
MAMMOTH
MARCH 25¢
IN CANADA 30¢
MYSTERY
...a NEW 70,000 word novel
by a sensational NEW author
THE DOUBLE TAKE
By Roy Huggins

the Author CONFESSES

NO WRITER ever minds writing about himself as long as he can disguise it as fiction—which it always is, of course. But drag him out into the open and he often turns out a pretty dull piece. In my case the piece is even duller on account of the raw material, a life spent chiefly attending school.

I was born in Litell Washington, a town where the trains stop only for laughs. That was thirty years ago. I graduated from grammar school in Portland, Oregon, with distinction, having been voted "the sloppiest kid in school." But I was of a studious turn and spent five years going through high school. Most people rush right through in four.

I left Portland after a couple of years of bumming around (all authors spend a couple of years bumming around. This is required). I went to U.C.L.A., an institution made famous by a novel called THE DOUBLE TAKE—and by cultivating the "readers" managed to graduate in four years with a bright little Phi Beta Kappa key and the words, "With highest honors" scrawled begrudgingly on my diploma.

I went into industry and when the war ended I was an associate in a firm of industrial engineers, and still am.

But I have said nothing about my writing through all these years. This is because I never wrote anything. I edited a "little" magazine—the literary type when I was nineteen, but the less said about that the better. THE DOUBLE TAKE is my first effort, but I hope not my last. It was written during the last months of the war in whatever spare moments I could find.

HOW did I happen to start writing at thirty? Several people have asked me that. The answer is that I am a mystery fan, and like most fans, I am disappointed in nine out of every ten detective stories I sit down to read. I decided to try to write a detective novel that would commit none of the more egregious sins against us readers, such as detectives who are "hard boiled" because they have a strident delivery and are nasty to old ladies and children; "cute" detectives who solve their cases casually between rolls in the hay; plots without integrity, based on accident, coincidence unmotivated behavior; long explanations, with the characters suddenly turning stooge while the detective reels off two chapters of double-talk that only the author understands; saboteurs, spies, big shots who have the mayor, the city council, and the state legislature in various pockets.

ROY HUGGINS

I don't know how well I succeeded, but William Morrow is bringing the book out later this month, and there have been two bids from the studfos, on the basis of galley proofs. But my agent says no sale until after publication. As he cryptically puts it: "Let's look this gift horse in the mouth."

REPORT BY THE EDITOR

BY this time, if you have picked up the previous issues of MAMMOTH MYSTERY, you will be familiar with our policy of presenting a full-length novel each time. And each one of them was a good novel too—as good as any you would pay two dollars for in book form.

WE were thinking along those lines a day or two ago, when the realization came that several novels in our pages later *had* appeared as regulation books. That led to wondering just how many of them had worked out that way, and so we did a little checking up . . . to discover something that amazed us.

HERE is what we learned. Of the three novels that have appeared thus far in MAMMOTH MYSTERY, two are scheduled for book publication; while no less than six of those in MAMMOTH DETECTIVE—MAMMOTH MYSTERY'S sister publication—either have or will appear between hard covers!

NOT that we mean to imply that a novel is good simply because it appears between stiff covers and a dust jacket. Some very bad detective stories show up in that form every year; you have come across a few of them, we are sure. But the editors of MAMMOTH MYSTERY and MAMMOTH DETECTIVE are very hard to please, so that you can be certain that any novel to appear in either magazine is exceptional in style and plot, and free of any taint of "formula"; i.e., the hackneyed, flat, blue-printed yarn that has about as much flavor as a mouthful of cotton.

SO, just for the heck of it, we'd like to run a sort of "box-score" each issue, showing how many of our novels later appear on the country's book shelves. And when the figure gets *too* large, we'll start keeping, instead, a record of the movies made from the whodunits appearing in our pages!

THIS month's novel, "The Double Take," is bound to rank high on your list of "best" detective thrillers. If you have read Raymond Chandler's rich contributions to detective fiction, you will revel in the reading of Huggins' story. By that, we do not mean that Huggins has consciously set out to follow Chandler's style, but the comparison is there nonetheless. In addition, you are getting one of the best-rounded plots we have ever had the pleasure of reading. All we ask is that you drop us a line and tell us whether you would like to read more of this writer's work.

REMEMBER Keogh, the private eye in "Start With A Corpse," who appeared in the previous issue of MAMMOTH MYSTERY? Well, he's back again in another of Larry Holden's inimitable series. This time Keogh gets mixed up in a mayoralty race in a town where they need either an honest city government or an infantry battalion. Keogh sort of substitutes for the latter. . . .

THIS issue, we're introducing a new character by a new author. The character is Uncle Shpinay, who came to this country from Syria, and who makes a living by peddling imported linens from door to door. The author is H. B. Hickey; and we humbly suggest you take notice of him, because we expect you'll be seeing a lot of his work in our pages.

STUART FRIEDMAN can always be depended on to give you a lot of story in a few words. This time he tells about an ex-G.I. who comes back to a mess that made his battle-field experiences seem like a vacation in Paradise. It seems that some guy stole his wife while he was away, and when he returned home, he found himself knee-deep in policemen, strange men who followed him around, and corpses on his bedroom rug. . . .

JUST to keep up our reputation for presenting stories that are fresh and different, we give you William G. Bogart's yarn, "It's Time To Go Home." This one takes you up into Canada. It seems a man went fishing and a fish caught him . . which ought to be enough to make you turn to page 102 to see what gives.

AT THE bottom of the issue (where it can hold up the rest of the stories!) is Frances M. Deegan's "Hattie Had a Hatchet," which we nominate as this month's off-trail thriller. What could prompt a nice, dignified old lady to dig a hatchet out of a tool-chest and go charging down the avenue in the best Carrie Nation tradition? You'll get laughs *and* thrills out of this one.

LOOKING Ahead: Next issue comes an 80,000 word novel by Milton K. Ozaki. Another pre-book-publication scoop! —*H.B.*

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

All STORIES Complete

William B. Ziff, Publisher; B. G. Davis, Editor; Raymond A. Palmer, Managing Editor; Howard Browne, Associate Editor; Herman R. Bollin, Art Director; Malcolm Smith, Art Editor; H. G. Strong, Circulation Director; H. J. Morganroth, Production Director.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MARCH 1946

VOLUME 2 NUMBER 2

All FEATURES Complete

Front cover by Arnold Kohn depicting a scene from "The Double Take."
Back cover by Malcolm Smith illustrating a "Picture Puzzle."

MAMMOTH MYSTERY MARCH 1946

Published bi-monthly by ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY at 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill. New York Office, Empire State Building, New York 8, N. Y. Washington Office, International Building, 1319 F Street, N.W., Washington 4, D. C. Subscription $2.50 for 12 issues; Canada $3.00; Foreign $4.50. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address. All communications about subscriptions should be addressed to the Director of Circulation, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

Volume 2 Number 2

Something came down on the back of my head with crushing force . . .

DOUBLE TAKE

By Roy Huggins

It seemed that a good many people wanted to find out the identity of Ralph Johnston's wife. Among them was the woman's own husband

CHAPTER I

I WAS sitting in his panelled office on the top floor of the Security Building looking at him across a desk that was bare as a mannequin's mind and large enough for a pair of midgets to play badminton on. His name was Ralph Johnston and he was president of Johnston and Forbes, Advertising. We had been talking for about twenty minutes, pleasant, aimless talk that didn't tell me anything about why he had brought me up there. He was thirty-eight or so, and he filled his high-back swivel chair to capacity. He sat with one knee drawn up almost under his chin in a small-boy gesture that said, Don't take these executive trappings too seriously, I don't.

He ran a hand roughly through coarse blond hair and said, "I don't know. Maybe this thing will turn out to be a bad joke, some sofa slug's idea of a very funny gag." He went on rubbing his head lightly and looking at me out of the round eyes that were the clear transparent blue of copper sulphate.

I didn't have any comment.

"It happened about a week ago, and I've just got around to doing something about it. It probably isn't too late."

I nodded and crossed my legs. There still didn't seem to be anything to say.

"I'm afraid some of my friends resent my wife," he went on. "Think she's too chilly. Any one of them might be capable of getting stuccoed and pulling a stunt like that." He had a lean, tanned face, and there was a hint of sweat at his temples; and I was beginning to wonder if he'd brought me up there to listen while he talked himself out of a case of nerves.

"This thing that might be gag," I said. "Is it a secret?"

Johnston had been raising his hand to his head again. It stopped midway and his mouth came open. Then he grinned. It was a broad, warm grin, a little lop-sided, backed up by a nice set of teeth.

He said: "Maybe it would help if I told you what I'm talking about."

"That would be fine."

"Six days ago I got a phone call. I don't recall the exact words, but the fellow asked me how much it would be worth for him to keep quiet about my wife. I asked him what he was talking about and he said, 'Let's not be coy.' I asked who was calling and he came back

with 'I'll give you a couple of weeks to think it over and maybe find out what I'm talking about. After that we'll get together for business.' Then he hung up."

Johnston leaned forward and folded his hands. "Do you think it's a gag?"

I said: "If it isn't, it ought to be."

His blond brows pulled together into a divot over his nose and he said: "Then you don't think I ought to take the thing seriously?"

"I don't know," I said. "Wouldn't it depend on what he might have on your wife?"

Johnston hadn't expected that. He was surprised first, then amused. He said, "I guess that's the point of this meeting. She's a quiet, refined girl I met at a concert at U.C.L.A. We've been married over a year, and I knew her for several months before that. She's probably the most conservative, discreet woman I've ever known."

"Did he talk tough — Hollywood tough, I mean?"

"No. He was kind of polite about it."

"That's too bad," I said. "But it still sounds more like a gag than a case of blackmail. That must be a rather rugged circle you run in . . ."

"There are a few people with bad taste in every circle," he said. "But what makes you so sure it isn't blackmail?"

"I'm not sure. But I don't like the delay. After all, if he's got something to sell, why not sell it now? Instead, he gives you two weeks to get set for him. It doesn't make sense. Blackmailers generally work for the quick touch."

"And they don't use phones, do they?"

"Yes, they use phones. They're real modern now."

JOHNSTON leaned back and nodded slowly. There was a distant look in his eyes and they seemed to have darkened a little. He got up and walked to a walnut cabinet and opened it. It was a bar, and he made two drinks with a nice economy of motion, pushed one into my hand and sat down again.

He gestured toward me with his glass grinned, and said: "I think you'll do. I don't agree with you, and I'm not crazy about your attitude. But I like your honesty—if it's a gag, there's no job in it for a detective, is there?"

I tasted the drink just to be sociable and said: "There might be, but I didn't expect you to agree with me anyway."

He put the glass down slowly, laughed, and said, "You didn't? Why not?"

"I don't believe I've said anything so far, Mr. Johnston, that you couldn't have figured out for yourself. What's the rest of the story?"

He stood up again and turned his back and pulled open the venetian blinds on the wide window behind his desk. The air conditioner came on and filled the room with a quiet competent drone, and the world outside was lost in a soft summer silence.

He turned back and looked at the drink in his hand as if he were wondering how it got there.

"It's a funny thing, Bailey. That phone call. It made me realize something. I know very little about my wife. The man *might* have something." He sat down heavily on the edge of his desk and went on, talking to his glass:

"I met Margaret at the University of California here in L.A. a year and a half ago. She was a freshman out there, but a little older than the average freshman. She's twenty-four now. She was a member of my niece's sorority. We went together about six months. I—I asked her to marry me several times, and she refused me as regular as clockwork." The smile became wry. "Then

one day she asked me if I still wanted her. I abducted her right on the spot, and we went to Tijuana for the wedding . . ."

He stopped for a drink and I kept him company—never let a client drink alone. It was good whiskey. Soft as a candle's flame and only slightly warmer going down.

"Well, she never went back to school after our honeymoon, although I told her she could. She had come down from Portland, Oregon, to go to U.C.L.A. But she never gets any mail from Portland . . . and she never talks about her home. She told me her parents were both dead and she had had to take care of her mother for several years, so she lost touch with her friends.

"Then this phone call made me remember another thing. After we got married she never had any contact with people she had known at the University. Last week I checked up and found out she hadn't told anyone at the House about our marriage, and she hadn't left a change of address with the Dean's office. My niece had graduated before we were married, so she didn't know about it. Margaret just suddenly dropped out of the world as far as the University was concerned, and the same as far as her home is concerned, apparently." He sat down and brought his knee up again.

I said: "What did she say when you asked her why she broke her trail at U.C.L.A.?"

"It was very reasonable: Her sorority sisters bored her, and she never intended going back to school, so why bother letting them know where she was." He looked up at me for the first time since he started to tell the story, and he was trying hard to keep the placid look of easy humor on his face. But the effort showed. I wondered what the expression he was holding back might have been: fear or deep concern.

