a pair of tan shoes and socks with attached garters. A neat, methodical man.

Did Wetherhold like to swim at night in shorts. Had he caught a cramp,

drowned, and made no outcry? When had he died? I had been near the pool since nine-thirty, and had heard nothing.

I lit a third match and checked the strip of sand between the bathhouse and the pool. Two sets of tracks in the sand. Deep, running tracks with the weight on the balls of the feet. A set with the prints closer together with plenty of weight on the heels. Both sets of prints were mine. No prints of a barefoot man in the sand. Suicide?

Before a man takes his own life does he wipe his footprints clean from the tell-tale sand? Could he have been strangled or hit over the head? He was such an elderly little man that almost anyone, even a woman, could have stunned or overpowered him. Strangled into insensibility or tapped into unconsciousness, and then dropped into the pool so that it would look like suicide.

But his death wasn't my headache. The coroner. Great fellows, coroners. They can tell you what happened to produce sudden death. If Wetherhold had drowned, there would be pool water in his lungs. If he had been slugged, there would be telltale globules of fat loosened from the blood stream. Perhaps there would be flesh under a fingernail, a sure sign that he had met with violence. No matter. The coroner would know how Fortsmann Wetherhold had met death.

I followed the curving path to the mansion and entered the side door. On the right, dim light struggled from a side room and lost itself in the brighter light of the corridor. Somewhere an orchestra played a Strauss waltz. You could almost see the swaying, graceful dancers and notice the sorrow on the faces of the musicians because Vienna had died under Hitler.

I headed into the side room. It was small and square, a man's idea of a den done in soft leather, maroon-colored ceiling and tapestries, and knotty pine siding.

SHE sat curled in the corner of a deep-cushioned divan, her right arm outstretched along the top of the divan. Her left hand lay relaxed in the lap covered by the white dress. There was a little white sand where the sides of her slippers met the soles. Her head was thrown back

against a cushion, her eyes closed and her face relaxed as she drank in the music from an automatic record player.

I tiptoed across the rug and flicked off the switch. The haunting melody ceased and the loveliness of old Vienna died again.

Her eyes opened slowly, as if her sleep had been disturbed. When she saw me, a smile formed on her lips. Her left hand lifted and the forefinger crooked. Twice the finger bade me cross to her.

When I reached the divan, her left hand caught my wrist and pulled me closer. I sat down. She leaned forward and her lips found mine. Full lips, warm and eager. I drifted off somewhere on the wings of a dream and after a long moment returned.

"Don't go," she pleaded sleepily. "Don't—"

"The pool," I interrupted.

"He came for his money?"

"The pool," I repeated. "Do people often swim there at night?"

"What does it matter, Darling?"

Her hands were pulling me closer. I've got red blood in my body. In another moment, I would be in over my head. Maybe I was in over my head already. I wrenched loose, stood erect, and backed out of the danger zone. Maybe I didn't have so much red blood.

"Your husband," I said brutally. "He's dead. Drowned or murdered at the pool."

She came up off the divan as if her body had springs. "No!"

"Dead over an hour."

"But he—he couldn't swim! He—oh, he just couldn't face it! He took his own life!"

"Face what?"

"The investigation!"

"But you told me that wasn't important. Was he guilty of profiteering?"

She nodded absently. Her mind must have been backtracking because she asked: "What do you mean—people always swim there nude?"

"He wore no clothes."

"You said murder."

"He left no tracks on the sand between where his clothes were at the bathhouse and the pool, Mrs. Wetherhold."

I should have been phoning the police. I would have phoned them, except that three thousand dollars had been left as bait in the stone jar by the pool. So I said: "Get a flashlight, please. Bring it to the pool

immediately. I've got to go back there in case the blackmailer comes."

I left the house and moved quietly along the graveled path. Not quietly enough, though. He must have been returning along the path toward me. He must have stepped aside into the laurel. As I approached, he suddenly lowered his head and lunged forward. The first indication I had that he was there was a quick step on the gravel. Then his head lunged under my upflung hands and struck my stomach.

A sickening sensation in my stomach. I fell backward, blacking out as I fell. . . .

"Please," someone crooned in my ear. "Are you hurt?"

I wasn't hurt. The wind had been knocked from my body from the impact of that billygoat block, but I was all right. It was nice to lie there with my head pillowed in Anne Wetherhold's lap and her soft hands caressing my face and her worried voice at my ear.

"He came at me in the dark," I said, and stood up.

"Who?"

"Perhaps the blackmailer. Maybe the killer—if Mr. Wetherhold was murdered. It was a man. Did you bring a flashlight?"

"That's how I found you. You're not hurt?"

"Wounded pride, Honey."

I took the flashlight, and we continued on until we reached the edge of the sand strip. Fresh tracks led to the stone jar. Someone had tried to brush out the footprints with hasty fingers. The outlines were there, but I doubted if the police would be able to take a recent moulage and identify anyone.

I walked close to the bushes. Thus I was able to reach the jar by stepping once on the sand. The flashlight illuminated the bottom of the sandstone jar. "You left three thousand dollars here?" I asked.

"At ten o'clock."

"It's gone now. He must have come while I was in the house."

That would mean but one thing. Whoever the blackmailer was, he knew I had been in hiding by the pool. I didn't like that one bit. It could also mean, however, that Mrs. Wetherhold had left no money in the jar, despite the fact that someone had crossed to the jar.

I let the light funnel the waters of the pool. Wetherhold still lay where I had left

him. She must have seen the body, but she made no outcry or effort to go near him. She didn't care any more for him than she cared for a torn nylon.

As I regained her side, still avoiding the sand, she said, "What must we do next?" Her hand rested possessively on my arm.

"We ought to take a walk."

We went along the path, took the right fork, and stepped on the lawn. Our feet made no noise on the deep turf. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"To the garage."

"You think—?" Her fingers tightened on my arm. "I'm afraid of Kennedy. He's so—so strong and dangerous!"

"Why dangerous?"

"I've—we've been afraid to discharge him. He has a terrible temper. You've the gun?"

"If he's a blackmailer, I won't need it. Blackmailers don't kill."

A DIM light burned downstairs in the garage. To the right, a flight of stairs ran to the top floor. I listened and someone was walking around up there. We started up and the overhead steps stopped.

Light streamed through a door and made the landing bright. Usually I manage to act like a gentleman, but this time I entered the doorway ahead of the woman.

Kennedy stood in the center of the room. His blond hair shone under the glaring light of an overhead bulb. He wore a white shirt, chauffeur's gray trousers, and black shoes.

"Hello, Mr. Gordon," he said, and grinned. Then he saw the woman. "Good evening, Mrs. Wetherhold."

We stood grinning at each other. I said: "Mind answering a few questions, Kennedy?"

His eyes swiveled to the woman. Then: "If you like, Sir."

"Were you at the pool tonight?"

"No, Sir."

"There any time today?"

"No, Sir."

"You've been in your room all evening?"

There wasn't a line of worry on his handsome face. "Of course, Sir."

"Why did you ask the girl in the lobby store at the Fornachon Towers Building who I was, Kennedy?"

"Curious, Sir."

"Curiosity satisfied when you found out

from the clerk that I was a detective?"

"Not entirely." He radiated more confidence than a chief of staff. "I didn't find out why you were coming here, Sir." He stroked his face, asked: "Anything go wrong at the pool, Sir?"

"You expected something to go wrong there?"

"No," he said, too slowly.

"You're going to tell the police when they come that you weren't at the pool a few moments ago, Kennedy?"

"Sure, if they ask me."

"Mr. Wetherhold drowned himself or was murdered there."

Surprise is difficult to fake; even actors have trouble with it. Kennedy didn't even try to fake surprise. Maybe he hadn't killed the old man, but he wasn't surprised.

"I'm sorry," he said, and his eyes fastened on the woman.

"You a college man, Kennedy?"

"High school is all."

"Play any football?"

"Some. Mostly it was basketball."

"Lineman or back in football?"

"Fullback."

"Learned to hit a line, to butt another man in the stomach, eh?"

"What are you driving at, Gordon?"

"In the cuff of your trousers, the right one, is a laurel leaf, Kennedy."

"Lots of laurel about the place." Perspiration began to come out on his forehead. Maybe it was the hot light overhead. "I was out back of the garage earlier. It could have—"

"But there isn't any white sand behind the garage, Kennedy. Look at your shoes, Man!"

He didn't bother to look.

"White sand," I continued, "where the uppers meet the soles. So you lied when you said you weren't at the pool a few moments ago."

No answer.

"You *did* butt me in the stomach on the path!"

"Wait," he snapped. "Mr. Wetherhold committed suicide."

Anne Wetherhold leaned easily against me, and casually held my right arm—my gun-arm. She could hold my right arm if Kennedy rushed me—and I would be in trouble. She and Kennedy, eh?

There was something between them, in-

portant and unspoken, that they both understood and were hiding. He had a lot to offer her. Youth, virility, a handsome face, and perhaps manly tenderness. That counts heavily with a woman.

"How do you know?"

He answered promptly. "Mr. Wetherhold knew he was guilty of profiteering and was afraid to face it."

"And the missing footprints?"

"He wiped them off the sand to suggest—uh—violence. Because he wanted to even himself with Mrs. Wetherhold and me."

"What is there between you?"

Kennedy hesitated.

Mrs. Wetherhold answered for him. "I—I liked him once."

Kennedy slowly started to simmer.

"Ran around with him, eh?"

"Some."

My lips curled. "Your husband knew about that?"

"It didn't concern him. I needed youth."

"What proof have you that your husband was guilty of war profiteering?"

"His books were—" She stopped too quickly. "Oh, I'm positive my husband was guilty."

There was that word "positive" again, slipping so easily off her tongue. I had been turning things over in my mind. Books? What kind of books? Books filled with statistics? A double set of books so that he could defraud the government? Had Kennedy and Mrs. Wetherhold gotten hold of such a set of books and held it over the old man's head and forced him to commit suicide? It began to add up.

