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A TALE OF
TRACKLESS MURDER

DEATH IS MY HOST

by **C. WM.
HARRISON**



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British Edition

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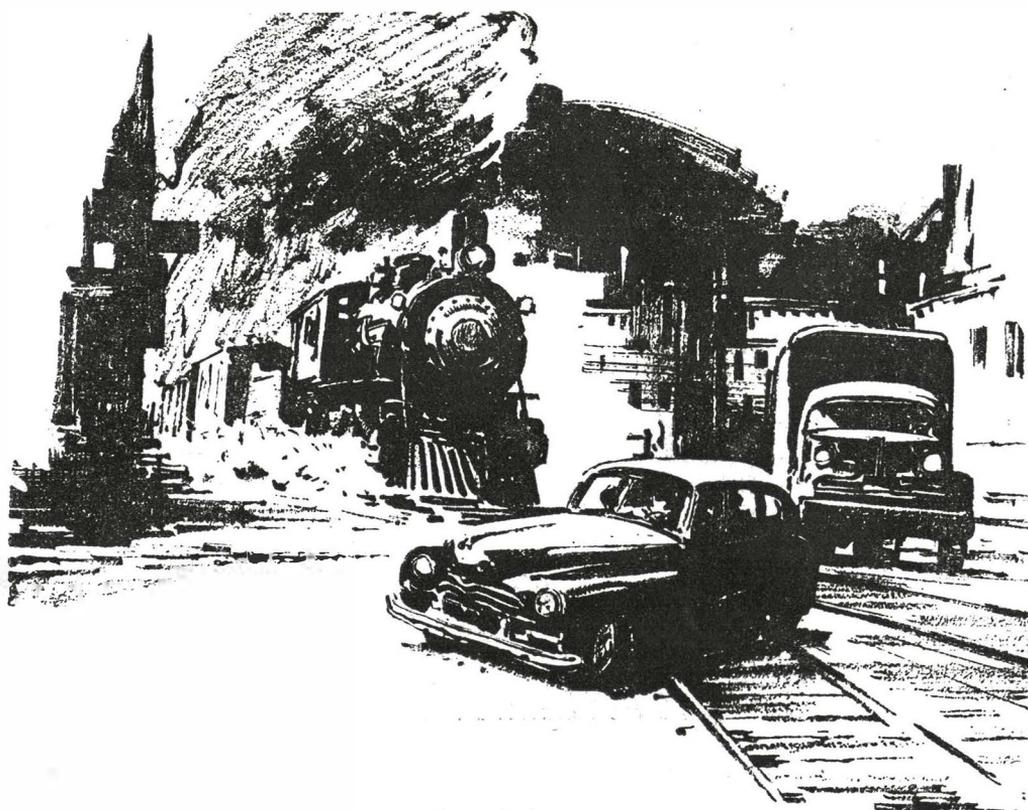
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DEATH IS MY HOST

**By C. William
Harrison**

*Hotter than the desert where he
found her . . . hotter than a forest
holocaust she was, the leggy brun-
nette who shared Dave Kennett's
last assignment—wine her, dine
her—and die!*

AND NOW HE could see the flames rushing after them through the pines.

He could not remember how long they had been running, or how far. It didn't matter. A while ago, when he had again helped the girl back to her feet, the sky had been deceptively blue and placid. But now the wind had changed again to that gusty up-draft that was a murderous thing in this steeply tilted canyon, and the sky was smearing over with the boiling yellowness of smoke.

He could hear the flames as a muted, malignant roaring behind and below them. Not much more than a quarter mile away, he thought in that hypnotic dullness of



*Her finger was around
the automatic's trigger, the knuckle
showing white as bone.*

sheer exhaustion. A moment ago he had seen the flames as they touched off a towering old pine and made it, for a brief raging instant, an enormous torch that flared redly through the clouding smoke. Even from so great a distance he had felt the heat, or against the sheen of desperation and near panic he had imagined he could. It was entirely possible that he had, for he fully understood the treachery of distance in this high-mountain back country of Southern California. There was no safety for himself and the girl in the distance remaining between them and the blazing forest. A pine knot could explode and hurl flaming fire-bombs of pitch that distance, to cut them off and trap them.

The man stood braced against the tree, making short, gagging sounds as he gulped air into his lungs. He turned his head now and looked at the girl.

"Let's go, Karen."

She lay sprawled where she had fallen against the steep slant of the ridge, her head turned so that he could see the grey mask of her face—a face that showed only a pinched shadow of its former beauty; dull, agonized eyes, taut cheeks and colorless lips. He could hear the hard rasp of her breathing.

"Karen," the man said again.

Her eyes moved, looking up at him from the ground.

"I can't, Dave." She broke into a thin, hacking coughing. "I just can't go on."

"We can't stay here, Karen. Not any longer."

She didn't say anything. She didn't move. She only looked at him in that slack, done-in way, breathing hard.

He watched her, a little stupidly, in his utter weariness. He did not know quite what he would do if she did not make some effort of her own to rise and go on. Or what he could do. Try to carry her, of course, the rest of the way to the lake. Or drag her, if nothing else. He didn't know.

He was so very damned tired, and he understood how much worse this had been for her. He was surprised she had made it this far.

In the beginning, just after they had discovered themselves cut off by the racing flames of the forest fire, the girl had trotted easily and confidently beside him, letting him set the pace. A slim girl who hadn't then realized just what they were up against.

"Lead off, Dave, and let's dunk ourselves in this lake you're telling me about. They can't kill us now, not if they start a dozen forest fires around us."

And now she lay where she had fallen against the steep slant of the ridge, the long slim muscles of her calves and thighs twitching in spasmed exhaustion. The corduroy skirt she had worn had hampered her running, even when she hitched it up above her knees. It had snagged on the hard spikes of broken tree limbs, throwing her when the fabric refused to tear. A mile back, when it had trapped her momentarily in a tangle of mesquite, she had cried out to him in a sudden break of hysterical panic, and he had helped her out of the skirt. But the branches and brush had been cruel on the deeply tanned skin of her legs.

"Two or three more minutes, and that fire is going to be on us, Karen," he told her now.

He was not certain at all that she was listening, so vague and unheeding were her eyes. He looked down at her, the sense of urgency rising heavily through his own weariness.

"It's just across this ridge, Karen. Not a half mile away."

"You said that two miles ago. A thousand miles ago." Her eyes opened wide. "Honest, Dave?"

"This time it's straight. Not more than another half mile, Karen. You can make it. We've got to make it."

HE HELPED her to her feet. Her breathing had steadied down a little, but her face had that dull, strained grey of over-exertion. She laughed shakily, and he knew how hard she was fighting against panic and hysteria.

"My knees are just so much water. My legs are stone. I can't, Dave! I just can't!"

Down-slope behind them he heard the swift, windy *whoo-om* of flames rearing through the parched tower of another pine. A down-draft brought hot smoke billowing around them, choking them. Terror broke loose in Karen. She screamed.

"Easy, kitten," Dave said. "We're all right. We'll make it. Easy does it, baby."

In that heat-laced blinding smoke, the girl was beyond rational thought. She screamed again. She kept screaming. He slapped her, cracking the palm of his hand across her cheek, hard. Sanity came back into her eyes.

"Sorry, Dave. Couldn't breathe or see—got scared."

"So would any one else, too, kitten. Think you can go on, now?"

"I'll try."

"You take a step, baby. And then you take another."

"You make it sound easy, Daddy." She giggled, and he knew how thin and fragile was her control over herself.

They stumbled on up the steep slope, choking for air as the smoke rolled away and gave them momentary relief. Step upward, swing the body, step again. Breathe, cough . . . never enough air for your tortured lungs. Forty yards to the rim of the ridge, forty miles, forty eternities of effort.

Karen fell. He helped her up again.

"I can't, Dave—not any farther."

He could see the trembling of the long muscles in her legs, and he knew her knees were about to buckle again. He knelt beside her, digging his fingers into her calves and thighs, trying to stimulate a last

measure of life in them. She stirred, barely.

He stood up. "Now get going."

"I—please, Dave—"

"And you're the one who gave with the fine, brave talk!" he said, cuttingly.

"Taunting me won't do any good, Dave. I tell you I—I'm finished."

"They can't murder us, you said. Not with one forest fire, or a dozen, you said. You made it sound great, Karen. Real brave. The indomitable courage and spirit of American womanhood—oh, hell yes! So now you're going to quit!"

She protested in a thin, despairing cry. "But I've tried, Dave, so very hard! There's a limit, and this is mine. I—I just can't take another step."

"Start walking, Karen."

"Please—"

"Walk. Walk, damn you!"

She took a stumbling, dragging step. Another then, and a third."

"That's the girl," he said.

"Damn you," she sighed flatly, hoarsely, "shut up."

The slope of the ridge was not too steep, now. As it flattened off, Dave Kennett could see the tips of pines beyond, and the wide blue of sky unstained as yet by smoke. And then he was looking down the west flank of the ridge, a gentler slope than the one behind that had all but defeated them. Through the trees he could see the blue glass of Dollar Lake. A small jewel of a lake trapped in a pocket high on the mountain, and he knew that they would make it. They had a chance for survival now, a thin and thready one—but a chance.

As they stumbled on toward the protection of the lake, Dave Kennett thought about the girl. Karen would know why this had happened. She'd tell him.

Yet even now, even though he did not yet know the reason why all this had happened, he could nevertheless look back to when he had first met Karen, and say: This, then, was when murder began.

CHAPTER TWO

Run to Your Grave

NORTH OUT OF Palm Springs the highway begins its long, swinging climb up through San Gorgonio Pass, reaching out thirstily from the desert toward the citrus valleys beyond.

It's a beautiful stretch of country if you have a horned toad's eye for bare rocks, withered sage brush, and parched cactus. Dave Kennett didn't. Especially at mid-afternoon in mid-August, with the mercury rolling up its sleeves at a hundred and fifteen and just starting to work.

When he first saw the girl she was dancing. At least she seemed to be, bowing, bobbing, and pirouetting with the exaggerated buoyancy and magnificent abandon that is seen in slow-motion movies. For a moment Dave Kennett believed his eyes. It was a crazy thing for a girl to be doing on an empty stretch of desert highway and in such murderous heat. And then he realized that she was not dancing at all, or even walking, but was standing quite motionless at the edge of the highway. Another deception by the heat waves rising glassily from the pavement, another trick of the desert mirage.

The girl was not as tall as he first thought. Her slimness and the tailored tangerine-colored slacks she wore gave her an illusion of height. Her dark hair was cropped close and curled under, and she was not wearing a hat.

"Beautiful fool," Kennett grunted. Only back-East tourists and complete fools went hatless in the desert at this season of the year.

He pulled off the highway irritably, and kicked the brakes. Without forward movement to flow air through the radiator of his somewhat battered Dodge, the heat gauge immediately soared up into the red. He could hear water spurting up under the hood as the radiator boiled over, and he

mentally crossed his fingers in a prayer for the temperamental motor and the probability of vapor lock. His prayer went unanswered. The motor coughed, sputtered, and died.

Kennett took a slow breath. It was too hot, he decided, to be angry. Be a good joe and take it all in stride, he told himself. So what if his car had died out in the middle of nowhere, and would likely stay dead for the next hour or two! And, of all places, within sight of a mountain-sized billboard portraying a cool, green swimming pool and a gorgeous blonde in a wispy Bikini, reaching out happily for a frosty bottle of beer. Dave Kennett grunted. Bikini swim suits were hard on a man's blood pressure. Beer wasn't everything in life. He kept telling himself that, firmly. So what if his Dodge had died from an acute case of vapor lock! At least he would have company with him. The girl was cute. She looked cuddly. Kennett leaned out the door and smiled very pleasantly.

He said amiably, "If you had been able to lope up the highway beside me and hop in at about forty miles an hour, this would have been easy."

Her eyes were a startling shade of blue-green. They widened. She shook her head vaguely, as if she didn't quite understand him. Beautiful and brunette, but a bit on the dense side.

Dave Kennett took a fresh grip on his patience. Be big about this, old boy. Be generous.

"The old girl boiled over when I stopped. Always vapor locks when she boils on a day like this. So you might as well come in out of the sun while we wait."

The girl nodded slowly. She looked down the highway in the direction of Indio, her eyes squinty against the sun glare. She kept her hands behind her, and the slim lines of her body were very tense. Her lips moved, and Kennett could scarcely

hear the hot, dry whisper of her voice.

"Please, I don't know—if I could only be sure—"

Scared of the pitiless heat bearing down on her, scared of the eternal emptiness and deadliness of the desert into which she had so foolishly wandered alone—afraid with the kind of irrational, corrosive terror that eats into the soul and spreads its madness into the nerve ends of the mind and body. The desert could do that to a person. Dave Kennett had reason to know.

He spoke quietly to the girl. "It's happened before out here. You park your car and decide to take a little walk. Or you pull into a side road, bog down in the sand, and have to hike out. No water, and you didn't think to wear your hat. But you were lucky. Most of them wander off into the desert, and stay lost. But you kept following the highway, and now you're all right."

Her eyes were very bright, very glossy. "After what they did—" Her lips kept moving, shaping each word against the sheen of some deep and threatening panic. "If only I could be certain that you—"

"My name's Kennett. Dave Kennett."

"Names don't mean anything."

"I'm a photographer. Freelance. Work the movie crowd, and just finished doing a picture story on a couple of starlets out roughing it on the desert, Palm Springs style."

Her whisper was a glassy, brittle sound. "So easy to tell a lie."

"But a sin, honey, according to the song. Look, if you want me to show you one of my cameras."

SHE SHOOK her head. Her lips were very taut. Her cheeks were flushed a vivid pink, with small islands of whiteness stranded in the corners of her mouth and below her temples.

Picture of a girl scared as hell of something, Dave Kennett thought. Picture of

a lovely girl about to have a heat stroke.

He spoke slowly, gently. "If you want to hitch a ride with me, you might just as well come in out of the sun and wait a while, lady. Relax in glorious comfort, like the ads say. Even the horned toads and lizards get out of the sun on a day like this one. Too hot for you to stay out there in the sun when it's only a breezy hundred and umpteen in here."

He pushed the door open for her. She stepped back from the car, swiftly and almost frantically, and her voice cried out at him.

"No, please—please, don't—"

"Look here, lady!" Kennett grunted. "If you think I'm going to let you stand out there and have a sun stroke, you're nuttier than you've been acting ever since I pulled up here."

He slid out from under the steering wheel, and to the edge of the seat. And suddenly, violently, the day turned tight and very cold. He saw the girl take another frantic step back from him. A thorny tangle of cholla halted her. Her breath ran hoarsely through parched, taut lips. Her face was entirely pale now, with a stark and irrational defiance glossing the surface of her eyes.

"Stand back," she said, and there was a rising wildness in her voice. "I knew they wouldn't let me get away. All this time I've been running. I tried to hide—just as Phil tried to hide—but I knew someday you'd find me. They never let you get away, do they?"

Her hysteria was a bright, sharp blade slashing at him. He lowered his feet to the ground, moving slowly, carefully. Poor little goof, out of her head from heat and thirst and a panicked fear he could not understand. He tried to reassure her with a smile, and his lips felt like so much wood.

"Take it easy, kitten. Look, lady—"

Her voice lashed at him in a kind of

singing panic, rising upward in a glassy spiral until it threatened to shatter into broken, screaming fragments.

"I won't let them do to me what they did to Phil Gaffin. Do you hear me? You hear? Stay away from me, I tell you. Don't you dare try to touch me."

Then her hand whipped out from behind her back and pointed, trembling tautly, at Kennett. A small, slim hand whose lovely, tapered fingers were made to touch a man with the softness of a kiss. A kiss of tenderness and love.

Or a kiss of death, for in her hand was a gun. Blue steel and pale pearl, a thing of prim and fastidious precision—a woman's weapon. The kind of gun that makes small, neat holes in a man, but leaves him none the less dead.

Kennett stared at her. He knew that she was going to shoot, for the terror lacing so widely and uncontrollably through her eyes had swept far past the point of return. Something had to break within her before full sanity could return. Nothing could stop her now. The hysteria had to burn itself out, and the convulsed panic that had claimed her mind had to be shattered and erased by violence. She was a steel wire that had been strung too tight, a blade that had been honed too sharp, a flame which had been fanned too high.

Her finger was around the automatic's trigger, the knuckle showing white as bone. Her finger convulsed as Kennett threw himself out of the car and to one side. He felt the angry wind of the bullet fanning his cheek. The slug ricocheted from the car's door, and sang savagely off through space.

The girl's scream echoed the explosion of the shot, as Kennett struck the ground in a hard, frantic roll. She kept jerking the trigger of the automatic in a blind, frenzied way, her screams torn ribbons of sound rising and lashing against the raging echoes of the shots.

Kennett's roll carried him to one side,

and then desperately toward her. The sand exploded under his face, like a thousand needles biting his skin. He rammed his heels against the earth, and drove at the girl in a low, lunging dive, coming up under her gun. He saw its flame and spurting feather of smoke. He swung the flat of his hand at her wrist, savagely.

In that moment of released desperation nothing he could do could have stopped the hard drive of his body. The point of his shoulder struck her, and the unchecked momentum of his one hundred and eighty pounds sent her hurtling backward like a thrown rag doll. She cried out once as she fell, but she didn't move. Out cold.

KENNETT bent over her. He was all mixed up inside; half angry, more than a little worried, and feeling a sense of alarm that was getting close to real fear. The beat of her pulse was steady enough, strong. A slight concussion perhaps from striking her head on the sun-hardened ground, but nothing more serious than that. Yet he felt no surge of relief.

His mind kept reaching out, from puzzlement and shadowy alarm to sharpening apprehension, as he considered what she would probably say and do when she came to. Charge him with assault, of course, or worse. Scream attack, and have them throw away the keys. They always believed and sympathized with the woman. The man didn't have a chance.

Kennett groaned. His head was beginning to ache, and he could already hear himself telling his story to the judge. Sure, I knocked her out, Your Honor. I didn't mean to at the time, but I did. She's so small and slim, and I guess I dived into her too hard. But I was only trying to keep from being killed. You see, she was shooting at me with this little automatic.

Kneeling beside the unconscious girl, Dave Kennett remembered the gun. He twisted around, and picked it up from the

ground. He instantly dropped it. And through a deep and gloomy corridor in his mind he could hear the sardonic laughter that would ripple through the courtroom when he admitted this idiotic thing he had just done.

You see, sir, the reason the girl's fingerprints aren't on the automatic is that I happened to pick up the gun. It's the honest truth, Your Honor. It was one of those crazy things you'll do when you're confused. I just wasn't thinking, that's all. Then when I saw what I'd done, I dropped the gun, but it was too late then.

Why should she start shooting at me? I sure as hell—heck, I mean—don't know. I wish I did. The heat had got her, I guess. You know how the sun can work on you out there when you aren't wearing a hat, and she looked like she'd been out in it a long time. Acted like it, too. A little goofy, if you know what I mean.

Or maybe she mistook me for someone else, I don't know. I tried to tell her that I was Dave Kennett, that I'd been out to Palm Springs doing a picture story about a couple of movie starlets. One of those cheesecake spreads—Bikini stuff—a lot of leg art and—oh, sure—Sorry, Judge.

Anyhow, like I was saying, there this girl was out cold, and a whole string of cars starting to show up down the highway from the direction of Indio. I didn't want them to see me there with a knocked-out girl. They'd get the wrong idea for sure, and then I'd probably have a small mob after my hide. So I picked up the girl and put her into my car. What else could I do? And as soon as I could get my car running again, I headed straight for town, just like I told you before.

Kennett could hear himself trying to explain it all. He could talk himself blue in the face, but it wouldn't do him any good. Newspapers always made the most out of anything that suggested a sex crime. The cops would be skeptical of his story. And

a girl crazy-headed enough to try to kill a man she had never seen before would not be likely to clear him by admitting the simple truth. Not a chance. Hell with her, then. A guy had to think of his own neck, this day and age.

But he couldn't go away and leave her unconscious on the ground, even if he was able to get his car started again. No telling what might happen to her, and he would always wonder. Couldn't leave anyone unconscious and helpless on the desert, even though she had tried once to kill you and might try again. Wasn't right even to think of it.

He turned his head, squinting through the desert sunlight. A long string of cars coming from the direction of Indio, and he could hear the distant sound of traffic flowing down out of the Pass, from Beaumont and Banning. He picked up the girl and put her into his car so that she was in a sitting position, with her head resting against the back of the seat. He trotted back, picked up the tiny automatic and dropped it into his pocket.

Seated behind the wheel of his car, he punched the starter button. The engine refused to respond. Traffic sped past him, and he mentally damned every side-turned curious face. He jabbed the starter button again.

The Dodge didn't care.

Kennett looked at the girl slumped in the seat beside him. "You crazy-headed, little dope," he said. "Ought to be a law against females like you. Menace to mankind. Little Miss Murder, no less!"

Cute as a paper doll, though. Cuddly, like a kitten with a ball of yarn. Kennett stopped reading the riot act to the unconscious girl, his malice beginning to melt and fade away. Very cute and very cuddly, the girl beside him.

Keep knives, guns, and other homicidal weapons out of her reach, and she might make some man a wonderful wife.

CHAPTER THREE

Speak No Evil

IT WAS one of those tidy little apartments on San Bernardino's north side, not far from the first rise of the mountains. There was a broad picture window looking out at a forest of television antennae sprouting over a new subdivision of pastel bungalows. Beyond and above was the high and wide sweep of the mountains, fringed at the top with pines. The lower atmosphere was a hazy blue with heat.

Dave Kennett said, "I had it all figured. You'd scream that I saw you alone out there on the highway, stopped my car, and attacked you. You'd tell the cops I was a fiend and a monster, and I would be chucked in prison for the rest of my life, if not longer. That's what I was expecting."

The girl who said her name was Karen Wayne smiled wryly. "I can't say I blame you much. I'm sorry, Dave."