"But that's why I've called you, Bailey. I used to think it was just reticence, or that she'd simply been unhappy in Portland. But that call gave me the jitters. If she's hiding something, if she's got something to fear, I've got to know what it is and help her."

"Why don't you just ask her what it's all about?"

THE warm smile came painfully back. "I hope you're not as crude as you seem, Bailey. I'm willing to pay you good money to keep from asking Margaret that question or telling her about the phone call."

"A dollar will just about cover it. For that price the Merchant's Credit Association in Portland will give you a pretty full report on her."

Johnston gave me a quizzical up-from-under look and drawled: "You come to your conclusions with the slow deliberation of a greyhound starting after a mechanical rabbit. Her maiden name as I know it was Margaret Bleeker. I think we'll find that that *is* her name, but we don't know that. We don't really know anything at all . . ."

"It takes a high school transcript in good order to get into U.C.L.A., Mr. Johnston. I don't like to seem difficult, but my services are specialized and I charge accordingly. I like to feel that a job is worth the money before I take it."

"Are you married?" he asked.

"No."

"Well, when a man waits till he's thirty-nine to marry, it's usually a kind of severe case." He reddened slightly, but he went on with an unobtrusive dignity that seemed an innate part of him. "I can't go on wondering if Margaret's in trouble. And I want what I do about it to be in capable hands. You

came pretty highly recommended. I'm not just asking you to go to Portland and see if there's anything up there Margaret is ashamed or afraid of. I want to retain you to help me handle this . . . whatever this phone call means. Do you want the job?"

"That phone call wouldn't have any connection with your appointment to the State Planning Commission would it?"

"Don't tell me anybody outside my immediate circle of friends and enemies knows that I'm a State Planning Commissioner?"

"Yeah. I read about it."

Johnston laughed. "I'm afraid there's no connection. I wish there was, then I could just resign, and solve the problem —the job isn't what you'd call a political plum."

I got up and put the empty glass on the bar and sat down again.

"I'll be glad to do what I can, Mr. Johnston. But I still think forty dollars a day and expenses is high for this job. I've done some pretty unpleasant work for a lot less."

Johnston laughed again. It was a restrained, unaffected release of tension. "Ever kill anyone?"

"Not lately."

"Are those your regular rates?"

"For an out-of-town job, yes."

"My attorney told me you'd play hard to get . . . and end up taking the job. So I prepared for you." He took an envelope out of an inside pocket and grinned. "There's a round-trip ticket for Portland in here, to leave tomorrow, a three hundred dollar retainer, and a picture of my wife. I want the picture back; it's the only one I've got."

I took the envelope and said. "What about habits, names of friends in Portland, or of people she was intimate with at U.C.L.A.?"

He shook his head. "She's never mentioned anyone in Portland except her mother. She wasn't intimate, or even very friendly, with anyone at the University; and her habits are to spend a lot of time at home or at our place at Malibu. She doesn't like night life—neither do I particularly."

I HAD the picture out of the envelope. It was a three-by-four glossy print, the kind that goes with hot dogs and kewpie dolls.

Johnston said: "We got that on our honeymoon in Tijuana. Be careful with it."

It was a good clear picture of a round-faced woman in tortoise-shell glasses. You couldn't tell much about the color of the hair, but the eyes, hiding behind the tortoise-shell and glass were what stopped and held you. They were large and wide, with the remote subdued intelligence of a woman who has discovered the quality of sex and has come to terms with it. The pupils were without light, and the skin below the eyes was darker than the pale face, and it made them look deep-set and thoughtful.

I said: "Does she always wear glasses?"

"Not any more. She wore them when she was going to school. I don't think it means anything. . . . There was another odd thing though: She lived like a Maharaja's daughter at U.C.L.A. A swank apartment in Westwood, a cabin at Arrowhead, and all the accessories. But her personal fortune amounted to about six hundred dollars."

I put the envelope away and stood up. Johnston came around the desk and walked with me to the door. He was a big man with lean shoulders, probably an inch taller than I. He didn't slap me on the back.

"I know you're going to find that things are just what Margaret says they

are up there; so take it easy, and don't show that picture around unless it's absolutely necessary."

I took hold of the mahogany-panelled door. "I'll do my best. But you stir things up a little and get your information, or you let things lie and stay ignorant. It's kind of hard to do both."

"I'm paying you to get the information without stirring things up."

"I'll do my best," I repeated. "But I'll have to handle it my own way. If she hasn't anything to hide, she'll never know about me. But if there are any bodies buried she'll know she's being cased no matter how careful I am. She'll probably find out I'm doing it. But she won't know you're behind it—at least not from me."

Johnston nodded distantly and said, "All right, it's in your hands. Good luck, and don't stay any longer than you have to." He shook my hand and turned back to his desk.

I said: "I suppose it's occurred to you that the man on the telephone might have wanted you to do just what you're doing."

He wheeled around and shoved his hands into his pockets. He shook his head, grinned, and said, "Bailey, I can see why you don't work for a salary. You wouldn't last five minutes in the business world. No, it didn't occur to me, and I don't give a damn."

I opened the door and grinned back at him. "By the way, you didn't make that phone call yourself, did you?"

I thought I could still hear him laughing even after I closed the heavy door and walked away.

But I wasn't trying to be funny. Not entirely anyway.

CHAPTER II

HANDLING it my own way meant one thing in particular: seeing Mrs. Ralph Johnston. Seeing her probably wasn't the most cautious move in the world but the obvious one. I had checked with U.C.L.A. She was from Portland all right. Jefferson High School, 1937.

I drove out through the Holmby Hills where white mansions glare superciliously across raw terraced hill sides. At the end of Duarte Road I found the house, or at least the drive. The house was set back and was hidden by acacias and high-trimmed hedges. I made a U-turn and parked outside about thirty feet below the wide entrance. I walked up the shaded drive and along a curving flagstone path to the door. I had checked first and it was safe enough. Johnston was at his office. I pushed a protruding pink button and heard the chime sound far off like an echo in a deep well.

The door was opened by a gaunt, gray-haired woman. She had on a white uniform that looked almost as stiff as her face.

"Was there something?" She left the last word hanging in the air.

"I'm from the Treasury Department. I'd like to speak with Mrs. Johnston."

Her face shifted a little, but it didn't relax. "You have a card?"

"I'm just a working man. But I'm sure Mrs. Johnston will see a representative of her government. It's Mr. Flood, War Bond Division."

"I'll see if Mrs. Johnston is in." She walked away and left the door open. She wasn't wearing the stiff dress. She was just walking around inside it.

Pretty soon she came back and asked me if I wouldn't please come in. We walked down a short hall, turned and went down two steps into a large living room. She mumbled the name I'd given her and left, taking the stiff dress with her.

The room had been ordered by cata-

logue from a firm of interior decorators and then left as they delivered it. There was the current grouping of sofa, chairs, and coffee table about the fireplace. And there was a woman standing in the midst of it. She was wearing blue satin lounging pajamas that buttoned high at the neck, Chinese style

"Thanks for seeing me, Mrs. Johnston."

"Not at all. Sit down." She sat in a wing-chair upholstered in something designed by a truck gardener, and waved a cigarette at the sofa.

I sat down and looked at her. About five-feet-six and at least one hundred-forty-five pounds on the hoof. It wasn't bone, she was just healthfully plump. In almost any other kind of clothes, you'd have called her voluptuous. Her hair was the kind of ash-brown that happens to people who were blondes when they were kids, and it was done up in no particular fashion. The eyes weren't hiding behind glasses now, but they were the eyes of the picture, dark and steady, and as melancholy as an Irish fairy tale. Her nose was a little broad at the tip, and her mouth was wide and full. She was gazing at me with a thoughtful, remote expression that meant nothing at all. She might have been sizing me up with wary care, or thinking about the menu for dinner.

I said: "Mrs. Johnston, we're contacting the wives of business leaders in the community to see if we can form a community bond sales group among the ladies. You know, we still want to sell bonds, and we feel that women with go-getter husbands probably have something of the go-getter in themselves." I smiled at her idiotically.

She studied me with a quiet repose for what seemed a long time without saying anything. I was glad I wasn't Mr. Flood from the Treasury Department. My day would be ruined. I would need a pep talk. Behind me, in the hall or in another room, I heard a a phone being dialled, faintly.

"Mr. Flood, I'm terribly sorry." Her voice was low, throaty, but very quiet and very gentle, like her eyes. "But I'm afraid I'm not a 'go-getter.' I know I'd just be a burden on the group. I'm sorry." She smiled. I could feel that smile down to my knee caps. It was wide. It was incongruous. It was lovely. But it didn't change the eyes much.

"I can't agree with you, Mrs. Johnston," I said. "I think you are just what we're looking for: intelligent, young, of good standing . . ."

MRS. JOHNSTON'S smile froze and she leaned forward and knocked an ash from her cigarette into a crystal tray. She did it slowly, deliberately. When she looked up the thoughtful, neutral, expression was back again.

She shook her head and said: "Really, Mr. Flood, you will have to excuse me. The cause is fine . . ."

The tall gaunt woman interrupted her, standing vaguely on the stairs from the hall. "Can you answer the phone, Mrs. Johnston?"

She excused herself and they both disappeared down the hall to the left. I hadn't heard a phone ring, and I had heard one being dialled. It didn't have to mean anything. The bell might ring in another room, the kitchen maybe, or the den. Or maybe the maid had put in a call for her.

She was back in no time at all. She sat down again and pulled the smile up from nowhere, as bright and as lovely as ever.

"Tell me, Mr. Flood, how large a group are you planning?"

That tore it. Not hearing a phone ring hadn't really bothered me. But the new lease on the smile and the sud-

den interest in the size of the group were all wrong. I suddenly wanted to know if anyone was outside looking for the registration card on my steering post. I didn't keep it there, but I had license plates.

I stood up and said, "We need at least one person to a square block, Mrs. Johnston." I turned and walked toward the hall. I heard her rise and she said: "Mr Flood, I . . ."

I turned at the archway and said loudly, with a wider smile and a cock of my head, "Think it over, Mrs. Johnston. I know you'll be a real addition to our group."

She had a hand up and her lips were parted, ready to say something when I stopped.

I went right on: "I don't insist on an answer now, Mrs. Johnston. Talk to your husband about it." I turned and started for the front door. "And thanks for your time. I know you're busy. . . ."

I went out the door. Coming up the flagstone path was the gray-haired maid. She jumped a little when she saw me and tried to pull herself into the dress like a turtle as she squeezed past me.

"You're wasting your time," I said. "I stole the car from a gray-haired old lady."

She hurried into the house without looking at me or saying anything.

I walked out and drove away. My license plates didn't tell me whether anybody had been looking at them or not.

CHAPTER III

PORTLAND lives on one side of the deep Willamette river and works and does its shopping on the other, so it is a city of bridges, some of them broad swaggering structures of concrete and steel, and others ancient draw-bridges that look as if they are weeping over the city.

Jefferson High School was far out on the east side of the river, an aged building with little greenery around it and a tired look under the eyes. The halls were empty, and sick with the old odor of schools. The office was of the standard pattern, the long bar-high counter cutting the room in half, the windows on the office side, the relentless glare on the other. There were three women shuffling papers behind the counter. I leaned on it and my foot felt instinctively for a rail. One of the women came toward me and I told her I would like a little routine information on a Miss Margaret Bleeker who graduated in 1937.

She said I would have to wait until Mr. Dolles, the Vice Principal, was back. He was at a meeting.

I showed her my buzzer.

"Los Angeleez, heh? You'll still have to wait."

I thanked her and decided to wait outside. I walked out and down the oiled, bitten hallway. I was on the stairs outside when I heard it: "Just a moment, sir!" I turned, and a woman came through the archway and trotted toward me.

She was forty, a little more, a little less, and thin. She had flat cheeks and a retiring chin that made her face look as if it were in full retreat. Her eyes protruded uneasily, and were the color and brilliance of cigarette smoke.

She said, breathlessly: "I didn't want to leave the office too soon."

"I see."

She smiled. She had nice big teeth. "Miss Hurkette doesn't like men," she whispered. "Mr. Dolles is at a meeting all right—in Seattle." She giggled and looked over her shoulder.

"How does she act when she hates

somebody?"

The eyes swelled. "Oh terrible!" she said. "But I can help you. We all remember Margaret Bleeker. What's she done?"

I had been edging down the stairs. I came back up again now. She was looking at me eagerly, and there was a vague light dancing behind the opaqueness of her eyes.

"You tell me first," I said. "What was she like?"