"You two forced him to do a Dutch," I said. "The three thousand dollars were for Kennedy, his part in the payoff for helping you force Mr. Wetherhold to commit suicide or face exposure through his set of books."

Kennedy finally exploded. "And where do you come in?"

"I want the three thousand dollars back, Kennedy."

That got him. He grinned, but his eyes darted back and forth, between Mrs. Wetherhold and me. "Like hell you'll get that, Gordon."

"A cheap blackmailer working on the boss, eh?"

He stared darkly, first at me, then at the

woman. He was as tall as I, thicker through the shoulders and narrower at the hips. "Call it that if you want to, Gordon, but I wouldn't."

"I was brought in to catch a blackmailer, Kennedy. A blackmailer who snapped a picture of Mrs. Wetherhold in the nude as she stepped from the pool two weeks back, who will exchange the negative for three thousand dollars."

The grin had disappeared from his face. I could almost see his mind working frantically behind his face.

I jerked away from the woman. Kennedy advanced a few steps, fists clenched, anger leaping from his eyes. He tackled and I hit the floor sideways, Kennedy on top of me. I whirled over and the .32 flew out of my jacket pocket. Kennedy went for the gun. Just as he got it, the woman kicked him hard, the heel of her shoe ripping his face. His eyes flaming hatred, his face dripping red, he fired. She staggered backwards with a low moan and wilted to the floor. Her hands clutched outward spastically, and that was all.

I grabbed the .32 by the barrel and wrenched it from his hand. Then I carefully konked him with it. Ironic, because that's what Mrs. Wetherhold had brought me in to do—handle Kennedy. She didn't care if anyone knew she swam in the nude. Why should she? She always swam that way!

There was something feminine about mentioning a hammered silver-backed comb. And that word "positively" appeared twice in the letter. Because she used it all the time.

She had written and mailed the threatening letter to herself, she had planned the whole phony blackmail scheme in an attempt to get rid of Kennedy. First she had used that handsome dummy to help dispose of her husband, and then she was afraid he would talk, so she called me in and gave me the .32 to use on him. Only it hadn't worked out that way.

My head hurt. I tried not to think about what had happened.

So I remembered a tanned, beautiful body cutting easily through green water. Graceful and clean.

A shame it had to happen like this. Yeah, *positively* a shame.

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 fore-knowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chiselers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your name, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Rackets Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 266 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17, N. Y.

What's in a Name?

Dear Sir:

I occasionally see ads in newspapers and magazines reading something like "Names Wanted. One dollar each paid for names of acquaintances and friends. Write today for details." Here is my experience with one of them:

I was a high school student in my home town, the population of which was about 7,500. My parents were not wealthy, and I longed to earn money to help them, but there was little opportunity. An Atlanta paper came to us daily and I read it carefully all through, even the classified ads. One day I saw an ad something like that described above. I knew practically everyone in my home town. I could do wonderful things with the money. I showed the ad to my mother and she agreed to my answering it. Within a few days, I received an answer to my inquiry:

"We pay \$1 each for names, but so many of our representatives have been careless, we require submission of the names on our own forms. Send \$1.00 today for your working kit, and begin making big money."

My mother could ill afford it, but she loaned me the dollar and I mailed it to the designated address. Within a few days, I received the kit—a number of printed forms with space for a *notarized* signature reading, "This is to certify that I am a chronic sufferer with *piles*." A printed slip instructed that \$1.00 could be claimed for each signed and notarized form that I submitted. Of course my dream of wealth vanished. I did write the newspaper, but they said that nothing could be done—and they continued running the ad for several weeks more.

Of course, my loss in cash was only \$1.00, but multiply this by all the other "suckers" and I have an idea the ad was profitable to the person who conjured it. What a racket!

Ann Oliver
Knoxville, Tenn.

Charming Counterfeit

Dear Sir:

The smartly dressed young woman who called to see the room advertised for rent in the apartment I share with two other girls was just as charming as her voice when she telephoned to make the appointment. She was just the type

to fit in with our group; she was a newspaper-woman, she said, which made things even more interesting.

It was pleasant, too, that she appreciated my efforts to make the room attractive, and the rent—which was \$30 a month, in advance—she found entirely satisfactory. When it was settled, over a cigarette, that the new occupant would come in on the following evening, she handed me a \$50 bill to pay the rent, explaining that she'd been paid that day just before leaving the office. It was the end of the month and I'd been paid that day myself, so, taking the \$50 bill as nonchalantly as if the \$50 bills were commonplace in my life, I gave her \$20 change.

You've guessed it, no doubt. The woman never returned. The \$20 compensated her for a good performance. The \$50 bill, of course, was counterfeit.

Miriam Armstrong
Lachute, Que., Canada

Trading on Tragedy

Dear Sir:

Here is a racket everyone should know. It is operated by the lowest crook there is today.

A crook buys up a lot of phony dime-store jewelry and wraps it in fancy paper, then puts it into boxes. He keeps a good supply of packages on hand.

He watches the daily papers for the names of well-to-do women who have suddenly passed away. He takes a nice pearl necklace and addresses it to the deceased. He puts a phony company's name on it to make it look legitimate, then stamps it COD and takes the package to the home.

When whoever answers the door tells him the party is dead, he sympathizes with them and in the same breath says: "COD, twenty dollars," or whatever he thinks the traffic will stand. The deceased's family will almost always pay, thinking they are purchasing the last article desired by the deceased.

W. G. Jenkins
Columbus, Ohio

Some Punch!

Dear Sir:

At the present time, punch boards are not allowed in the State of Wisconsin, but before they were disposed of, many of the boys were making

good money off of them. One fellow and his partner made their own punch boards. On each board were four large winners: one at \$5.00, the second at \$10.00, a third at \$20.00, and a jackpot of \$30.00. The racketeer would sell the boards for \$5.00 apiece to taverns, restaurants and sweet shops. Several hours after he had made a sale, his accomplice would come in. He knew where the winners were on each board and would spend \$5.00 before he picked the last one, which was the jackpot. The cost of making these boards was very little, which gave them almost \$65.00 profit on each sale that they made, and they never sold more than one board in a town.

Arthur F. Now
Antigo, Wis.

Picture in the Papers

Dear Sir:

You may want to warn your readers about a practice which has been making suckers of a good many big-city visitors in recent months. The perpetrators of this racket have been taking advantage of the gullibility of tourists in New York and other metropolitan centers and have done much to leave a bad taste in the mouths of these temporary visitors.

Photographers posing as representatives of well known news agencies or newspapers telephone hotel guests in their rooms and ask them to sit for pictures. Their manner implies that they want the pictures for use in the papers, or for national distribution, and the guest is usually flattered by this attention and goes out of his way to be cordial to the photographers.

Actually they have no connection with any reliable newspaper or agency, and use such identification merely as a means of getting inside. After the pictures are taken, a high-pressure salesman calls on the guest and sells him the prints at exorbitant prices. The system is, in short, merely a means for an unscrupulous body of commercial photographers to sell some of its work.

Authorized representatives of newspapers or magazines all carry press cards which identify them, and are ready and willing to show them to subjects of photographic interviews. A guest is wise to ask for such identification, or, if in doubt about the validity of a press card, to consult the hotel authorities.

A little caution in such cases can save not only a misunderstanding, but also cash which could be put to much better uses.

E. A. Pierce
New York, N. Y.

Three-Dollar Lesson

Dear Sir:

Shortly after my marriage, a young magazine salesman called an informed me that "Mrs. John Doe," a neighbor of mine who lived five houses down the road, had just taken a subscription from him for a leading monthly magazine. He claimed that she had paid him \$3.00, half the amount for a two-year subscription, saying that she knew I would be more than willing to pay the other half—and we could share the magazine.

As I was very young and gullible, and as Mrs. Doe was really my friend as well as neighbor, I was very easily taken in. I paid him the \$3.00 for the remainder of the subscription and did not insist upon a receipt, as he claimed that he had given Mrs. Doe a receipt for the full amount and that the subscription would be in her name.

When I called upon my friend the next day, I discovered that he had used the same racket on her, making her believe that I had sent him on to her and that the subscription would come in my name. We were each \$3.00 poorer, but much, much wiser!

E. B.
Strongsville, Ohio

Hen Pecked

At a time when I was looking for a way to earn my living, an ad appeared in a large city newspaper. This ad explained how one could make fifty dollars profit per week owning and operating a scientific poultry plant. I had a few thousand saved and thought, "Why not?"

I answered the ad and was taken out to see the project. It sounded so good. "Why," I thought, "My savings will set me up in business and I'll always have a place to live." I bought a piece of land for a thousand dollars, another thousand went for the coop and equipment, and I made a small down payment on a small cabin in which to live. I was started—yes, and finished, too, in six months.

The outfit sold you the chicks, the feed, and included the services of a poultry expert to teach you the ropes. But they never told you that one of those ropes would finally choke you. The feed was exorbitant in price, as well as everything else they sold you. My savings melted away so rapidly that I became panicky and investigated the outfit thoroughly, as to markets, etc. They had no market and were ready to jump to another section when I had the District Attorney and the State Commissioner clamp down on them.

This particular outfit was put out of business, and I'll bet they won't want to sell anyone a feather any more, let alone chickens. We did not get all our money back, but some restitution was made. And were those swindlers surprised when they found out it was a tiny, eighty-five-pound woman who made them toe the mark!

Mary Gorman
Brentwood, L. I., N. Y.

The Case of the Robust Roaches

Dear Sir:

How many years must we live before we learn to become wary of tricksters? My neighbors and I have been hooked again and by a new racket.