"For shooting at me? You didn't hit, so there's no harm done. Forget it."

He waited for her to say something, but she sat in brooding silence, nervously nipping her lower lip with even, white teeth. He offered her a cigarette, but she shook her head.

"I'm the old-fashioned type," she said.

She sat on a rose-colored divan, with her legs curled up under her. Her slacks fitted her as slacks are supposed to fit a woman, but seldom do. Her face, already deeply tanned, showed no noticeable burn in spite of her dangerous exposure to the desert sun.

Kennett lit his cigarette, squinted at her through rising wisps of smoke. "You don't look Victorian at all, Karen."

"Oh, but I am," she said. "I don't smoke, and hardly ever take a drink."

"It's like I've always said," Kennett drawled. "A girl doesn't have to smoke and drink to have a good time."

She gave him a quick, searching glance. She saw a lean, masculine face that was remarkably void of expression, eyes that were deceptively naive. And she laughed. Her laughter was lilting and bell-like, bursting like long-hidden music through the incessant humming of the apartment's air-conditioner. And in her laughter the tiny tensions of anxiety softened and went out of her face, and the haunted fear and cloudy panic vanished, for that small moment, from her eyes.

"Thank you, Dave. Thank you ever so very much for not being curious."

"But I am curious. All the time, I've been curious."

"You haven't asked any questions."

"I'm the polite sort. Also very timid."

"You're nice, Dave—real nice."

"A carefully cultivated illusion," Kennett grunted. "Everybody likes me, but nobody actually knows me. Not the real me. To tell the truth, Karen, I'm a cad and a bounder."

Her eyes were blue-green, and wide with startled innocence. "Not really!"

"Yep. A heel. Absolutely no conscience or sense of propriety. I've been known to get up in the middle of the night just to ask why a girl was wandering alone twenty miles out in the desert, and why she'd take pot shots at the guy who wanted to help her."

The small, bitter tensions came back to her face. The deep, haunted clouds of fear and panic returned to her eyes.

Kennett said softly, "You're in some kind of trouble, Karen. I want to help you. Please let me."

Her hands were taut in her lap, her fingers tightly interlaced and white across the knuckles. For a long, aching moment her eyes searched him. Hopefully, desperately, despairingly.

Her voice came as a whispered thought. "I've no right to let you."

"I'm an old friend of the family, Karen.

We were kids together, and I used to carry your books to school. Remember? Stop thinking of me as a stranger you never saw before this afternoon. We've known each other forever, Karen, and today we happened to find each other again, right at the time when you were alone and in need of help."

"Dave—oh, Dave—"

"What are you afraid of, Karen. Whom are you afraid of?"

SHE CLOSED her eyes tightly. She shook her head slowly, her fingers white-pressed against her temples.

Kennett got out of his chair and went across the room to where she sat on the divan. Sometime within the last few minutes the sun had gone down and the mountains had turned to a deep purple. Full night was not far away, and with it would come relief from the day's heat.

Kennett stood close to the divan, looking down at the girl. He reached his hand out to her hair, but he didn't touch her. He let his hand sink back to his side.

He said quietly, "Someone is trying to kill you?"

Her eyes flew open, staring up at him. Her breathing was quick and shallow, with fright in it.

"Is that why you're so afraid, Karen? Is that what you're afraid to tell me?"

She whispered it. "Yes—yes, Dave."

Her words came swiftly then, in a released torrent of anxiety and despair. Broken chips of words that came spilling out of the panic she had held sealed up too long inside her, words that ran through the deepening shadows of dusk like frantic, little mice. Meaningless words at first, until they sorted themselves in Kennett's mind and shaped relentlessly into the stark and brutal pattern of avarice and murder.

He sat down beside her on the divan, and all at once she was close against him, with her cheek tight against his chest and

her fingers biting into his arms, as though afraid he might go away from her and she would again be alone. One scared girl.

He understood how this was for her. It was not cracking of her courage, but of her control. She had been alone too much, trapped in a web of hate and malice. Twice she had heard the whisper of death, and this was her reaction from it—the near hysteria and the way her voice clutched frantically at him. He put his left arm around her and held her close, somehow feeling in himself the sharp, cold touch of the panic that ran to him through the torrent of her words.

"Today wasn't the first time, Dave. They tried once before to kill me, about a week ago. I don't know who they are. I mean, I couldn't identify or describe them. How could I, when I've never actually seen them. I've tried, Dave—of course, I have—but they know all about these things, and I don't. They've been too smart for me, and too cautious.

"The first time? As I said, it was about a week ago. I'd been up in the mountains, around Barton's Flat, and I was on my way home. You know those deep cuts they made when they built the highway? Well, some rocks had slid down one of the cliffs and were on the highway, and a work crew had blocked off the traffic while the slide was being cleared away. It happened I was the first car they stopped, and the rest of the down-traffic was strung out behind me. A dozen other cars, I guess. Maybe twenty. I don't really know. Please, Dave, let me tell this my way!

"It was a hot afternoon, Dave, and it was going to take several minutes to clear off the highway. I got out of my car to stretch my legs. People were walking around, talking, or watching the highway crew at work. You know how people do at such times. What is the name for them? Yes, sidewalk engineers.

"It was on a steep grade where this

happened, and I walked down and was watching the bulldozer shove the boulders off the road. I was standing apart from the others, just watching. Suddenly someone yelled at me, and one of the workmen jumped off his truck and jerked me to one side. The next instant my car rolled right over where I'd been standing and crashed against the cliff. Dave, if—if it hadn't been for that man grabbing me when he did—"

A shudder ran through her body, and her fingers bit hard into Kennett's arm.

"It could have been an accident, Karen."

"Accident?" She raised her head from his chest, and her face was pale with a sickness of fear and knowing.

"The brakes could have slipped. Such things can happen when a car is parked on a steep grade."

Her lips were tight, the tone of her voice was taut. "And someone also might have released the brakes," she said.

"Did you notice anyone monkeying around your car at the time?"

"No, of course not. I was watching the highway crew when it happened."

"Or anyone acting suspicious after the accident, Karen?"

"I was so startled, confused. Not particularly afraid, though. I thought it was just one of those things. It didn't even occur to me that it was anything but an accident until—until what happened today."

"And now—all of a sudden—you decide it was an attempt to murder you."

She stared up at him. "Now look here, Dave—"

"You seem remarkably certain it was a murder attempt, but I haven't heard anything yet to convince me."

"I believe I detect a bit of sarcasm in your tone, Mr. Kennett."

HE WAS A little impatient with her, and he showed it in the way he spoke. "All I've heard so far is a scared girl talk-

ing. No real evidence. Nothing tangible to point to murder. No motive for anyone to want to kill you. Just a lot of scarey talk, Karen."

"So now you're thinking I'm just a psycho."

"Baby, I'm beginning to wonder."

She stood up angrily. "When you reach your decision, my friend, please don't bother to let me know. In the meantime, if you will kindly get the heck out of here—"

He reached up, gripped both rigid shoulders firmly, and pulled her back down beside him.

"Sorry, Karen."

"Then stop being so masculinely cynical, please."

"Exactly what did happen today?" he asked her.

She told him. She had taken a narrow, unpaved desert road not far from the Palm Springs cut-off. She did not know how far she had driven when the road had petered out on a wasteland of rocks and sage brush.

"It must have been three miles, Dave. Perhaps five," she said. "I got out of the car and started walking toward one of the nearby hills. I wanted to climb it so I could have a better look at old Grayback."

"All the way out there, just to look at a mountain," Kennett said dryly.

"I was hunting for landmarks, Dave."

"Why?"

Her lips tightened. She was silent for a moment.

"What landmarks?" Kennett asked stubbornly. "And what were the landmarks to help you locate? A gold mine, huh? Pegleg Smith's gold? Dutch Annie's! The Lost Coyote claim? Is that why you were hunting landmarks?"

She shook her head, speaking slowly. "I was trying to locate an airplane that crashed up in the mountains during a snow-storm last winter."

"Now the brew thickens. So?"

"They started shooting at me, Dave."

"Who did?"

"The two men in the green sedan. They drove up to where I left my car. They saw me and started after me. I ran and they began shooting. I don't think they were really trying to hit me, but I didn't know that, then. I ran and ran, Dave. I've never been more frightened. Then I couldn't run any farther, and I fell. I don't know how long I lay there before I came to my senses, and then I realized how completely lost I was."

Dave Kennett swore softly. "Neat. Neat and safe."

"What do you mean, Dave?"

"They weren't shooting to hit you. Only to scare you out of your wits. Terrorize you into running and running until you were hopelessly lost, and then the desert would kill you. If your body were ever found, there would be no marks of violence to point to murder. You'd be checked off as another fool hiker who had been killed by thirst or sun stroke. You see now, Karen?"

She nodded slowly, and a sickness of horror was in her eyes. She shrugged. "You do believe me, don't you, Dave?"

"Yes, Karen." He hadn't realized it until now. He believed her.

The fear was in her eyes, deep-rooted and alive. "Whatever am I going to do, Dave?" she asked, and her voice was a shaken whisper.

"Fight back, Karen." He smiled down at her, pretending a confidence that he did not feel. "But not on an empty stomach, kitten. It's a rule I learned from my old grand-daddy. Killer Kennett, they called him back in Cactus county, when he tamed Black Ben Bosco's gang of outlaws. Feed before yuh fight, my grandpappy always told me, and I'd be mighty obliged if yuh'd join me, Karen gal," he drawled.

Suddenly, unaccountably, there was a

hot, stinging mist in her eyes. She blinked, turning her head away quickly so that he would not see. She tried bravely to mimic his drawl, and did not succeed any too well.

"That's mighty neighborly of yuh, and I'm plumb grateful, Dave. I shorely am."

CHAPTER FOUR

Mind Over Murder

THE LAS FLORES was a memory of old Mexico, hidden away in a grove of acacia and eucalyptus trees on the outskirts of town. The walls showed the natural mellowness of native adobe bricks, tawny and rounded under the room's soft lighting. The music of guitars and castanets drifted pleasantly through the place, like the whisper of *caballeros* in the days of the dons.

"The works?" Kennett asked.

"I'll probably regret it tomorrow," Karen said. "When it comes to Spanish food, I have absolutely no self control."

"Tomorrow is *mañana*, kitten."

"Tonight is when I should be counting calories. But I don't intend to. Yes, Dave. the works."

An old man came to their table, smiling friendliness. Kennett ordered *tacos*, *enchilladas*, and Mexican fried beans, and they topped it off with cold beer. A feeling of gay buoyancy came to them. They talked about small, inconsequential things and they laughed when there was really nothing to laugh about, as people do when in all the wide world there're only the two of them and the magic of their moment.

She reached across the table and touched his hand. "I'm glad it's like this, Dave. You and I—together."

"But what about tomorrow, Karen?"

"Tomorrow is another world, another lifetime."

Only words. Brave, empty, meaningless

words spoken by a girl who was trying to hide from the fright that was in her. For the fear was again in her eyes, the haunted dread, the glossy edge of terror.

"Dave, why—why did you have to bring it all back to me."

"We can't run away from tomorrow, Karen."

"For now, we could have. For tonight, we might have."

The grimness was in Dave Kennett, the feeling of baffled impatience and futile anger. "What makes you think we could steal even that short a time?" he demanded bitterly. How do you know they're not ready, right now, to make another attempt to kill you?"

She raised her head a little, like one suddenly alerted to a menace that was near and threatening. Her gaze ran desperately through the dimness of the room, searching each table and its occupants. Her eyes came back to Kennett, and an appealing look was in them. Her voice was a despairing whisper.

"Surely not here, Dave. Not here!"

"Who knows when or where," Kennett said savagely. "They've already made two attempts at you. Why not a third here, tonight?"

She shuddered, and her face was quite pale as he watched her.

He said softly, flatly, "When I first saw you today out there on the desert, you were out of your head from heat and fear. You kept saying that you weren't going to let them do to you what they had done to Phil Gaffin. Let's talk about that, Karen. What about Phil Gaffin?"

Her eyes widened. "You—you knew him?"

"Freelance movie photogs seldom pal around with top political brass, kitten. But I knew of him."

The girl had stopped breathing. Kennett watched her, waiting. She said nothing.

Kennett grunted dryly. "Head of the

crime investigating committee at Pacific City, wasn't he? Or chief investigator? I don't remember exactly. Apparently he wasn't enough of a publicity hog to get very widely known."

Her hands were on the table before her, fingers tightly interlaced, the knuckles white.

"Last I heard about Phil Gaffin," Kennett said slowly, "was of his private plane disappearing somewhere in the San Gabriel mountains during a storm late last winter."

"Not the San Gabriels," Karen answered. "The San Bernardino mountains, Dave. Somewhere on the southeast slope of old Grayback."

Kennett stared at her. "You seem remarkably certain of that, my friend."

She said nothing.

He spoke grimly. "The area you're talking about is thirty or more miles and ninety degrees by the compass away from where Gaffin was reported to have crashed that day."

"I know, Dave." She nodded, slowly, and her lips were taut, pale. "That's how Phil intended it to be. He lied about his position before he crashed his plane. You see, he didn't want them ever to find the wreckage of his plane."

Kennett's throat was dry. "Why?"

"Because the syndicate had marked him for death," Karen said in a voice that was flat, toneless. "It was Phil's one hope of escaping. If they thought he'd been killed in a plane crash they'd write him off their list."

Kennett whistled softly. "I pick up a female hitchhiker, and next thing I know I'm up to my ears in a crime syndicate that swings this whole end of the state by the tail. Those boys play for keeps, kitten. Now it's my turn to get scared."

She smiled bitterly. "It's not too late for you to get out, Dave."

He shrugged. "We've wine and dined

together; we may as well die together."

SHE REACHED across the table and pressed his hand in a gesture of genuine gratitude. "You're very brave," she said softly.

"I'm very scared," he answered flatly.

The music of Spanish guitars, lilting and muted, filtered through the murmuring voices of diners at other tables. The old man who had served them came out of the shadows, smiling his question. Kennett shook his head. The old man moved away, still smiling.

Kennett studied the faces at the other tables, his thoughts turning sharp and wary, angry. What did a murderer look like? Like the man across the room, the one with the white hair and remarkably youthful features? How could you identify the killers who had been sent out by the crime syndicate to murder the girl who sat across the table from you? To murder you, yourself? The thought was like cold water spilling into his veins and into his stomach; it was like an icy wind on the back of his neck. You read about other people shot down, murdered, but they were only names, without warmth or dimension. But this time it was different. This time it was you who had been marked for death. You.

Kennett swallowed against the dry ache that was suddenly in his throat. He didn't watch Karen as she talked. He listened to her, his mind recording each bitter word and intonation, but all the while his eyes studied, searched, probed each occupant of the tables. Fat men and skinny ones, tall men and short ones; smiling or unsmiling, talkative, silent, watchful, enigmatic. What did a gungel look like? Who, of all those men, were the ones waiting to kill?

"You'd have to know Phil Gaffin to understand why he did it," Karen was saying. Her voice was low, and not too steady, like a girl who had been deeply hurt and wanted

to cry, but had long ago forgotten how.

"Maybe Phil was too ambitious; maybe he was too cynical; maybe it was just that he had so much pressure put on him that he couldn't do anything else but fall in line. I don't really know, Dave. I don't guess it matters much, now."

Kennett brought his gaze back to the girl. He said incredulously, "You say Gaffin was one of the big wheels in the syndicate?"

She nodded slowly, and there was a glistening wetness on her eyes. "He was head of the Crime Investigation Committee at Pacific City, but in some way, by bribery, threats, or who-knows-what, the syndicate got control of him. He must have hated himself for selling out, and the time came when he couldn't stand it any longer. He'd been secretly keeping records on the syndicate, and he had them with him when he crashed his plane against the mountain that day last winter."

Kennett's mouth was tight. "That's your reason for wanting to locate Gaffin's plane?"

She nodded. "It's also the reason the syndicate is trying to prevent me from finding the wreckage. Only they'd rather my death looked like an accident, instead of murder."

"How did you learn all this about Gaffin?"

Karen's smile was bitter. "He told me. He radioed a false location during the storm, and deliberately crashed his plane at another place. He made his way down the mountain on foot, caught a bus at Banning, and went to Indianapolis, where I live. We'd been engaged once, and he came to see me. That was when he told me about himself. I only saw him that one time, Dave."

"Then the syndicate caught up with him?"

She closed her eyes, shuddered. "They were thorough. His body was found in a

stolen gasoline truck that had been wrecked and burned." Her voice was thin-edged, sick. "There wasn't even enough left for the police to identify him, Dave. But it was Phil. I know it was Phil."

Kennett looked around the room, and most of the tables were empty. He kept hearing Karen's voice, her words eating into his brain like things acid, corrosive.

She had gone to Gaffin's rented room, but the landlady had told her he had paid his bill and checked out. No forwarding address. All doubt had drained from Karen's mind, then. The crime syndicate had tracked him across the country, caught up with him, murdered him. She knew that now, beyond any doubt. And she knew that before Phil had died the killers *must* have tortured information out of him about the records he had kept. About the files and photographs, the records of money taken in by the rackets, and the bribes paid to city, county, and state officials.

But he wouldn't have told them about the spool of wire. That would be the one secret he had taken to the grave with him.

"Phil had made a wire recording of everything he'd had in his files about the syndicate," Karen said. "It gave names, places, and all the proof anyone could need to break the syndicate. He left that spool of wire in the wreckage of his plane, Dave."

"Then Gaffin told you how to find the plane, Karen?"

"Yes."

"Let's go, then," Kennett said. He got out of his chair, at once restless and impatient. "The syndicate's got two strikes on you now. Your only chance to live through the third is to get that spool of wire, and quick!"

THE TRUCK swung out of the side road as they drove out of the Las Flores grounds and turned into the highway. It was a big semi, and Kennett saw it

briefly through the rear-view mirror, waiting for it to grind up its speed and high-ball past. It didn't, content with a speed that rolled it along a safe distance behind Kennett's car, neither gaining nor dropping behind. Another trucker who'd parked his rig long enough to catch a few winks before making his night's run across Cajon Pass and the Mojave desert beyond. Kennett put the truck out of his mind.

"We'll go up the mountain first thing in the morning," he told the girl beside him.

He felt her worried glance on him. "Shouldn't we tell the police first, Dave?"

"Tell them what?" he grunted. "You said there wasn't enough left of Gaffin's body for identification. You couldn't prove the syndicate tried to kill you, and you could talk yourself blue without selling them your story about Gaffin purposely wrecking his plane thirty or more miles away from the position he reported over his radio. Sure, go ahead and tell them, Karen. But no one would believe you until you're dead."

At Vernon Street the red blinker was signaling a warning for the freight train grinding out of Cajon Pass toward the outskirts of town. Kennett braked the car to a halt, and put it out of gear, idly watching the approaching freight. It was in his mind to warn the girl beside him that locating the wrecked plane would be anything but easy, that in such rough and torn high country they might not find it at all.

"Grayback is big," he was telling her. "You've no idea how big, Karen. Canyons and ridges and any number of lesser peaks to throw your directions off. And when you're hiking at close to eleven thousand feet—"

Light flared at him through the rear-view mirror. He whipped a glance over his shoulder, and through the rear window saw the big semi rolling, rolling ponderously at them with its huge and malevolent

promise of violence and sudden death.

The answer was suddenly in Dave Kennett's mind, like a scream. This, then, was the third attempt. This was murder that would no longer wait or be avoided. He shouted at the girl beside him, a hoarse, wordless cry of futile warning. The back of the seat slammed against them and glass shattered as the heavy truck struck the rear of the Dodge. The car jolted forward, toward the rails of the approaching freight. He rammed the brake pedal desperately and heard the scraping protest of the tires on the pavement, but he couldn't stop the relentless movement of the car.

He stomped the brake pedal savagely, frantically, but there was a thirty-ton rig behind him with the massive power of its 240 horsepower diesel and the traction of its eighteen wheels, shoving him inexorably out on the tracks of the railroad. He wanted to shout at Karen to open the door and jump, but he had no voice. His breath was locked in his lungs, and in his mind was a roar of half-born thoughts and clashing fragments of panic and horror.

The locomotive's horn raged at him. The big wheels shrieked, sparks spraying as steel ground against steel. He heard the girl beside him scream. Her scream was a blade stabbing its terror into him as he released the brakes, slammed the car into gear, and drove his foot down on the gas pedal. The car lurched, leaped. Rubber wailed against the pavement. A heavy shock crashed through the car from somewhere at its rear, and there was a screech of torn steel. The rear end veered around sickeningly, and Kennett fought the wheel savagely to counter it. Then, all at once, they broke loose from the locomotive and were across the tracks and in the clear.

He braked the car to a halt, kicked the door open and piled out, lashed by a wild and senseless rage, wanting only to get his hands on the men in the truck who had

tried to do murder. He took a long, lunging stride back in the direction of the railroad tracks, and realized instantly that the men in the truck would be gone long before the freight rolled out of his way. He cursed them in a hot, hating voice, then had a brief look at the rear of his car. He turned, looked through the open door at Karen.

"Not much damage, kitten. A crumpled fender and the bumper torn off. That's about all."

Reaction struck him then. Sudden weakness spilled through him, and he felt his gorge rise. He gripped the car's door to steady himself while the tide of nausea swept through him. He grinned through the darkness at Karen, trying not to betray how he felt, trying a little foolishly, he thought, to reassure her.

"Stop trying to look brave," he heard her say. "Go 'way Dave. Damn you, I—I think I'm going to be sick."

CHAPTER FIVE

Trial By Fire

THEY HAD climbed across the highest ridges of the mountain, where the air was thin and chill and there was no trail to guide them. Far below they could see cotton-tuft clouds following their shadows across the sweep of the valley, dimly seen through the lower haze of heat.