"Well, she was expelled when she was a freshman for getting terribly drunk at a Hi-Y dance."

"But she settled down later, huh?"

"Oh no. She learned to hold her liquor." She clapped her hand to her mouth and giggled again.

"Quite a young lady."

"She was beautiful. When she was a junior she got one of our chemistry teachers in trouble."

"You mean one of the chemistry teachers got her in trouble, don't you?"

She shook her head solemnly and said. "She was perfectly innocent. It was in the laboratory. He made her stay after class . . . She reported him." She put a bony hand on my arm, looked over her shoulder again, and hissed: "What's she done?"

"One more thing. Where'd she live?"

"Oh, down in Albina. A terrible district."

"Can you get me the address?"

"But she's been gone so long. She sang at Keller's after she graduated—Keller's Hofbrau, down on Broadway," she added, when she saw the gleam in my eye. "Now, what happened to her?"

"A man in Seattle left $10,000 to someone named Margaret Bleeker. We're just running down a lead."

Her long face grew longer, and the eyes grayer. "Ohhhh," she said hoarsely. She turned and ran back into the building.

IT WAS raining when I got back to the Willamette Hotel on Fourth Street. I went up to my room and decided to put off going to Keller's Hofbrau until later in the evening—it sounded like that kind of a place. I undressed and hung my coat and pants up to dry and lay on the bed and watched the wet unwholesome twilight creep into the room and huddle in the dark corner.

After a while I got up and turned on the lights and called the bell captain.

"I'd like to ease the inner writhing a bit," I said. "Where can I get something to eat?"

"Huh?"

"Something to take the sting out of living. You know, whiskey, champagne, buttermilk laced with gasoline—whatever you can get me."

"Oh. Oh yeah. We got state control here y'know. It'll cost ya extra."

"See if you can find some ice and soda to go with it."

It came up five minutes later on a covered tray carried by a pale little man with brown welts under his eyes and a skin like a filefish. He set it down on the dresser, handed me a bill, and silently disapproved of the color of my shorts. He took his money, pocketed a dollar tip, gave me an obscene smile, and went out. It was good bond bourbon and I made a tall one and took it into the bathroom with me and crawled into a hot tub.

The drink was gone and I was rubbing myself down and wondering if I needed a shave. Through the bathroom door I heard another door open, and then close. I didn't hear anything else. I put the shorts on and opened the bathroom door.

She was standing uncertainly in the middle of the room, a damp chubby across one arm, and a blue silk dress

doing a nice job of covering but not concealing her round little body. The dress was too short, the heels too high, the legs too white and shaven. She had a wide smile that almost swallowed up her face, and her hair was like autumn corn silk after a rain. She looked about sixteen.

"Oh, there you are," she said politely.

I didn't say anything.

"Where ja get the nice tan?"

I said: "Baby, there's been a mistake. I didn't send for anybody."

The smile faded and her face reddened just a little. "You didn't? The bell cap . . ."

"He jumped at conclusions."

"Oh," weakly.

"Sorry. It's just that I've got a lot of work ahead of me." I pointed to the dresser. "There's some makings over there, help yourself." I climbed into my trousers and picked up a clean shirt.

"I don't drink," she said primly. "Thanks, anyhow." She went to the door.

I said: "Maybe you can tell me how to get to Keller's Hofbrau?"

She turned and cocked her head at me. "What would you be doing there?"

"It's a club, isn't it?"

She gigled. "It's more a ladies' tea room than anything. I think it used to be a club, long time ago when Keller owned it."

I buttoned the shirt. "And Keller and the old management are all cleared out, huh?"

She came back into the room and leaned against the dresser. "If it's a club you're looking for, Keller is still your man. But his place is kinda hard to get into—it's illegal you know, and they're a little skittish right now." She watched me tie my tie and waited for me to make an offer. I didn't make one.

She said: "I might be able to get you in, though. I got a friend works there. He'd fix it."

I grinned at her and took out a ten spot and held it in front of me. "How does it work?"

"You just go in the reg'lar way and tell the jerk at the desk you're a friend of George's. I'll call 'm up." She took the ten and told me how to get there and how to go in. She went back to the door and opened it and turned around and said:

"Thanks for telling me you had work to do." She went out and shut the door.

THE building was a huge opaque square against the transluscent blue of the night sky. The rain had let up, and there was nothing here but wet darkness and the thick chemical smell of the river. A car came up the long narrow street and lit the face of the building faintly, and I could read the legend across it: "Rudy Milbrunner, Warehouse and Storage." The car turned into a hole.

I walked down the ramp and came out in a dim-lit concrete basement with a few cars parked in neat rows, and white-marked spaces for a few hundred more. To the right there was an open freight elevator, and by the elevator a desk. The desk had a lot of stuff on it that looked like freight receipts and invoices, and there was a man sitting behind it with a greasy hat on his head looking like a warehouse foreman. He watched me sharply as I walked toward him.

I said: "I'm a friend of George's."

"Where's your transportation?"

"I came in a taxi."

"Friend of George's, huh?" He ran suddenly drowsy eyes over my face and picked up the phone. He looked at me some more. He could hardly keep awake. The eyes stayed on my face like two dull and rusty gimlets. He put the phone back on its cradle without

calling anybody.

"Okay. Go ahead," he said without moving his lips.

There was an old man in the elevator, sitting on a beer barrel reading a Western magazine. We went up two floors and stopped. Double doors of frosted glass slid back and I stepped out. The old man mumbled, "Scares ya half ta death, don't he?" I turned and grinned at him. He winked faintly, closed the doors, and went back down for another load.

THE lobby looked like Los Angeles' Sunset Strip of ten years ago. It was bright, walled in glass brick, and the floors were covered from wall to wall with a heavy sea-foam carpeting. The lighting was indirect except for a colored spot that picked up a uniformed hat check girl and made her look like something you'd like to send the boys for Christmas. She took my hat and coat and was so nice about it I wanted to tell her she could keep them.

The first room off the lobby was for dining and dancing. It wasn't crowded yet, and empty linen-covered tables were spaced nicely in three tiers around the floor. The walls were glass with murals painted on them limning dancing naked girls, with here and there a check-suited guy with lacy long white pants holding a banjo. Light came from behind the glass.

At the back there was a long glass-and-chrome bar. I stopped off there. The bourbon wasn't good, but they were generous with it, as is the way with chip-cribs. After the third drink I noticed that people came in, but they didn't stop in the dining room or at the bar. They went right on by, down a dim-lit corridor to the right of the bar. One man didn't go on by. He stopped at the bar, and the barkeep fixed him a drink without waiting to be told. The man was thick and short, and his clothes were too tight for him. His coat concealed the bulge his gun made with all the subtlety of a school girl's bra.

He was watching me. Not covertly, just looking at me out of eyes that were the color of gin. I winked at him and his eyes watered at me. I got up and went on down the dark corridor and through a heavy sheet-metal door. This room was different. It was already crowded, and there was a feeling of hot, sweaty tension in the place that the air conditioner wasn't doing anything about. There was blackjack. Four games going, and tables for more. Five crap tables with the crowds attached to them like bees. Chuck-a-luck. Two-bit slot machines. And in the back, quiet men under a net of blue smoke at round felt-covered tables. Poker. There wasn't a roulette wheel in the place. Some of the players were noisy, with an overtone of hysteria in their voices and movements; but most of them were quiet, intent, like primitive people engaged in a solemn ritual.

Someone tapped me gently on the shoulder. It was the little man with the bulge.

"Well, what d'ya think of the place?" His voice was high, tinny, and it was trying to be cordial.

"No roulette," I said.

"We got wheels. They're in storage. People up this way don't go for roulette."

Three fat, gray-haired women pushed by us, and we moved over, out of the way of the door.

"What did you expect to get for your ten bucks, Mr. Bailey? Anything in particular?" He smiled.

"You work together up here."

"We try to."

"I wanted to talk to Keller a couple minutes about a very small matter."

"Keller. Assuming I knew anyone named Keller, what would the small matter be about?" The smile was getting a little sharp at the corners.

"A girl. A girl who used to work for him."

He looked at my left ear with a slow loss of expression, like a man filling an inside straight. "Uh-huh," he said softly. "We try to oblige our guests. Wait at the bar."

HE WAS back at the bar in about ten minutes and we took the elevator to the third floor. It looked like a warehouse up here. In front of the elevator there was a green-painted greasy door with a long splinter out of it just above the knob. The short man knocked and the door clicked and opened. Inside was more of the through-the-looking-glass stuff. The room was large. The walls were inlaid panels of Philippine mahogany, the grain alternating every other square. The lighting was indirect and came from around the wall molding and dropped a soft glow over several over-stuffed pieces that looked as if they were upholstered in lamb's wool.

Behind a blond-wood desk in a high-back executive chair sat a white-haired, benevolent looking old gentleman. He was getting up with a slow and heavy dignity and giving me the kind of warm smile you give to people who have something you want. I was going to hate to disappoint him.

"Sit down, Mr. Bailey." His voice was low, and it bumbled out as if he had marbles in his throat. I sat in one of the lambs' wool chairs in front of the desk, and the short man stayed somewhere behind me, silently. The white-haired man took hold of his great belly and sat down again carefully. "My name is Keller, sir. How can I be of service?" He coughed loudly and brought up some marbles. I never knew what he did with them.

"I'm looking for a girl," I said. "She used to work for you." I stopped and waited.

He nodded heavily and blinked. He was a man who might have been fifty and living too well, or seventy and well-preserved. His white hair was soft and flowing like a senator's, and his face was round and puffy, and smooth as an inner tube. His eyes were just wet dark gleams deep in soft cushions of fat. They didn't tell me a thing.

"She may have taken a cozier name for your show," I went on. "She was born Margaret Bleeker."

There may have been a change, a subtle release of tension in the room. Or maybe I just thought there was, because I was looking hard for a reaction. The man behind me moved audibly for the first time, and Keller's shoulders and face seemed to relax imperceptibly. He chuckled softly and said:

"What's that high-nosed little brat got herself into?"

"She's just missing."

Kellar squirmed slightly and glanced at a clock on the corner of his desk. He was bored. "I'm afraid I can't help you, Mr. Bailey. She left here in 1938 when I sold the Hofbrau. Went to L.A. with a two-bit comic named Buffin."

"That's a long time ago. Sure of the date?"

He stood up slowly, painfully, and came around the desk. "I'm afraid so," he rumbled. "Do you know her, Mr. Bailey?"

I shook my head.

"Private operator?"

"Uh-huh."

He chuckled again. "She was quite a young lady. Luscious as a pomegranate, and twice as acid. I don't think anyone ever got to her. Buffin was just a sleeper ticket to L.A."

I stood up. "Would you know any-

one who might have kept in touch with her in Los Angeles?"

He patted me on the shoulder with a hand like a pink pin cushion and said, "Sorry I can't help you. But six years is a lot of years, sir."

"Yeah. You wouldn't have any pictures around would you?"

"I might. I have a room full of relics I trucked over from the Hofbrau. Want to go through it?"

"I'd like to."

He walked over to a bar set in a blond-wood cabinet and began to mix a drink. His hands shook a little.

"You know the room, George. Take him down and let him go through it."

I walked to the door and turned around. Keller was taking a long, business-like drink. I said:

"Thanks for your time, Mr. Keller. Sorry I had to disappoint you."

He lowered the glass and looked at me blankly over it. He belched majestically. He didn't say anything.

THE room was large and cold and had a sour smell to it. There was a 100-watt bulb burning fiercely in the high ceiling and throwing a begrudging light on a collection of junk stacked against the far wall. I could make out a few sandwich boards, some broken floodlights, and a collection of cheap silvered shields, the kind a five-man orchestra sits behind.

I left George standing at the door and started through the junk. It was probably forty-five hot and dusty minutes later that I turned over the large rectangle of black cardboard. It was the kind of board that fits into a glass-enclosed box, like those outside some of the Hollywood spots on Vine.

There were nine eight-by-ten photographs glued on the board at meaningless angles. And in the center in fancy gold-leaf that was flaking badly now it said: "Gala show tonight with these popular stars," and then it listed the names. The fourth name was Peggy Bleeker, the seventh name was Buster Buffin.

Three of the faces were male, so I only had to look at six. She was easy to find. The hair was blonde, but the eyes in their seeming shadows, and the wide smile, were the same.

It was a full-length picture, and the figure was slender as a boy's, with long trim legs. But there wasn't any doubt about it. It was Mrs. Ralph Johnston of U.S.L.A and the Hofbrau.

I had to use a knife, to get it off. George had come over from the door and was watching me carefully while I folded it and put it away in an inside pocket.

"Which one of them is Buffin, George?"

He indicated one of the photographs with his foot and said, "Cute, ain't he?"