War-time housing being what it is, we in this back lot are grateful for the little three-room houses we have managed to wangle. But, being from another section of the country, we do not accept philosophically the water bugs, cockroaches and other vermin that seem to associate themselves with this damp climate and emergency housing. We trot from one drug store to another, seeking new sprays, new poisons, new powders. Sometimes we have as many as four 'proved'

cockroach eradicators going at the same time.

The frantic search for relief from our pests seemed at an end when a prosperous new car pulled into the yard and a earnest, middle-aged man announced that he and his partner were making appointments for an exterminating company. They were using a new war-discovered pressure gun that would shoot a deadly variant of DDT, guaranteed to kill every insect in the house and, what seemed even more heavenly, leave a film that would make all insects stay away for six to eight months. He would show me the dead insects when they were finished, and promised to make a routine check at the end of ten days to insure the permanence of their job. My neighbor and I agreed to the job at a cost of eight dollars.

The following morning the sleek new car again pulled into the yard and the assistant, a shy, silent youth, went to work. He closed all the windows and donned a gas mask. From the car he lugged a small electric motor attached to a flat board and with an impressive hose attachment. He shut himself up in the house, and the buzz of the motor could be heard while I sat waiting on the front porch.

The older man leaned comfortably on the gate chatting about exterminating in a learned way and finally wandered over to a neighbor's, evidently to sell where he had failed the day before. He indicated that I could complete my arrangements for pay with his assistant.

It wasn't more than ten minutes before the youth re-appeared with his man-from-Mars mask and machine. He closed the door carefully behind him and advised me to stay out of the house for at least four hours. When I reminded him that I was to be shown the dead insects, he muttered that his partner must "have holes in his head." Surely the fellow knew that the rooms couldn't be entered immediately!

He made up a sales ticket, carefully noting the address, name, number of rooms and the date for the re-check. He made such a point of the receipt and that information that I didn't notice that there was no signature. He had expected to be paid in cash but since they had said they represented an established firm, I insisted on making a check. The youth said their employer wouldn't let them take checks, but since I refused to pay any other way and he had his receipt made out already, he finally said to make the check to him personally. He produced a Navy discharge card for the spelling of the name.

Needless to say, that when four hours had passed and my neighbor and I entered our houses again, the pair were nowhere around. I cleaned thoroughly and found one or two dead insects. I didn't worry too much because there was a strong odor of disinfectant and I was of the belief that any insects not killed had departed. But that evening I discovered that they were all there and in an unimpaired state of health!

When the bank opened the next morning, I was parked on the doorstep waiting to stop payment on my check. But of course it had been cashed. I went to the police and learned that they were already looking for the pair on a fraud charge. They had been using a noise apparatus and a fit gun with an odoriferous solution!

Until I had reported it, they had had no name or signature for either man. Now they had definite information on at least the younger one because of the Navy discharge card he had shown me and his signature of endorsement on the back of my check.

My neighbor and I have heard of a new roach-killer that is 'guaranteed' and we are sending off an order tonight. Wasn't Barnum right?

G. M. Meehl,
Biloxi, Miss.

Sidewalk Shylock

Dear Sir:

One of the nastiest little rackets I ever heard of happened to me last week.

On Saturday noon I hurried down to the bank to exchange a few five-dollar bills for dimes and quarters. The bank closes promptly at 12 noon. I happened to be about 3 minutes late.

As I turned away from the door, I noticed a well dressed stranger eyeing me closely. He exclaimed: "Too late, eh? Too bad."

"Yes," I said, "I did want some change in silver for the store this afternoon."

"I can let you have some rolls in dimes, if it will help you any. I was too late to get in myself and deposit as I intended." He must have noticed that I foolishly held five \$5.00 bills in one hand, for he said: "I can trade five rolls of dimes for your bills."

"O.K.," said I, and passed them to him in exchange for his five rolls of dimes, wrapped in the regular bank wrappers. When I went back to the store, I opened the rolls for the cash register. Out of each roll spilled 50 bright Lincoln "tin" pennies.

I had \$2.50 worth, which I had traded \$25.00 in Uncle Sam's folding money for. Some stunt, eh?

Roscoe E. Prescott,
Tilton, N. H.

He Can't Miss

Dear Sir:

Have you ever noticed that when you come out of the race track at the end of a day's pleasure (?) you find some fellow who's hawking "Sure Shots"? It always develops that "Mr. Sure Shot" has managed to pick six winners out of a possible eight and is now gloating over the fact. If you happen to be a sucker, he will sell you a "Sure Shot" for the next day—along with the list of winners that he just managed to pick. If you don't buy the sheet on your way out, you're sure to buy it the next day when you remember that "Mr. Sure Shot" picked six out of eight the day before.

If you look into this, you will discover that "Mr. Sure Shot" has a mimeograph machine set up across the street from the track. He gets the results of the day over the wire, quickly makes a stencil, allowing himself to pick six of the eight winners—to pick eight would be just too much for a sucker to believe. Then, when you're on your way home, "Mr. Sure Shot" is all ready to sell you the sheet and the next day's choice. It's been going on for years, and suckers still bite.

William W. Kelly,
New York, N. Y.

Homing Pigeon

Dear Sir:

I have never heard of a case like this before, but it could happen again.

I bought a car from a private owner last spring who had lived in my home town only a few weeks. He seemed to be a rather honest person, so I took his word that a bill of sale from his home state was all that was needed to get the car changed into my name.

The bill of sale was good, as he had said, but I also needed the registration certificate. When I went back to him, he told me in a nice way that he did not have it with him, but could get it in a week. Well, I could see how he could have forgotten it when he moved, so I agreed to wait. This was my downfall.

At the end of the week, I called him, only to find out he couldn't locate it, but that he was willing to buy back said car at a reduced price.

Checking with the State Police, I found that while I could get my money back, I would have to pay a fine for owning a car over five days without getting a title in my name.

Rather than get involved with the law, plus waiting for court action, I let the car go back—at a lower price.

B. E.
Southport, N. C.

Perpetual Pupil

Dear Sir:

You say you are interested in letters from the readers on how they have been swindled. Well, here is my story. This caper has to do with a business college in which I enrolled for a course. The president of the school told me when I started that I could go right ahead with my studies and should be finished in two months if I applied myself.

Well, I started—and then he started. Every time he enrolled a new class, he would put me back in it. This happened to me three times. At the end of two and a half months and with my fifty dollars all spent, I was a third of the way through. Fifty dollars being all I had, I was forced to discontinue my studies. Thus ended the swindle. I am not the only one that he treated this way, I know personally at least five others.

Thomas Calvin Swanson
Sophia, N. C.

Hands Off!

Dear Sir:

The next time you're standing in an auction or a circus crowd listening to a barker give his spiel, be on the alert for a tricky remark that has led to financial embarrassment for many a fair citizen.

It goes something on this order: "It's all right, folks, your wallet is perfectly safe in this crowd. No need to feel for it—there are no pickpockets in this area."

When you hear that, keep your hands at your sides. It's merely a cue for Mr. Average Man to reach for his wallet and see for himself that it is safe. Such a gesture on your part, however, is just what the pickpocket is waiting for—to see

exactly where you keep your billfold. It solves about nine-tenths of his problem.

S. B. Kampf
Bloomington, Ind.

This Isn't Peanuts!

Dear Sir:

Here is a new racket twist.

A peanut vendor who lived in a river bottom shack bought \$34,000 worth of jewelry, a \$900 piano, and a \$500 combination radio on credit. His credit was good all over town, and the Retail Credit Association gave him high recommendation to any inquirers. He had an account of \$6000 with one store, more than \$1000 with another, and many smaller accounts. When arrested, his total cash capital was less than \$5.00, yet no one dared to file a complaint against him. He had not missed a single payment on any account.

His elaborate system consisted of buying more jewelry and pawning it to make his payments. Police became curious upon reading pawn broker's reports, and investigated. He also had kept up interest payments on these loans, leaving no angle for the puzzled police to prosecute him. They held him in custody for over two weeks with his own consent. He did not even hire a lawyer.

Obviously, discovery before the liquidation of his racket ruined it. He finally agreed to plead guilty to the only charge that could be made and was given three years. He had orally promised one jeweler to keep a valuable ring in a safe deposit box until paid for, but had pawned it instead. Fraud.

Undoubtedly, had he not been discovered when he was, within a few weeks he would have quietly disappeared with a profit of well over \$20,000. Retail Credit Associations, please note.

Paul Michael
Oklahoma City, Okla.

Busy Signal

Dear Sir:

In a writers' magazine, I found an advertisement which promised help to amateur writers of verse and humorous material for magazines. The boxed ad said that, on receipt of one dollar, the advertiser, a teacher of writing, would send certain valuable and helpful information on construction of verse and humor. In addition he would send a comprehensive list of magazines which buy verse and humor.

Since the magazine in which the ad appeared is one with an irreproachable reputation, and since I could have used the information, I sent my dollar. Nothing happened. A month later I wrote to the advertiser, asking what his intentions were, and why I had not received the information I had paid for. I challenged his right to advertise in that magazine if his ad were not bona fide.

There was no reply to my letter. I waited another month. I wrote to him a second time. This time, I told him that if I did not receive the material I had paid for, I would consider he was collecting money illegally. And I would describe his racket in a letter to the "Rackets Editor" of DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE.

That brought an immediate reply. He had, he admitted, received my money. In fact, he had re-

(Please continue on page 97)

★ SECRET ★ ★ STREET ★

In the bird man of Annunziata lay the answer to the blonde's murder—three thousand miles away.

THE life of Giacomo Matteo began in the crooked streets of the humbler part of Genoa, Italy, and it would never again, he knew, wander too far away. No farther than *Via Garibaldi* and the Church of the Annunziata. Giacomo had done his share of traveling; he had seen his bit of the world. In this white edifice, some day soon, the blessed saints would take his immortal soul and all its secrets, while that part of old Giacomo with which the world was as familiar as it cared to be, would be put away forever—and small loss, too. He was just an old man, a poor man in a poor part of the world—known to hardly anyone except the birds of the Annunziata. As they once had upon Saint John the Baptist, the church doves descended upon Giacomo in droves as he came each day to look at the church and feed them.