Up here were the silence and loneliness of the primitive, the towering boulders and the tortured groping of gnarled, stunted trees. Up here were the wild blue skies, and the far winds, and the whisper of a million yesterdays.

They found the wreckage of Phil Gaffin's plane in a remote and sunless pocket between two gaunt ridges, torn and shapeless and already taking on the color of the rocks and soil around it. They saw it, and thought of the desperation of the man who had risked death in this high, trackless

country in an attempt to escape the relentless reach of a crime syndicate. Phil Gaffin had not planned carefully enough; he had not run far enough. He had been caught by murder, and all that remained to mark his life was the small spool of steel wire Kennett found in the wreckage of the plane—wire that could speak human words and tell of evil and corruption; wire that was, even on this high shoulder of the mountain, a magnet for murder. As they returned to where they had left their car, Kennett saw the flames of the forest fire racing toward them and he knew that this was a death they might not escape.

They stood at the edge of the lake and watched the forest fire break across the rim of the ridge. The flames marched steadily forward through the tall pines, fanned by fitful gusts of wind. Smoke roiled upward across the shoulder of the mountain, a churning yellowness that swallowed the sun and smeared the blue out of the sky. Somewhere high above an airplane droned in watchful circles.

“By now a couple hundred fire fighters are getting ready to make a stand. The spotter up there in that lane will tell them where.”

Karen’s face was grey from exhaustion, the tone of her voice thin and not too steady. “What about our chances, Dave?”

“We’ll make it.”

“But how can they possibly get here in time?” she cried out at him.

He pointed up-slope in the direction of the saddle that topped the steeply tilted canyon. “That’s where they’ll make their line. Up there, somewhere. But we’ve got the lake, Karen. We’ll make it now.”

There was life all about them in the trees, frantic creatures fleeing the terror of wildfire. Grey squirrels raced through the upper limbs of the trees, scolding each other in panic; a bobcat bounded across a clearing and was lost in a tangle of boulders up-slope, a pair of does appeared

on the opposite shore of the lake, testing the air in head-high alarm, then breaking up-canyon in frantic flight.

The wind shifted and rolled smoke down across the lake. Karen broke into a spasm of coughing, and something close to open terror ran through her eyes.

Kennett put his arm around her. “Easy now, kitten.”

She tried to laugh it off. “Any time you think I need it, just slug me.”

“You’re doing fine, Karen.”

“I never imagined a forest fire could be like this. I’m scared. I can’t help it.”

“That makes two of us then.”

“You, too, Dave?”

“Getting trapped in a fire like this one is not my idea of healthful recreation.”

The fire was running close, driving waves of heat ahead of it, forcing them back into the lake. The water was cold, even in this mid-summer month, fed by underground springs. They waded deeper into the lake as the flames advanced relentlessly through the towering pines. And then they were treading water in the center of the lake, ducking under the surface frequently to escape the tortures of the heat.

The line of flames swept on past the lake as swiftly as it had attacked, leaving blackened skeletal trees behind it. The heat diminished. The smoke thinned. A breeze fanned down across the lake, sweet and clean.

“You all right, Karen?”

“Yes, but a little cold.” She shivered.

He watched her as they waded out of the water. The cold of the lake had brought color back into her face, and there was less weariness to be seen in her eyes. Not an easy-to-break china doll, this girl. Plenty of bounce and snap-back. Too bad she had been forced to give up the protection of her corduroy skirt during their long flight from the flames. The deeply tanned skin of her thighs had suffered from the

brush. But she couldn't have made it otherwise, though, the way that tough cloth had snagged in the brush and slowed her running.

"Nylon and lace," Kennett drawled. "Not very practical for hiking, it would seem, but certainly most attractive, Karen."

COLOR FLAMED under her tan. "A gentleman wouldn't look."

"That kind of gentleman, you find only under tombstones, little one."

He peeled off his shirt and wrung the water out of it. She tied it around her waist, and he saluted her gesture toward modesty with a wide grin.

"A man's shirt," he said, "never had it so good."

The men were waiting when they got back to the road where they had left their car. There were two of them, and it was the tall one who showed them the gun. He took it out from under the sport shirt he was wearing, and his eyes were as round and hard as the ends of the bullets glinting in the cylinder chambers.

"This time, people," he said softly, "you get taken care of my way."

The man with the gun was tall, heavy across the shoulders. Death lurked in his unwinking gaze. His mouth was thin and tight.

"My way, Benny," he said to the man beside him. "You hear me?"

The other man sighed. "All right, Sid."

"You had three tries," Sid said. "Muffed them all. Make it look like an accident, you kept saying. Anyone tell us we had to be brainy on this job, Benny?"

The short man sighed again. "Talk, talk." His eyes were deep brown and moist looking. His gaze studied the yet damp shirt Karen was wearing as a skirt, and he smiled up at Kennett. "Nice legs. Real nice. Too bad about her."

An ache was rising in Kennett's throat.

He swallowed. "Look, if it's the wire you want—"

The short man, Benny, nodded pleasantly. "Gaffin mentioned the wire, just before he died. Seems he must have kept his wire recorder busy most of the time. But what good did it do him?" He shrugged his neat shoulders. "No good at all, friend."

Kennett said hoarsely, "It's the wire you want. All right, then you can have it."

He started to reach into his pocket and the tall man's gun tilted swiftly up at him. The tall man snickered. "We can have it, he says. Nice of the man, ain't it Benny?"

Benny's moist, brown eyes were drifting across to Karen again. "Nice legs. Very nice."

The tall man grunted sourly. "Forget 'em. With what the syndicate is paying us for this job, you can buy every calendar dame in the country."

"This one, though, Sid—"

"Just another dame, Benny."

Kennett knew what fear was. It was the cold pitting his stomach and gall rising in his throat; it was the heavy slugging of his heartbeats; it was a roaring in his temples. This, then, was fear. But it was a fear that came out of his thoughts about Karen and the murder that was soon to come to her. She was fumbling with the shirt around her waist; he didn't know why.

He said in a hoarse, begging tone, "Look, it's the wire you want. The girl knows nothing. She's just a kid who happened to know Phil Gaffin once, and she couldn't hurt the syndicate without the evidence that's on the wire. What good could it possibly do for you to murder her?"

The tall man motioned with his gun. "We'll go back into the bushes. You first, then the girl."

The shirt fluttered and fell from around Karen's waist. Kennett heard the soft, low

(Continued on page 66)

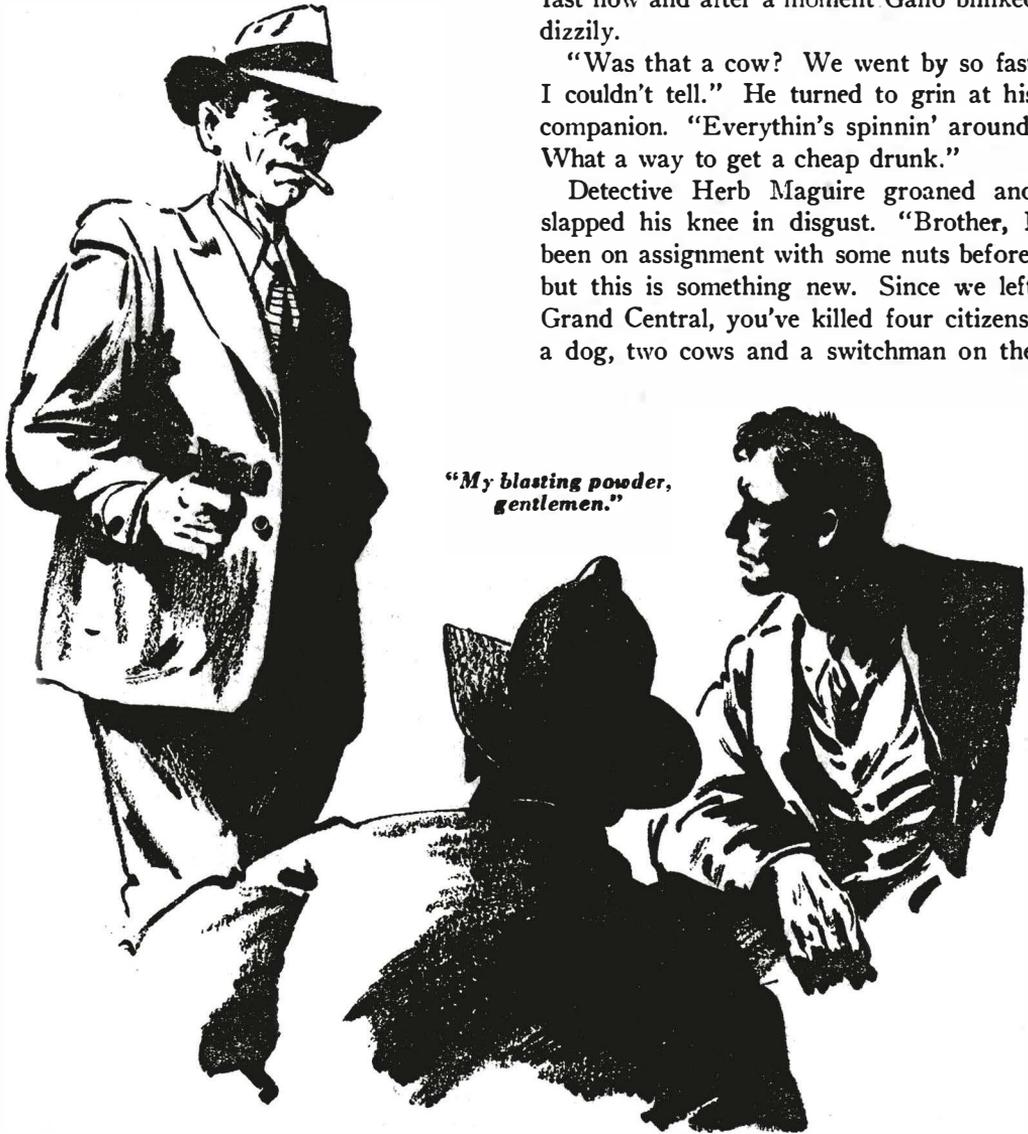
ONE AGAINST MURDER

By
Frank Scott York

DETEKTIVE GALLO pressed the cold nose of his .38 against the train window and squinted along the barrel. The train was moving very fast now and after a moment Gallo blinked dizzily.

"Was that a cow? We went by so fast I couldn't tell." He turned to grin at his companion. "Everythin's spinnin' around. What a way to get a cheap drunk."

Detective Herb Maguire groaned and slapped his knee in disgust. "Brother, I been on assignment with some nuts before, but this is something new. Since we left Grand Central, you've killed four citizens, a dog, two cows and a switchman on the



Goodlos knew all the ropes—till the dumbest pair of honest cops that money couldn't buy came up with the one that hanged him!

tracks. Not to mention the six traffic lights you shot out and the wheels off a pushcart." He groaned anew at the recitation. "Why don't you put the rod away? And load it! This boy we're supposed to be tailin' don't play games."

Gallo grinned cheerfully and took the bullets from his side pocket, poked them into the .38 and put the gun in its shoulder rig.

"I just like to keep in practice," he explained. "You'll be grateful if Goodlos should try to shoot it out."

Herb stared moodily out the window. "The crumb don't even know we're on the train. And I think if you ever really fired that heater of yours, a little flag would come out of the barrel with 'BANG' written on it. A real character you are, Gallo. Right out of burlesque and I wish you was as dead."

"I pull down the same money you do, Herbie boy," the smaller man pointed out with gentle logic.

"Yeah, I know. They must have pulled you off the beat just so's the taxpayers wouldn't start asking embarrassing questions."

"As a matter of fact, kid," Gallo said with dignity, "even you remember how the papers played up my incredible heroism in snagging them four heisters on Lexington. In the dead of night it was, and there I stood, my back to the wall and these four hoods—not a one under seven foot tall—blastin' at me with tommy guns. . . ."

"The way I read about it," Herb said coldly, "they was four kids on a reefer jag and the four together weighed as much as you do with your elevator shoes on. The tommy-guns was plastic things off the five and dime counter."

Gallo gestured airily. "You read the wrong paper."

"I don't know," Herb said wearily. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you, Gallo. Always clownin' it up."

"Uh—Herbie, old buddy, I wonder if—"

"Oh no, you don't," his companion cut in, paling a little. "You don't tap me again, ever. Like you pointed out, you pull down the same rocks as I do."

"Don't be a cynic, Herbie. I was after information, that's all. You know I was called out of the sack to make this trip. I guess the commish figured you'd louse things up alone. Anyway, what with bein' sort of fogged up so early in the mornin', I kind of missed out on the instructions."

"I knew it!" Herb howled. "You was at your mamma's eatin' lasagna and drinkin' that lousy red and you're hung over again."

"As I was sayin', Herbie, my ex-pal," Gallo said with quiet hurt, "I am fogged up a little from lack of sleep, and—"

"All right, Gallo, I'll give it to you once more. And if you louse up this detail, you and I are through. For good, this time. Maybe we'll be dead, so I'm through with you as of now!"

"Sometimes, Herbie, I don't think you fully appreciate me."

"I would appreciate your listening," Herb snarled. "This is not marbles. Two cars up from us there is a compartment containin' one, 'Schlammin' Sammy Goodlos." He raised a sarcastic eyebrow. "I presume you have heard about Sammy?"

"I am personally acquainted with six widows who achieved that status through Sammy," Gallo nodded.

"I'm relieved you know that much about him. Now, Sammy is rumored to be pulling his potatoes from the fire and leavin' the good old U.S.A. for parts unknown. He don't know it, but we've had a tail on him for two months now. Our pigeons have informed us this train ride is the first leg of his one-way trip. The commish and parties higher up do not care for the idea. It seems there is evidence piling up that Sammy's potatoes—the ones I mentioned a minute ago—are used to make a mash from which thousands of barrels of tax-free alcohol is annually produced."

"I read the papers," Gallo protested.

"You don't have to give me his history."

"I am workin' under the assumption you are a moron," Herb explained patiently.

"Oh, okay then. Go ahead."

"Our pigeons," Herb continued, "also tell us Sammy is carryin' over a million in medium-sized bills. Our job is to stay with him till he gets off this train when the Feds take over. Ain't it nice of the government to trust us like that?"

"I'm all choked up," Gallo agreed.

"It's a wrap-up . . . a soft touch. Sammy is sittin' in his compartment thinkin' what a nice world it is and all we gotta do is keep him from thinkin' otherwise while the government boys prepare a nice, warm cell for him."

"It sounds like good duty," Gallo nodded, "unless Sammy is aware of our presence. It could thusly develop into a situation fraught with peril, so to speak."

"Impossible," Herb said scornfully. "Would he have climbed on this train in the dead of morning if he thought he was bein' set up for a pinch? No, Gallo, you can sit back and count your sins. This is gonna be a quiet trip and except for your company I might have enjoyed it. Unless," he ended ominously, "you figger a way to ~~lose~~ the deal up."

"Your faith in me has got me choked up again," Gallo said, wiping a nonexistent tear from his eye.

"Now, are there further questions, little man?"

"Yeah," Gallo said after a pause. "Who just knocked on our door?"

"Uncross your chubby little legs and go see," Herb snarled. "If it's Sammy Goodlos, just say bang, bang at him."

IT WAS the porter who, while definitely no Greek, was bearing a gift . . . A tinsel, beribboned package. "For you, gentlemen. They's a card within, I am given to understand."

Gallo stared at the package and at its bearer. He dug in his pocket and came

up with a quarter. "Here," he grinned, "to further that college education."

The two men put the package on the seat and prodded it suspiciously.

"A poison snake?" Gallo suggested thoughtfully.

"Or one of them little novelty clocks that blows your head off when you open the wrapping." Herb shrugged and picked the package up. "He wouldn't dare."

It was a bottle of club soda.

Gallo scratched his head. "I heard the railroad was after customers, but this is ridiculous."

Herb opened the note and read silently. When he finished he swore mildly and handed it to the smaller detective, who read:

Dear Maguire and Gallo:

Why don't you pick up a bottle of soda somewhere and join me for a drink in my compartment? I got the other ingredient. Real stuff, honest. It's a long trip and you boys looked thirsty when you got on the train.

It was signed simply, "Sammy."

Gallo turned to his companion and said politely, "You was sayin' somethin' about a setup? I now see to what you was ferrin'. The club soda here, and the whiskey two cars down."

"All right, wise guy. This is serious. How in hell—"

"It's simple, kid. Pigeons don't necessarily play one side of the ball game."

Herb scratched his jaw. "Well, if he knows he's got company, it would be easier for us to keep him company. While the cat's in one compartment, the mouse might skip the other."

"And," Gallo pointed out, "there's bound to be a few milkstops between here and Albany. Whilst we sat here, our mouse could fly the coop, to keep the discussion animalwise."

Herb sighed. "Well, moosejaw, let's get the hell up there and see what gives."

Gallo patted the imperceptible bulge of

his .38. "Now ain't you sorry you didn't take target practice with me?"

Sammy Goodlos was a man who loved to laugh. He proved it for a full three minutes while Herb and Gallo stood in his compartment biting their lips and pushing back red waves of gathering ire.

"Oh," Sammy wheezed, "if you could've seen your faces when I opened the door."

Herb glared at the overlapping, blood-diffused neck under its burden of fleshy, ugly head. "When you laugh, Goodlos," he commented, "you look just like a fat hyena with a nervous breakdown."

"Sit down, you two. You can't make me sore today. I ain't laughed like that since they tried to pin a double murder rap on me."

The two detectives sat down on the seat facing him. "For a guy that's headin' toward the kiss-off," Gallo observed, "our chubby pal is really yakkin' it up."

"You mean the Federal boys waitin' for me in Chicago?"

Herb shifted uneasily. "I'll bet you know how much dough I got in the bank, too."

"Federal Trust or that checkin' account at the First National?" Goodlos had stopped laughing, but this broke him up again.

To Gallo's inquiring glance, Herb nodded dumbly. His throat was very dry.

"I ain't no mystic," Goodlos explained weakly. "It's just I like to find out what a man's price is. You, Maguire, should come cheap. Two-hundred and seventeen bucks is a disgraceful amount of security for old age."

"I don't smoke or eat," Herb said sourly.

"Don't look now," Gallo said, "but I smell a buy comin' up."

"No," Herb said. "Sammy knows it's against the law. Don't you Sammy?"

"And you, Gallo," Goodlos said, "ain't even got a bank account."

"That don't mean a thing, Sammy. You should see the bumps in my mattress."

Herb lit a cigarette impatiently. "Let's

stop playing, shall we? Goodlos, you know you're washed up, don't you? I got a badge that sez I don't have to wait till Chicago to put the grab on you."

The fat man grinned thinly. "What's the make?"

"Oh, come now, Sam! You take your pick from murder to peddlin' your own one hundred and eighty proof. It's all backed up this time. You'd be surprised how much mystery about you has been cleaned up by the downtown boys."

"Really, now," Goodlos sneered. His good mood was giving way to irritation. "Things look black for ole Schlammer, don't they?"

"You might say," Gallo pointed out evenly, "there ain't a schlam left in ole Schlammer."

"Are you gonna be cute?" Herb asked, "or do we remain pals? Just sit back and don't make plans, Sammy. When we hit Albany the ride is cut short. With the knowledge you seem to have, it is doubtful you will lead the Feds to more than a lot of mileage."

"You mean I have spoiled everybody's party?" Goodlos protested sorrowfully. "I even brought along some false faces to liven the sport up."

"Herbie, kid," Gallo said quietly, "I don't much care for the attitude he's taken. I would say off hand that we was the one bein' taken."

"Once in a great while," Herb nodded soberly, "you speak little pearls of wisdom. What's up, Sammy?"

The heavy man chuckled and mouthed a cigar. "First off, could you boys use twenty G's apiece?"

Herb looked pained. "What a silly question. You know I'm independently wealthy. What a laugh my rich, eccentric, but lavish old daddy would have if he could hear you speak in such low numerals."

"And as for me," Gallo said, "I'm married to a retired burlesque queen now writin' best sellers. She pampers me some-

thin' awful and there ain't a day I don't get an indorsed royalty check."

"What does all the double-talk mean?" Goodlos snapped.

Herb stared at him, unblinking. "It means if you open your crumby mouth about a buy just once more, my homely little friend and I will walk over you till your lungs is squeezing out your eyes."

Goodlos shrugged. "I'm shocked."

"You don't look it," Gallo said. "What's pitch number two?"

"I'll lead up to it with a little story. You boys will get a laugh out of it."

"I'm chuckling already," Herb said, loosening his gun.

"It's about a guy like me. He has all the dough he wants and just needs the years to spend it, so he decides to sell out his various business enterprises. He does. He knows, however, that there are many parties interested in his future plans, so he lets these parties think they got him on a leash. He even takes a train knowin' both ends is crawlin' with law. What better protection against the common hoods that are also interested in this guy?"

GALLO SHOOK his head slowly. "You mean you crossed your pals? The ones that bought you out? Tch, tch."

The fat man quivered with mirth. "You see, when I sold out my interests I neglected to inform the buyers the company was dissolving due to pressure from high places. The high places you guys represent."

"You've known all along about the Feds closing in on you?"

"I have a payroll that extends to the damn'dest places. You fellas wouldn't believe it."

Herb smiled politely. "Oh, I'll bet I would. Don't be modest Sammy."

Gallo looked uneasy. "Go on with the story."

The mobster shrugged. "You have most of it. You boys are protectin' me from the

unhappy buyers—they probably know by now—and everything is jolly."

"Except for one thing," Herb said. "You're in a hollow log with trouble at both ends."

Goodlos coughed loudly. "No," he said, "a guy can always blast a hole in the middle."

The compartment door swung open and two men came in fast. They held guns and the guns took an immediate bearing on the two detectives' foreheads.

"My blasting powder, gentlemen," Goodlos waved, smiling. "They are probably very happy about the forty G's you refused. I promised them they could split it if you didn't play."