It was a studio photograph of a hatchet-faced man with a hungry grin, a cocky straw hat, and a bow tie that might have been somebody's horse-blanket. I cut it off and put it away with the one of Mrs. Johnston.

George said: "How d'ya know the other one was Peg Bleeker? I thought you said you didn't know her."

"You don't miss anything, do you? But you ought to carry a smaller gun. I saw a photograph of her in Los Angeles."

"Oh." He ushered me down to the elevator, left me without saying anything and knocked at Keller's door. It clicked, and he slipped in quickly.

Outside, the mist was heavy and the street had the echoing darkness of a deserted alley. Strands of fog wandered aimlessly. I had thought I would find a cab, or a place to call one. In ten blocks I didn't find either. A car passed me, appearing from nowhere out

of the night and going nowhere into it. I lost it in the drifting mist and stopped and listened to the night silence. A ship moaned distantly. I put a cigarette in my mouth and lit it. I didn't really want a smoke, but the bright warmth of the match was pleasant.

Then I heard it. The quiet shush of leather on the wet walk, growing suddenly hurried and confused as I turned. Something glinted brightly and came down across my head. I went down on my hands and knees. Nausea pulsed upward and pounded at my throat, and I pulled myself up and my feet slipped on the wet pavement. I heard a gentle, sighing sound and light suddenly broke into bright fragments behind my eyes. Then there was only darkness stretching away endlessly.

CHAPTER IV

THE sidewalk had a clean wet smell. I came to know that smell. I smelled it for a long time before I moved my face and decided I didn't like it down there. I dragged myself up slowly and reached out and steadied the darkness while my stomach throbbed like a base fiddle, sending sour tones hammering against my skull.

At my feet several of my cards were scattered, with my wallet and the pictures of Mrs. Johnston and Buster gleaming in the midst of them. I picked them up and put the pictures and the cards away. They were soft and wet. I opened the wallet with clumsy, palsied fingers and looked into it. It was empty.

It didn't have to mean anything. Just a man with a donnegan; someone who liked to crack a head now and then in a friendly way for whatever it was worth. A nickel here, a nickel there. Heads are hard and I was a stranger in town.

I didn't believe a word of it.

I found a cab a few blocks away and went back to the hotel. The elevator girl clicked her tongue at me impersonally and asked me what floor I wanted, if any. I leered at her and held up four fingers. She cracked her gum and said, "Mister, it's a good thing you don't live on the first floor." She showed me her teeth.

I got out on four and wandered down the dim hall to my room. I let myself in, turned on the light, and stood looking the place over. I couldn't see anything different about it. It still looked like a cave man's dream of a home away from home. I went through the drawers, the unlocked suitcase in the closet, the pockets of my extra suit where I had about sixty dollars. The money was still there. If the place had been searched, it had been down with a nice professional touch. The bottle looked a little emptier, but that might have been on account of my consummate thirst. I didn't take a drink. It wouldn't have helped.

I lay down on the bed and thought it over. If Keller, just for example, had wanted to know a little more about me, or to see what I carried around, he'd have had a go at my room. And how would he know where that was? Not from the cab driver who took me down there, because I picked him up two blocks from the hotel. But, easily enough, from the little girl with the shaven legs. I liked those legs. I wanted to see more of them. I rolled over and sat up slowly and picked up the phone.

I got the bell captain, tried to get the proper tone of oily obscenity and said, "This is four-eighteen. I've got a little time now. How about sending up that little number with the taffy hair—what was her name?"

"You kiddin', Jack?"

"You're the one who sent up the liquor aren't you?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"If she's busy I can wait. Mind giving me her name? I'll see that you're taken care of."

"You didn't ask for no girl."

"No, but I must have looked lonely. You sent one up anyway. Remember?"

"Sorry, Jack. I didn't send nobody up. But I can get you a nice redhead . . ."

I didn't say anything.

"Okay . . . you don't like redheads. Don't get sore about it. I can get you a brunette, the friendly type."

"Never mind," I said, "I'll go out and take a run around the block." I put the receiver back and forgot to take my hand away. It had grown suddenly cold. I stood up and had a drink. I looked around the room, at the bare walls, the blank windows. The rain that night was slow and endless.

THE next morning I checked on the woman at Jefferson and, sadly enough, she was just what she had seemed. She got me Margaret Bleeker's last known address and I went out there. The block where Margaret Bleeker had lived was taken up now by a machine tool manufacturing company. There weren't any houses for two blocks around. None of the merchants remembered any Bleekers.

That evening I saw Keller again. I went down there early and George let me go up to the plush office on the third floor. I told Keller about being dry-gulched ten blocks away from his place.

He laughed in his big barrel belly and said. "Anybody who wanders around down in that neighborhood at night deserves what he gets."

I said: "I thought maybe you might have been looking for something."

Keller was surprised first, and it looked genuine enough. Then he was hurt, rather elaborately. He said:

"I'm sorry to have given you that kind of impression, sir. I don't employ sand-lot tactics. If I were at all interested in you, which I am not, I'd have used more effective methods. Good day, sir."

I got up. I had just sat down, but I got up. I went halfway to the door and turned and said, "How about asking George to tell me where to find the girl —the one who told him I was coming down here last night."

Keller looked at George and nodded. George said: "Hell, she's just a little hustler that comes in now and then. Calls herself Candy. I don't think I've ever heard her last name, and I don't know where she lives."

There didn't seem to be anything more for me there. I wandered out. Outside, the mist and the narrow darkness of the street were waiting for me. I hadn't called a cab. I wanted to walk. I tried to find the street I had taken the night before, but the slow drizzle and the drifting fog made the world a kind of eyeless gray infinity. I walked with fists lying free in my pockets and the muscles crawling restlessly across my back. It was a long walk. Sounds from the river and from the city off to the south came to me with a lost and distant lowing. Now and then small and fleeting noises sounded close by, behind me, across the street, at my side where alleys split the darkness. But nothing happened. On Fourth Street I found a two-by-four cigar store and called a cab and went back to the hotel.

The next day, before my train left, I tried to find Candy. I never found her.

I STEPPED out of Los Angeles' Union Depot into thick rain. The lights from the burlesque houses cut deep orange chasms across Main Street, and the little dark people hugged the building walls and hurried through the down-

pour with an air of incipient panic. I went home and called Johnston. He wasn't in, so I sat down and typed up a report on the trip and went to bed.

The next morning the sun was warm and friendly and the mountains off behind Burbank were cutting the washed sky with a hard bright edge. I was driving east on Sunset. I turned at Virgil just as the signal flashed red. I drove south about a quarter-block and something in the rear-view mirror caught my eye and held it. It was a car wheeling into Virgil from the direction I had come. After the wild turn it slowed and stayed a comfortable half-block behind me. It was a green Dodge coupe. I pulled up and went into a drug store and bought some filters for my pipe. I drove off again. He wasn't doing a bad job. I was over a block away before the Dodge pulled out from the curb and rolled along after me.

I didn't have time to play with him. If it was important, he'd be around again. I turned onto Beverly. At the intersection where Second runs into the Boulevard there is some tricky six-way traffic. I timed the signal to catch him. It did, and I cut over to Wilshire and downtown to the Security Building.

Johnston gave me a warm greeting, put a highball into my hand, settled me on his tan leather casting couch, got behind his desk and said,

"Well? Let's have it. You weren't gone long enough for the news to be bad." His eyes were smiling, but there was a strained, guarded expression behind their brightness that said he didn't expect the news to be at all good.

I took the report out of a pocket and handed it to him. He opened it, looked at me briefly, and settled back to read. When he had finished he stood up and walked over to a wastebasket and began tearing the report into small pieces, dropping them slowly. "Don't write any more reports," he murmured. "Let's just keep it oral."

He sat down and regarded me quizzically. "I don't think they were talking about Margaret at all," he said simply. "You didn't show the picture around, did you?"

"No. But they showed me one." I got out the 1938 version of Peg Bleeker and gave it to him. "Keller gave me that one."

He studied it for a long time, while a slow flush came and went away again under the heavy tan of his face. "It's Margaret, all right. She's beautiful." There was a kind of mournful wonder in his tone.

I played with my drink. It was too early for us to get really friendly. He stood up and clinked the ice around in his glass. The slow drone of the air conditioner and the ice clinking against thin glass were the only sounds in the quiet room.

Johnston murmured: "That puts her in Los Angeles six years ago instead of only two as she says. What the devil does it mean?"

"Not much," I said. "A lot of show girls, the ones who don't yearn to marry millionaires, have complexes about education. I've known a couple. They used to get drunk and tell me about how they were really just doing this to get a college degree. I've heard of one or two that actually did it."

Johnston looked at me with the rapt expression of a county sheriff listening to a side-show grinder.

I went on: "After all, she used her own name. So she can't be hiding from anything serious. She's probably just getting the grease paint out of her blood."

JOHNSTON went on looking skeptical. I didn't blame him. I didn't believe it myself. Why had she put on

weight and made herself up to look like an apple strudle? Why the blackout at U.C.L.A.? Using her real name didn't impress me at all. Even in Portland it had been "Peggy" Bleeker. When she got to Los Angeles it probably became Clare deLune, or maybe something even prettier. And I couldn't think of a better place for a second rate show girl to hide than in bobby socks and glasses on Sorority Row. But that kind of a hideout needs a real name, one with a high school record.

And she wasn't running from her imagination. It was something that counted. A bell captain was bought off, a little blonde apprentice in the most ancient of professions had been made to disappear — probably to keep me from finding out who asked her for my room number. The wires had hummed and some marginal workers in the torpedo trade were on my tail. Blackmail slipped in a tentative hand. Something was in motion. How big, how dark, I didn't know.

That's how it added up to me, but I hadn't put it to Johnston that way.

He frowned and said, "I can't agree with you. There's something wrong some place. I don't believe you got that clout on the head just because you walked down the wrong street. . . ." He drew his lips back in a tight and mirthless grin and his voice became a taut purr as if he were having difficulty restraining himself. "We've started something, Bailey. I'm not sure we did the right thing now—maybe this is just what the guy on the phone wanted. But we're going to finish it. . . . So help me, I'll never forgive myself if I don't."

I didn't say anything.

After awhile he said almost cheerfully: "What'll I hand this fellow when he calls again?"

"Tell him you're interested. You'd like to know what he's got to sell—but don't sound too interested. I've got a hunch he's just taking a flyer. He might only know one thing, that your wife was a show girl once."

Johnston nodded.

"Let him carry the conversation," I went on. "If you get stuck tell him you're letting me handle it, give him my number and hang up." A shaft of morning light streamed through the window and glared at me like the spirit of Carrie Nation. I got up and put the whiskey on the bar.

I said. "I'm being tailed."

"Since when?"

"Since I got back. Since this morning rather."

"So I'm being watched?"

"Probably not. It could be from the Portland end. I shook him off down on Beverly."

"Better not come up here any more. Contact me by phone — here, not at home."

I went to the door and stepped out and glanced back at him. He was looking toward me, but he didn't seem to be seeing anything. I left him sitting there, the sun shimmering in his blond hair, shoulders hunched, looking like an old and tired man.

CHAPTER V

THE switchboard was silent and Hazel was harassing her ancient typewriter and smoking a cigarette. There wasn't anyone else in the place. I went over to my desk and sat down.

Hazel stopped hammering and smiled. "Hi! Where ya been?" She was thirty-one, and looked it in a nice lean way.

I said: "If I didn't know your first love was that P.B.X. board, I'd swear you missed me."

"I did, lug. Did you get the job?"

That was the nice thing about Hazel.

Her heart was roomy enough for all fifty of her clients. Hazel had been a government stenographer with imagination and a few pennies in the bank. She rented two offices in the Pacific Building, knocked out the partitions, moved in five desks, six phones, a P.B.X. board, and a rack of pigeonholes and she was in business. For ten dollars a month I and about fifty other gentlemen from various walks of life—all legitimate, Helen insisted—got a mailing address, a telephone, with a competent voice to answer it, and the use of the office whenever we needed it. There was a small room in one corner for private conferences and for five dollars a month extra Hazel had let me bring in my broad-gauge files, two Mexican posters, and my own desk, set down by the east window overlooking Broadway and the distant, dusty hills of San Bernardino.

I told her yes, I had got the job, and asked for an outside line. The rest of the day I gave my left ear a workout calling theatrical agents and employers of second-rate talent in the area. None of them had ever heard of a Peg Bleeker. A few of them remembered Buster Buffin vaguely, and one had an idea he'd left show business and bought himself a meat market.

It sounded more like a gag than a lead, but I took my phone book out of its drawer, looked around to see if anyone was watching—no one was except a large fly perched on the end of my pen desk set—and looked under the B's. After the Buffetts came one lonely Buffin. Buster Buffin's Buffet, with an address in Venice.