The bird man with his doves—and his secrets. . . .

In a cheap west-side hotel in uptown New York, Detective August Meyer gazed upon a scene of violence and reflected on all the ways there were to make a living. Of them all, his was not the most pleasant. Other people met girls like this when they were at their prettiest—at dances, at parties, or for a quiet evening at home. He was seeing this girl at her worst. Not that Emmeline Ferris cared any more.

She was quite dead.

She was blonde, young, and strangely beautiful. There was a curious frailty about her and a strength, too; and it seemed to Detective Meyer that she was one for whom life might have held a lot of promise. One, too, who had lived beyond her years. But for some reason or other, he couldn't escape the notion that she might have been starting

on a new and vital enterprise if death had not interrupted her. There was a curious peace about her in this violence her murderer had created.

He asked his routine questions. The management knew little about her, except that she had been a model tenant and came from London. When the house physician had treated her for a minor ailment, she had told him she was to be married as soon as her fiance arrived from England. So that, Meyer thought, was her reason for looking as if her life were just beginning. And then he found the dead part of her life, the part that had added age to her years, and that had died before Emmeline Ferris actually did.

Tucked away under some old clothing, he uncovered a small, diamond-encrusted hypodermic case, whose expensive glamour contrasted strangely with her currently seedy surroundings.

He looked sharply at the girl on the bed—a dope addict. But there were no marks of the needle now. *Cured*, he thought.

He examined the case carefully and got another surprise. Painted on the inside bottom with exquisite detail and workmanship was a picture of a white church and an old man feeding the church doves. The painting bore the dead girl's signature. . . .

Old Giacomo wandered out of the ancient shadows of the crooked streets into the sunlight of the little white church, and the white doves descended upon him like so many welcoming holy spirits. But they were

**By EJLER
JACOBSSON**

not yet ready to take the soul of Giacomo, so he fed them, not guessing that back in New York, raw and cold in the grip of an early spring gale, Detective Meyer was staring intently at his picture, wondering who he was and where. Wondering and speculating about the name of the bird man. . . .

Art galleries had not heard of Emmeline Ferris, whose great talent apparently had been overwhelmed by her narcotic habit. The perfect little miniature on the inside bottom of the narcotic case seemed almost symbolic to Detective Meyer as he closed the box and set about checking more prosaic clues to her murderer.

But there were none. Evidently Emmeline Ferris had done a thorough job of breaking off with her old life; among her effects there was not the slightest clue to anyone who might have known her, not even to her alleged fiance. Then, several days later, a letter arrived from the young man in London, saying he would be over any day now to marry her, and "—God be good to us." It was signed Dudley Ash. Three hours after Detective Meyer had cabled Scotland Yard for information concerning Dudley Ash, he received a reply.

Ash had been murdered in his bedroom almost at the same moment his fiancee had been killed three thousand miles away in New York!

New York and Scotland Yard burned up the ether, swapping information, and got exactly nowhere. Ash had been an art dealer—and there were no clues to his killers. There simply was no reason why either of the two young people should have been slain.

Gradually the case lapsed into the files of the unsolved killings of two continents. Detective Meyer was taken off it and put to other work. After all, taxpayers were still getting knocked off, and the survivors insisted he earn his keep.

In due time and some promotions later, when the case of Emmeline Ferris had been forgotten, he was sent to Europe on an assignment. The job took him to Genoa and Via Garibaldi, and he had a sudden, strange sensation that he had been here before. There was a white church. . . .

On that day again Giacomo Matteo came

to see if the spirits of Annunziata were ready to receive him. Again they descended upon him in clouds, and again in their shiny eyes he read only friendliness and simple hunger for his bread crumbs. Nothing more. . . .

Across the street an American cop grabbed the nearest passerby and managed to make himself understood. Who was the old man feeding the birds? The other shrugged himself free, stared at the demented foreigner.

"Who cares—he does that every day. The bird man, they call him."

A police interpreter proved of even less value. Giacomo Matteo refused to talk. He had had nothing to do with the police, even though he had lived many years on the crooked, shady streets of Genoa. He had done nothing.

Meyer sent to New York for the diamond-encrusted narcotic case, and when it arrived, showed it to Giacomo Matteo. The old man's eyes softened when he saw the painting.

"She was good. . . ."

"She's dead—murdered," Meyer interrupted him.

The old man's eyes widened; then words poured from him in a torrent. "So they got her at last—she lived on my street, where she was like many others. . . ."

Emmeline Ferris had been the Genoa agent of an English dope-smuggling ring—her own addiction had made her useful to the gang as bait to lure others. It was thus she had met Dudley Ash, who had persuaded her to break away from both narcotics and her gang. Old Matteo had helped the couple to escape. Now from Matteo's lips came names and dates—enough to break one of Europe's greatest narcotics setups, involving even a British peer in its sordid clutches.

The head of the ring, one Hugh Harkness, was captured in Switzerland. He was hanged in London, officially for the murder of Dudley Ash, but also, in the private books of Detective Meyer, for the death of Emmeline Ferris.

And when old Matteo went to visit once more the doves of Annunziata, it seemed they were a little more ready to receive him this time. . . .

CRIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER

**Exciting
Suspense Novelette**

**By TALMAGE
POWELL**

CHAPTER ONE

Sailor, Take Warning

HE HAD no inkling that anyone wanted to murder him. There was nothing in his background to cause it, nothing in his mind or heart. He was an old man. He had gone down to the sea many times in ships. All types of ships. Tramp steamers and fine freighters, that had taken him to such places as Liverpool, Madagascar, Port Said, Port-Au-Spain. He spoke a smattering of four languages. He knew Lotus Lil's place in Shanghai, and had drunk rum in Barney's in 'Frisco. He'd seen his own share of bar-room brawls, and time had been when no man would dare his rock-like fists. But he was an old man now, and there was nothing in his background to cause his murder.

It was early night in the month of March. Winter was thrashing out its last fury, and the wind was cold and biting as Gustav Olafsen mounted the majestic stone steps that led to the post office.

Halfway up the steps he paused, drinking in the wild night and wind for a moment. He forgot the disturbance he'd felt because of Jean's party, her many parties. There was the faintest tang of salt in the wind, and by closing his eyes, he could shed the years away and hear a ship's bell, its lonely horn shattering in the wild, wind-tossed night.

He smiled at himself, shrugged in his pea



Old Sea-dog Olafsen figured he was salty enough still to catch his son's wife at her pantry pastime—and tie a neat half hitch in a cold-blooded kill-scheme.

"He made a play for the babe
—just before he died. . . ."



jacket. He went on up the steps and entered the post office. The building was silent, deserted save for a woman coming from the bank of lock boxes and the watchman stopping to punch his clock as he made his rounds. The watchman nodded at Olafsen. "Bad night."

"Yes," Olafsen agreed. The years had shrunk him to leather gauntness, but they had not stooped him; neither had they taken the glint from his eyes, blue and clear as the tossing north Atlantic.

From the pocket of his pea jacket he fetched the key to the lock box. There were three pieces of mail: an advertising circular, a post card from an old friend, and a plain manila envelope, six by nine, which had been curled a little to fit the box. There was no return on the manila envelope, and it was addressed simply: P. O. Box 5432, City.

Without another glance at the manila envelope, Olafsen stuffed it in the pocket of his pea jacket. He dismissed it as mail for Bob or Jean, and with the card that had arrived tonight in his hand, Olafsen strolled over to a spot where the lighting was better.

At that moment another man entered the post office, bringing a gust of cold air with him. He stood just inside the double doors, blinking, a massive, chunky man with a pig-gish face. He let his pig eyes flick over Olafsen, and walked toward the lock boxes, puffing on his ragged cigar. He bent, peered in a box, and as he straightened, his glance passed over box 5432. He saw that it was empty, and his face changed, darkened. As if a light had been turned off in the building, throwing his face in dark, deadly shadows.

The chunky man turned, looked at the watchman, who had the seat of his baggy pants backed against a radiator. "Bad night," the watchman opined.

The chunky man agreed. "A very bad night." He tossed his cigar in a cuspidor that sat on a rubber mat. He wore a dark felt hat that was wrinkled, soup stains on his tie, and a gray topcoat with wrinkled lapels. He pulled the coat up tight about him, looked once again at Olafsen, and then walked out of the post office.

The watchman muttered, "Something funny about that man."

"Eh?"

The watchman looked back at Olafsen. "The way he looked. The jerky way he

acted, as if he were waiting for something."

"Maybe he was expecting a letter and didn't get it."

"Yeah," the watchman said, "I guess that was it."

Outside, the wind smote Olafsen. He ducked his gray, close-cropped head against it. There was little traffic, a slow trickle with lights bright and eerie in the chill night. Few people were on the sidewalks.

As Olafsen reached the foot of the post office steps, two men moved from under the shadows of an elm across the street. One was a rapier-thin shadow, the other was massive, chunky, wearing a soup-stained tie and topcoat with wrinkled lapels. . . .

Olafsen reached the corner, turned. He was on a side street, with few lights, with trees growing along the edge of the sidewalk until their overhanging branches formed a corridor of deep night. Wind sobbed in the trees and Olafsen didn't catch the sound of the voice at first: "Pop, can you tell us how to find Wildwood street?"

Olafsen paused. Two men were moving up close to him. "Sure. You're four blocks out of your way. You—"

For an instant, he fancied that he had seen the big man recently. He twisted to see the chunky shadow that had moved up almost behind him. The movement saved his life. The chunky man's arm was up-raised, falling with a swiftness that was heart-numbing.

Olafsen dodged, and the blackjack washed pain down his shoulder. The thin man, who'd walked up in front of him, bored in, grappled for Olafsen, but the wiry old seaman writhed out of his grasp. They came at him together then, and Olafsen broke and ran.