Herb shook his head wonderingly and went for his .38. One of the men leaned across Gallo's lap and whipped his .45 across the bigger man's jaw. Herb's head bounced off the cushion and he grinned bleakly.

"At least my report can say I tried."

Gallo's voice shook a little. "Herbie, don't be a chump. I've gotten kind of used to you—like a guy gets used to a headache."

Sammy Goodlos stood up quickly. All amiability had vanished and his face was a cold, dangerous thing. "There's not much time. You two, stand by the door. If these coppers get gay, cut 'em down. I don't want 'em to get gay."

"I take it," Herb said quietly, "Albany is the last stop."

"That's the hole in the middle of the log you mentioned," Goodlos snarled. "Now, I want a straight answer. Do you play my way, or do we leave you here in the first stages of rigor mortis?"

"What's your way?" Gallo asked. He was sweating.

"I know the whole routine," the fat man sneered. "You're supposed to call your office during the layover in Albany . . . tell them how peaceful and well behaved I been. If the call ain't made, the Feds know somethin' has soured. Right?"

The silence was answer enough.

"What an insult to my intelligence," Goodlos complained to the two goons at the door. "I'm supposed to carry a tail halfway around the world without knowin' it. You get it, boys? They got me tied in with the national crime syndicate, whatever the hell that is. I'm supposed to lead the hungry little kids to the cookie jar. Me! Schlammin' Sammy, who was around when most of these cub scouts was swipin' doughnuts from the delivery truck! How insulted can a guy get!"

"You're right, boss," one of the goons said heatedly. "It's a dirty shame."

"Shut up. So they stick two underpaid, undernourished, underbrained tin badges on my train and think it'll be enough to hold me to my seat. Fat, dumb and happy, that's what they think I am!"

"Sammy, you're raving," Gallo said tiredly. "You proved what a big man you are."

"Okay, copper, I'll stick to fact. We leave the train at Albany. You make your call. As far as the Feds know, you get back on the train and go to bed. Everybody is happy. Maybe even the Feds go to bed till the train comes in tomorrow. And when it does come in—well—" Sammy threw his hands up in mock dismay—"no Schlammer. And no coppers! The Schlammer is still too cute for comfort. Boys, let's go break the bad news to J. Edgar."

"Who's meeting you in Albany?" Herb asked.

"Friends," Goodlos smirked. "Important friends. The kind of friends the Feds hoped I'd lead them to."

"And you want us along just for laughs?"

"That's right, copper. Only it ain't you gonna do any laughing. You know what I got planned? I'm havin' a picture made of both you boys, sittin' around a table with me."

"Goody, goody," Gallo said, "we're gonna have a party."

The fat man glared at him. "I will have my arms around each of your shoulders. You will both be smilin' at me like I was Lana Turner. A bottle of whiskey on the table alongside a stack of dough."

"I get it," Herb said. "You're gonna run for mayor."

"Two wise guys. Go ahead, make with the cracks. The party's on Sammy. Anyway, as I said, you will be smilin' because beside the camera you will be lookin' into more heavy artillery than they used in the Civil War. Copies of the pictures will be put in your pockets. A quart of whiskey will be spoon fed to each of you till—"

"Not your whiskey!" Gallo said, horrified.

"That's right, shamus. My whiskey. You'll wish you was dead."

"We won't be?"

Goodlos started to chuckle. "Maybe you will be when they pick you up out of the gutter."

Herb stared. "Why, you fat pig! I get it. Gallo, Sammy is going to dump us outside the local lockup with a snootful of poison likker and with them pictures in our pockets."

The two detectives glared at Goodlos as he wheezed and snorted in an explosion of mirth.

The goons at the door grinned at each other and shook their heads in admiration.

Herb felt the sharp prod of Gallo's elbow and the two men left the seat as one.

It didn't last long—there really wasn't enough room in the compartment to throw an honest punch—but Herb went for Goodlos with a short right cross to the second and third chins. The shock of the blow squeezed a yelp of pain from his chest, and his knuckles felt like marbles rattling in a paper bag. The fleshy face went pop-eyed with pain and blood sprayed down over white-on-white.

Gallo wasn't so lucky. He tried to throw two punches at once and neither of them landed. The men at the door moved back

a half step and clubbed the detective to the floor with the butts of their automatics. From a great, telescoped distance he saw feet jump over him and seconds later someone bounced hard on the floor next to him.

The face glaring at him seemed hazily familiar though it was blood-smearred and torn.

"Gallo," the face snarled, twisting on the floor so it could see him better, "the way you went at them two guys it looked like you was dancin' around a Maypole."

Gallo smiled blearily. "Shut up, you big ape."

THE NIGHT AIR was cold and the two men stiffened from the shock of it on their battered faces.

Guns nestled up to the small of their backs. Goodlos stepped down on the platform and scowled up and down the length of the train. All the other passengers had left.

"Take them to that phone booth over by the newsstand. The cars will be waiting around by the baggage exit."

Herb turned to the squat, powerful Goodlos and felt satisfaction at the new and somewhat messy twist his nose had taken.

Goodlos saw the look.

"It's been busted before, copper," he said softly, "but never in six places at once. It was the most foolish thing you boys ever did."

Herb's grin turned into a pucker of pain. "You mean no pictures?"

"I mean no pictures. You spoiled the effect. Now it becomes a different kind of party."

Gallo looked pleased. "We don't hafta drink that corn of yours?"

"Why should I waste it? It gets a buck-fifty a gallon on the open market."

They neared the phone booth. The platform was deserted except for the news dealer and he was engrossed in a movie magazine. The two goons walked behind

the detectives, prodding them on viciously when they slowed.

Gallo stepped into the booth. Goodlos grabbed his arm and yanked him out. "Don't get gay, copper. Your partner does the phonin'. You think I ain't been briefed?"

Herb shrugged. "You'd make a fortune guessin' weights."

"No guess, Maguire. Everything was blueprinted and I got the master copy. I told you, I got a big payroll."

Herb slipped into the booth. "You fellas wait for me in the waiting room." He started to close the door but Goodlos snarled and caught it.

"I never saw such wise guys! You think I wouldn't have you blasted right here and now. Get the operator, Maguire, and if you think I don't know you're supposed to call the commissioner direct, just try gettin' another number. They'll find your body right in this booth. Hurry up, the boys outside will get nervous."

Herb licked his swollen and split lips.

"No use," Gallo said quietly. "Do it right, Herb. These guys got everything."

He got through to the commissioner's office and spoke to Captain Mallory, as instructed. The goon nearest him kept the bulge in his overcoat pocket just under his nose.

The captain snapped, "Yeah, Maguire?"

"On the nose," Herb mumbled. "Our boy is asleep."

"No trouble?"

"Nah."

"Good. Stay with it. See you when you get back."

Herb hung up and looked at Gallo sadly. "Well, moron, there goes the lifeline. Snipped right in the middle."

"All right, move out," Goodlos said.

They walked rapidly down the platform, turned left past the baggage room and got out in the street through the back.

A car across the street flicked its lights nervously.

The detectives were helped into the back seat by rough and pushing hands.

"Sit 'em on the floor," someone grated.

"I catch cold easy," Gallo protested.

Goodlos jumped into the front of the car. "They been crackin' wise all night," he complained. "A couple of birds."

They were forced down, back to back, their feet resting against the doors. A fist exploded against Herb's ear. "Just sit quiet, you two," the snarl said.

Herb shook his head dizzily. "Gallo," he complained, "will you keep that fat mouth of yours closed."

There were four men on the back seat, two in front. Goodlos told the two hoods on the street to take the bus.

The man behind the wheel punched the starter button and said, "Sammy, you got the dough?"

"What do you think?"

"Only askin'. The Salter said not to bring you to his place unless you had the dough." He chuckled. "It was on the radio."

"What was?" Goodlos said irritably.

"The Feds threw a blanket over your operation this afternoon. Pulled in nine of the twelve guys that you sold out to."

"You mean there's three of them lookin' for me?" Goodlos said nervously.

"Nah. They was killed resistin' the Feds. You should'a heard the Salter laugh."

Herb found he had been soundlessly mouthing the name. The Salter . . . the Salter. He felt Gallo's excited nudge at the same time he remembered.

Silas Salter, the lifer who'd broken the gate at an upstate hoosegow just after his trial. Two years ago and there hadn't been a sniff of him since. Well, well.

They rode for twenty minutes and felt the car turn into a graveled drive. Fifteen minutes actually, Herb reflected. Five of the twenty had been spent losing a hotrod full of kids that wanted to play games with the big Caddy. The one called Burt, behind the wheel, had wanted to run them

into a pole but Goodlos talked him out of it.

The detectives were blindfolded before the big car stopped grinding the gravel. They were pulled from the car and led up a flight of stairs. There were traffic noises in the distance and Herb estimated the distance was at least a mile.

"Gallo," he said softly, "are you all right?"

The small man's voice was almost in his ear. "Of course, ducky. Sweet of you to worry, though."

"Shut up, you two."

THEN THEY WERE being led over a long carpet, up another flight of stairs, winding this time, and Herb felt his shoulders brushing through a door. He sensed other men in the room; someone coughed and ice rattled in glass.

The blindfolds were pulled off and the two men blinked as they were propelled onto a low, hard-backed couch facing the center of the room.

"Well, well," Gallo muttered. "If there was a stamp machine, I'd swear this was the post office. These faces look so familiar."

The faces, eight of them, were grinning.

Herb recited their names dully, "Floyd Asher, Penthouse, Grease Levin, Pusher Dowd. I recollect you other birds but I got a faulty memory. Except for you with the cigarette holder, you got a face like a wart—it sticks with you—you're the Salter. You been a bad boy, Salter. You're under arrest. Anything you say. . . ."

"Turn him off," Salter snapped. "New York coppers, always wise guys. Don't these boys realize what the score is, Goodlos?"

"I been tellin' them all night," Sammy said. "I come to the conclusion they shoot their mouths off when they're the scarest."

Salter was a lean, immaculate man with iron grey at the temples.

The banker type. Which followed, be-

cause in his day the Salter had seen the inside of a lot of banks. Several guards had made the mistake of protesting. They would never testify.

"It's been a long time," Salter said to the others, "since I gazed on big city coppers. They look as seedy as ever." The lean jaw bit into the cigarette holder. "They even presented me with my first rap. I always wondered what made them tick. Maybe we find out, eh, boys?"

The boys tittered appreciatively.

Goodlos put his briefcase on the big, oak desk. "Here it is. Everything like clockwork. We got our million-two. The citizens of New York got the impression crime is cleaned up because all the punks is out of the way and now we can start buildin' all over again."

Salter smiled at him. "Fine work, Mr. Goodlos. I told you it was airtight."

Just like a banker approving a loan, Herb thought sourly.

Goodlos grinned. "I never believed two heads was better than one, till this happened." He turned to the detectives, still grinning. "See boys? Two heads is better than one."

"The guy that throws the switch upstate is gonna approve too," Gallo said. "Twice the regular fee."

"You won't live to see it, copper."

"Gentlemen," the Salter frowned, "let's keep things friendly." He smiled at the detectives. "Except for that one brief instant of hard feeling when we kill you."

"I got to admit," Herb said, "your blueprint makes ours look like one for an erector set."

The Salter nodded. "It was rather well handled, wasn't it."

What the hell's the use of stalling, Herb thought angrily, but the smoky air felt good in his lungs, better than any air ever had felt and it hadn't been a bad life.

He grinned. "You two planned the whole deal, eh? Things was closin' in on Sammy and you saw a chance to get out

with a whole skin and a fresh start. Not to mention them Fort Knox mash notes in the satchel."

At his side, Gallo exclaimed, "The cleverness of it, Herb! What sheer cleverness!"

Goodlos frowned. "They're clownin' again."

"While we and the Feds worked like mules buildin' up a case, Ole Sammy here was settin' up his suckers for the sell-out and goin' right along with us so we wouldn't catch wise. Astounding!"

The Salter pouted. "Don't forget, boys, he had my help. I let it be known I was bidding for Sammy's shooting match. It relieved any suspicion on the part of competitive buying and sent the market value way up." He gestured grandly toward the briefcase. "To that much!"

Goodlos snorted through the crushed nose. "Enough of this. Let's toss 'em to the boys. See what the big crumb did to my face?"

"I don't know," Gallo said critically, "if it don't help you, Sammy. Instead of bein' revoltin' looking, you're only ugly now. My friend doesn't have much of a punch but he seems to have corrected some earlier disfiguration."

"See what I mean," Goodlos snarled.

The Salter stood up casually. "It is time, gentlemen. Believe me when I say, from the very bottom of my heart, it will be an honor and a pleasure to have you killed. I dislike policemen intensely. They have taken some very good years off my life." He smiled gently but Herb saw the hate burning in his eyes.

"Penthouse and Dowd," Salter said softly. "You may do the honors. Right there, while they sit with their mouths open, trying to figure a way to stall just a little bit longer."

From somewhere downstairs there was an explosion of sound.

Goodlos whirled, stared at the door. The Salter lost his urbanity and stuttered frantically, "W—what the hell's goin' on down

there?" He glared at Goodlos. "Was you tailed?"

"No, of course not. They shot the door down." He ran to the window and screamed back over his shoulder, "Bulls! All the bulls in the world! Creepin' around the house, in the trees. . . ." A spotlight from the front of the house sent the heavy man dodging back. "A lousy frame!" he screamed.

Herb turned to Gallo and remarked, "There is going to be a hell of a lot of shooting."

They exploded from the couch and hit the two nearest men below the knees. The Salter was bellowing orders but the men were out of hand, howling with fear and falling over each other to get through the door.

Herb saw Goodlos running toward him, the gun in his hand pumping wicked, red tongues of sound. He rolled over on top of the man he'd tackled, wrestled the gun away from him. His hip blossomed with a sharp, burning agony but he got the gun up with Goodlos still yards away. His bullet smashed the heavy man backwards over the desk, his face a red smear of frozen hate.

Gallo had crawled to the wall, reached up and threw the light switch. Bullets ate the wallpaper next to his head and he went down again, rolled toward the couch.

There was shooting in the hall now, but it didn't last. Someone sobbed with pain and it died fast, with the shooting.

Herb was on his stomach, panting, clawing at the sticky pain behind him. It had to happen, he thought frantically. I always knew I'd catch one there sooner or later.

The lights went on with the last of the shooting in the hall. Policemen swirled in the room in a blue, shouting tidal wave.

Gallo came out from behind the couch. He spotted a familiar figure crawling behind the bar in the far corner. The police stared at him as he exploded past them and dove on the Salter.

It was quick . . . and messy.

He dragged the limp figure out by the heels.

Herb got to his knees in time to see Captain Mallory puff into the room. "Captain, you take a jet plane?"

The red face beamed. "Great work, boys. No, we had it arranged for your call to be switched back to an Albany number."

"You mean, you knew?"

The captain coughed embarrassedly. "Well, Maguire, we owe you an explanation and I'll be brief. We let Goodlos think he was conning us through this whole thing, planted phony tips with his pigeons—"

"You mean everybody on the force knew it but Gallo and me?" Herb tried to stand but couldn't make it.

"Are you bleeding, Maguire?"

The kneeling detective colored violently. "Just a scratch."

Captain Mallory looked around the room with satisfaction. "We had a couple of boys dressed like kids try and tail you in a hotrod, but your driver lost them. It looked bad for a while, but lo and behold, we pick up two of Goodlos's boys waitin' for a bus on the corner just across from the railroad station."

Herb snorted. "Kids in a hotrod! What a hokey idea."

"Not so hokey. They had a radio and confirmed the direction you'd gone so that it checked with what the two pickups finally told us."

The big detective looked around in sudden alarm. "Hey, where's that knuckle-headed Gallo?"

He knew instantly, with the bellow of laughter from behind. He whirled, clutching his wound. "You lousy—"

"Captain," Gallo said with mock seriousness, "get this man to a hospital immediately. He's badly wounded."

"What do you mean? He just told me—"

"Never mind what he told you. Herbie here took a slug right where his brains is. That ain't serious?"



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I have not smoked a cigarette since I received my APAL. I had been in the habit of smoking between 30-40 cigarettes a day, now you see what a saving it is. I never dreamt that I could knock off smoking so easy.

W. L., Longlands.

Dear Sirs,

I received an APAL from you two years ago. I have never smoked or wished to smoke any form of tobacco. My congratulations as I at one time thought this impossible.

G. L., Fifeshire.

Dear Sirs,

I wish to add my tribute to the many you have received. Briefly my case is that after being a heavy smoker, both pipe and cigarettes, for twenty years I was able to give up smoking with the aid of APAL. I received it on October 28th, and have not smoked since.

J. C., Romford.

Dear Sirs,

I am sending for another APAL to give a friend. I am glad to say APAL has been a real Pal to me.

J. B., Durham.

Dear Sirs,

I had an APAL about two years ago and found that it did the trick.

H. J., Dorset.

Dear Sirs,

My APAL has been most successful that I have persuaded my husband to try, now that he has seen my good results.

Mrs. U. W., Middlesbrough.

Dear Sirs,

When I wrote for my APAL in February I promised to write you again if your cure has been successful. I must confess that on receipt of the APAL I stopped smoking immediately, and have not smoked since. No will power required, no craving since. To cure me in ONE day of a 25-year habit, smoking 60 a day, is beyond me. I am saving £4. 10s. 0d. per week. Being an outdoor salesman, my friends first of all laughed at me, but I am laughing much harder as it cured my wife as well, and it might interest you to know that several of my laughing friends have acquired an APAL since, and all are cured, NO failures.

W. C., London S.W. 9.

Dear Sirs,

I am simply dying to let you know the result of my using your APAL. The APAL remedy has achieved what I have been failing to do myself. I have been using 40 cigarettes a day for a period of about 10 years. Since I stopped smoking I have bought a new suit, and saving 42s. a week. God bless your APAL.

Kenrick, S. N. K., Rapo., M.E.L.F.

Send stamped addressed envelope for full details, free advice and PROOF!

HEALTH CULTURE ASSOCIATION

(Dept 45) 245 HIGH HOLBORN, LONDON, W. C. 1

THE CHUMP

By

Bess Ritter

IF A MAN named Harry Eberle hadn't firmly believed that "all cops are chumps," the odds might have been with him when he decided to pull his last job. For he was certainly experienced enough, having cracked about as many safes as any man who ever lived. This came to, approximately, a round five hundred, with a take that amounted to one million dollars.

That was his trouble—an oversupply of ego. Not that his pride in himself was ill-founded. For he was an underworld "professional" man, who'd studied in "school" from a well-lettered "master" before commencing to practice, himself. His teacher consisted of a safe-company employee, his university, a penitentiary where they were both forcibly detained, and when he finally "cum laud-ed," he did very well . . .

He became known, for example, as three different people in three different cities: The "sashweight burglar" in Philadelphia, who always knocked off the knob of a safe and then turned the tumblers with a strong piece of wire. In Baltimore, as the "steel punch thief," because he always used one to do his jimmying with. Pittsburgh knew him as simply "Old Clumsy." Here he employed a heavy mallet and was pointedly untidy. But all of these nonentities had two things in common: A. No fingerprints. B. No body.

That was something else he was ostentatiously proud of. For he'd become such an invisible thief that insurance companies were offering as much as \$1,000.00—not for his capture, but merely for a reasonably recognizable description!

They tried other stunts, too, like the night in 1940 when the city's public safety director posted six hundred policemen around a small area in an attempt to capture

"The Ghost." This added up to a gendarme for every twenty feet. By morning they were tired. But so was Harry Eberle, who'd robbed half a dozen safes before dawn started breaking—to the tune of approximately five figures of dough.

Once, he blandly told a policeman that he was renting a building next to a bank. "I'm opening one for myself, here." He did. It belonged to the Trust Company located next door. And—naturally—he withdrew all its depositors' monies.

Again, he deliberately looted sixteen safes in six days so that old-time detectives could marvel at the difficult accomplishment.

He let a rumor make the rounds that he was planning to crack a particular safe "just to see what will happen." Every cop in Baltimore appeared for the event, grimly stationed in doorways, in alleys, on roofs.

This was too much for Harry, who'd originally planned to take off for Washington, D.C., in order to pick up a tidy \$100,000 so that he could retire to a home near Chicago.

But the temptation of outwitting "those experienced old dimwits with badges instead of brains" was entirely too alluring, and he altered his plans. "And I just wish I could see their faces when I'm finished."

He did—and he was. As a result he is today working off a thirty-five year stretch in the Maryland Penitentiary. At the tender age of eighty, he will be released. Then Philadelphia will slap him with one hundred and five warrants.

But the cream of the story is not that, but this: The "experienced old dimwit with a badge for a brain" who spotted him softly melting down a dark alley turned out to be—surprise—a brand new little rookie who had just joined the force.

MURDER MOON

A Story of Revenge. . . .

HENRY'S POINT, on Florida's lower Gulf Coast, hadn't changed for the better in the six years since John Stanhope had seen it last. A miserable collection of weathered buildings and a couple of piers leaning drunkenly over the bay, it still had the drab, wormy look that artists like to capture on canvas and call local color, but which is no more than the gray decomposition of a town that has died.

On that other visit, Stanhope and Martin Connell had stopped only long enough on their way to Key West for Connell to show him what Connell claimed to be the best fishing waters in the world. They hadn't stayed long enough to get a line wet so Stanhope was sure no one would remember his face. As for his name, if he elected to give the right one, John Stanhope would have meant no more to the people of Henry's Point than it would have to anyone else within a hundred miles—Martin Connell excepted.

Three native sons were squatting on their haunches on one of the piers. They knew Stanhope was coming but their expressions remained inscrutable. They sat in silence, their eyes fixed upon their bare feet, and listened to the hollow thud of his steps as he walked along the shaky planking.

He stopped in front of them and waited a full twenty seconds for one of them to look up. "Nice day," he finally said, but that astute observation got him nowhere. "A good day for fishing."