The large fly sneered at me and said, "Bailey, you're losing the simple touch." Or maybe I said it to the fly.

. . . I was thinking about something else and I didn't notice the green Dodge until I was out to where Wilshire passes the Los Angeles Country Club and the traffic had lost its Beverly Hills bulge. I let him tag along to Westwood Village.

At Warner I swung to the right and then pulled up and leaned out, waiting. He came wheeling into Warner in an agony of sound, straightened up and shot by me. As he went by, he saw me, and I caught a glimpse of a sallow face under a green felt hat, and a loose-lipped mouth hanging open in indecision and surprise. He drove up to Woodruff, turned left, and disappeared.

I started the car and drove up. A few feet down Woodruff, the Dodge was parked. I pulled up and got out. The car was empty. There was no registration showing, and the single plate was the deep chocolate brown issued by Michigan that year. Across the street a tall growth of oleander ran along the walk for half a block. I got back in my car and drove off. When I turned toward Wilshire, the green Dodge was still sitting at the curb, empty.

Buster Buffin's Buffet was on the ocean front, a colorless, beaten little shack cuddled up next to the Paragon Ballroom like a barnacle clinging to a luxury yacht.

INSIDE there was warmth and steam and the smell of fried onions and fat. There was a horseshoe counter in the center with a kitchen at the open end and booths along each side. Some stairs at the rear on the left side went up to a second floor. A sign over them said: "Private Dining Rooms." There were some smaller signs on the back walls that made me pretty sure I had come to the right place: "Yes! We serve crabs. Have a seat." "Stomach pumps provided with our blue plate special." "Vy is der zo miny mor orzis azis den der iz orzis?" Several others suggested with the same pungent humor that asking for credit would be a mis-

take. There weren't any customers.

A little fellow with quick eyes like a nervous robin and the same hungry grin I had first seen on the display board at Keller's came out of the kitchen. He had aged some, and he managed to look unhealthy under a heavy coat of tan.

He had a rag in one hand and a cigarette in the other. "Bein' as it's meatless Tuesday," he grinned, "what'll you have?"

"You're using last year's calendar. This isn't Tuesday."

Buffin put the rag up to his nose, screwed up his face in a pained grimace and held the rag out stiffly behind him. "Brother," he said, "at Buffin's every day is Tuesday. You can have clam chowder—or clam chowder."

"Chowder," I said agreeably. "And a cup of coffee."

He trotted back to the kitchen and came out after awhile with a paper napkin, a bowl, and a large spoon. He put them down in front of me.

"You'll find the chowder warmer than an old's maid's feet," he said, "but not half as clammy."

I said: "You'll have to watch that stuff . They'll be making you charge an entertainment tax."

Buster suddenly grabbed up the bowl in front of me and with a pseudo-horrified expression on his face said,

"You wouldn't be a food inspector, would you?"

"No," I laughed. "And anyway, I'm hungry—put it back."

Buster put it down again and walked over to the coffee urn. I tried the clam chowder. It was tepid and thin and I didn't find any clams in it, not even a dead one. Buster put the coffee in front of me in a cup that weighed a pound. He was grinning again. It was a nice grin, not really inane, just a little tired and a little sad, the remnant of an insatiable optimism.

"Cream?" he asked, "or do you take it like it is—mud gray?"

I reached for the sugar and said, "Get much business from the ballroom?"

"Yeah, except when the weather's like it was last Monday. That kills business at the beach. Even at night. I guess it's psychology."

That looked like a fine opening. I said: "I liked that rain. Reminded me of home. I'm from Portland, where it really rains."

"You don't have to tell me," he snorted. "I left there when my feet started to grow webs."

"You know the old burg, huh?"

"Spent some time up there back in '37 or '38. Hoofin'."

"Where? The Orpheum?"

"How's the chowder?"

"Fine. Fine. So you know the old town?"

"Yeah."

"The Orpheum, huh?"

"Nope. That's straight vaudeville. Warm up your coffee?"

"No, it's fine."

He started back to the kitchen.

"Say, are you the owner—Buffin?"

"Yeah."

"I think I remember you. Keller's Hofbrau, wasn't it?"

Buster's face lit up and he said, "Brother, you're kiddin' me, but it's soothin', very soothin'."

"No. I remember the name. I used to go down and buy my jug of beer every Friday night."

"Yeah," he said, and winked. "That was a cheap town if there ever was."

I didn't hear that. "Keller had a corner on the lovelies though. I can remember a couple I wouldn't mind going back for."

"Yeah," he said. "How long you been in L. A.?"

"Five years."

"You're a native. It's been good to me. I like L. A. Sure your coffee's okay?"

"Yeah."

HE TURNED and went back to the kitchen and left me sitting there. I'm a good fisherman. I can play any kind of fish, if he isn't a bright kind of fish, like a dog shaak. I drank some of the coffee and got up. Buster came back and stood by the cash register.

"Two bits," he said.

I paid him and decided to stop wasting time.

"You didn't know that blonde gal who sang for Keller, did you? Her name was Betty Bleeker."

He jerked his head up and gave me a slow stare. His quick eyes were puzzled, almost worried. "You mean Peggy Bleeker," he said slowly.

"Oh. Was that it?"

"That was it," he said and gave me a slow smile that showed a line of even white teeth that looked as genuine as a sound-effect. "Did you go through this routine just to find out if I know Peg Bleeker?"

"Yeah," I said. "Pathetic, isn't it?"

"Copper?"

"No. I'm just looking for Peg Bleeker."

"Why?"

"Okay," I said. "You win. Her aunt died almost a year ago and left a piece of property out by one of the shipyards. We've tried to find Miss Bleeker through the police down here, but they don't seem to be trying. The property is pretty valuable right now, and we can't do anything without her. Keller told me she came down here with you."

"But, chum, that was six years ago. What's your angle on it?"

"I'm just working for the executor."

"What's the information worth?"

"It depends on the information." I got out my wallet and laid a ten on the counter. "Let's see how much that'll buy."

He looked at it and left it there. He said: "She came down here with me and I helped her land a job. Then when I tried to get a little she tossed me out and called me a cheap bum." He said it casually enough, but color crawled up under his tan and burned in two points on his cheeks.

"What sort of a job?"

"Song spot. Down at King Henry's Cellar on Fifth. But she didn't like tea. She was strictly dynamite. I never did make her. And I don't think anyone else ever did. But I came back for more. I got her a nice spot with the Revues and then she moved over to the Glendale in a strip routine. The Glendale was tops in burlesque then, but she was too genteel for the boys, and she wasn't built right anyway. Strippers are slobs."

I nodded.

"Well, that's about it. I went back east, and when I got back I found out she'd got up a bubble dance routine and was hitting the night club circuit. I traced her to a couple of second-rate joints—one in Long Beach, and one in San Pedro. Then I lost her."

He gave the counter a slow, eloquent swipe with the dish rag. He said: "I haven't given that babe a dime's worth of thought since."

I said: "Was she using Peg Bleeker as her professional name?"

He looked up at me, almost shyly, and grinned. "I been waitin' for you to ask that. That's the sixty-four-dollar question."

"It's worth twenty, Buster. I could find out, you know."

"Like hell you could, but I'll sell it for fifty bucks. Take it or leave it."

I took it. He gave me the addresses

of the two night clubs in Long Beach and San Pedro free of charge. The name Peg Bleeker had taken, and was still using when Buster lost track of her some time in 1939, was Gloria Day.

I took out the Hofbrau version of Peg Bleeker and handed it to him.

I said: "Did she still look like that down here? The long bob and the ammonia rinse?"

He looked at the picture for a while without saying anything. Then: "Did Keller give you this?"

"Yeah."

He handed it back to me. "She dyed her hair red after she got down here." His face looked stiff and tight. He turned and walked back to the little kitchen.

. . . There's a lot of traffic on Wilshire, but I got the idea a dark blue Chevrolet that stayed behind me all the way in wasn't interested in getting ahead of me. I didn't try to find out. I was going to my office, and my office is in the phone book.

I parked in the lot on the corner across from the Pacific Building. I walked by the little lunch room in the Hart Building and up to the cross walk, across the street and into the lobby.

I hadn't noticed the Chevrolet, but I had seen something else more interesting: Mrs. Ralph Johnston, sitting in the window-booth of the lunch room, watching the entrance of the Pacific Building with the tense patience of a terrier watching a gopher hole.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT I did for the next four days I could have hired a high-grade moron for; but I didn't have anything else to do, and besides, all the high-grade morons were working. I tramped around to agencies, burlesque houses, the two clubs in Long Beach and San Pedro, and made more phone calls than a Crossley inquirer. Ma Schaeffer, employment manager and house-mother-at-large for the Revues, remembered Gloria Day vaguely, but then she wouldn't have told me anything anyway, I smelled like a cop. A throaty blonde of uncertain years and talents located at the San Pedro address remembered a bubble dancer named Gloria something-or-other. The name was in the records of a couple of theatrical agents, but nothing later than March of 1939. And at all the places I asked the same question: Had anyone else ever been around asking for her? The answer was always the same: No.

I was sitting at my desk gloomily mumbling puns on the theme of *sic transit Gloria* and not getting any fun out of it. It was a gray morning with a heavy wetness in the air, and I was all through. I had planted forty acres of cards in the best green room soil. Now I was letting the earth turn and awaiting the doubtful harvest.

I heard Hazel say: "Yes, he is. One moment."

I looked up and she said: "For you" with her lips.

I picked up the phone. A voice said, "Hi ya, Sherlock."

I gripped the receiver a little tighter. The voice was Buffin's. "Who's talking?"

"Me? Why, your old pal. From the old home town. Buster Buffin."

"Just call me Watson. How'd you find me?"

"Easy. . . . I got somepin for you, Watson."

"All right. I'm listening."

"It gives for cash. And I'm afraid fifty bucks won't even buy you a seat."

"What kind of figures do you think I'll talk in?"

"For what I have—plenty, brother, plenty!"

"I'll save you some trouble, Buster. If you're going to tell me where I'll find Peg Bleeker, you're wasting your time."

He laughed. Not a nasty laugh; there was merriment in it, and a thin edge of hysteria.

He said: "Where she is I don't know, and I care less. If you're smart you'll come down here. And be ready to talk cold turkey."

I tried to sound casual, like a man going out to look at an orange grove. "Where'll I find you in case I decide to listen?"

"You'll listen. You'll find me right where you left me: Buffin's Buffet." He hung up. I could hear his thin laughter before the little click came and left me sitting there alone.

I TOOK Santa Monica Boulevard down to the beach and kept one eye on the rear-view mirror all the way. Nobody followed me down there. I parked in the Paragon Ballroom's lot across from Buffin's.

There was a sign on the door that said the place was closed and would open at 11:30 A.M. I tried the door. It wasn't locked.

There was nobody inside. No customers, no little man with cold turkey to sell. I looked around in the kitchen. It was dirty, with a cold odor of rancid fat. There was no one there.

I sat down on one of the counter stools and waited. Hard waves were pummeling the breakwater with a distant roar that made the silence of the little shack palpable and menacing. I got up and walked around. I yelled, "Oh, Buster!" and the echoes joined and jarred against me. And then the silence settled down again like a cold wet sheet. It was broken abruptly, sharply by a tight clap of sound from overhead, followed by another, and then again. I was half way up the stairs when the third shot sounded and something hit the floor, hard.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE top I stopped suddenly and wondered what I was doing up there. I was armed with a pen knife, very dull. I hadn't carried my .38 to talk with Buster. While I stood and wondered about it I heard the hollow stumbling sound of feet moving quickly down a flight of stairs, wooden stairs from the noise they made. There was a door in front of me. I threw it open and looked in at a cold and empty room with a green table in the middle of it and two chairs sitting on its dusty top. To the right, at the end of a five floor corridor, there was another door. I tried it. It was locked, but it gave easily to a steady pressure that broke nothing but the latch. It wouldn't open far. I slid in and let go of the door. A body lying half against it slammed it shut. I ran through the room I was in to a porch-like cubicle at the rear of the apartment. I found another door there, open to the outside, to the dull sound and salty color of the bay. A steep and narrow flight of wooden stairs led downward to a walk that ran behind the ballroom and out onto the pier. There was no one in sight.

I closed Buster's private beach entrance and walked back into the room where the body lay. It was a living room. There was table by a window, a chest of drawers, a davenport, a couple of easy chairs, some framed pictures on the wall, and a thin carpet on the floor. It all looked as if it had been ordered by phone from a second-hand store.