Over the high screaming of the wind, Olafsen caught the fleeting sound of their steps. They were gaining, preparing to drag him down. *Why?*

A HAND touched his jacket. His insides knotted. He whirled and slugged. Totally unexpected, the blow caught the thin man flush in the mouth. Pain shot to Olafsen's armpit, and old fire smoldered and caught flame in his veins.

The thin man cried out as he plunged to the street, burning flesh from his hands and face on the concrete. The chunky man

came at Olafsen again with the sap. Olafsen ducked, thrust out a foot, threw a punch. It landed, but it didn't hurt the chunky man much. Olafsen was breathing hard. The fire was flaming high, but his heart was old. His lungs were old. He felt dizzy.

"Get him, Lunt!" the thin man said. "Knock his brains out. Kill him!"

"I'll get him, Candy," the chunky man panted. He came at Olafsen like a bull gone mad. The sap was a thing of blurred motion, striking and striking. Olafsen fought back, sheltering his head. Strength was washing from his knees. He was listing, sinking.

Then he realized that the sap had gone, had quit torturing him. The howling wind gouged at the sweat soaking him. Bright light shone on him, and for a moment Olafsen blinked, blinded.

He was standing bathed in the headlights of an approaching car. The horn of the car was blaring, tearing the night with an unceasing, raucous scream. Olafsen stood with arms dangling like chunks of lead. He stood with his head spinning, his breath tearing in and out as the car stopped beside him with a screaming of brakes. "Get in! Get in, Gus!"

"Gregory!" Olafsen said. He staggered in the car, slammed the door. Gregory was big and flabby behind the wheel, his face quivering, chalk white.

"I saw them!" Gregory's voice bubbled like a hysterical woman's. He still had his hand on the horn. "When they heard the horn and saw the lights, they ran. They were beating you, Gus!"

A warm car. Expensive. An expensive man, Gregory. A widower who lived alone in the house next door to Bob and Jean.

"Aye," Olafsen said. "Did you see which way they went?"

"Over there. Through the trees, through that alley."

"We'll never catch 'em," Olafsen decided. "A good thing you came along."

"I saw you leave the house, Gus. But why'd they jump you?"

The motor surged, latent power, strong, secure.

"I don't know," Olafsen said. "They were trying to rob me, I guess."

Olafsen sank back in the seat, but his body was stiff. *I'm sure the chunky one, the one called Lunt, was the man who came*

in the post office while I was there. Rob me? Of what? One look at me would show any crook it would be a rotten risk to rob me.

And the blade-thin one, Candy, had mouthed, "Kill him!"

* * *

Olafsen stood on the walk that led to his son's house. The walk bisected a sweeping green lawn, and the lawn was encompassed by a box hedge. Before Olafsen, the house was a solid pile of brick in the night. The downstairs was blazing with light. As Olafsen moved up the walk, he saw shadows fleet past the wide picture windows, heard the faint strains of music. He knew what it was like in there. The party had been getting wound up when Olafsen had gone to the post office. Hot and stuffy. Sticky drinks. Chattering people. Fast, hot music. And dark corners. There were several cars in the drive, more than when he'd gone to the post office. A party that would draw itself out into early morning hours.

Olafsen's face was etched with lines. His son's house. His son's wife. His son's wife's party. An old man, an intruder, must keep his mouth shut. But the lines were deep in his face.

He stopped at the front steps, stood a moment, and went around the side of the house. He was an old man in a tattered pea jacket and corduroy pants. He wouldn't go in the front.

Cold wind bit at him. Night shrouded him. Snatches of the past came back to him. Scenes, and letters. He'd lost his wife many years ago. His wants had been simple, his pay good through the years. He'd been able to help Bob a great deal in the way of an education.

"Dad, I've passed my bar exam." That letter had caught Olafsen in Trinidad.

"I'm with a law firm now and the future looks swell. And she's wonderful, Dad. Her name is Margaret. You must come home and meet her."

". . . Some time since you've written, Dad. The breaks have come at last. Used an account I landed to pry me out a junior partnership. Margaret sends love."

"Dad, it's a boy!"

1941 ". . . And she wasn't at all well from the birth of the baby. She's dead now,

Dad, leaving me Buddy and a wonderful memory."

1943 "... Scratched up a little on Guadecanal, but back with the old firm, better job than ever. When I went to his school to get him, I hardly knew my son."

1946 "So they finally de-commissioned you, you old sea dog! How in hell did the company stand you all these years? You're coming to see us. I want you to meet her. She's Jean Kincaid Olafsen now, blonde and lovely. I can never love her in the same boyish way that I did Margaret, but I love Jean just as much, if not more. A mother for the boy, a wife for me. I know it's what Margaret would have wanted."

AND now Jean was giving a party—one of her many parties. Bob was out of town. Business took him away often these days. "You go ahead, Darling, and have some fun," he'd say to her. "Daddy has got bacon to bring home."

She'd kiss him with her bubbly blonde kiss, standing on tiptoe, like a delicious pixie, and Bob would look at her, stars in his eyes, stars that blinded him. But of late sometimes the stars weren't there. "Darling," he'd say, "you spent that much? That much for liquor alone? It must have been quite a party!"

Then her blonde laugh, bubbling. Like a child, she would look at him, move close to him.

Olafsen reached the rear corner of the house. He was alongside the kitchen windows. He stopped, stock still. He fancied that he had heard a woman's soft, bubbly laugh. He moved across the strip of lawn between the house and side walk. The kitchen windows were small and high. He craned his neck.

She was in there, beside the sink, mixing drinks, her blonde head bent over a little. Behind her, smoking a cigarette in an ivory holder, was a man. The same man. Always the same one. Rodney Branson. Taller than average, well-tailored, with long sideburns, a delicate air about him. A tanned face, and eyes that turned limpid when Branson gushed his charm on women. Branson was a woman-kept man.

He moved closer to her. He tried to kiss the back of her neck. She laughed, eluded him, forced a tray of drinks in his hand.

Branson said something and laughed a faint, chagrined laugh. She forced him out of the kitchen. Then she stood there a moment longer, drying her hands, before she went through the swinging kitchen door.

Olafsen moved finally, going on around the house and entering the kitchen. He crossed the kitchen, and the swinging door opened abruptly, almost striking his face.

"Oh, hello, Gus."

"Hello, Faquar."

Frank Faquar laughed. "Most people call me 'Mister,' Gus." From his tone he might have been speaking to a bootblack.

"I wouldn't know about that, Faquar."

Faquar walked over to the sink. He was all globules of fat. A vast globule for a body that quivered when he walked, a globule of fat for a round, pink face, in which the eyes were almost buried. Pudgy hands, with globule fingers with very pink nails. He rinsed a water glass and drank water from the tap. "She's serving good liquor, but I never touch it. Maybe it's because I see so much of it, Gus."

He filled the water glass again and held it to the light. "There are merits to water, Gus. Few people realize it. Water, a very common thing taken too much for granted. We wash in it. We drink it. A very handy thing to drown your enemies in, Gus."

"Maybe you ought to know."

Faquar's globules quaked and shuddered as he chuckled. "That would be telling, wouldn't it? As the respectable owner of the Blue Swan, a respectable night club, I shouldn't tell things like that, should I?"

He drank his third glass of water. "Why don't you drown her, Gus?"

"Her?"

"Jean. Your daughter-in-law. You'd like to, wouldn't you? And it might save trouble, be far less messy all the way around. Sometime her husband is going to return unexpected from one of his business trips. He's going to walk in on one of these parties. He's going to walk in on her kissing somebody. Rodney Branson, maybe. You think your son would lose his head and commit murder under those circumstances, Gus?"

They stood looking at each other. Their breathing sounded in the kitchen. Olafsen looked at the globules of fat that was Faquar. "Somebody ought to tell you, Faquar, to keep your trap out of other people's busi-

ness! Don't mess in my private affairs."

"Oh, come now, Gus. That's no way to act. You know as well as I that they're heading for a crackup, for something desperate. You read it in the papers every day. 'Hubby Slays Wife's Party-Pal.'"

"And what makes you so interested in it, Faquar?"

Colorless brows went up. The fat face quivered with laughter. "Interested? Me? Of course! I'm interested in all people, Gus. You think I like this party for its own sake? Oh, no. I like to take people, Gus, and put them under a microscope and see what makes them tick, and squirm their way through life. That's why I like to own a nightclub. People, Gus. A young woman, stepping out behind her husband's back for the first time. A man gambling, losing more than he should, sweating, squirming, getting sick in his belly."

"Just bugs under a microscope to you, Faquar?"

"What else?"

"Well, I couldn't drown her. I've seen too much of water in my time. If I wanted her—Jean—out of my son's life and had your detachment, your way of looking at people like they're ants, I'd have somebody do it. I'd get a couple men, say. Like two I know of. Candy and Lunt, they're called."

"Candy and Lunt. Odd names, Gus."

"I thought maybe you, being in the nightclub business, might have heard of them."

"I can't say that I have."

"I'd like to get a lead on them," Olafsen said. "Maybe they're new in town. Maybe they just never came around to your place."

Frank Faquar paused at the kitchen door. "And Jean? I'd like to see how this deal comes out, Gus."

"It'll come out okay," Olafsen said savagely. "Meantime it's none of your business—or mine!"

CHAPTER TWO

A Corpse in the Kitchen

UPSTAIRS in his room, Olafsen stood heavily before his window. Outside lay black, wind-tossed darkness. From below came the sounds of music, muted, faint up here, an occasional ripple of laughter. What was she—Jean—doing down there? In the kitchen with Rodney

Branson again? Olafsen shuddered. As if a bit of the chill night outside had stolen in the room and touched against his heart. *He's going to walk in on her kissing somebody. You think your son would lose his head and commit murder under those circumstances?*

Olafsen beat his fist in his palm and damned Frank Faquar for having said the things that had been bubbling in his own mind.