Two of them were in their early twenties. The third was about forty-five. He took a toothpick from his mouth, flipped it into the bay and looked around slowly at Stanhope. His scrutiny was that of a man studying the conformation of a horse.

"It's fair," he said, and the younger men nodded jerkily.

"Any of you fellows know where I can charter a boat for the day?"

They looked at each other briefly, then looked down at their feet again.

Thinking they had reached a point of conversational exhaustion, Stanhope started away.

"It all depends," the old one called, and John Stanhope went back. "A charter boat ain't cheap." The others nodded in agreement.

"How well do you know these waters?" Stanhope asked.

"Good enough."

The going rate in the off-season would be about twenty. Stanhope added to it. "I'll pay thirty-five."

At that, the two young men looked at him directly for the first time, and the old man got to his feet with amazing agility. He grasped Stanhope's arm in an iron grip and looked into his face with piercing blue eyes. "I heared you to say—"

"Thirty-five."

The man grunted. "Where's your gear?"

"In the car." Stanhope pointed to the coupe at the head of the pier.

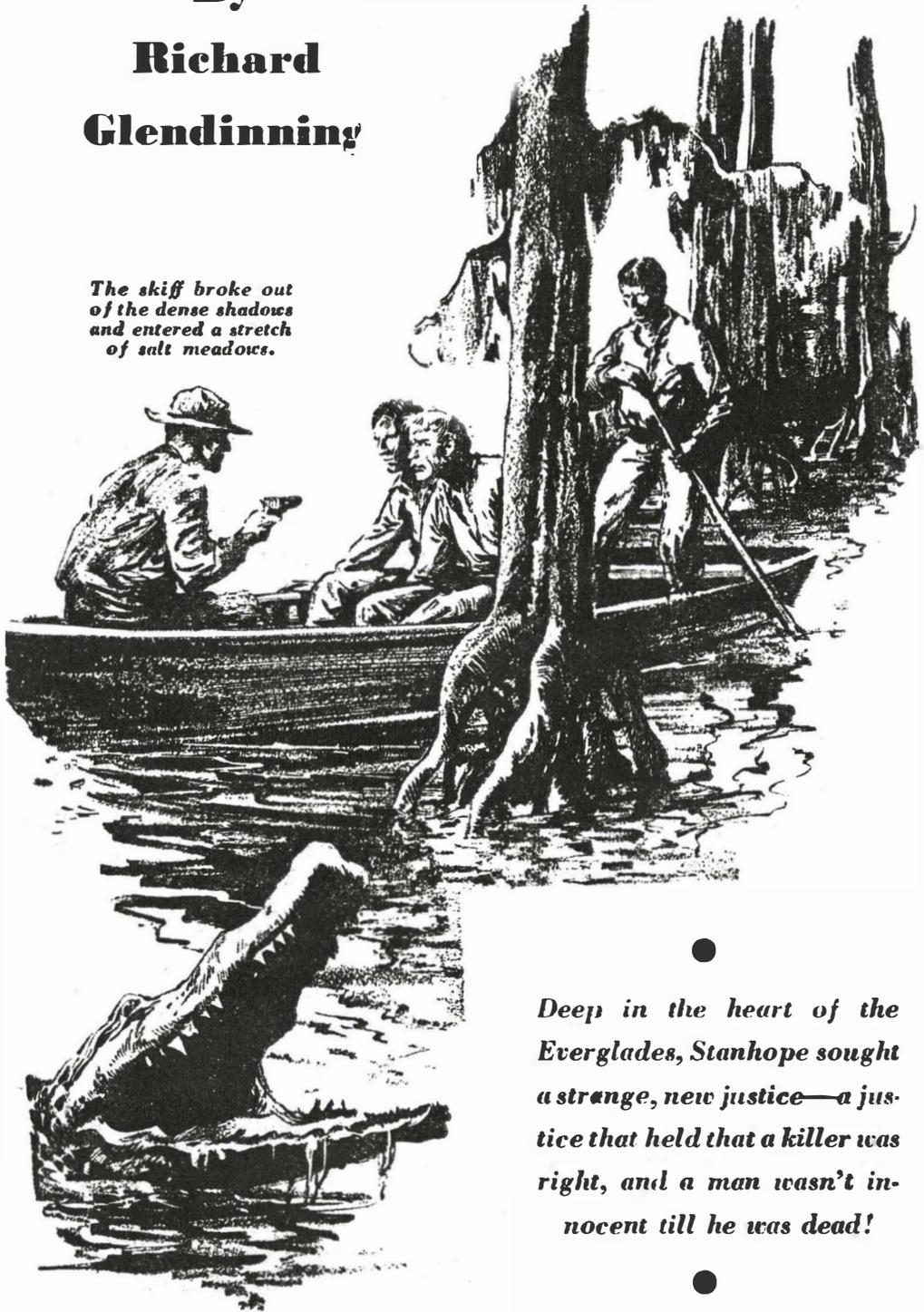
The old man thrust out his hand. "I'm Kenny Tyson."

Stanhope deliberated a moment, then gave the right one. "John Stanhope."

"Well, Mr. Stanhope, I don't mind sayin' it's a great day for fishin' and you couldn't of come to a better man." He looked to the young men, waited for their nod, and then, pointing to one of them, said, "You, Hob, hustle Mr. Stanhope's gear out of the car. Will, get to the boat and get ready to cast off." They trotted off to carry out his orders and Tyson turned to Stanhope.

By
Richard
Glendinning

*The skiff broke out
of the dense shadows
and entered a stretch
of salt meadows.*



●

*Deep in the heart of the
Everglades, Stanhope sought
a strange, new justice—a jus-
tice that held that a killer was
right, and a man wasn't in-
nocent till he was dead!*

●

"They're my boys, but it seems like they don't have no ambition without I crack the whip over them."

A moment ago it would have been easier to draw water from a dry well than to get words from Tyson, but now he chattered away at a furious clip as he walked with Stanhope to the ugly boat at the end of the pier. Stanhope wondered what would happen to the gush of conversation when he announced that he didn't want to fish at all. Hob overtook them with the tackle box, rod and lunch box. Stanhope was glad he had slipped the .380 under his shirt before leaving the car. It would have been awkward to go back for it, and there would have been the danger of their seeing him take the gun from the glove compartment.

He and Tyson got aboard the boat but the boys remained on the dock. Tyson gave them instructions about a net he wanted to find repaired when he got back, and, Will and Hob handling the lines, Tyson backed out from the dock, came about and headed for the open bay. Stanhope's gaze turned south. Somewhere down there, on the fringe of the Everglades, there was supposed to be a colony of lost people . . . voluntarily lost. They were bandits, murderers, embezzlers—criminals of all types who had fled from the law to a junglelike sanctuary.

And then there were those like Martin Connell. He had left Tampa a month ago, not to escape the law but because he feared John Stanhope.

When the boat was a good half-mile from Henry's Point, Stanhope turned to Tyson. "You say you know these waters well?"

"Ain't no one knows 'em better. I was born right here, and I'd give a dollar for every foot you could name that I ain't—"

"What about a kind of lost colony this side of the Everglades?"

TYSON'S REACTION was so immediate that the boat took a sudden yaw. Tyson brought it back on course and looked

flintily at Stanhope. "Where'd you hear a thing like that?"

"A man told me about it once." That was true. Martin Connell had mentioned it on that other trip to Henry's Point. They had been standing on a dock and Martin, pointing southward, had said there was a thieves' retreat down there that he would head for if he ever had to run from anything. He hadn't expected then that he would ever need it.

"If there is such a place—I ain't sayin' there is—but if there is such a place, how's that to you?"

"I'd like to see it."

"Ummm." Tyson's hard, tanned hands tightened on the wheel and he started to bring the boat about.

"Are you taking me there?"

"We're headin' home. Thirty-five dollars ain't enough money."

"Fifty?"

"A million and fifty ain't enough. I'm an active man in good health and I aim to stay that way."

"Suppose I give you a good reason?"

"There ain't no reason good enough to make—"

"How about this one?" Stanhope slipped the gun from under his shirt and let Tyson take a good look at it.

"That's a better reason'n most," Tyson admitted solemnly, "but there's a chance you won't use it. On the other hand, if I take you to where you want to go, there ain't no doubt but what I'll be shark bait inside of an hour." He had brought the boat completely about by that time and was heading for his home dock. "You a gover'ment man?"

"No." Stanhope had planned to say he wrote articles for magazines but the gun made that ridiculous. He told the truth. "I just got out of the state prison."

"Oh, one of them," Tyson said with quickened interest. He looked at the grayness of Stanhope's face, the premature silver in his hair. "Crashed out, eh?"

Stanhope made no reply to the query. "Anyone down there know you?"

"I'm not sure. I think a friend of mine, fellow named Connell, is there."

Tyson chewed it over for a moment. "This puts me in a funny spot. If you do belong there and I don't take you, they'll get me just as sure as if you didn't and I did. Look—suppose I do this. I'll put in as close as I dare to and then I'll halloo for this Connell. If he says it's all right, we'll go in the rest of the way. Fair enough?"

Stanhope nodded. It was the best he could do under the circumstances but he knew that there wasn't a chance in a million that Martin Connell would okay him, unless Martin saw a good opportunity to draw him in and get rid of him before he could be taken himself.

"You sound as if you've been there a good many times."

Tyson shrugged his powerful shoulders and, pointing the bow south, he said, "Enough. They need supplies once in a while and I run them down. I don't ask any questions and they trust me. That's the way I want to keep it. I got a wife to look after."

Stanhope's mouth tightened. He had once had a wife and had provided for her quite well. She had died of a broken heart and shame in the first year of his four-year stretch. Death by natural causes, with a doctor's certificate to prove it, but Martin Connell might just as well have held a gun to Norma's head and pulled the trigger.

"This fella Connell," Tyson said. "What's he look like?"

"Big and broad-shouldered with red hair, a snubbed nose and—"

"Always laughing like this?" Tyson gave a good imitation of Martin Connell's booming laugh.

"That's the man."

Connell always laughing. There in the courtroom, when the judge branded John Stanhope an embezzler and passed sentence, Connell had not been able to laugh

aloud. Yet Stanhope, staring grimly at Connell's face, had heard the laughter. The laughter had rung in his ears for four years. He wondered if Martin Connell had laughed at Norma's funeral. Probably the silent laughter that seemed loudest of all. Connell had wanted Norma badly enough to build a foolproof frame around her husband, and when he still couldn't get her, he must have found her death hilarious.

"I never seen him there until about a month ago," Tyson said. "Then one day he asked me to save up the Tampa papers and bring them to him once a week."

Connell was obviously watching for news of Stanhope's release. That pleased Stanhope. He wanted the fear to build up in Connell.

Tyson twisted and turned along a pinked shoreline, ducking around islands that were submerged even at halftide, easing past the water-rooted mangroves, working slowly along sandy beaches where the water was so shallow that Stanhope waited nervously for the boat to go aground. It was no wonder that the criminals felt safe.

At the end of a half-hour, Tyson said, "Not much further. Just around that spit of land."

"Can you see the camp from the bay?"

"Not without you see one of them down on the beach you wouldn't know there was a soul within a million miles. The huts are back a couple of hundred feet, and the only way to get right up to them is by a bayou."

"How do you know the bayou?"

"By the dead mangrove at the entrance."

That was all Stanhope wanted to know. He stepped up behind Tyson and clipped him behind the ear with his fist. He hated to do it but he couldn't run the risk of Tyson's calling to Connell. He dragged Tyson into the cramped, smelly cabin, stuffed a gag in his mouth and quickly tied him to the bunk. Then he put on Tyson's battered hat and pulled it down to shade his face. He and Tyson were of about the same build and he felt sure that he could

get close to the camp before anyone was the wiser.

He steered around the point of land and saw the dead tree immediately. No one was on the beach and he breathed easier, but then a voice called to him from the undergrowth and his stomach flipped. A man stepped out of the tangle and walked out on the sand. He shouted something but Stanhope couldn't make out the words. He waved as he hoped Tyson might have. The man stared at him a moment longer, then returned the wave and strolled down the beach with a fishing rod. Stanhope had passed the first obstacle.

The bayou was narrow but there was water enough under the keel as he steered slowly into the gloomy shadows of the black mangroves that arched over the root-stained water. There was the stink of mud and vegetable rot and saltreek, and the mosquitoes swarmed in vicious, eye-stinging, blood-hungry clouds. A rickety dock lay about thirty feet ahead and Stanhope approached it cautiously. He knew how to handle small boats but certainly not with Tyson's skill. It would take only a slight miscalculation to smash down the flimsy dock. With more luck than good seamanship, he gently nuzzled the boat against the wharf and took a half hitch about a post.

He took a last look at Tyson to make sure that he was still unconscious and that the gag and bindings were secure before he hopped from the boat to the dock. He had taken no more than three steps toward shore when a scrawny, leather-tan man in sagging khaki shorts hurried down a path to meet him.

"Tyson, did you bring any whis—" The man broke off in surprise. "You aren't Tyson."

"He couldn't make it today. He went on a drunk last night and sent me."

"Sent you to do what?" the other asked sharply.

"There's been a stranger asking too many questions around Henry's Point,"

Stanhope lied glibly. "Tyson thinks he's government. Maybe Revenue."

"Not a one of them would dare show his nose in here. Even if he could get in, which he couldn't, we'd take to the swamps. They can ask all the questions they want but they still can't get us." The man started toward the boat. "I'll help you lug off whatever stuff you—"

"I didn't bring anything," Stanhope said hastily, thinking of Tyson in the cabin, "just information about the government man—and the questions he was asking about Connell."

"Connell? Nobody here by that name." His face was so blank that Stanhope could not doubt his sincerity.

WITH A sinking heart, he said, "A big redhead, the agent claimed."

"That's Welsh. Anyway, that's what he calls himself. Names don't mean anything in here. Take me, for instance. I'm 'Shiv' to the bunch." He chuckled mirthlessly. "Maybe they got a point there."

"Where can I find Welsh?"

"I'll take you. The guys'll get nervous if they see a stranger walking into camp alone all of a sudden." He led the way along a trail that twisted this way and that until it ended at a clearing in which were built several open-sided huts that were only a slight refinement on the palmetto-roofed *chikis* of the Seminoles. The only human beings Stanhope saw were two coarsened women who were working at the communal cook fire at the center of the clearing. They eyed him warily.

Shiv stopped and pointed to the last hut. "In there." Stanhope started on but Shiv grabbed his arm. "Listen, where's Boston?"

"What do you mean?" Stanhope asked, wondering if Shiv were a madman.

"Boston Americans. The Red Sox. Where are they?"

"Second place."

"Yankees in front, I suppose?"

Stanhope nodded his head for an answer. Shiv spat in disgust and stalked away.

Stanhope looked at Martin Connell's hut no more than thirty feet away. He had waited four years for this moment. He had been sitting in a cell thinking of the way he would approach Connell, what he would say to him, what he would do then, and only the prospect of this moment had made those years sufferable. But now he didn't know what he was going to do, and his hand was shaking so violently that he knew he couldn't hold a gun on Martin Connell. He took a few steps forward but his entire body was trembling and he was drenched with sweat. He had to stop and get his nerves under control, but the trembling continued.

He thought then of Norma and of the way he had watched her faith in him die in her eyes, killed by the poison of doubt as the evidence against him grew and became irrefutable. Though she had loved him with all her heart up to the trial, it would have required a rare kind of love to remain unshaken when the juggled realty company books had been produced and the defalcation neatly balanced against the four thousand dollars found in an old paint can in the garage. He had shouted his innocence but Norma had died because she believed him guilty. Martin Connell had destroyed him in her heart and, in the end, had killed Norma.

That did it. The trembling ceased. He covered the remaining twenty feet in a confident stride and was on the raised floor of the hut with his gun in his hand before Martin Connell could lift his head from the cot to see who was casting the shadow across his face. Connell didn't even have the time to force a laugh.

Stanhope laughed for him, then softly asked, "How are you, Martin?"

Martin Connell stared at him stupidly.

"You know me, Martin. Your old friend John. Grayer than I was, and not as heavy, but it's John. Stand up and let me

get a good look at you to see how you've changed."

Connell swung his legs over the side of the cot as if he were wearing diver's boots and stood up with the same leaden slowness. "John, I—" he began. He couldn't go on.

"Where is the big laugh, Martin?" Stanhope leaned against a corner post, the gun held at the ready in his right hand. "I never knew you not to laugh."

"I don't know what you came here for but—"

"To kill you. Why else?"

He shivered, but Martin Connell was never a man to be caught off balance long. In the days when he and Stanhope had been working for the same company, Connell had been able to squirm out of almost any situation. He had once knowingly accepted a deposit on the same house from two different buyers, then turned on the guileless charm, reached an amicable agreement, made both parties think they were well out of it and kept the money from each. That sort of thing probably couldn't happen twice but it was indicative of Martin Connell.

He drew himself up and the old smile began to bloom on his ruddy face. "You don't stand a chance, John. I don't know how you got in here but you'll never get out."

"Getting out isn't very important to me," Stanhope said grimly. "There's nothing for me to go back to. You saw to that. This is going to be for Norma as well as me."

He waited tensely for the first sign of Connell's laughter. Something born of those four years, and of hearing laughter in his head, made it imperative that he shoot Connell in the middle of a laugh. He wanted to hear it break off sharply and become a wet, bubbly sound.

But Connell did not laugh. He attempted solemn innocence.

"You don't blame her death on me, do you?"

"You're damned right I do," Stanhope snapped. "You wanted her from the moment you first set eyes on her but she loved me too much to even look at you. You had to wreck that love. Well, you succeeded in that but it still didn't do you any good. Just once, I'd like to hear you admit you rigged the books and planted the money in my garage."

"Sure. I'll admit it. But you'd have to prove it."

"I might have to if I wanted to take you back, but you aren't going any place. Laugh, Martin. Let me hear that big laugh."

Connell looked down at the gun in the white-knuckled hand, then darted a sharp glance toward a point behind Stanhope, but Stanhope refused to be decoyed by an old dodge and he held his gaze fixedly upon Connell's face.

The blow must have come at that moment but he never felt it. He was not even aware of falling, though he must have gone down with a heavy crash. When he came to, his knees and elbows were badly skinned and the side of his face burned from another abrasion. A lump throbbed painfully at the back of his head where the club, or whatever had been the weapon, had landed. He didn't know how long he had been out but he was no longer in the hut. He was sitting in the clearing with his hands tied behind him and around a post that was at his back.

THE TWO WOMEN were still working at the fire. One of them glanced at him, whispered something to the other and they both laughed coarsely. A couple of dirty-faced kids were playing with a homemade ball on the other side of the fire. There was no sign of the men. Stanhope began to wonder if the man he had seen on the beach, Shiv and Martin Connell were the only males in the camp. He wasn't left to wonder long.

He heard them laughing and talking long before they stepped into the clearing.

It sounded like a thousand of them. Actually, when they squatted in a semi-circle in front of him, he counted fifteen men and five women, including the two who had been cooking. In their ragbag outfits, they looked like a group of adults bound for a shipwreck party. He might have laughed under other circumstances, but not now. He knew a kangaroo court when he saw one.

The leader of the group—someone called him Raymond—looked old enough to have come here after holding up the Pony Express, but he ruled the others with a firm hand. Silencing their mutters and curses with a jerk of his grizzled head, he pointed to Martin Connell.

"You know him?"

"Certainly," Martin said, grinning at Stanhope. "He testified against me at my trial a couple of years ago. He's a cop out of Tampa. When I crashed out of the pen, they must have put him on my tail."

Martin had figured all the angles. Calling Stanhope a cop guaranteed the verdict if it had ever been in doubt; and giving himself a background of trial and jailbreak, in this place where no one was in a position to check his story, cemented his position as one who belonged. Yet he was the only one of them who could leave without fear of the law once he disposed of Stanhope.

"Anyone else ever see him?" Raymond asked, and when no one replied, he said, "Well, it doesn't make a hell of a lot of difference. He doesn't belong here and he can't leave. It's just that simple."

The rest was rhetorical. Twenty hands lifted lazily. Twenty criminals condemned an innocent man to death. And Martin Connell laughed as he had not dared to laugh in the court of law.

"He's yours," Raymond said to Martin. "Shiv will give you a hand."

"I don't need him."

"Shiv," Raymond said, ignoring Martin Connell's protest, "give him a hand."

Shiv hurried forward eagerly. "I do a nice job. Clean, fast."

"I can handle it myself," Connell said.

"Sure," said Shiv, "but I'll be your insurance policy. Raymond likes a nice clean job." He looked at the leader. "Right, Raymond?"

Raymond nodded and walked across the clearing to the middle hut. His departure seemed to be the signal for the others to leave Connell and Shiv with Stanhope. It was probably a point of camp etiquette, Stanhope thought grimly, because certainly this gang of cut-throats was not too squeamish to witness a thing as mild as murder. Most of them looked like the faces seen in the "Wanted" bulletins on post office billboards, and a few of them he swore he had seen in the newspapers.

Shiv danced around him as if he were a Maypole. Then Connell cut his bindings and he was jerked to his feet.

"You like alligators?" Shiv asked.

"More important," Martin Connell corrected, "will the 'gators like him?" Stanhope's .380 in his right hand, he shoved Stanhope toward the path to the bayou.

Even if Stanhope had tried to make a break, he would have been nailed before he'd taken three steps. In any case, he thought helplessly, it wouldn't have done him any good to run. He was cut off from Tyson's boat and the only direction he could go was into the swamps, but he knew nothing about them and death lurked there just as surely as it waited here.

On the way to the water, he massaged his wrists to bring back the circulation. Connell would get him eventually but he was determined to drive his fist at least once into that laughing mouth.

A flat-bottomed skiff was tied up next to the dock and Stanhope was pushed to it. He got in and Shiv followed him, but just as Connell was about to get in, there came a heavy thumping from Tyson's boat.