The man lying on the thin carpet had stained it with an almost black flow of blood. It was Buster Buffin. I

went over and looked at him. He was dead. His face was the color of sand in a cold dawn and his lips had drawn back and the even white teeth had slipped a little so that he seemed to be grinning at me. I knelt and looked at him emptily and wondered what it was that Buster had had to sell me. The teeth grinned at me and said that he didn't care now if I never found out.

He had been hit twice, in the chest. I looked around for a gun and didn't find one. Then I went back to Buster and apologized to him and went through his pockets. In his wallet there was something: a wrinkled piece of paper. There was an automobile license number scrawled on it in pencil. I knew it was a license number because it was my own. Under the scrawl, in ink, were my name, address, and phone number. I put the slip of paper in my pocket, wiped the wallet off and put it back.

I looked the room over. In one of the drawers there was a stack of glossy publicity prints. I took them out with a handkerchief in my hand and spread them out on the floor. They weren't all of Buster. There was one of Margaret Bleeker. Three smiling blondes, gathered about Buster and pointing their fingers at him. Mrs. Johnston was on his left, one arm about his shoulder, her slender legs crossed, and one eye winking at the camera. The pointing fingers made me feel a little uneasy. I pushed the pictures together and put them back.

I looked around once more to see if there was a telephone, then I wiped off everything I had touched, including the door at the head of the stairs, and went down. I looked for a phone downstairs. It was important. If Buster had called me from here it was a toll call. There would be a record of it. There wasn't any phone.

I opened the front door and looked out. I didn't see any telephone wires running into the place. There was no one on the street, and the drug store across the way looked as empty as a night club at 8 A.M. I slipped out and walked over to my car. It was a foggy morning. I didn't think anyone saw me.

And no one followed me back, except a face that hung over me as gray as an unwilling dawn and grinned at me with an amiable horror.

I WAS sitting in my limber swivel chair with the blinds drawn against the afternoon sun listening to the flies going urgently nowhere around the room. One of them was buzzing fitfully about the edge of my glass like a teetotaler trying to make up his mind. The glass held Cubana rum, which was the nearest thing to bourbon I could find. Hazel was getting ready to go home, and pretending not to see me.

But I wasn't doing any business-like drinking. I was staring at the glossy wall with the Mexican poster on it. It was a nice poster, with warm earthy colors and dark-skinned people built like blocks of granite.

But I wasn't seeing the poster. I was seeing Mrs. Ralph Johnston, nee Peg Bleeker, alias Gloria Gay. I was seeing the gentle eyes and the warm smile and trying to put them behind the smoking muzzle of a gun. I was trying to see her ferreting out defeated little Buster Buffin with his fifty-dollar deals and putting two slugs in his heart. I wasn't doing very well. I couldn't see her leaving the picture in the drawer. But she didn't have all the time in the world. I took a drink and thought about Keller, and the man on the phone, and finally about nothing at all. . . .

I lifted the glass for another drink

but the fly was at the bottom. He had come to no good end. I heard the door open and Hazel was standing in it, looking crisp and attractive in her new caracul coat. She was trying to give me a long, cool stare, but her dark eyes had a soft light in them like a warm lake at night. She said:

"When I close this door you'll be sitting there drinking all by yourself, like any Fifth Street wino!" Then she closed it, with a sharp clap and rattle of glass. I could hear her little heels clicking grimly away toward the elevator.

I got up and put the bottle in the bottom drawer of my combination sideboy and filing cabinet, went over to the sink, rinsed out the glass, sent the fly down the gutter where he belonged, put the glass in with the bottle and locked up the cabinet. Hazel was a girl of parts. She would probably ring the night-line about midnight, just in case I was still there and didn't know about it.

I sat down again and wondered what it was that was poking at me from deep inside. Oh, yes. Murder. And I was in it now, up to the last polka dot on my tie. The one who shot Buffin knew about me. That's why Buffin had to die. And tomorrow the papers would lay a pall of words over Buster's grubby exit, and the boys in the wrinkled suits and the tobacco breaths would begin turning over the leaves. I wondered how long it would be, and what I would have to do before I could be sure I was clear of the thing.

There was a soft noise at the door. My desk was eight or ten feet over to the left of it, so I couldn't see the shadow on the translucent glass — if there was one. Then the door opened slowly, inward toward me, and I could see a shadow now. It was motionless, undecided, and without menace. It looked like it might be an old woman.

I told the shadow to come in.

IT WASN'T an old woman. She stepped beyond the door and half-closed it behind her. She was young, with wide eyes that had a question to ask, and a mouth that turned up for an eighth of an inch at both ends after the lips had given up. It kept her from being beautiful and gave her the kind of face that makes you assume she's honest before you have any right to. Her nose was short and there were a couple of timid freckles on it. She was a little on the tall side and she wore a tailored gabardine suit under a wide-shouldered tweed coat with pockets the size of pup tents. Her hands and half her arms were lost somewhere in the pockets.

I stood up. She walked toward me and said, "Are you Mr. Bailey?"

I said yes, I was Mr. Bailey, and stepped around and held the client's chair for her. It was a good chair, with arms on it. I sat down across the desk from her and put on my businesslike-sleuth smile. I thought I could probably use a job.

I said: "What can I do for you, Miss . . ."

She looked around and said, "Do you need all this office in the detective business?" She had a warm, husky voice.

"I share it with a couple of casket salesmen."

She smiled. It was an ungainly smile, but it couldn't be too hard to like. It would be a little like getting fond of a moppet with a heart of gold and a habit of throwing rocks at your cat.

"So you're a detective? You don't look like one. You don't even dress like one."

"I'm sorry. I left my detective kit at home—everything but the truss."

"Do you like it?"

"The truss? No, it's too tight."

"I mean the detective business. Or is it a profession?"

"Are you just up here after some local color, or can I help you—or something?"

"I think I may be able to do something for *you*," she said sweetly.

I was a door-to-door salesman once myself. I leaned back and said, "Pitch it. I'll let you know if it goes sour."

She raised one eyebrow slightly and said: "I think you're trying to find someone I used to know—Gloria Gay."

That shook me. I wasn't prepared for it. I hadn't dropped many cards west of Main, and she didn't look much over nineteen anyway. I looked again and decided the freckles and the mouth were deceptive. I could believe it if she turned out to be thirty.

I said: "Yes, I was making some inquiries about her, for a client."

She brought her hands out of her pockets and folded them in her lap. They were rather small hands and the nails were painted, but without the raw harshness of most painted hands.

She said: "What's it all about? Has something happened to her?"

I looked into her wide cobalt eyes and didn't say anything. That was supposed to confuse her.

She looked back at me with all the confusion of an aging St. Bernard and said: "My information is pretty ancient, I'm afraid. I saw her last in 1939."

"When you were all of thirteen," I put in.

She brought up her chin and smiled faintly through her teeth. "I was sixteen."

I counted the fingers on my left hand and got twenty-one. "Go on," I said.

She took a large white cigarette case out of a long slender bag and put a Parliament between her red lips. I lit it for her.

"Thanks," she said, and smiled. She blew a gray jet of smoke at the ceiling and said, "I met Gloria at a fly-by-night school in Long Beach. It was supposed to teach you how to walk and how to sit down like a lady of the *haut monde*." She dropped her eyes and then raised them again. "I was as tall then as I am now and I'd already decided I was going to be a model. That's why I was there."

From down the long corridor came the lone, defeated sound of a scrub pail against the floor. The traffic sounds had moved uptown and settled down to a muted thrumming.

"Well," she went on, "to make it brief: the teacher was a man—Carlos something-or-other. When I showed up for the fifth or sixth lesson the studio was locked up. It never opened again—and I had paid tuition for six months, too." She knocked off some ash, carefully, in the desk tray. "Then, about six weeks later, I got a letter from Gloria in Mexico City. She'd gone off with Carlos. It had a money order in it for my tuition—all of it. The letter said she didn't mind Carlos' swindling the others, but she had liked me."

WE BOTH sat. It took me a little while to realize that she was through, that she had told her story. Then I had to start readjusting myself to her. This took a little time, too, and she was getting up and losing her hands in her pockets again.

"Sit down," I said.

She sat down.

"You didn't tell me your name."

"Norma Shannon."

"Did you answer the letter?"

"Of course, but I never heard from her again."

"But she got the letter?"

"Well, someone did."

"How do you account for her writing you particularly?"

She didn't answer right away. She looked at me, and her full dark brows pulled together for a moment as if she didn't like the way things were going. She said: "We were very friendly. I was the only one in the group she ever spoke to. I thought she was something rather special and she liked that."

"Do you know where I might get hold of some of the other people in that group?"

She said, slowly: "No-o. I don't remember their names; hardly any of the faces. There were about twelve in the group."

I sat back and looked her over, starting from scratch. The blue eyes still looked like the very cradle of truth, and the wide mouth still turned upward at the corners like a Botticelli cherub. I shook my head at her.

"Baby, you're good. So good, I'm surprised they didn't have you consign her to Afghanistan, or the Belgian Congo."

She had been half-smiling, like someone who really enjoys her work. The smile dropped like a ballast sack and her teeth came together in a sharp little click and gleamed through half-parted lips. She didn't say anything.

I went on: "But they gave you some really corny lines, angel. People just don't give information like that away. If you'd come in with one shy little 'what's-in-it-for-me,' I'd probably have drooled, and bought the whole bill of goods."

Her cobalt eyes had widened and she was looking at me distantly and impersonally as you might look at a blind man. Then her eyebrows raised and she took on a look of earnest sympathy. "Tsk, tsk. Acute cynicism." She shook her head at me slowly. "I suppose it's an occupational disease, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "It's the people you meet. Chiselers, con-men, girls with truth itself dawning in their big blue eyes. . . ."

Her teeth came together again and she stood up. She looked down at me for a while and her face relaxed visibly.

She said: "You're a highly improbable character, Mr. Bailey. Did someone just dream you up?"

I laughed and said, "This is an awful empty building around this time of night. Aren't you afraid I might get mean?"

"It hadn't occurred to me. Might you?" She widened her eyes at me.

"Speaking of improbabilities—listen to that story of yours for a minute. You come in here and hand me information about someone I want to find, information I would pay nicely for. You tell me — free of charge — that she's two thousand miles away in a foreign country and all the people who knew her when you did either went away with her, or you've forgotten them. Period. Do you like it?"

She sat down again.

"Hmm. It does sound a bit fuzzy, doesn't it?"

"Uh-huh. I think you'd better tell me all about it."

She stood up and said: "There he goes again!" and started for the door. She went about six inches.

I said: "So you're still sitting on that mare's nest."

SHE leaned lightly on the desk and frowned at me. It was a nice frown. "I don't follow that metaphor, but I'm staying with my story, if that's what you mean. It's the truth. You know, I don't really care whether you believe it or not. I came up here because I thought you would probably know a lot

more about Gloria than I do. I liked her very much. I wanted to know what had happened to her." She turned and walked to the door.

I jumped up and came around the desk. "Wait," I croaked. "I'm beginning to believe you. How did you hear I was looking for her?"

She stood with one hand tightly gripping the door-knob as if she were trying to make up her mind whether to tear it off and throw it at me or to let it stay there for a while.

She said: "I went by the Gene Longacre agency yesterday—I do magazine modeling when I'm lucky—and I saw your card on one of the desks with Gloria's name written across it." She gave me a grim look and added: "You can check on that tomorrow."

"I don't think I'll need to," I said.

She opened the door and gave me a wintry smile with just a hint of Spring in it.

I said: "You've helped me a lot, Miss Shannon, and I've sat over there playing Hard-nose Harry. Let me buy your supper for you."

She said no. Then we batted it around for the proper number of times and ended up with an arrangement to meet at the Biltmore at seven o'clock.

After she left I sat and watched the dusk erase the gray mountains off to the east, and contemplated the inadequacies of human understanding.

I had been planning to browse through my back-copies of the *Times* for 1939, the bright-lights sections, and I had over an hour before I could take up where I had left off with the Shannon. I brought January and February out of the files, untied January's rope, blew off the dust of the years, and started in.

I was on page 10-B of the January 28 edition. It was quiet in the room. The traffic noises had subsided now, and I was hearing the little haphazard sounds a city makes when it had ceased to be day-town and hasn't yet become night-town.

The office door opened with a sharp dry click and a tall man stepped into the room and nudged the door shut with a deft foot. It looked as if he'd done that trick a couple of times before. He stood and looked at me out of the deep shadow of a black felt hat with a turned-down brim. There was a dark kid glove on his left hand and his right hand was buried in the bulging pocket of a gabardine coat.

It was too warm for gloves like that.

CHAPTER VIII

MY MOUTH was hanging open in the dry air. I licked my lips and said: "You made a mistake. The casting office is on the fifth floor."