Of late, Bob's face had clouded. *So much for liquor, darling?* The way he looked at her, thoughts mirrored on his face. *It certainly must have been some party, darling!*

Olafsen sat down. He picked up the newspaper that lay on the table beside the chair. He listened to the sounds of the party downstairs and tried to read.

On the front page, near the bottom, was a picture; the aquiline, lean face of a young man. It was captioned: "Lichenfels' Appeal Fails." Olafsen read snatches of the story. "Edward Lichenfels was informed by his attorneys today that their last and final appeal to higher courts had failed. Lichenfels, convicted of the slaying of Elice DuVal, today faced life imprisonment for his crime, his last avenue of escape vainly exhausted."

A rehash of old newspaper stories was given: Elice DuVal, night club singing star, had surprised Edward Lichenfels rifling her apartment. It was known that Lichenfels had cultivated her acquaintance and had gone to her pink and gold love nest many times. Entering the place with a key he had made, Lichenfels had been about to make off with valuables, including jewelry, when Elice DuVal had walked in on him. She had rushed for the phone to call the police, and in a frenzy, he had struck her with a fireplace poker, knocked her down, killed her.

Olafsen studied the lean, young face of Edward Lichenfels. A killer's face? Perhaps. They said so. There had been evidence in the apartment to prove it so. At that moment, under the pressure of those exact circumstances, Lichenfels had been a killer. But normally? No, normally no one was a killer.

In life, murder was an insane thing, and people killed for insane reasons of the moment.

A moment when they returned home, perhaps, to find a party shrieking out its

wild course, a wife in the kitchen, kissing another man.

Olafsen dropped the paper in his lap, sighed. He was morbid. Old. Tired. Chilled from the night. He reached in his pocket for his stubby cob pipe. His fingers touched the six-by-nine manila envelope.

He looked at the envelope. He'd almost forgotten putting it in his pocket at the post office. His lips become wry. The envelope had been wrinkled, almost torn in two in his struggle with Lunt and Candy. From the mangled envelope the corner of a torn photograph was showing. He pulled the two pieces of the photograph from the envelope, which contained nothing else. He'd have to explain to Bob how it had happened.

He fitted the two pieces of the photograph together, looked at it, and Olafsen stiffened. His throat went dry, and the sobbing of the wind against the gable of the window mocked him darkly.

He remembered. Lunt, the chunky one, had come in the post office. He might have easily seen that this envelope, this glossy photograph had been taken from box 5432. Lunt must have been waiting, watching the post office. *But the wrong person had gotten the manila envelope!*

Who should have gotten it? She—Jean—his son's wife?

Who else?

Tiny beads of sweat stood out on Olafsen's seamed face. He looked at the glossy photograph. A young man sitting at a table in a dim night club, near the band stand. A girl on the band stand giving out with a hot song. Then Olafsen looked at the newspaper photograph again. There was no doubting it. Both were of the same man. *Both photographs of Edward Lichenfels—murderer!*

A knock sounded on his door, bringing him out of his chair with a jerk. He folded the two pieces of torn photograph and the manila envelope inside the paper and tossed the paper on the table.

Knuckles rapped again as he crossed the room. He opened the door. She was standing there, as if his very thoughts had conjured her out of the black, cold night. Her blonde hair was a cloud about her face. Her eyes were bright, looking at him; her cheeks pink with color.

"Can I come in, Father?"

Father. She always called him that. This

room for you, Father. A special dish for dinner tonight, Father. Coddling him and smiling at him and gazing fondly at Bob, while all the time what had her mind been concealing?

He looked at her with the strange feeling that he was seeing her for the first time. It seemed that the wind whispered to her as she moved toward the opaque blackness of night outside framed by the window. The gay party downstairs was still moving its raucous, singsong, chattering path. Bright lights and laughter down there while up here he felt the growing evil of the room. The malignance of the house, filled with her presence.

He thought of Lunt and Candy. Of Bob out of town. Of Buddy sleeping in his room down the hall, a six-year-old cherub, innocent and at peace through it all. He thought of Edward Lichenfels, a murder in his cell. This night was Lichenfels lying in his bunk, staring at the night beyond the bars of his cell and thinking? Of her?

OLAFSEN felt caught in a web of strangeness. He found it hard to breathe. He had never experienced anything like it before. Storms and fist fights, yes. But always things he could face, fight back. Never anything like this involving others dear and close to him in an insidious tangle of murder, and his own near murder at the hands of Candy and Lunt.

He felt it inside of him. Terror. Decaying his insides.

She was speaking. "Father, did you go to the post office this evening?"

"The post office?" Downstairs, the record player was playing *Melancholy Baby*, very slow and sad.

"Yes," she said. "I came up earlier. You weren't in your room. I've asked you to let me or Bob get the mail for you, but you never do."

"I know," he said. "But I like to get out, stretch my legs. Yes, I went to the post office."

For an instant, there was a flicker in her blue, blue eyes. "I suppose there was some mail?"

There. It was before him. A decision he had to make. A decision he needed time to make. But he had no time. He had to speak quickly, blandly.

"There was a post card to me," he said.

She looked at him. He met her gaze. An old, sleepy-eyed man. She didn't see beyond the mask. She bit her lip. "And that was all?"

"That was all," he said.

There was a sound at the doorway. Frank Faquar stood there, all his globules of fat still quivering from his climb up the stairway. "You're deserting your party, Jean."

"I'm coming right down." She turned to Olafsen. "Good night, Father."

He told her good night. Watched as she let Frank Faquar take her arm, escort her down the hall. He crossed the room heavily, closed the door. He returned to his chair, sat down. He got up again. The room felt close and stuffy. He opened the window a few inches and the night wind sent its greedy tongues licking over the room, billowing the curtains. Olafsen stood with his hands on the sill, looking out in the night.

With the night in his face, he could look across the side lawn and see the lights in the house of Gregory next door. Flabby, humbling Gregory. "Come to work for me, Gus," Gregory had said once. "I need a man like you. I've made a great deal of money keeping a fleet of fishing boats operating, but I'm a business man. I don't know boats the way I should, the way my father did who started the business. I don't know men. And this pleasure boat I'm going to buy—I'll be sailing it down the coast and inland waterways to Florida next fall."

Gregory with his hobbies and money and loneliness. Gregory the widower who lived next door and who had saved his life tonight. It would be nice to have the old sense of freedom and go over and chew the fat with Gregory awhile.

Olafsen sat down again. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He was very tired. He felt old, and his body, as of its own accord, slowly relaxed in the chair. The music downstairs blurred and ran together like leaves whirling in the wind in his mind. Gradually the music faded.

Olafsen sat up. He sensed that time had passed. He had dozed. Like an old, doddering man, he had dozed.

He heard the music.

But he didn't see anything. He was still in his chair, and his light had been burning when he'd dozed.

But now the light was off!

For an instant, his clawed hands froze on

the arms of his chair. His body was rigid. His lungs were icy bellows, tearing air in and out.

He came up out of his chair. He heard nothing. Saw nothing. The room was as black as the belly of a deep well. He took a step, and another. Behind him the wind gurgled and laughed in the gable outside his window.

He reached the far wall of his room. His hand touched the door. It was closed. He had left it closed. Had he himself turned off the light and forgotten?

His fingers found the switch beside the door. He clicked it. The darkness remained. He clicked the switch three times. No light came.

An accident? The switch gone bad! The light bulb burned out?

He knew it wasn't so. He knew this was murder. He could sense it in the taut darkness, in the mockery of the cold wind, the house. He was alone with it. *Now!* Here in the room? In the hall outside?

He had underestimated Candy and Lunt. They had known where he lived. With the noise of the party, it had been easy to gain secret entry. One of them had come up the stairs, to be ready. The other had gone into the pantry downstairs, where the fuse boxes for the house were. The circuits were marked. One twist of a fuse, loosening it, and the upstairs was cut away from the world, in darkness. Isolated from the bright lights and noise of the party downstairs.

WHY? Because of Edward Lichenfels who had murdered a girl known as Elice DuVal. A stage name? Perhaps. But why had it reached here? Because of Jean? What had she been to Lichenfels? And why had the photograph of Lichenfels at a nightclub table caused the twisting of the fuse downstairs?

Olafsen's throat muscles were agonized. His hand touched the doorknob. Outside the door they would be waiting for him. They hadn't known that he'd dozed. They'd expect him to think that a fuse had blown. He'd walk from the room, into the hallway where they were waiting. . .

Cry out? He'd have to shout very loud to make himself heard downstairs, over the noise of the party. He'd have to shout so loud it would awaken Bob's little guy down the hall. He could picture it, Buddy waking

in fright at the sound of the shout. Wandering into the hallway where they were waiting. . .

Not Buddy, too!

Like a man stroking a snake, Olafsen turned the knob. A breath of icy air rippled over his back. He eased the door open. An inch, two inches. They hadn't heard. They'd expected him to walk out in the hall, cursing perhaps, thinking a fuse had blown.

He slid his body around the door jamb, stood pressed against the wall. The hallway was noisome with dense blackness. Downstairs the record had changed, a gay, frenzied rhumba beat now. His heart was pounding faster than the music.

Seconds drained out of his life. He was halfway down the hall now. Nothing had happened. Had he been wrong? Was it, after all, only a fuse?

Then he heard the whisper of sound. In the dark stairwell at his left. The narrow rear stairs that led down to the pantry.

He twisted. He tried to run. Pieces of the night came crashing into him. A body hit him. A soft curse sounded. He felt a breath in his face. The breath was laden with peppermint. Candy, he thought. A nickname. The peppermint breath was very close to him.

He was in a tangle of arms and bodies, thrashing. A hand clamped over his mouth. A hard fist came whistling out of the night. A lucky punch. It caught him in the left eye, and the eye became sudden, molten lava in his head.