"Watch Stanhope, Shiv," Connell said, and he went down the dock to the fishing

boat. He ducked into the cabin and came out a minute later with Tyson right behind him.

Tyson started on a run for Stanhope, trailing a blue cloud of profanity as he ran. "Conk me on the head and tie me up, will you!" he spluttered, and he tried to get at John Stanhope's throat.

Connell grabbed him from behind and threw him into the boat with Stanhope. "If this keeps up, we'll have to rent a ferry."

"Where you takin' me?" Tyson had screamed, seeing Connell's gun for the first time, noticing, too, the knife that Shiv was drawing lovingly from his belt.

"You and Stanhope are going to feed the alligators, old timer," Shiv said.

Tyson shook with fright. "I don't know nothin' about him! I only—"

"You only brought him," Connell said gently. "I thought he'd rented your boat and come in by himself."

"You fellas can trust me! Ain't I the one been bringin' in supplies without ever tellin' a soul you—"

"You brought him," Connell repeated, "and if you go back without him, someone might begin to wonder about it. You understand." Connell got into the skiff and pushed off from the muddy bank with the long pole.

"When I don't get back," Tyson argued, "my boys'll come lookin' for me."

"And they won't find you, Stanhope or your boat. They'll think you sank."

"On a day that's as calm as this? My boys—"

"Shut up," Connell snapped, and he cracked Tyson across the mouth with the back of his hand. "The Gulf plays tricks, and what can't be proved isn't going to hurt us any. Besides, your boys don't know about your traffic with us, do they? They won't come in here."

"My boys—" Tyson began, then broke off with a sob. It was plain from his expression that his boys did not know about his business with the lost colony.

CONNELL TURNED the push pole over to Shiv and took a seat in the bow where he could keep his gun on Stanhope and Tyson. The skiff moved into the swamps, following one of the many channels that twisted deviously through the gloom. Branches overhead blotted out the sky. From the high limbs swung hairy ropes which would eventually touch water, submerge and become roots. The breathing organs of the mangroves, both the black and the red now, broke water like thousands of bristling, sharp sticks, and the sweepage of the fresh-water channels and salt-water tides was caught in the barrier spikes and labyrinthed, buttressed trunks. Shiv guided the boat so expertly through the maze that Stanhope wondered how many times he had made this trip before, and for this reason.

The skiff broke out of the dense shadows and entered a stretch of salt meadows where the thick-stemmed waterweeds lifted above the marly water and shimmered yellow and coral in the bright sunlight. Stanhope glanced at Tyson and saw the fear that rode him. Tyson was kriping the gunwales and his violent trembling was transmuted to the boat itself. His eyes were fixed upon a mud bank to the right, and when Stanhope followed the direction of his stare, he understood all too well the reason for Tyson's horror. This was a 'gator pool and the blunt-snouted saurians, their slumber disturbed by the approaching boat, were beginning to stir.

"Nice little fellows, aren't they, John?" Connell said. He fired a shot into the bank. The alligators came full awake then and slid into the water. For a moment, only their noses and knobby eyes were visible and then they sank from sight.

"Connell," Stanhope said, watching Tyson, "let the old man go. He won't say anything."

Connell smiled and shook his head.

Until now, Stanhope had been motivated only by a thirst for revenge. Nothing else had mattered to him. But now he was be-

ginning to look at it in terms of Tyson, of the wife who depended upon the fisherman, of the boys who would be worried about him. Whether Tyson was right or wrong in bringing supplies to the lost colony was not up to Stanhope to judge. He knew only that he was responsible for bringing Tyson to this—the lie told to him on the boat—the blow on the head—and it was up to him to do everything in his power to get Tyson out of it. For the first time in four years, he wanted to do something outside his own sphere.

"Tyson," he said calmly, hoping that levelness could curb the fisherman's panic, "do you know where we are?"

"Y-yes."

"Could you get back from here?"

"Shut up," Connell growled.

"Could you, Tyson?"

"I—I expect so." He looked at the dark water and shuddered.

"They have a gun and a knife," Stanhope continued, speaking as if Shiv and Connell were a thousand miles away. "Connell will want to get me first, and Shiv's knife won't do him any good if— Do you understand me, Tyson?"

Tyson's blue eyes were blank for a moment, but then light like candles at the end of a long, long tunnel flickered in them. He nodded almost imperceptibly and his hands steadied on the gunwales.

"All right, Shiv," Connell said tersely, "take Tyson." He raised the gun slowly, aiming it at Stanhope's chest, and waited for Shiv to put down the pole and get out his knife. "Too bad, John. You made a good try but you never did have the guts to—"

"Tyson!" Stanhope snapped, even as he threw his weight to the right, sharply tilting the boat, and went over the side into the water. In the instant before he went under, his mind, registering like a fast-lens camera, received the picture of Tyson still sitting in the boat, hands riveted to the gunwales, of Shiv struggling in vain for balance to keep from going out of the

boat and of Connell crouching in the skiff's bottom. In that scrap of time, it seemed to Stanhope—though he could not be sure—that Connell no longer held the gun, and as he sank down into the dark water, he thought that Connell might have dropped the gun to have both hands free to grip the sides of the boat and keep from tumbling out into the 'gator pool. He had to take the chance that Connell was now unarmed.

He went to the bottom. In his imagination, he saw the alligators streaking toward him like sonic torpedoes drawn unerringly to the sound of his wildly thumping heart. He seemed to feel the thrashing, roiling water around him. "Don't panic," he kept telling himself. "Don't panic!" His foot brushed something. A log. It had to be a log, long submerged. But the imagination was too active. He couldn't convince himself. He broke for the surface, sensing the thing rising in close pursuit.

The boat was ten feet to his left when he came up, and Connell, trying to look everywhere at once, had his back turned momentarily.

On the far side of the skiff, Shiv was screaming, "I can't swim! Connell, I—" The scream ended abruptly.

Stanhope swam in a swift, silent sidestroke to the boat and grasped the gunwale just as Connell turned. That first impression had been correct. Connell was unarmed. He pounded with his fists on Stanhope's fingers and tried to break his grip on the boat. Stanhope held tight. Then Connell stood up and lifted his booted foot to smash Stanhope's fingers. But at that mo-

ment, Tyson snatched up the push pole and cracked Connell across the shoulders with it. Connell tried to wrest the pole from the fisherman and the diversion gave Stanhope enough time to haul himself into the boat.

"Connell," he said with murderous intensity, and when Connell jerked around, he hit him full on the chin, then drove a fist into his stomach. When he doubled up, he hit him again on the chin with a looping right that sent a satisfying jar up to his shoulder. Connell's eyes glazed over. He stumbled backward, tripped on the gunwale and went into the water. He sank swiftly.

Stanhope waited, watching the surface of the water. There were some bubbles, but only a few, and there as a roiling of the water, as if a great fire had been built under the bottom of the pool, but that lasted only briefly.

Neither Connell nor Shiv appeared again.

Stanhope looked at Tyson. "Can we get out?"

"With the skiff," Tyson said. "I know some channels that'll keep us away from the camp."

"What about your boat?"

"I'll come back for it, the law with me. If the law won't come, then me and my boys'll do it ourself."

"I'll be with you."

Tyson nodded. "Fair enough." He went to the stern, the long pole in his hands, and pushed toward a cut in the savanna.

Stanhope looked back only once. The pool was mirror calm. An alligator was crawling up the distant mud bank to doze in the sun. Somewhere far off, a bird cried out on a note of wild laughter. ■



It was a strange, little room, with a one-way door. Behind it, Bob lost not only his life and his future—but also his yesterdays!



"Please don't hang up," she said hurriedly.

DYING ROOM ONLY

By Richard Matheson

THE CAFE was a rectangle of brick and wood with an attached shed on the edge of the little town. They drove past it at first and started out into the heat-shimmering desert.

Then Bob said, "Maybe we'd better stop there. Lord knows how far it is to the next one."

"I suppose," Jean said without enthusiasm.

"I know it's probably a joint," Bob said,

"but we have to eat something. It's been more than five hours since we had breakfast."

"Oh—all right."

Bob pulled over to the side of the road and looked back. There wasn't another car in sight. He made a quick U-turn and powered the Ford back along the road, then turned in and braked in front of the cafe.

"Boy, I'm starved," he said.

"So am I," Jean said. "I was starved

last night, too, until the waitress brought that food to the table."

Bob shrugged. "So what can you do?" he said. "Is it better we starve and they find our bleached bones in the desert?"

She made a face at him and they got out of the car.

"Bleached bones," she said.

The heat fell over them like a waterfall as they stepped into the sun. They hurried toward the cafe already feeling the burning ground through their sandals.

"It's so hot," Jean said and Bob grunted.

The screen door made a groaning sound as they pulled it open. Then it slapped shut behind them and they were in the stuffy interior that smelled of grease and hot dust.

The three men in the cafe looked up at them as they entered. One, in overalls and a dirty cap, sat slumped in a back booth drinking beer. Another sat on a counter stool, a sandwich in his hand and a bottle of beer in front of him. The third man was behind the counter looking at them over a lowered newspaper. He was dressed in a white, short-sleeved shirt and wrinkled white ducks.

"Here we go," Bob whispered to her. "The Ritz-Carleton."

She enunciated slowly, "Ha-ha."

They moved back to the counter and sat down on stools. The three men still looked at them.

"Our arrival in town must be an event," Bob said softly.

"We're celebrities," Jean said.

Then the man in the white ducks came over and drew a menu from behind a tarnished napkin holder. He slid it across the counter toward them. Bob opened it up and the two of them looked at it.

"Have you got any iced tea?" Bob asked.

The man shook his head. "No."

"Lemonade?" Jean asked.

The man shook his head. They looked at the menu again.

"What have you got that's cold?" Bob asked.

"*Hi-Li Orange* and *Doctor Pepper*," said the man in a bored voice.

Bob cleared his throat.

"May we have some water before we order. We've been—"

The man turned away and walked back to the sink. He ran water into two cloudy glasses and brought them back. They spilled over onto the counter as he set them down. Then the man stood there waiting for them to order.

Jean picked up her glass and took a sip. She almost choked on the water it was so brackish and warm. She put down the glass.

"Can't you get it any cooler?" she asked.

"This is desert country, ma'am," he said. "We're lucky we get any water at all."

He was a man in his early fifties, his hair steel grey and dry, parted in the middle. The backs of his hands were covered with tiny swirls of black hair and on the small finger of his right hand there was a ring with a red stone in it. He stared at them with lifeless eyes and waited for their order.

"I'll have a fried egg sandwich on rye toast and—" Bob started.

"No toast," said the man.

"All right, plain rye then."

"No rye."

Bob looked up. "What kind of bread have you got?" he asked.

"White."

Bob shrugged. "White then. And a strawberry malted. How about you, honey?"

The man's flat gaze moved over to Jean.

"I don't know," she said. She looked up at the man. "I'll decide while you're making my husband's order."

The man looked at her a moment longer, then turned away and walked back to the stove.

"This is awful," Jean said.

"I know, honey," Bob admitted, "but what can we do? We don't know how far it is to the next town."

Jean looked disgruntled. She pushed away the cloudy glass and slid off the stool.

"I'm going to wash up," she said. "Maybe then I'll feel more like eating."

"Good idea," he said.

After a moment, he got off his stool, too, and walked up to the front of the cafe where the two rest rooms were.

His hand was on the door knob when the man eating at the counter called, "Think it's locked, mister."

Bob pushed.

"No it isn't," he said and went in.

JEAN CAME out of the washroom and walked back to her stool at the counter. Bob wasn't there. He must be washing up, too, she thought. The man who had been eating at the counter was gone too.

The man in the white ducks left his small gas stove and came over.

"You want to order now?" he asked.

"What? Oh." She picked up the menu and looked at it for a moment. "I'll have the same thing, I guess."

The man went back to the stove and broke another egg on the edge of the black pan. Jean listened to the sound of the eggs frying. She wished Bob would come back. It was unpleasant sitting there alone in the hot, dingy cafe.

Unconsciously she picked up the glass of water again and took a sip. She grimaced again over the taste and put down the glass.

A minute passed. She noticed that the man in the back booth was looking at her. Her throat contracted uneasily and the fingers of her right hand began drumming slowly on the counter. She felt her stomach muscles drawing in. Her right hand twitched suddenly as a fly settled on it.

Then she heard the door to the men's washroom open and she turned quickly with a sense of body lightening relief.

She shuddered in the hot cafe.

It wasn't Bob.

She felt her heart throbbing unnaturally as she watched the man return to his place at the counter and pick up his unfinished sandwich. She averted her eyes as he glanced at her. Then, impulsively, she got off the stool and went back to the front of the cafe.

She pretended to look at a rack of sun-faded postcards but her eyes kept moving to the brownish yellow door with the word MEN painted on it.

Another minute. She saw that her hands were starting to shake. A long breath trembled her body as she looked in nervous impatience at the door.

Then she saw the man in the back booth push himself up and plod slowly down the length of the cafe. His cap was pushed to the back of his head and his high-topped shoes clomped heavily on the floor boards. Jean stood rigidly, holding a postcard in her hands as the man passed her. Then the washroom door opened and closed behind him.

Silence. Jean stood there staring at the door, trying to hold herself under control. Her throat moved again. She took a deep breath and put the postcard back in place.

"Here's your sandwich," the man at the counter called.

Jean started at the sound of his voice. She nodded once at him but stayed where she was.

Her breath caught as the washroom door opened again. She started forward instinctively, then drew back as the other man walked out, his face florid and sweaty. He started past her.

"Pardon me," she said.

The man kept moving. Jean hurried after him and touched his arm, her fingers twitching at the feel of the hot, damp cloth.

"Excuse me," she said.

The man turned and looked at her with dull eyes. His breath made her stomach turn.

"Did you see my—my husband in there?"

"Huh?"

Her hands closed into fists at her sides.

"Was my husband in the washroom?"

He looked at her a moment as if he didn't understand her. Then he said, "No, ma'am," and turned away.

It was hot in there, very hot, but Jean felt as if she'd suddenly been submerged in a pool of ice water. She stood numbly watching the man stumble back to his booth.

Then she found herself hurrying for the counter, for the man who sat drinking from his water-beaded bottle of beer.

He put down the bottle and turned to face her as she came up.

"Pardon me but did you see my husband in the washroom before?"

"Your husband?"

She bit her lower lip.

"Yes, my husband. You saw him when we came in. Wasn't he in the washroom when you were there?"

"I don't recollect as he was, ma'am."

"You mean you didn't see him in there!"

"I don't recollect as seein' him, ma'am."

"Oh this—this is ridiculous," she burst out in angry fright. "He must have been in there."

For a moment they stood looking at each other. The man didn't speak, his face was blank.

"You're—sure?" she asked.

"Ma'am, I got no reason to lie to you."

"All right. Thank you."

She sat stiffly at the counter staring at the two sandwiches and milk shakes, her mind in desperate search of a solution. It was Bob—he was playing a joke on her. But he wasn't in the habit of playing jokes on her and this was certainly no place to start. Yet he must have. There must be another door to the washroom and—

Of course. It wasn't a joke. Bob hadn't gone into the washroom at all. He'd just decided that she was right; the place was

awful and he'd gone out to the car to wait for her.

She felt like a fool as she hurried toward the door. The man might have told her that Bob had gone out. Wait till she told Bob what she'd done. It was really funny how a person could get upset over nothing.

As she pulled open the screen door she wondered if Bob had paid for what they'd ordered. He must have. At least the man didn't call after her as she went out.

She moved into the sunlight and started toward the car almost closing her eyes completely to shut out the glare on the windshield. She smiled to herself thinking about her foolish worrying.

"Bob, wait till I—"

Unreasoning dread pressed her insides into a tight knot. She stood in the pounding heat and stared into the empty car. She felt a scream pushing up in her throat.

"Bob—"

She started running around the side of the cafe looking for the other entrance. Maybe the washroom was too dirty; maybe Bob had gone out a side door and couldn't find his way around the shed that was attached to the cafe.

She tried to look through one of the shed's windows but it was covered with tar paper on the inside. She ran around to the back of the cafe and looked out across the wide, empty desert. Then she turned back and looked for footprints but the ground was as hard as baked enamel. A whimper started in her throat and she knew that in a few seconds she was going to start crying.

"Bob," she murmured. "Bob, where—"

In the stillness she heard the front screen door slap in its frame. Abruptly she started running up the side of the cafe building, her heart hammering excitedly. Stifling heat waves broke over her as she ran.

At the edge of the building she stopped suddenly.

The man she'd spoken to at the counter was looking into the car. He was a small

man in his forties, wearing a spotted fedora and a striped, green shirt. Black galluses held up his dark, grease-spotted pants. Like the other man he wore high-top shoes.

She moved one step and her sandal scuffed on the dry ground. The man looked up at her suddenly, his face lean and bearded. His eyes were a pale blue that shone like milk spots in the leathery tan of his face.

The man smiled casually. "Thought I'd see if your husband was waitin' on you in your car," he said.

Then he touched the brim of his hat and started back into the cafe.

"Are you—" Jean started, then broke off as the man turned.

"Ma'am?"

"Are you sure he wasn't in the wash-room?"

"Wasn't no one in there when I went in," he said.

She stood shivering in the sun as the man went into the cafe and the screen door flapped closed. She could feel mindless dread filling her like ice water poured into a cup.

THEN SHE caught herself. There had to be an explanation. Things like this just didn't happen.

She moved firmly across the cafe floor and stopped before the counter. The man in the white ducks looked up from his paper.

"Would you please check the wash-room?" she asked.

"The washroom?"

Anger tightened her.

"Yes, the washroom," she said. "I know my husband is in there."

"Ma'am, wasn't no one in there," said the man in the fedora.

"I'm sorry," she said tightly, refusing to allow his words. "My husband didn't just disappear."

The two men made her nervous with their silent stares.

"Well, are you going to look there?" she said, unable to stop the break in her voice.

The man in the white ducks glanced at the man with the fedora and something twitched his mouth. Jean felt her hands jerk into angry fists. Then he moved down the length of the counter and she followed.

He turned the porcelain knob and held open the spring-hinged door. Jean held her breath as she moved closer to look.

The washroom was empty.

"Are you satisfied?" the man said and he let the door swing shut.

"Wait," she said. "Let me look again."

The man pressed his mouth into a line.

"Didn't you see it was empty?" he said.

"I said I want to look again."

"Lady, I'm tellin' ya—"

Jean pushed at the door suddenly and it banged against the washroom wall.

"There!" she said. "There's a door there!"

She pointed to a door in the far wall of the washroom.

"That door's been locked for years lady," the man said.

"It doesn't open?"

"Ain't got no reason to open it."

"It must open," Jean said. "My husband went in there and he didn't come out this door. And he didn't disappear!"

The man looked at her sullenly without speaking.

"What's on the other side of the door?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Does it open on the outside?"

The man didn't answer.

"Does it!"

"It opens on a shed lady, a shed no one's used for years," the man said angrily.

She stepped forward and gripped the knob of the door.

"I told you it didn't open." The man's voice was rising more.

"Ma'am?"

Behind her Jean heard the cajoling voice

of the man in the fedora and green shirt.

"Ain't nothin' in that shed but old trash, ma'am. You want I'll show it to you."

The way he said it, Jean suddenly realized that she was alone. Nobody she knew knew where she was; there was no way of checking if—

She moved out of the washroom quickly.

"Excuse me," she said as she walked by the man in the fedora, "I want to make a call first."

She walked stiffly to the wall phone shuddering as she thought of them coming after her. She picked up the ear piece. There was no dial tone. She waited a moment, then tensed herself and turned to face the two watching men.

"Does—does it work?"

"Who ya call—" started the man in the white ducks but the other man interrupted.

"You gotta crank it, ma'am," he said slowly. Jean noticed the other man glaring at him suddenly and, when she turned back to the phone, she heard their voices whispering heatedly.

She turned the crank with shaking fingers. *What if they come at me?* The thought wouldn't leave her. What if they come at me?

"Yes?" a thin voice asked over the phone.

Jean swallowed. "Would you get me the marshal, please?" she asked.

"Marshal?"

"Yes, the—"

She lowered her voice suddenly hoping the men wouldn't hear her. "The marshal," she repeated.

"There's no marshal, ma'am."

She felt close to screaming. "Who do I call?"

"You might want the sheriff, ma'am," the operator said.

Jean closed her eyes and ran her tongue over dry lips.

"The sheriff then," she said.

There was a spluttering sound over the phone, a series of dull buzzes and then the

sound of a receiver slowly being lifted.

"Sheriff's office," said a voice.

"Sheriff, would you please come out to—"

"One second. I'll get the sheriff."

Jean's stomach muscles pulled in and her throat became taut. As she waited, she felt the eyes of the two men on her. She heard one of them move and her shoulders twitched spasmodically.

"Sheriff speaking."

"Sheriff, would you please come out to the—"

Her lips trembled as she realized suddenly that she didn't know the name of the cafe. She turned nervously and her heartbeat lurched when she saw the men looking at her coldly.

"What's the name of the cafe?"

"Why do you want to know?" asked the man in the white ducks.

He isn't going to tell me, she thought. He's going to make me go out to look at the sign so that he can—

"Are you going to—" she started to say, then turned quickly as the sheriff said, "Hello?"

"Please don't hang up," she said hurriedly. "I'm in a cafe on the edge of the town near the desert. On the western edge of town, I mean. I came here with my husband and now he's gone. He—just disappeared."

The sound of her own words made her shudder.

"You at The Blue Eagle?" the sheriff asked.

"I—I don't know," she said. "I don't know the name. They won't tell—"

Again she broke off nervously.

"Ma'am, if you want to know the name," said the man in the fedora, "it's The Blue Eagle."

"Yes, yes," she relayed to the mouth piece. "The Blue Eagle."

"I'll be right over," said the sheriff.

"What you tell her for?" the man in the white ducks spoke angrily behind her.

"Son, we don't want no trouble with the sheriff. We ain't done nothin'. Why shouldn't he come?"