He allowed the silence that followed to jell for a while, then he said, quietly, thick-tongued: "You're out of your class, chowderhead, you're way over that thick neck of yours." He looked at me some more.

After awhile, I said, "You'd better give me the next line. I've forgotten my cue."

"Gloria Gay, chowderhead. There's nothing in it for you. Nothing but a Chicago overcoat."

"Like Buffin, huh?" I'm great for trial balloons. This one got about as far as Byrd-for-President. His mouth opened for a second and closed again. It was a lipless mouth set in a battered chin.

"I'm doin' you a favor, chowderhead. I figure a word to your kind is enough, and we want you healthy, so if you're workin' for someone you can take him out with you."

I said: "What I earn doesn't cover lead insurance. If it's that kind of a

deal, count me out."

He leered and showed a line of white teeth growing at an angle in his head. He said: "That's fine. We don't like to take a guy's bread away from him, chowderhead, and you seem to wanta play nice." He reached into the pocket of the coat with a thumb and finger and drew out a green packet. He threw it onto the desk. It hit the glass top and slid off into my lap. I picked it up. It was a packet of quiet money with a ten on top. He went on: "There's two hundred and fifty berries for ya—for playin' it smart. And tell your boss—if you've got one—that we won't stop with his leg man next time. We'll just clean house."

Then he opened the door without looking at it, stepped out, and was gone. I gave him time to get to the first landing before I started after him. I hit the lobby stairs just as the big glass door swung in and a bulky figure disappeared into the waning twilight. When I got outside he had jay-walked across Broadway and was going into a parking lot. He went through the parking lot and looked back over his shoulder. He didn't see me. I had stepped in the shadow of an ancient concrete pillar that used to help hold up a garage. He crossed Main Street and I started after him again. He went south a block and stopped at a long Packard limousine. I was surprised. I had expected a green Dodge coupe.

He got in, pulled out from the curb, and shot up the street like a man leaving the scene of a crime. I stepped back against the dark building wall and got the license number as he went by.

I walked back toward the Pacific Building, wondering if the thing hadn't been just a bit too easy, and got to my office on time to count the money—two hundred and fifty dollars, all right—and find that I was already ten minutes late for my date with Norma Shannon.

. . . She was sitting in one of the enormous couches in the lobby looking around with a stiff little frown on her face. I sat down beside her.

"Hungry?"

She smiled and said: "Where have you been? Searching my apartment?"

"I didn't have time," I said. "Would I have found anything interesting?"

"We'll try it together sometime and see."

"When you know me better," I said, "you'll realize I'm too subtle to use this as a gag; but I haven't been home yet. I haven't washed, changed my cuffs, or done any of the little chores I usually do before dining out with a lady. How about you coming up and making us both a drink while I change?"

"How far is 'up'?"

"'Up' is by the Good Samaritan Hospital, and my car's just out back."

She got up and put her hands in her pockets. She smiled and said: "If you've got gin I'll make you a 'Shannon hypnotic.'"

When we got in the car she said: "To answer your question: Yes, I'm hungry." We didn't say much after that until we'd got out of the little self-help elevator and I was fumbling with my keys.

Then she said, "Bailey, you must be an honest man. And in your business, too!"

I knew what she meant. It wasn't the nicest apartment building in town. I didn't say anything.

INSIDE, she didn't develop the I'm-in-your-apartment kittenishness. While I switched on the floor lamp by the mohair easy chair and pushed the folding bed up into the wall she stood and looked the place over. She took in the thin, graying carpet, the high

unpainted bookcase full of worn volumes that had lived as full lives as I was capable of giving them, the faded lawson sofa, the cabinet with the albums of folk songs and ballads, and the turntable sitting on top of it.

My desk was behind her, by the door to the three-by-six kitchen. She had walked over and was looking at the titles in the bookcase. I stepped over to the desk and opened the middle drawer and took out the Hofbrau version of Peg Bleeker and propped it up on the jutting desk-shelf. I turned around. Norma Shannon was taking off her coat, still looking at the ancient books.

She was very much at ease. She laid the coat on the sofa and said: "Where's the skullery?"

I waved in the direction of the kitchen, said: "The gin's in the bread bin," and went into the little dressing room off the bathroom and turned on the light.

It happened sooner than I expected. I heard her saying, "So you go in for pin-up girls, hm?"

I had my shirt half unbuttoned. I went and stood in the doorway and looked at her. She was leaning over, looking at the picture closely, with a derisive little smile on her face.

"It's an old flame," I said. "I'm a little sentimental about her." I put on a smile. She shrugged her shoulders, said "Nice gams," and went into the kitchen.

I went back into the closet and glanced into the dresser-mirror. It wasn't a smile I had put on my face. It was a hideous grimace.

It was hard to take, being wrong about Norma Shannon. But it was more than that. It meant she hadn't been sent by Mrs. Johnston. Peg Bleeker had changed, but not that much. If Norma Shannon had ever seen Mrs. Ralph Johnston—especially five years ago, she'd have recognized the picture.

I decided not to bother changing into my other suit. I finished dressing and went out to the kitchen. On the way out I thought of something, something simple and clear. "Gloria Gay" was the kind of name that might occur to more than one would-be show girl. That made me feel suddenly a little better, a little hopeful.

Norma handed me a cold drink in an Old-Fashioned glass and said: "Do I ever get to know what it is with Gloria? Why you're looking for her?"

I tasted the drink. It was good. I said: "Did Gloria Gay ever tell you her real name?"

Her eyes grew thoughtful. Her mouth lifted a little at the corners and she touched one of her freckles with a slender little finger. I thought it would be nice to kiss that freckle, and the cheek beside it, and the soft wide mouth.

She said: "Yes. It was Peggy something." Then she looked at me and held the finger out stiffly. "It was Bleeker. Peggy Bleeker." She smiled.

CHAPTER IX

WE WENT back downtown and had dinner at Mike Lyman's. I didn't say much, but she didn't seem to mind. She talked. Not too much, but with an easy humor and a pleasant, hyper-thyroid energy.

While we were waiting for the sherbet and coffee I excused myself and went into the bar where there was a public telephone. I dialed a number, and a high-pitched female voice screamed into it.

I said: "Is Lee there? Lee Martinez?"

"It depends."

"Tell him it's Stuart Bailey."

The voice lost its stridence: "It's someone who says to tell you it's Stuart Bailey."

Silence. Then: "Hi ya, Stu. Now whose dog do you want caught?"

"This is just a dog I want watched. A fox terrier. Should be an easy two, three days' work. Are you finished with the State job?"

"Yeah. Time-and-a-half for overtime?"

"My coffee's getting cold. The hitch is I want you tonight. Pick us up at the Kazbah so you can spot the girl and take her from there. I'll be with her, so don't know me. I'll take her home. You stay on for an hour or so, then come back and pick her up in the A.M."

"Uh-huh. Well, jus' minute." There was some mumbling and then the high-pitched screaming came over the line as a background to Lee's, "Okay, Stu, the Kazbah? About an hour?"

"An hour's okay."

At the Kazbah, Norma Shannon began to show signs of wear. But she did her best. Then Lee came in and leaned on the bar. I took her home.

She lived north of Sunset near the county strip. It was one of those apartment dwellings sprawled on the hillside that look as if they are holding their breaths to keep from sliding down onto the boulevard. A long flight of steps—five hundred, you decide after you climb them—divided it into halves.

Her apartment was at the top on the west side. You could probably see Catalina on a clear day if you cared to look. She got out a key while I caught my wind.

"That's how I keep my figure," she said, as if she had just stepped out of an elevator.

"That won't keep me from feeling bitter about them," I wheezed.

She opened the door and turned toward me. It was dark there under the little port-cochere. Her face was a soft blur against the night, and her close warmth and the dry scent of her hair were all about me.

She whispered: "Come in for a moment. There's a fire laid, and I have some brandy you'd like." Her breath was warm, and I could feel it moist on my lips.

I took hold of her shoulders and pulled her against me and looked at her, and the warm breath was closer now, on my tongue, a part of my own. I found her lips and pressed and hurt them.

After awhile I pushed her away and for a moment I had to fight down the impulse to talk, to see her go down in a torrent of words, to watch the mask slip away. It wasn't the time for that. . . .

I muttered: "Can't stay, darling, got my paper route to take care of." I left her standing there and started down the long flight, feeling a little rotten inside, like a desert jackrabbit in the off season.

I GOT up the next morning when I heard the paper clomp against the door. Buster had made page two, with a picture. He had been moved out of the dark stain of his blood, but they had left him on the floor. He was never a big man; now he looked like a child, huddled grotesquely, grown old suddenly in death.

The story was brief. He had been shot with a .25 caliber gun, a woman's weapon, the story said. The police were investigating and were on the trail of a tall dark man, driving a 1942 Buick convertible, who was seen leaving the scene of the slaying. I drive a 1939 Oldsmobile convertible. I wondered which door the tall man was seen leaving by.

I showered and drank two cups of coffee and went down to the office. There weren't any men in blue waiting for me. A call to Marshall Wherry at the Department of Motor Vehicles got me the name and address of the registered owner of the Packard. It was John Vega Cabrillo, of Pasadena. I took the Oak Knoll car and got off at Berendo Drive and walked four blocks to the address Wherry had given me. I was out to look the place over.

But it wasn't that kind of a place. It covered two-thirds of a square block, surrounded by the most ambitious hedge in Southern California. The hedge probably wasn't more than six feet higher than the local ordinance allowed. The number was carved in an iron shield that hung by two chains from an arch topping a half-ton wrought iron gate.

I turned and walked back to wait for the red-car. While I waited I wondered why I'd never heard of John Vega Cabrillo. When I got back I called Franklin Patterson. He'd been a newspaper man in Los Angeles for thirty years. Now he was teaching American and California History at U. S. C.

We insulted each other pleasantly for a few seconds. Then I said: "What can you tell me about John Vega Cabrillo?"

"Oil."

I waited for a while, but he didn't say any more. "You were always a great one for gossip. Can you give me any other dirt on him?"

"He has a positive passion for anonymity—like a Presidential assistant. Outside of the fact that he's grimy with gelt and socially stratospheric, I don't know anything about him."

"Well, that's something. Thanks."

"Why don't you call Noel Cruickshank?"

I said I would and we hung up.

Noel Cruickshank was society editor of the *Evening Standard*. For a promise to give him anything I might uncover for publication on John Vega Cabrillo, he gushed that Cabrillo was a member of one of California's oldest families, that he was sixty-five years old, married to a young Brazilian beauty, and that he spent most of his time collecting and classifying microscopic fauna.

"I gather there are no purple pages."

"Not in the past twenty years, probably never. As far as I'm concerned, he's strictly bad copy."

"You said his wife was young. Know anything about her?"

He coughed delicately into the phone. "There've been some wolves at the door, but she seems to be the soul of discretion—or else very dull. He married her in Brazil several years ago. I haven't bothered to look into them very much further."

"Definitely bad copy," I said.

"Right. Tiresome people, really."

I GOT my car and drove out to the iron gate and parked facing it about a quarter block up the street. I had the two hundred and fifty dollars in my pocket.

I waited for an hour and then opened my lunch box and ate. I waited three pipe-fulls longer and the iron gate swung out, a station wagon rolled through, stopped, and a big fellow in a white shirt, gray peg pants, and leather leggings got out and went back and closed the gate. I started my motor and hoped he wouldn't turn my way. He didn't. We both rolled down to LaJunta, turned right, went a quarter of a mile and turned right again. He pulled up in front of a cleaning and pressing shop, got out, and went into the shop. I parked and went up to the station wagon and waited for him to come out.

When he did, he had three bright and

lacy dresses on hangers held gingerly in his left hand. It was the menace with the lipless mouth. He looked different with the dresses and without the hat. The nose wasn't as straight as it was meant to be and the chin had a deep cleft and a puckered scar. He had a mass of dark brown curls and dark eyes that were large and full-pupilled and dreamy. They looked like eyes that were never really at home except when they were looking at a woman, and nothing was being said because the eyes were saying it all.

I waited until he noticed me. He was almost to the car when he really saw me. He stopped short and his feet did a little startled shuffle like a prize-fighter getting out of the way of a haymaker.

I stepped up and shoved the pack of money at him. He took it. He'd have taken it if it had been an old shoe.

I leered at him and said: "You went off and left this last night. I took out a dollar for my trouble finding you and bringing it back."

His eyes took on a far away look as if he were seeing me through a diminishing-glass. He was thinking, and I could see he didn't like to be hurried when he was doing that. His lips moved, slowly. But no noise came out.

The conversation had got into a rut so I said politely: "Those are nice dresses you've got there. Did you make them yourself?"