He kicked and fought. But they were in close, beating him down. He was dizzy and felt blood dripping off his chin from a blow that had slashed his lips open. A gun barrel bored against his temple, and Lunt's heavy voice said, "You'd better get gentle as a kitten, old-timer!"

He relaxed against the pressure of the gun, and a small pencil flashlight shot its rays into his seamed, broken face.

Candy was wheezing breath. "We'd better get him out fast!"

"Where are we going?" Olafsen asked.

"To a quiet place. To a place where we can persuade you to tell us what you did with the photograph of Lichenfels."

"You're causing us too much trouble," Candy said. "One peep out of you and I'm going to grab the kid. We know all about you and the people in this house. You bet-

ter remember the kid! My hands and face are still raw where you knocked me down."

Lunt gave Olafsen an easy push. "Get going, old-timer."

The rays of the pencil flash lighted the narrow-back stairway. Olafsen went down. They followed him, Lunt's gun tight against the crawling flesh on the back of his neck.

The pantry was at the foot of the stairway. On the other side of the pantry, a narrow door opened on the side yard. Olafsen knew they would take him through that. Back here the music and noise of the party were distant, muffled.

Olafsen's feet touched the floor of the pantry. There he shuddered, shied away. The rays of the flash glinted on the red, moist pool on the floor before him. A red pool like catsup. Only it was blood.

He heard Lunt breathing. He smelled the peppermint on Candy's breath. Almost out of the area of diffused light from the flash, a man lay. His throat had been cut, and was still oozing blood. It was Rodney Branson, limpid brown eyes limpid no longer, frozen in death. Branson, who'd always tried to back Jean in a dark corner and kiss her. Branson, the woman-kept man.

"You killed—"

The gun smashed the side of Olafsen's face, knocking him back against the wall. "Let your voice rise like that just once more!" Lunt warned. "We didn't kill him."

"Then you're working for somebody who did!"

"Could be," Candy said. "Only us and the man who did it know that Branson is laying back here dead. He made a play for the babe—just before he died. Tough. Anyway, we're going to take him out with us, old-timer. When I wipe up the worst of the blood, we want you to pick him up."

"Pick him up?"

"You're going to take him out to the car," Candy explained. "We'll plant him somewhere when we're through with you."

When they're through with me, Olafsen thought. I've seen Branson's murder. They're going to plant us together! Me and Branson!

Candy was looking at him. "Don't get any ideas about balking, old-timer. We can make it plenty hard. We can make death a very hard-bought thing!"

CHAPTER THREE

Like Stepping on Ants . . .

THE street ahead was narrow, dark. The car was a heavy gray sedan. Olafsen was in the front seat, between Candy and Lunt, thinking, *My life is running out*. He was an old man. He had lived. He didn't fear death. But he hadn't wanted death to come this way.

Lunt, a big chunky shadow behind the wheel, was driving. Lunt had lighted a ragged cigar butt and the pungent smoke filled the car. Beside Olafsen, Candy kept a gun inches away from the old, seamed face. In the back, lay what in life had been Rodney Branson. Olafsen had carried the dead weight out the back of the house, across the dark lawn, through the moaning night wind. With the trees bowing their heads along the driveway, he had put Branson's body in back. The guns in the hands of Lunt and Candy had given him no choice.

The motor purred. No one spoke. Olafsen could sense the tightening up of the man on either side of him. Theirs were devious ways. Their minds worked in dark, crooked channels. They believed he had hidden the photograph of Edward Lichenfels somewhere as they would have hidden it. They were nerving themselves for the ordeal of beating the truth out of him, finding the photograph.

Thoughts filtered through Olafsen's mind. Insane things like the memory of Frank Faquar's globular body and the way it quivered when Faquar chuckled. Gregory, who bumbled around and made money and had offered Olafsen a job. Buddy at the dinner table tonight, begging to be allowed a bottle of soda pop before bed.

One last pleasant memory to take into the realm of Death.

He had nothing to lose.

Thus far, he had hardly moved, sitting there between Lunt and Candy.

But he moved now.

He had it gauged to fractions of inches. When he moved it was sudden, swift.

His foot slammed down on Lunt's foot, jamming the accelerator of the car to the floor. He dropped, twisted, flung up his hands, his fingers closing over Candy's gun.

Candy screamed. Lunt took one hand

from the wheel, slugged, but the old man had his face buried in Candy's chest. The heavy car swerved, gaining speed. Candy fought at him, and Lunt fought at the car. Then Lunt cut the motor, slammed on the brakes, and the car stopped. With a scream of rubber. Stalling the engine. Almost throwing the three men through the windshield.

Lunt reared up behind the wheel. Olafsen became a thrashing fury. Candy's gun went off with a roar that shook the car. Sparks showered from Lunt's cigar and he tried to scream. Candy's bullet had punched a hole in his face just above his mouth, at the base of his left nostril. Lunt's face was suddenly horrible with blood. He spilled his way back out of the car. In the middle of the street, he went round and round, like a crazy top, mouthing, "You shot me! You shot me!" He had his gun in his hand. Dying on his feet, Lunt choked out his sudden hatred.

He began firing crazily at the car. Sinking, firing as he kneeled slowly to the street, cursing the partner who had shot him. A bullet pinged off the car, another put a round spider in its cobweb in the windshield.

Candy screamed and tried to tear his gun loose from the crazy old man clinging to him. Olafsen had bested Candy once, earlier tonight when he'd knocked Candy down. He bested Candy again, now. He slammed the rapier-thin man's head back against the window of the car. The glass shattered and Candy went limp.

Olafsen pulled himself out of the car. The night was very silent, very cold. Lunt was a mounded shadow against the chill concrete of the street. Here and there porch lights began to flash on in the neighborhood, and Olafsen turned and ran, down through the dark corridors of night.

The lights downstairs were still blazing in his son's house as Olafsen went up the walk. The party was reaching a climax. Even before he opened the door, he could hear shrill laughter, louder than it had been. He opened the front door, slammed it behind him, stood in the middle of the living doom. The laughter died like a tide receding from a rocky shore.

He looked at them. The lovely women. The suave men. He said, "It's time you went home. All of you."

Jean crossed the room to him, took his arm. "Father! You're hurt! Blood on your mouth, and your eye, so swollen—"

He shook her hand from his arm, pushed her to one side. "Get out!" his voice quavered, rising to shout. "I meant it! Get your coats and get the hell out of here!"

"Father!"

He didn't look at her. He watched them. They smiled at him. They got their coats and laughed at him and went out. The room was very quiet. Then Jean began sobbing softly.

He walked back through the house, to the pantry. He opened the fuse box, tightened a loosened fuse. He went back to the living room and said, "I want you to come upstairs with me, to my room. There's something you've got to explain."

She followed him up to his room. He clicked the switch and the room flooded with light. He left the door standing open, and she stood there, framed in the doorway, watching him.

He unfolded the newspaper on the table, and tossed the torn photograph on the bed. "It seems like somebody is willing to do a lot of murder for this photograph. You'd better tell me about it. They've tried to kill me. Branson is dead."

"Rodney? Rodney Branson is dead?" She looked at him, then at the photograph. She rushed across the room, picked the photograph up, and her hands were trembling.

She breathed, "He was telling the truth! Edward Lichenfels was telling the truth! But I didn't dare hope that Branson would really sell—"

"It was too bad that he did." The voice came from the doorway. A man was standing there. It was Frank Faquar. He had a gun in his hand. He was shaking all over. He pushed his massive globules of fat across the threshold. "I'll take the photograph, Jean."

"No!"

Faquar took a step toward her. Olafsen said, "Lunt and Candy were working for you?"

Faquar nodded. "I knew they'd failed when you returned to the house a few moments ago. I knew I had to get the photograph."

"Maybe you'd better tell me what the

photograph is all about," Olafsen said.

"Why should I? I'll have to kill you. Both of you. And when I've killed you and Jean, I'll have to fix it up. The beserk old man, bursting in the house, running his daughter-in-law's guests off. They argue. In blind passion, because she's playing around, the old man kills his son's wife. Crazy, they'll say. Trying too hard to guard his son's happiness, his son's home. Then the old man shoots himself. That's how it'll look to them."

"Just like that? Just like stepping on a couple of ants?"

"Like stepping on a pair of bothersome insects," Faquar agreed. "To keep myself from going to prison for life. I'd rather gamble my life than to face that."

"Because you, not Edward Lichenfels, killed Elice Duval?" Olafsen said.

"Yes." For an instant Faquar's eyes clouded. "It was the only time in my life I let myself become subjective. I loved her. But she wouldn't return it, Olafsen. Elice Duval had too many men. She teased me, she toyed with me, until there was a fight between us, finally, in her apartment. I killed her."

"And then you got objective again," Olafsen said bitterly. "You picked yourself an ant—Edward Lichenfels. You framed him to close the case and save your own fat skin."

"Something like that. Lichenfels was a young guy who thought it was smart to run with people in a fast, shady crowd. Elice Duval saw something in him—and I hated him for that. I thought he would be a prime fall guy. I believed he had no one, no relatives to care. But it seems he had a sister."

Olafsen turned slowly, looked at Jean. Her eyes were brimming in tears. "We had a step-father. Edward took his name. Edward was foolish and young. Our mother and step-father had died, and Edward left home. I didn't hear from him until he'd been tried and convicted of the death of Elice DuVal. I came here. I hadn't been sure his lawyers had sold him out. I went to Bob Olafsen. That's how we met, Father."

"We fell in love, Bob and I. We married. We've worked and tried to save Edward. We've spent money. We've filled the house with rotten people, while

Crime of the Ancient Mariner

Bob made himself absent. He wouldn't agree to it at first, but finally I talked him into it, into this—into murder!" Her voice broke.