For a long moment Jean leaned her forehead against the phone and drew in deep breaths. *They can't do anything now*, she kept telling herself. *I've told the sheriff and they have to leave me alone.* She heard one of the men moving to the door but no sound of the door opening.

She turned and saw that the man in the fedora was looking out the door while the other one stared at her.

"You tryin' to make trouble for my place?" he asked.

"I'm not trying to make trouble but I want my husband back."

"Lady, we ain't done nothing with your husband!"

The man in the fedora turned around with a wry grin. "Looks like your husband lit out," he said blandly.

"He did not!" Jean said angrily.

"Then where's your car, ma'am?" the man asked.

There was a sudden dropping sensation in her stomach. Jean ran to the screen door and pushed out.

The car was gone.

"Bob!"

"Looks like he left you behind, ma'am," said the man.

She looked at the man with frightened eyes, then turned away with a sob and stumbled across the porch. She stood there in the oven hot shade crying and looking at the place where the car had been. The dust was still settling there.

SHE WAS still standing on the porch when the dusty, blue coupe braked in front of the cafe. The door opened and a tall, red-haired man got out, dressed in grey shirt and trousers, with a dull, metallic star pinned over his heart. Jean moved numbly off the porch to meet him.

"You the lady that called?" the man asked.

"Yes, I am."

"What's wrong now?"

"I told you. My husband disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

As quickly as possible she told him what had happened.

"You don't think he drove away then?" said the sheriff.

"He wouldn't leave me here like this."

The sheriff nodded. "All right, go on," he said.

When she was finished, the sheriff nodded again and they went inside. They went up to the counter.

"This lady's husband go in the lavatory, Jim?" the sheriff asked the man in the white ducks.

"How should I know?" the man asked.

"I was cooking. Ask Tom, he was in there." He nodded toward the man in the fedora.

"What about it, Tom?" asked the sheriff.

"Sheriff, didn't the lady tell you her husband just lit out before in their car?"

"That's not true!" Jean cried.

"You see the man driving the car away, Tom?" the sheriff asked.

"Sure I saw him. Why else should I say it?"

"No. No." Jean murmured the word with tiny, frightened shakes of her head.

"Why didn't you call after him if you saw him?" the sheriff asked Tom.

"Sheriff, ain't none of my business if a man wants to run out on—"

"He didn't run out!"

The man in the fedora shrugged his shoulders with a grin. The sheriff turned to Jean.

"Did you see your husband go in the lavatory?"

"Yes, of course I—well, no, I didn't exactly see him go in but—"

She broke off into angry silence as the man in the fedora chuckled.

"I know he went in," she said, "because after I came out of the ladies washroom I went outside and the car was empty. Where

else could he have been? The cafe is only so big. There's a door in that washroom. He said it hasn't been used in years." She pointed at the man in the white ducks. "But I know it has. I know my husband didn't just leave me here. He wouldn't do it. I know him and he wouldn't do it!"

"Sheriff," said the man in white ducks, "I showed the washroom to her when she asked. There wasn't nobody in there and she can't say there was."

Jean twisted her shoulders irritably.

"He went through that other door," she said.

"Lady, that door ain't used!" the man said loudly. Jean flinched and stepped back.

"All right, take it easy, Jim," the sheriff said. "Lady, if you didn't see your husband go in that lavatory and you didn't see if it was somebody else drivin' your car away I don't see what we got to go on."

"What?"

She couldn't believe what she'd heard. Was the man actually telling her there was nothing to be done? For a second she tightened in fury thinking that the sheriff was just sticking up for his own townspeople against a stranger. Then the impact of being alone and helpless struck her and her breath caught as she looked at the sheriff with childlike, frightened eyes.

"Lady, I don't see what I can do," the sheriff said with a shake of his head.

"Can't you—" She gestured timidly. "Can't you l-look in the washroom for a clue or something? Can't you open that door?"

The sheriff looked at her for a moment, then pursed his lips and walked down to the washroom. Jean followed him closely, afraid to stay near the two men.

She looked into the washroom as the sheriff was testing the closed door. She shuddered as the man in the white ducks came down and stood beside her.

"I told her it don't open," he said to

the sheriff. "It's locked on the other side. How could the man get out?"

"Someone might have opened it on the other side," Jean said nervously.

The man made a sound of disgust.

"Anyone else been around here?" the sheriff asked Jim.

"Just Sam McComas havin' some beer before but he went home about—"

"I mean in this shed."

"Sheriff, you know there ain't."

"What about big Lou?" the sheriff asked.

Jim was quiet a second and Jean saw his throat move.

"He ain't been around for months, Sheriff," Jim said. "He went up north."

"Jim, you better go around and open up this door," the sheriff said.

"Sheriff, ain't nothin' but an empty shed in there."

"I know, Jim, I know. Just want to satisfy the lady."

Jean stood there feeling the looseness around her eyes again, the sick feeling of being without help. It made her dizzy, as if everything were spinning away from her. She held one fist with her other hand and all her fingers were white.

Jim went out the screen door with a disgusted mutter and the door slapped shut behind him.

"Lady, come here," Jean heard the sheriff say quickly and softly. Her heart jumped as she moved into the washroom.

"You recognize this?"

She looked at the shred of cloth in his palm, then she gasped, "That's the color slacks he had on!"

"Ma'am not so loud," the sheriff said. "I don't want them to think I know anything."

He stepped out of the washroom suddenly as he heard boots on the floor. "You goin' somewhere, Tom?" he asked.

"No, no, Sheriff," said the man in the fedora. "Just comin' down to see how you was gettin' on."

"Uh-huh. Well—stick around for a while will you Tom?" said the sheriff.

"Sure, Sheriff, sure," Tom said broadly. "I ain't goin' no where."

THEY HEARD a clicking sound in the washroom and, in a moment, the door was pulled open. The sheriff walked past Jean and down three steps into a dimly-lit shed.

"Got a light in here?" he asked Jim.

"Nope, ain't got no reason to. No one ever uses it."

The sheriff pulled a light string but nothing happened.

"Don't you believe me, Sheriff?" Jim said.

"Sure I do, Jim," said the sheriff. "I'm just curious."

Jean stood in the doorway looking down into the damp smelling shed.

"Kinda beat up in here," said the sheriff looking at a knocked over table and chair.

"No one's been here for years, Sheriff," Jim said. "Ain't no reason to tidy it up."

"Years, eh?" the sheriff said, half to himself, as he moved around the shed. Jean watched him, her hands numb at the fingertips, shaking. Why didn't he find out where Bob was? That shred of cloth—how did it get torn from Bob's slacks? She gritted her teeth hard. *I mustn't cry*, she ordered herself. *I just mustn't cry. I know he's all right. He's perfectly all right.*

The sheriff stopped and bent over to pick up a newspaper. He glanced at it casually, then folded it and hit it against one palm casually.

"Years, eh?" he said.

"Well, I haven't been here in years," Jim said hurriedly, licking his lips. "Could be that—oh, Lou or somebody been holin' up in here sometime the last year. I don't keep the outside door locked ya know."

"Thought you said Lou went up north," the sheriff said mildly.

"He did, he did. I say in the last year he might have—"

"This is yesterday's paper, Jim," the sheriff said.

Jim looked blank, started to say something and then closed his mouth without making a sound. Jean felt herself trembling without control now. She didn't hear the screen door close quietly in front of the cafe or the furtive footsteps across the porch boards.

"Well—I didn't say Lou was the only one who might have sneaked in here for a night," Jim said quickly. "Could have been any tramp passing by."

He stopped as the sheriff looked around suddenly, his gaze darting past Jean. "Where's Tom?" he asked loudly.

Jean's head snapped around. Then she backed away with a gasp as the sheriff dashed up the steps and ran by her.

"Stick around, Jim!" the sheriff called over his shoulder.

Jean rushed out the cafe after him. As she came out on the porch she saw the sheriff shading his eyes with one hand and looking up the road. Her eyes jumped in the same direction and she saw the man in the fedora running toward another man, a tall man.

"That'd be Lou," she heard the sheriff murmur to himself.

He started running, then, after a few steps, he came back and jumped into his car.

"Sheriff!"

He glanced out the window and saw the look of fright on her face. "All right, hurry up! Get in!"

She jumped off the porch and ran toward the car. The sheriff pushed open the door and Jean slid in beside him and pulled it shut. The sheriff gunned his coupe out past the cafe and it skidded onto the road in a cloud of dust.

"What is it?" Jean asked him breathlessly.

"Your husband didn't leave you," was all the sheriff said.

"Where is he?" she asked in a frightened voice.

But they were already overtaking the

two men who had met and were now running into the brush.

The sheriff jerked the car off the road and slammed on the brakes. He pushed out of the car, quickly reaching down for his pistol.

"Tom!" he yelled. "Lou! Stop running!"

The men kept going. The sheriff leveled his pistol barrel and fired. Jean started at the explosion and saw, far out across the rocky desert, a spout of sand jump up near the men.

They both stopped abruptly, turned and held up their hands.

"Come on back!" yelled the sheriff. "And make it fast!"

Jean stood beside the car, unable to keep her hands from shaking. Her eyes were fastened on the two men walking toward them.

"All right, where is he?" the sheriff asked as they came up.

"Who you talkin' about, Sheriff?" asked the man in the fedora.

"Never mind that, Tom," the sheriff said angrily. "I'm not foolin' any more. This lady wants her husband back. Now where—"

"Husband!" Lou looked at the man in the fedora with angry eyes. "I thought we decided agin that!"

"Shut your mouth!" The man in the fedora said, his pleasant demeanor gone entirely, now.

"You told me we wasn't gonna—" Lou started.

"Let's see what you got in your pockets, Lou," the sheriff said.

Lou looked at the sheriff blankly. "My pockets?" he said.

"Come on, come on." The sheriff waved his pistol impatiently. Lou started emptying his pockets slowly.

"Told me we wasn't gonna do that," he muttered aside to the man in the fedora. "Told me. Stupid jackass."

Jean gasped as Lou tossed the wallet on

the ground. "That's Bob's," she murmured.

"Get your things, lady," the sheriff said.

NERVOUSLY she moved over at the feet of the men and picked up the wallet, the coins, the car keys.

"All right, where is he?" the sheriff asked. "And don't waste my time!" he said angrily to the man in the fedora.

"Sheriff, I don't know what you—" started the man.

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The sheriff almost lunged forward. "So help me!" he raged. Tom threw up one arm and stepped back.

"I'll tell you for a fact, Sheriff," Lou broke in. "If I'd known this fella had his woman with him, I'd never've done it."

Jean stared at the tall, ugly man, her teeth digging into her lower lip. *Bob, Bob.* Her mind kept saying his name.

"Where is he, I said," the sheriff demanded.

"I'll show you, I'll show you," Lou said. "I told you I never would've done it if I'd known his woman was with him."

Again he turned to the man in the fedora. "Why'd you let him go in there?" he demanded. "Why? Answer me that?"

"Don't know what he's talkin' about, Sheriff," Tom said blandly. "Why, I—"

"Get on the road," the sheriff ordered. "Both of you. You take us to him or you're really in trouble. I'm followin' you in the car. Don't make any wrong move, not one."

The car moved slowly behind the two walking men.

"I been after these boys for a year," the sheriff told her. "They set themselves up a nice little system robbin' men who come to the cafe, then dumpin' them in the desert and sellin' their car up north."

Jean hardly heard what he was saying. She kept staring at the road ahead, her stomach tight, her hands pressed tightly together.

"Never knew how they worked it though," the sheriff went on. "Never thought of the lavatory. Guess what they did was keep it locked for any man but one who was alone. They must've slipped up today. I guess Lou just jumped anyone who came in there. He's not any too bright."

"Do you think they—" Jean started hesitantly.

The sheriff hesitated. "I don't know, lady. I wouldn't think so. They ain't that dumb. Besides we had cases like this be-

fore and they never hurt no one worse than a bump on the head."

He honked the horn. "Come on, snap it up!" he called to the men.

"Are there snakes out there?" Jean asked.

The sheriff didn't answer. He just pressed his mouth together and stepped on the accelerator so the men had to break into a trot to keep ahead of the bumper.

A few hundred yards further on, Lou turned off and started down a dirt road.

"Oh my, where did they take him?" Jean said.

"Should be right down here," the sheriff said.

Then Lou pointed to a clump of trees and Jean saw their car. The sheriff stopped his coupe and they got out. "All right, where is he?" he asked.

Lou started across the broken desert ground. Jean kept feeling the need to break into a run. She had to tense herself to keep walking by the sheriff's side. Their shoes crunched over the dry desert soil. She hardly felt the pebbles through her sandals, so intently was she studying the ground ahead.

"Ma'am," Lou said, "I hope you won't be too hard on me. If I'd known you was with him, I'd've never touched him."

"Knock it off, Lou," the sheriff said. "You're both in up to your necks so you might as well save your breath."

Then Jean saw the body lying out on the sand and, with a sob, she ran past the men, her heart pounding.

"Bob—"

She held his head in her lap and when his eyes fluttered open, she felt as if the earth had been taken off her back.

He tried to smile, then winced at the pain. "I been hit," he muttered.

Without a word, the tears came running down her cheeks. She helped him back to their car and, as she followed the sheriff's coupe, she held tightly to Bob's hand all the way back to town.

THE LAST SLEEP

Jonnie wasn't too different from other girls, her killer found. She just made more sense to the cops dead . . . than alive!

By

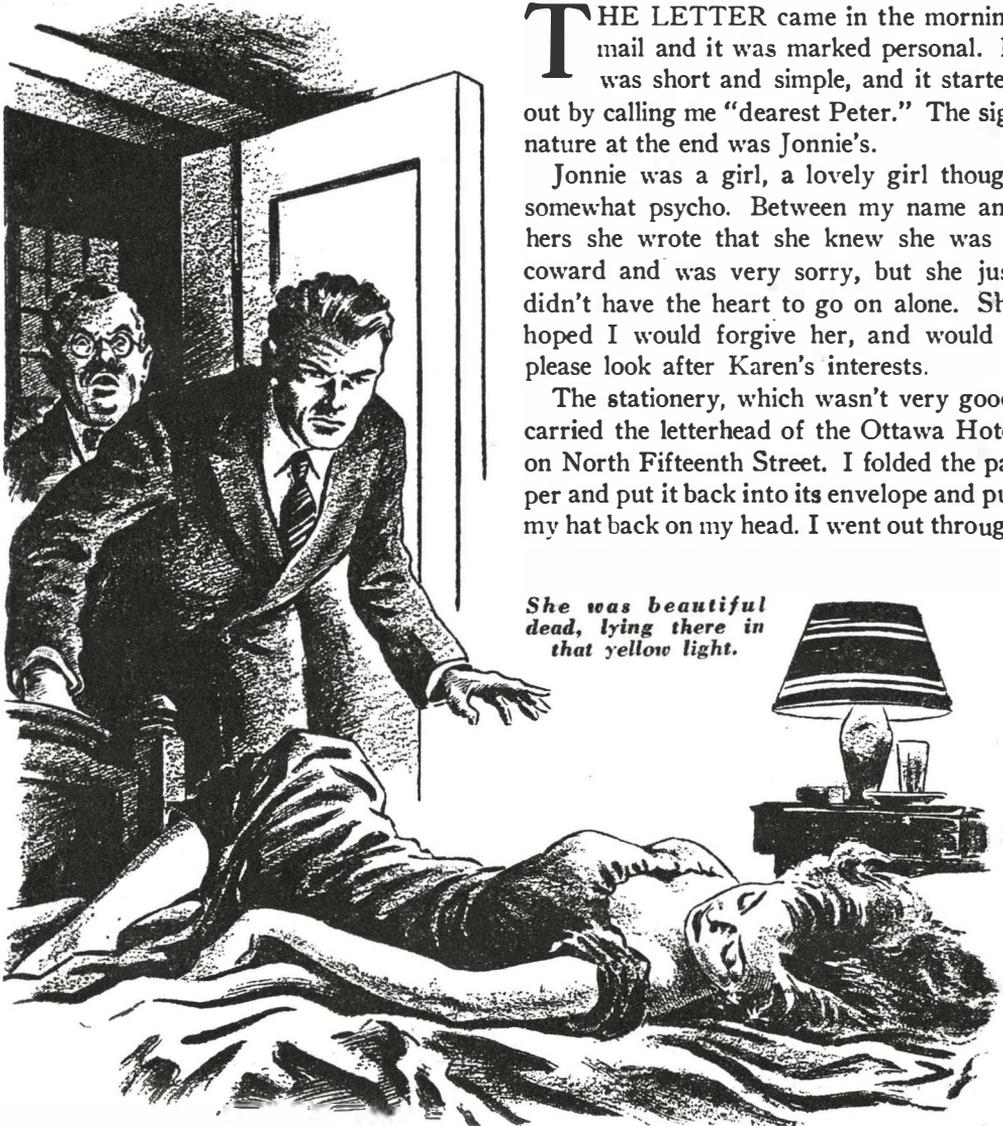
Fletcher Flora

THE LETTER came in the morning mail and it was marked personal. It was short and simple, and it started out by calling me "dearest Peter." The signature at the end was Jonnie's.

Jonnie was a girl, a lovely girl though somewhat psycho. Between my name and hers she wrote that she knew she was a coward and was very sorry, but she just didn't have the heart to go on alone. She hoped I would forgive her, and would I please look after Karen's interests.

The stationery, which wasn't very good, carried the letterhead of the Ottawa Hotel on North Fifteenth Street. I folded the paper and put it back into its envelope and put my hat back on my head. I went out through

She was beautiful dead, lying there in that yellow light.



the door with frosted glass and gold-leaf letters that told any party with legal problems that Peter Peterson, Attorney-at-Law, was available. Down on the street, I got into my Pontiac and started for the Ottawa.

The sun made a pretense of shining, just as if it were the nice June day it had started out to be. People and vehicles were moving around as if life had not gone out of the world. But I understood that appearances are illusory and that actually the day was grey and cold and still; as cold and still as a girl named Jonnie who was lying dead no doubt, in a cheap room in a cheap hotel in a second-class section of town.

I got out in front of the hotel and went in across a tired-looking lobby. The carpet and furnishings looked as if they were ready to give up. The clerk behind the desk didn't. He had apparently just come on duty and was brisk. He wore a carnation that looked almost real and he rubbed his hands at me.

"I'm looking for a young lady," I said. "Her name's Jonquil Molitch, and she should be registered at this hotel."

"Any idea when she registered, sir?"

"Last night, probably. Maybe earlier yesterday."

He consulted the register and shook his head. "Sorry, sir. No lady with that name."

"Any woman with those initials who registered either yesterday or last night?"

He looked again, drawing a manicured nail down the column of signatures. After a while the nail stopped, pointing delicately.

"Janice Moore," he said. "Room seven-eleven."

Seven-eleven. No point. Crapped out. The taste of irony was an acrid bitterness rising in my throat like something already swallowed, like the tonic I used to get as a kid.

"That must be her," I said. "You'd better go up with me."

His left eyebrow ascended like the toupe

of a startled character in the comic section.

"I, sir?"

"You. The manager. Anyone with a key. Just so we get there."

"Do you suspect something wrong, sir?"

"Now you're getting the idea."

"Perhaps I'd better ring the room."

"It wouldn't do any good. The lady's dead."

Eyebrow up, face as white as the phony carnation, thyroid cartilage of the larynx bobbing like a cork on water. I might have sympathized if I hadn't been bleeding. Dead ladies in hotel rooms are very bad for business. Something to whisper about. Something to take down in the service elevator and out the back way as quickly and quietly as possible.

"I think I'd better get Mr. Nason," he said.

Mr. Nason was the manager. He was fat and florid with sleek black hair and a carnation that had actually grown from a little seed. He looked like maybe this wasn't the Waldorf, but things went properly just the same and don't forget it. He came out of his office saying, "What's this?" over and over like a stymied phonograph record.

I told him what this was, and all the time his expression implied that this foolishness had to stop immediately.

"May I ask your name, sir?"

"My name is Peter Peterson," I said, and he looked as if he considered that highly improbable, too. "I'm a lawyer," I added.

The first syllable of my last word seemed to take something out of him, or maybe it put something in—a kind of rodent wariness prompted by a sudden scent of the same old cheese.

"How could you possibly know that there's a dead lady in seven-eleven?"

He said the words dead and lady as if they were mutually exclusive. A lady could not be dead. A female might be dead, but if so, she was no lady.

"This morning I got a letter," I said patiently. "It was on the stationery of this hotel. It was signed by a young lady whose name is—or was—Jonquil Molitch. She wrote it to me, I assume, because I was both her lawyer and her friend. Perhaps she could have found a better lawyer—not a better friend. The letter was to say good-bye. It was a suicide note if I ever read one. Miss Molitch, by the way, was a young lady of some consequence. Her father left her over a million dollars. Now, I think we'd better go up."

By the time I'd finished he was looking sick, but he still had in him a stubborn resistance to concede. Turning back to the switchboard, he plugged and waited. He waited for a long time, giving himself every full second of chance until time ran out and left him with nothing on his hands but what would probably be a body. Finally, he removed the headphones and the plug and headed for the elevator.

Now that he'd started, he seemed unable to move fast enough. His fat, little legs scissored him into a kind of desperate trot, and I just managed to slip into the car behind him before the door closed. As the lethargic car labored up its shaft, he stood by the control buttons and jiggled from one foot to the other like a kid who had been made to wait.

At the door of seven-eleven, however, the urgency seemed to drain out of him, leaving him, in spite of his pomade and carnation, a rather seedy and pathetic character who had run into more than his share of tough luck already. He unlocked the door and pushed it open, stepping aside for me to precede him. He seemed to have developed jowls on the way up.

The blinds had not been opened in the room and there was no light except the soiled yellow diffusion of a bed lamp that cast a pale perimeter on rug and bed. On the bed, within the perimeter, Jonnie lay with her brown hair spread like a walnut stain on the pillow and her lashes lying be-

neath closed eyes in the shadows of their sockets. She lay at rest on top of the cover as if she'd gone quietly to sleep. She was wearing a sheer, nylon gown that adhered to the slim lines of her body like transparent, pale blue foam. She had used cosmetics, and she was as beautiful dead as she had ever been alive, lying there in that dirty yellow light that had been for her the last light of earth and perhaps the last light ever.

Over my shoulder, I said, "You'd better call the police."

The manager's voice was wearily bitter. "Why? Why do they have to do it in hotels? Always in hotels."

I STOOD there staring at Jonnie all fixed up in her nylon gown, looking like she'd gone to sleep while waiting for her lover, and I said, "Who knows? Maybe because it's considered a kind of sacrilege that shouldn't be committed in the home. Maybe to remove it as far as possible from the lives of the ones who will suffer. If you feel inclined to weep over your precious guest-house, I wish you would go away to do it. Will you call the police, or shall I?"

He went away then. I didn't hear him or turn to watch him, but the space between us seemed to have congealed into a rubbery, adherent tangible that stretched out and out with his retreat until it snapped at its tensile limit and left Jonnie and me isolated from the world behind a debris of atoms.

I went over and put a hand on one of her bare feet, and it was very cold. Then I put my lips on hers, and they were cold, too. I realized then that you can't say good-bye to a stone and I quit trying.

On the bedside table beside the lamp there was an unlabeled cardboard box. It was like the boxes that matches come in. The container part was pulled partially out of the cover. Inside were three bright green tablets, the stuff she'd taken—or what was left of it. Some kind of barbiturate, no doubt. In quantity, the stuff of death. I tipped one

of the tablets out into my hand and dropped it into my coat pocket.

Turning away, I had my eye arrested by another bright bit of green. It was apparently a spot on the faded brown rug just inside the perimeter of light. I removed the spot and held it between a thumb and index finger. Another tablet—more of the stuff—dropped without sound and unnoticed in the simple prelude to dying. It went into the pocket with the other, and I went over to a chair and sat down.

I sat there waiting for the police and thinking of the days when I had first known Jonnie on the campus of the university where I'd sweated out a degree in law. A queer gal. A queer, beautiful gal living with an inheritance of shadows from a just as beautiful mother who had died in a mental hospital.

Her old man had been a fugitive from an institution himself, a professor of mathematics, one of humanity's three dollar bills. He'd married a second time, a woman with a daughter just about Jonnie's age, but he had bad luck with wives. This one lost little time in dying also. That left the old man and Johnnie and Karen, the stepsister whose interests were now my concern.

The three of them lived on a professor's salary, which wasn't much, in a house that wasn't much, either. I used to play hooky from Blackstone on occasion and go out there to do a little necking with Jonnie behind the rose trellis, but the necking was pretty spotty. Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Blow hot, blow cold.

As I said, she was a strange, sweet gal in bloodline that may or may not have been something to worry about. I was gone on her. I was gone and heredity be damned, but I could never strike oil. I became, as I had now ended, "dearest Peter."

When I was in my last year of law school, old Molitch decided he'd had enough, and didn't get out of bed one morning. It developed, when his estate was settled, that he was slightly better off than anyone had

suspected. The old curmudgeon had been quietly playing the market for years, and he left better than a million bucks in this and that to Jonnie with the understanding that she'd take fat care of Karen. And now it was Karen with more than a million.

I'd drawn Jonnie's will, and I knew. Karen had come into a fortune; I had come into a grey and stony day; and Jonnie had come into the last full heritage of darkness that was hers by blood. She lay there on the shabby bed with her flesh chilling under blue froth, and there was nothing at all I would ever be able to do about it.

After what seemed like a long time, a guy with his hat on the back of his head came into the room. He looked at the bed and took the hat off, holding it in one hand down along his right leg and continuing to look at the bed. He had a face like a hound dog, long and sad with big, brown eyes that were like a couple of mute elegies for everything in general.

Pretty soon, he said, "She's pretty. She's a pretty dame. She looks like she just went to sleep."

"That's just what she did," I said.

He went over to the table and looked at the green tablets in the box, lifting one out and sniffing it, laying it for a moment on the tip of his tongue.

"Guess you're right. Sleeping stuff. It's a good way to do it, at that. Often thought I'd use it, if it ever came to it." He turned and looked at me directly, and the elegies were there for me just as they'd been for Jonnie. "You ever think maybe you'd like to die?"

I was thinking something like that at the moment, but I didn't say so. I didn't say anything at all. He walked over in front of my chair and said, "My name's Gregson. Yours Peterson?"

"Yes."

"That's what the manager said. He said you got a note."

I took the letter out of my pocket and handed it to him. "This is it. It came in

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the office mail this morning—early morning.”

He removed the letter from its envelope and read it in the semi-darkness, holding it up close to his eyes and moving it back and forth in the way old people read when their sight is almost gone. When he'd finished, he put the envelope and the letter in his pocket.

“I'll have to keep this for a while. You can have it back later.”

“That's all right.”

“Thanks. What's this alone business? She said she couldn't go on alone.”

“I don't know. Just a feeling she had, I guess. It's a feeling we all get sometimes. Being alone, I mean.”

He looked beyond me for a moment with his sad hound's eyes, and he said, “I know what you mean. You ever had an idea she might do something like this?”

“It's crossed my mind. I guess I never really considered it seriously.”

“Manic depressive?”

“I don't think so. Just moods. Recurrent despondency.”

“Anything in the family?”

“Her mother. I don't know anything beyond her.”

“I see. Who's this Karen?”

“A stepsister. They lived together in the Granada Apartments out on Hillcrest Drive.”

“That's a fancy place. She must've had rocks.”

“A million or more.”

His eyebrows rose, but instead of making him look interested or surprised, the change in expression only increased his canine sadness.

“Yeah? That's plenty rocks. You her lawyer?”

“Yes.”

“That's something else the manager said. That's why she sent the note to you, eh?”

“Partly. And partly because I was her friend.”

“Yeah. I guessed that. Dames don't usu-

ally call their lawyers 'dearest' unless there's something else there.”

He turned and walked over to the bed and pulled the cover out from under Jonnie's body, drawing it back up over. All the way over.

“It's clear enough,” he said. “Suicide. I'd better have this Karen dame come in and look at the body, because she's family, you know. You called her about it?”

I said I hadn't and he swore softly. “What a job. What a lousy job. Tell me her last name.”

“It's Birch. Like the tree.”

“Okay. Thanks again. You can go on, if you want to.”

I got up and went over to the door. I stopped and looked back for a second at the faded mound on the cheap bed; it looked very short and shallow, as if a child were lying there. Then I turned and went downstairs into the bright June day that no longer seemed like it.

BACK IN my office, I talked to a woman who wanted to break a will. I told her she would have just as much chance breaking the Bill of Rights and sent her home unhappy. Then I sat behind my desk and thought about Jonnie not wanting to go on alone, and I thought that we are all alone in the final analysis and that we go on being alone until we become nothing.

But it seemed to me that the note had not intended a philosophical generalization, but something specific. It had meant, rather, that Jonnie hadn't wanted to go on without some particular person; that going on alone was just a manner of putting it. If that were so, the particular person must be Dr. Nelson Sorenson.

I turned my thoughts to Nelson Sorenson. He was tall, handsome and very Nordic. He had a plush office that was usually filled with women whose troubles amounted, in the definitive diagnosis, to being women. In spite of that, he was probably a good doctor, and I hated his guts in a gentleman-

ly way because he'd struck the oil I could never reach. He and Jonnie had been engaged. Now Jonnie had written about not going on alone, and I wondered if he had told her in a nice way that he'd decided he didn't care for her after all.

I conceded his right to renege. I admitted that he couldn't be blamed for not wanting to marry a given body, or even for changing his mind about marrying a given body. But after I'd finished conceding and admitting, I went on to decide that if he had caused Jonnie to do what she'd done, I'd probably kill him the first time I thought I could do it quietly and get away with it.

Putting a hand in my coat pocket for a cigarette, I felt one of the green tablets. I took it out and laid it on the desk and felt for the other one. It seemed to be gone, but after feeling for awhile, I found it lodged in a corner of the pocket. I put it on the desk beside the other one and noticed that they were not identical at all. The surface of one was hard and smooth. The other had a duller finish, considerably more porous. Their color was not precisely the same either, differing as bolts of cloth will differ when they come from different dye lots.

I examined the tablets for a few minutes, and then I cracked them one at a time in my teeth and tasted them. The shiny one was faintly bitter with no discernible odor. The dull one had no odor either. It tasted like sugar. Sealing the broken tablets in an envelope, I put the envelope in a desk drawer.

There were some items. There was a girl named Jonnie who was dead by suicide. There was a Nordic medico with a bedside personality who had been engaged to the girl named Jonnie. There was another girl named Karen who would become, in the good time of the courts, definitely upper bracket. There was a green pill that was obviously a barbiturate. There was another pill that was just as obviously

a placebo. There were all these things inside my skull, and they were all right except the placebo, and the placebo made them all wrong.

I returned cerebrally to consider Karen. Sleek and sultry Karen, the poor stepsister. If the Brothers Grimm had written the script, she'd have been the heroine. And she had the looks to carry the part. In her own way, she was in a class with Jonnie. If it was a way you went for—a lush, hotter, more tropical way—you might have given her preference. I wondered what a million bucks of her own would mean to Karen, and I decided that they would mean a hell of a lot.

I got up then and started for the door, but before I reached it, I stopped and came back on impulse to the desk. From the bottom drawer, I took a Banker's Special that I kept for possible violent clients. I put the gun in the inside pocket of my coat and made it to the door.

In my Pontiac, I drove back to the Ottawa and went across the lobby to the desk. The clerk looked distressed and opened his mouth as if he were going to scream for Mr. Nason. I tried to look reassuring. It must have been effective, because his mouth closed and only that bobbing larynx cartilage indicated a residue of emotional stress.

"I'm back for information," I said.

He worked his expression into an interrogation point but didn't risk vocalizing it.

I said, "Did anyone check out early this morning? Before I arrived, that is."

He resorted to the record and said, "Several people checked out before that time."

"Anyone alone?"

After a moment, he said, "A Mr. Williams in five-ten. A Mr. Samuels in six-six."

"Were you at the desk when they left?"

"No, sir. The night clerk was still on duty."

"Where does the night clerk live?"

"He has a room here. He's sleeping now."

"Let's wake him up," I said.

We went through a door at the rear of the lobby and down a short hall. At a door near the end of the hall, the clerk stopped and knocked. He kept on knocking with paced graduation of volume until we heard the sudden, sharp sound of bedsprings and the slap of bare feet inside. The door opened to reveal a tousled nondescript with an overlay of belligerence. The day clerk told him I had some questions, and the belligerence faded into a queasy kind of curiosity.

I said "Last night a lady died in seven-eleven. This morning two men checked out early and alone. You were still at the desk then. One was a Mr. Williams. The other was named Samuels. Describe them to me."

The clerk combed fingers through tousled hair and tried to get his sluggish brain to function. His face took on an expression of acute pain from the effort.

"This Williams," he said, "is hard to remember. Just a guy, I mean. He looked like anybody. Samuels is easy. Tall and real blond. A smooth number. He talked in a kind of clipped way that wasn't exactly an accent but almost. Had a way of making you feel like dirt."

"Thanks a lot," I said. "You can forget about Williams."

TURNING, I went back through the lobby and outside. Standing there on the curb, I put it all together. A tall, blond guy with a clipped voice. Samuels. Sorenson. Why, even when the change was only for a little while, did they always keep the initials? Maybe something subconscious. Maybe an uneasy reluctance to give up all connection with a familiar designation, as if by doing so one were cut loose and lost in a vast eerie world of half-folk.

I knew now why Jonnie had died on that cheap bed in this cheap hotel with dirty yellow light washing over the pathetic blue foam of her prettiest nylon gown. I knew it as well as I knew that I stood there on the curb with a gun in my pocket and murder in my heart. Proving what I knew was something else, but if I could find out one last thing I wanted to know, it would be good enough for me.

Steering the Pontiac across town to Hillcrest Drive, I turned up the broad and impressive sweep of its gradual ascension to the Granada Apartments. A whispering elevator that was just barely sub-sonic lifted me in split seconds to the floor I wanted. At the right door, I used a key and went through. That's one of the small prerogatives of being "dearest," if not "darling." It earns you a key to the front door in case you ever want to drop in and wait when nobody's home.

I went through a short hall into a huge living room and across the living room into another hall. I went down the second hall past doors to bedrooms. Behind one of the doors, I heard voices and stopped, standing ankle deep in grey carpeting to listen. Two voices. One was the sultry, suggestive voice of Karen, apparently returned from viewing the body. The other was clipped, not quite like an accent but almost. I couldn't distinguish words, and after a moment I went on to another door.

It wasn't locked, which was lucky, because the prerogative of being "dearest" didn't include a key to the bedroom. The drapes across the room were drawn off the wide windows, and the June sun lay bright across the floor. Within the room there was a feeling of aching emptiness that originated, not in the room itself, but in my knowledge that Jonnie had lived there intimately and would not again.

For a moment, standing there quietly inside the door, I thought I could see her on the broad bed in the bright sunlight with

the sheer blue gown a soft cloud around the slim lines of her body. But of course she wasn't really there at all, and I went over to a desk against the wall near the end of the bed.

In a drawer of the desk, I found what I was looking for. A large volume bound in brown leather with a strap that came over from the back and snapped in front. The end of the strap was a flat metal piece, and in the metal was a tiny keyhole. I searched the desk until I found a key that would fit the hole, and the strap came free with a faint click.

She'd always kept a diary. I remembered it from college days, and I knew that she had probably continued to keep it afterward, because it is often a practice of people, both literate and lonely, with the strange, exceptional loneliness that comes from an isolated spirit regardless of place and people. It's a way they have of talking to themselves, these exceptional people, when loneliness is accentuated by night.

In the final pages of writing, I learned what I needed to know. It was set down in a small, clear hand in black ink, but it should have been written in blood—Jonnie's blood. I read the symbols of anguish until they became, toward the end, by a kind of tortured transformation, the symbols of an ethereal acceptance, an exalted rejoicing, like a martyr going singing to the fire.

And in the end it had come to nothing but fraud. In the end it had come to the sum of death in dirty yellow light. And the powers of darkness in the realm of the damned must have held their sides from laughing.

I locked the diary again and put the key into my pocket and the diary back in the drawer. I felt sick, but it was a cold, still sickness, and I had a light, heady sensation of moving in an atmosphere without resistance under an impulse that was not my own. Leaving the aching room to

its emptiness, I went back down the hall to the door with voices behind it, but now the voices were still. Turning the knob and pushing the door open ahead of me, I saw why.

Nelson Sorenson sat on a chaise longue of yellow satin. Karen Birch was stretched on the lounge with her body raised above his lap and twisted toward him, supported in suspension by his arms beneath and her own arms locked around his neck. One leg was bent at the knee, and the skirt of her dress had slipped unheeded down a sharp angle of nylon and soft thigh. Their mouths were caught fast in a hard and hungry kiss, and I stood watching them, thinking that it would be pleasant to kill them as they were, in the blind absorption of their million dollar passion.

"With Jonnie just gone," I said, "and not out of the morgue."

For a moment they didn't move, as if passion and its physical functionaries had gone into a sudden-deep freeze. Then Karen sat up slowly, swinging her legs off the lounge and sitting there looking at me with eyes as hot as lava. Slowly, unconsciously, she smoothed her dress primly over her knees. Nelson Sorenson got to his feet, assembling the scattered elements of his arrogant personality.

"Do you make a habit of walking into a lady's bedroom without knocking?"

I took two steps into the room and felt the cold temptation of the Banker's Special in my pocket.

"Pardon me. I just stopped in to tell you a story. It's about a handholding, bedside charmer who was engaged to a swell girl. This girl was a little strange and not quite his type, but she had a million dollars. He really wanted another girl who didn't have a million dollars. He thought it would be nice to have the girl he wanted and also the money he wanted, but the trick was to get the girl and the money together. In this case, it wasn't too hard, because the

first girl's million was willed to the second girl. It was really very easy when you stop to think about it."

I STOPPED and thought about it, and they did too.

"As I said, this girl was strange. Rather unstable, you might say. She had recurrent periods of despondency. The suicidal type. He knew the girl was completely gone on him, and that, being what she was, she probably wouldn't want to live without him. So this guy I'm talking about got an idea. He told her he had cancer and was dying. He even showed her an X-ray that was supposed to be his. He told her he was determined not to linger on in suffering, but would take the quick way out. He said he was sorry, but it was best for everyone. So he kissed her and said goodbye, and it was all very sad. From there, it went like a dream. She wanted to die with him, just as he'd thought.

"She didn't want to do it at home, because she wanted to save the girl in the will as much grief as possible, which is really another fine laugh. He convinced her, of course, that she mustn't tell anyone about the pact, and they arranged to fulfill it at a certain hotel. On the evening of the night they chose, she went to the hotel and checked in under an assumed name. Later on, he checked in.

"He went to the girl's room, and they did whatever lovers do when they are about to die together, and then they took a hell of a lot of sleeping pills. She did, that is. He took placebos. After a while, she went to sleep—the kind that never ends. He got up and went back to his own room. Early the next morning he checked out. It was that easy. It was that easy and that fast to a hot lovely and a million bucks. Only it wasn't. Because of me, I mean. Because I'll see you both in hell before I ever let you bring it off."

His laugh was clipped, brutal. "You're

out of your head. How do you expect to prove this fantasy?"

"I'll prove it," I said. "If I'm a lawyer, I'll prove it. I've got a witness who'll swear that you registered at the hotel. I've got two pills, one a barbiturate and the other a placebo, that were left in the room. I've got a diary to substantiate the hocus-pocus about the cancer that a medical examination will show you haven't got. And the diary will verify the suicide pact."

He took a step toward me. He didn't intend to attack. Not yet. He was only easing the unbearable tension of his body. But it was a good excuse, and I took it. I took the gun out of my pocket and shot him. Being a lousy shot, I only got him in the shoulder, but the force of the slug slammed him back.

I looked down at him with a sudden fine feeling of satisfaction, and I considered for a second the pleasure of trying again.

I looked at Karen, who had found her feet with the shot, and I could see coming up in her eyes behind the diminishing heat a complexity of terror and fury.

"I've got something else, too," I said. "I've got a hungry gal who knows how to butter her bread. When a certain mournful cop named Gregson gets through explaining the advantages of being state's witness, she'll talk. She'll talk and talk and talk, and afterwards she may get off with no more than a couple of years, which is considerably better than the eternity that Jonnie got."

Then I turned and went out into the hall where I called a hospital for an ambulance and police headquarters for Gregson. I went into the living room and sat down.

Pretty soon I began to wonder if I'd done what Jonnie would want, and I decided that probably I hadn't. After all, Jonnie was a little psycho, which is a polite way of saying crazy; she didn't believe in things like hate and revenge that good, normal people like me believe him

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GREAT CLOWES STREET

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DEATH IS MY HOST

(Continued from page 21)

intake of Benny's breath, the surprised, appreciative whistle. The tall man's head swung around toward the girl, staring.

And Kennett hit him. He was lunging forward as he threw his blow, and the momentum of his full weight was behind the blow. Sid's head snapped back, and the gun in his hand exploded a single convulsive shot as he twisted and fell.

Kennett spun and caught the short man by the shirt front. He jerked the man around and slammed him back against the side of the car. He caught the blue glint of gunmetal coming out of Benny's pocket, and drove his knuckles to the point of the jaw. One blow was enough, but he hit the man again.

"That's for what you were thinking," he grunted.

He turned, and Karen was standing slim and straight, staring down at the unconscious gunman with angry disdain.

"Just another dame, am I?" she sniffed. She heard Kennett's amused chuckle, and raised her head defiantly. "Well, Mister Kennett!"

"Some day I'll tell you," Kennett said swiftly. "After we're married, maybe. But it'll take a lot of telling, Karen—a lot of telling! Meanwhile, if you'd please tie that shirt around you again so I can think—"

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AS LUCK BRINGER

Another writes: "Since the War my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a 'Joan the Wad.' We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job, and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back, and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan.'"

AS MATCHMAKER

A young girl wrote to inform me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER

A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting 'Joan the Wad' I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize, but I know that —, who won £2,000 in a competition, has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan.'"

AS SPECULATOR

A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares, and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at 'Joan the Wad.' Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

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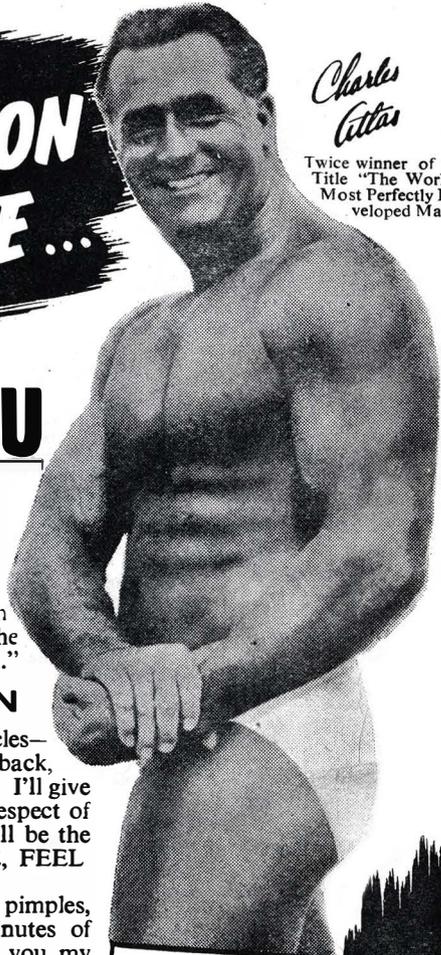
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