"I was so sure I could handle it," she said. "It was our last chance, our last hope. At the trial, Edward stated that he had been in a night club at the time of Elice DuVal's murder. He said a girl, one of those strolling photographers who take souvenir pictures of patrons had taken his picture. But the girl denied it. She was one of Rodney Branson's women. He'd wanted the picture for blackmail, for it shows in the background a girl singing on the bandstand. She was a big time star, booked from New York, for one night in the club. Her show was going on at the time Elice DuVal was being murdered, so the photograph would have cleared Edward."

"I worked on Branson. Finally, he agreed to see the photograph. We raked the money together, the last of the savings I had before Bob and I were married and money that Bob used to finish the amount. Branson was to mail the photograph to us, afraid to carry it on himself.

"He thought that Faqar didn't know who was blackmailing him."

"But I did," Faqar checked. "Lunt and Candy were good men. A little of the proper persuasion made the girl photographer talk, and kept her from telling Branson that she had talked. Tonight I was going to get the photograph, finish Branson off, finish the whole thing."

"Only an old fool got himself in the way," Olafsen said, huskily. He looked at Jean. "I sort of did a crime myself, Daughter. My crime was not having faith."

"Very pretty," Faqar said. "Perhaps you'll think it over in your graves. We're going downstairs."

He kept the gun trained on them, backed out in the hall. Backed one step into the hall. And the hallway became splitting shadows, piling on Faqar. Voices shouted. Three men in blue bore Faqar to the floor. They worked a moment, and Frank Faqar lay unconscious, a great unconscious globe of fat.

Olafsen's eyes popped at the sight of the three policemen. At the sight of Gregory from next door, who came stumbling in the

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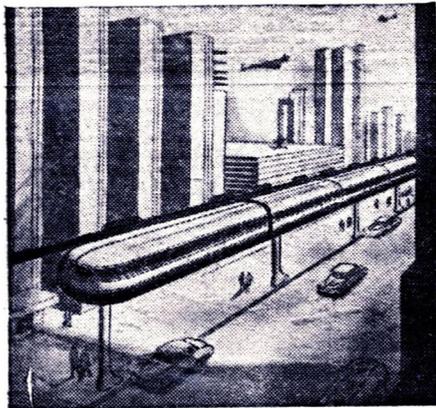
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room. At the sight of Bob's little guy, Buddy. Buddy's teeth were chattering. He ran to Jean. "I was scared. Will there be any more parties and mean men in the house?" he said.

She picked him up in her arms. Tears ran down her cheeks as she hugged him close. "No, Darling. No more parties, ever."

Gregory said, "Are you all right, Gus?"
 "Yes, but how—?"

"It was the little fellow," Gregory said. "He came to my house, scared half to death. He said that he had woke up, entered the hallway. He saw light coming from the open door of your room, and heard voices, a voice saying that you and Jean were going to be killed. When he told me, I phoned the cops."

The tallest of the cops grinned crookedly. "We slipped up the rear stairs, heard enough to break Faquar down when he regains consciousness and clear the whole thing up. We'll get all the minor details, you can count on that. And you, Mrs. Olafsen, can count on seeing your brother freed."

She wore her tears like jewels. She said, "I—I'd better get Buddy back to bed."

"Buddy," Olafsen said, "how come did you wake up?"

Buddy crooked his finger. Olafsen bent his head close, listened, nodded. "Good-night, Grampa."
 "Good night."

He watched Jean take the child from the room. A good life now for them, for his kids. He felt a lump in his throat. He watched the three cops take the heavy burden that was Frank Faquar down the hall. He turned back in his room. Gregory was still standing there.

"Confound you, Gregory," Olafsen said, "you keep bumping in and out of my life. I guess I'll just have to go to work for you!"

"Swell." Gregory smiled. "But I wish you'd explain one thing. Exactly how was it, Gus, that the boy woke up?"

"I tried to warn him at dinner," Olafsen grinned, "but he went ahead and drank that bottle of sweet, sticky pop anyway and— well, God bless that little guy's kidneys!"

THE END

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 81)

ceived so many dollars following the running of his ad that he had not had time to fill all the requests. He begged me to be patient. His reputation as a teacher of writing, he said, was impeccable; I must not spoil it by writing about him to DIME DETECTIVE. He was a busy man. He would get around to filling orders as soon as he could. Indeed, he set a date, a few days hence, on which he promised without fail to send my material.

I am still waiting. Nothing has arrived. The last I heard from him was four months ago. The man who received so many dollars that he could not fill his orders is still too busy, apparently: busy collecting money—but not keeping his promises.

B. H.
Oswego, N. Y.

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Upon taking the letter to the newspaper office, I soon found (as I had expected) that the paper had authorized no publishing company to reprint the letters from their newspaper, and that the said company had never been heard of before. After further investigation it was found that the writer of the letter had contacted all authors of letters published in the local newspapers, and he would have collected many dollars if his scheme had not been detected.

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Dale Clark

(Continued from page 39)

or something, just like you tried to kill me tonight. All you thought about last night was the money, and you never dreamed of a hitchhiker being asleep there in his car."

He heard the floor creak under a gentle footsteps.

"Miss Dixie," the kid said, "you never did try to help me a bit. Harry and Augie wanted that reward money. They thought they could steal it from Pauley themselves. That's why they phoned and said to let me go—they were waiting outside for me. You didn't lie, and I don't owe you any favors, even if you hadn't just tried to kill me now."

The floor creaked again.

The kid said, "It won't do you any good to try and crawl out the window. I can run faster than you can. You can't beat me in a race to the car. You know that, Miss Dixie."

"You little fool, I've got the car keys, though."

"I don't need keys to break the spark plugs," the kid said. "I can run farther than you can, too. I can run to the highway and get help. The cops will find your car here, and they'll find where you hid Pauley's money, and I bet Mr. Gooler and the others will turn on you, besides. You're just sunk, Miss Dixie."

"Wait." Her voice changed. It pleaded. "You're wrong. I didn't try to kill you. I shook the bed to wake you up, and something fell off and made all that noise—"

"No," the kid said. "You left the car down on the road so I wouldn't wake up. Miss Dixie, you had me fooled at first, but that's just because I thought you were being good to me. I couldn't understand it. But people doing me dirt, I understand that fine."

Miss Dixie swore. And then she yielded. "You win. Look, I'll give you half. How's that?"

"That's fine. I wanted to hear you say it. I wouldn't want to tell the cops on anybody until I was sure."

Miss Dixie wailed, "Wait. I'll give you—!"

It was no use. The kid was off like a shot in the dark.

THE END

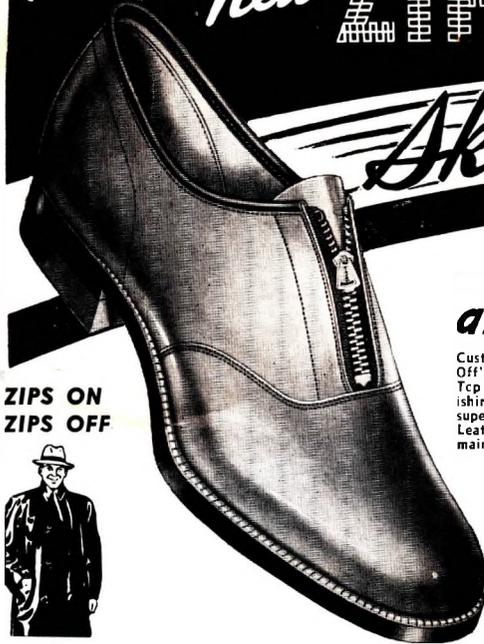
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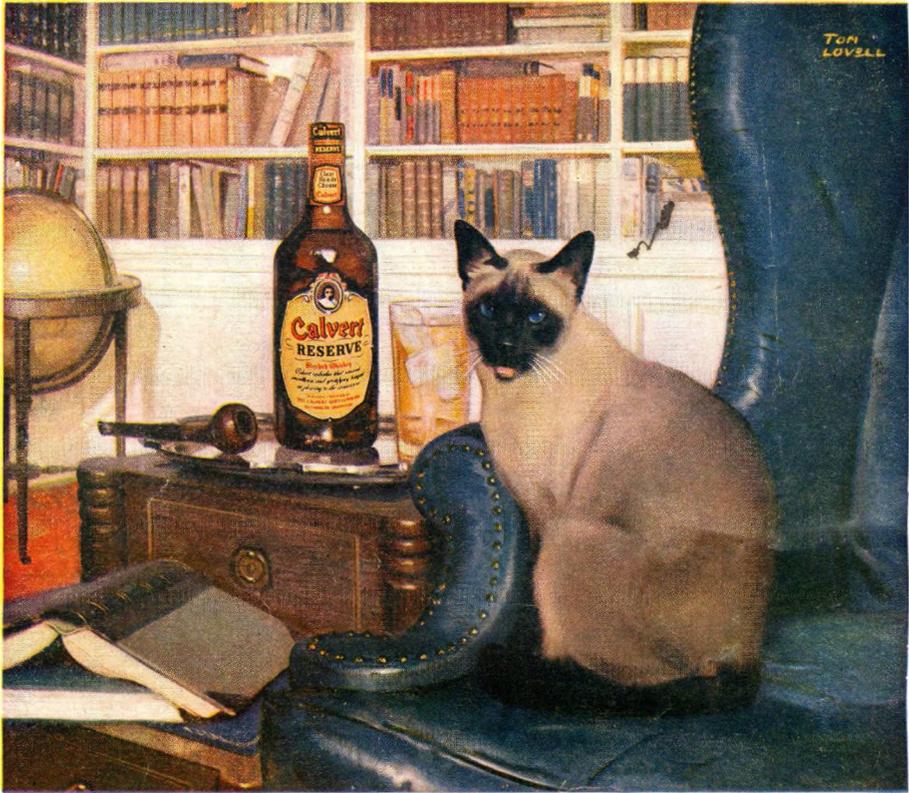
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