He found some words: "Okay, wise-guy. You made the wrong play; let's see how it comes out."

I said: "How would you like it this way: I go downtown to the homicide detail and tell them about your little visit with me last night and where they can find you. You know, homicide—the detail you go to when people offer to shoot you, or cut off your head and such like."

He didn't like that. He looked skeptical, then he thought about it for awhile, then he lowered his eyelids and stared out at me with the lower ten per cent of his big black pupils. I thought he might be trying to scare me to death. If I'd been a woman, I felt I probably would have been, and enjoying it like anything. He said: "You won't do that, chowderhead."

"I'm afraid I'll have to, Svengali, unless you start making sense quick."

His eyes widened, wavered, and fell to my necktie and bounced around there for awhile. He looked panicky, if a man can do that without moving a muscle. I was a problem for him. I wasn't acting right, and he was frozen. I decided I'd better help him or I might not like what he did when he pulled out of it. Little beads of sweat were coming out on his forehead.

I said gently: "Let's get in the car and talk." I moved over and opened the car door for him.

HE PUT the dresses on the rear seat and slid over under the wheel. I sat down beside him. He was feeling better, the sweat was gone.

"Okay," I said. "Do tell me whose snakes you were supposed to be killing, or do I go ask your boss about it?"

He stared hard at the oak-grained dashboard and said, "Don't waste your time. They dont' know nuthin', and it'd only lose me my job."

"What's so good about the job?"

He just looked at me on that one and didn't say anything.

"All right. Who sent you?"

He looked back at the dashboard and said, "You're nuts, chowderhead. My life wouldn't be worth a snowball in hell."

"Really tough."

"You said it."

"Didn't give you any idea what the

deal was, huh?"

"He just gimme a job to do."

"Professional."

"Yeah. From Chi."

"How'd he recruit you?"

"I did some work for him once in Chi."

I let that hang in the air for a while. Then I said: "Man, I've been to Chicago a couple of times myself. They just don't grow 'em like that, not even in Chicago."

That didn't get anything out of him so I went on: "Your performance last night had me on the edge of my seat for the opening curtain, but that twist with the money was something right out of Aunt Sadie's hope chest. Whoever's in back of you is about as dangerous as a badminton bird."

He kept right on looking at the polished dashboard and not saying anything.

"Want to tell me about it, or shall I go now?"

He looked at me then, lowered his lids and gave me the ten per cent again. He still didn't say anything.

I got out and leaned into the car. I said: "You know, you shouldn't do that. One of these days you'll go right off to sleep in the middle of something big." I shut the door softly and walked back to my car.

When I drove by him he was still sitting there, staring out at the gentle blue foothills beyond Altadena.

CHAPTER X

JOHN VEGA CABRILLO'S phone was unlisted and not even Noel Cruikshank knew what it was.

I called the Zoology Department at U. S. C. and learned that Cabrillo was an authority in marine biology and that his special field was the study of the mutations in the species *sporomitus*. Then I called the Pacific Marine Life Society and said I had made a very unusual discovery involving *sporomitus*; I thought I had an unusual mutation and I wanted to get hold of John Cabrillo.

That's how I found out Cabrillo's phone number was Sycamore 64201. It didn't make me feel clever at all.

A gentle male voice answered.

I said: "I'd like to speak to Mr. Cabrillo."

"This is he."

"This is Stuart Bailey, Mr. Cabrillo. The Marine Life Society gave me your number. I have something rather important to discuss with you."

"The Marine Life Society? I see. Would you like to come out here?" My name didn't seem to have meant anything to him.

"Yes. When?"

"At your convenience, sir. I am always here."

"All right. Three o'clock."

"You have the address? Very well. You will be met at the gate."

. . . When I turned in at the iron gate there was someone there to open it for me. It wasn't the man with the dreamy eyes. I drove in and stopped.

He closed and locked the gate and came toward the car. He was a tall, elderly, bald-headed man in work-dirty white smock. I wondered if the old gentleman made a practice of opening the gate for people as well as answering his own phone.

I opened the car door and the man got in with a tentative smile on his face. "I'm Cherkin," he said. "Mr. Cabrillo's assistant. Follow the drive around the house. The laboratory is in the rear."

The house was a large, sprawling French chateau. It had a genuine look to it, an air of decayed dignity, a kind of brooding nostalgia. The laboratory was different. It was long and low with huge rectangles of glass-brick and

stretches of glaring white stucco. I drove into a four-car garage next to the laboratory and we got out.

"I'm afraid you'll find it uncomfortable in the lab, Mr. Bailey." He looked at me briefly. "But of course you know what to expect."

"No. I'm afraid not. I'm not a zoologist."

"Oh, I see."

We went into a small office that looked crowded and tight as if the laboratory were trying to push it out of the building. It had a white and chrome desk and a couch and two chairs of white leather and chrome. There wasn't room for anything else. It looked as sterile as a surgeon's tool kit.

Cherkin said, "If you'll wait just one moment. You'll find the latest copy of the . . . Uh, but you . . ." Mr. Cherkin turned and went on into the laboratory.

In about five minutes another man came in. He was a little man, not more than five and a half feet tall. He had on a clean white smock. His face was dark and slender, with eyes that had seen the ultimate fate of man, or they looked as if they had. They were set deep in his face and looked out of their shadows with an infinite patience. His hair was fine and white, and lay about his high-domed head like a cumulus cloud.

He walked over to me and held out his hand. It was dry and brittle and I didn't squeeze it very hard.

"What was it, Mr. Bailey? Sit down." He sat in one of the chairs beside the couch. I hadn't thought he would get behind the desk. He didn't need to.

I said: "I came about Gloria Gay. Or should I say Margaret Bleeker?"

HIS forehead wrinkled and the patience in his eyes gave way to a gentle sadness. "I'm afraid I don't understand, sir," he said.

I smiled. "I'm sorry. I was shooting the moon. Shall I start at the beginning?"

"Please do." There was still no sharpness.

"I'm a private detective. I was hired to find out what went on in the life of a show-girl named Gloria Gay from 1938 to a little over a year ago, when she showed up again." I took my pipe out of my mouth. "May I smoke?"

He nodded and smiled. It was a gentle smile. It said he was still prepared to tolerate me in spite of everything.

"I started making inquiries a little over a week ago. The other night a man came to my office and told me to lay off or else. He seemed to mean business. I was able to trace him here. Dresses like a chauffeur. Tall, lots of curly hair. Looks like he might have been in the ring once."

Cabrillo had begun to look interested. "How did you trace him here?"

Cabrillo nodded silently for a moment and said, "That would be Martin, Mrs. Cabrillo's chauffeur." He glanced at me vaguely, like a man looking at a brick wall. "There couldn't be any mistake?"

"Huh-uh. I talked to him. He said his boss wouldn't know anything about it. Did he mean you?"

Cabrillo thought about that for awhile and said, "No. He would mean my wife; but of course she could not help you."

We sat for awhile, listening to a steady hissing sound like escaping steam coming from behind the laboratory door.

"Would you have any idea who may have hired Martin for the job?"

Cabrillo's eyes came from about five thousand miles away and looked at me. He looked at me with the piercing di-

rectness of a kindly owl looking into the gathering dusk, and said, "Do you think I did it, Mr. Bailey? Or were you just testing an hypothesis?"

I smiled. "I don't even have an hypothesis to test, Mr. Cabrillo. Would is be possible for me to see Mrs. Cabrillo?"

"That won't be necessary. We'll discharge Martin, of course, if what you say is true."

"Martin threatened my life. I'm afraid the law will take care of the discharging for you."

"You intend to bring charges?"

"I might not. If I could talk with Mrs. Cabrillo . . ."

Cabrillo stood up. He was all alone in the room. He looked a little sad, and said slowly, "Mrs. Cabrillo is home now. I'll have Doctor Cherkin take you over to the house." He turned around and opened the door. The hissing sound filled the room. Then he was gone, and the sound was quiet again like little breezes playing among tall trees.

CHAPTER XI

DOCTOR CHERKIN left me in a large room at the front of the house. I had been in cozier and more inviting rooms, the fossil room at New York's Museum of Natural History, for instance. There were a dozen or so portraits on the walls in varying sizes and moods. Some of them looked at me out of eyes that were full and compassionate like the eyes of the little man with the cloud-like hair, but most of the faces were fatuous or predatory, or just painted and meaningless.

I heard a sound behind me like a butterfly sighing and turned around. There was a dark-haired, dark-eyed little thing standing in the vaulted door way. She was wearing a black uniform that looked suspiciously like silk and I got the impression she would flit away if I did anything unusual, like blowing my nose.

She asked me to come with her in an accent that was cuter than Carmen Miranda's and not half as loud. We went up a circular stairway that couldn't have accommodated the five o'clock rush at Macy's. At least not on Saturday. We went along a hall with still more portraits of Vegas and Cabrillos long since called to their uncertain judgments. Then she opened a door and let me into a room.

It was a large room. There probably weren't any small ones. Otherwise, it was as foreign to the house as Keller's office was to the third floor of Milbrunner's Warehouse.

It was a pink room. A half dozen tall windows were hung with rose velvet draperies pulled together so that the hard sunlight filtered in in a gentle pink diffusion. There were little tables and wood pieces here and there. They were painted a warm gray, but they and the large chesterfield and the little loveseats by the fireplace, were of various hues and shades of pink. There was an enormous frosted glass bowl on a table behind the chesterfield. It was filled with talisman roses.

The little thing in black whispered that Madam would not be with me for a little while and would I care for a drink.

I shook my head and formed the word "no" with my lips. She vanished silently.

There were no portraits in the room. Not even the little stand-photographs that usually go with milady's boudoir. There was one painting, a Madonna, hanging above a little *prie-dieu* placed against the right wall next to a high, wide door.

There was a desk by one of the win-

dows to the left of the fireplace. I looked around and then went over and tried to open it. It was locked. The pigeon holes were empty. I walked to the chesterfield and buried my feet in a great fur rug and sat and listened to the silence until I thought I could hear the roses filling the room with their lavendered fragrance. In front of me was a long rose-gray coffee table with cigarettes on it and a decanter with two little glasses on a silver tray.

IT SEEMED a long time later that I heard a door open softly behind me. I stood up and turned around and looked at her across the rim of roses. She closed the door and walked toward me with a kind of stately carelessness. She had curves that were being treated with just the proper respect by a full-skirted black dress, taffeta maybe, fitted high and tight at the waist and with a low round neck. There were lace cuffs on the sleeves.

She swung around the chesterfield and waded in the white fur rug to one of the love-seats. She said: "Please sit down, Mr. Bailey."

She put herself into the love-seat with a regal sweep and looked at me. She had one dark, full eyebrow raised in delicate alarm as if she half expected me to produce a bomb from my hip pocket.

She had a lot of things that you can buy with time and money, and some that you can't. A white velvet skin that could have been equalled by almost any woman under twenty-five with a million dollars to spend on it. High firm cheek bones with milk-blue shadows under them, and a smile playing around the corners of her cherry mouth and not getting anywhere. She looked like a woman who would save her smiles for the right moment.

Her hair was as black as a raven's wing and it was drawn tight from a gleaming white part in the center of her head and then allowed to express itself in a genteel way about her neck and shoulders. It made her look young, younger than I thought she should be.

She came right to the point: "I'm afraid my husband is ver-ry sensitive to publicity, Mr. Bailey. It seems that I am seeing you to avoid some of it."

Her voice had the smoothness and rhythm of an ice ballet, but not the warmth. There was only the moon-cast shadow of an accent. It was more like something born in a vacuum, with nothing in it of a foreign tongue or of the East, or South, or West. I had heard a few people talk like that, actors mainly, a couple of college professors. But it didn't sound affected.

I said: "I'm just trying to clear something up, Mrs. Cabrillo, with as little disturbance as possible."

I told her about Martin.

She nodded slightly when I finished and leaned back and crossed her legs. I didn't look at the knee edging out from the dress. It was a nice knee or she wouldn't have bothered to show it to me. She arched her neck. That made it look whiter and longer.

She said: "Mr. Cabrillo told me this much, Mr. Bailey. It is a curious story. This show girl. You are not looking for her. You are simply trying to find what she was doing a few years back. Why should anyone wish to interfere with you?"

I smiled. "You're not questioning my story, are you?"

She leaned forward. The low round neck of the dress had a lot of play in it. She was as indifferent as a professional model. She took a cigarette from the china tray on the coffee table and said, "But yes, Mr. Bailey. You see, I spoke to Martin. He knows nothing of the incident."

I held onto the smile, but it was getting a little stiff around the edges. "What might be my point in telling the story?"

SHE had the cigarette lit now. She leaned back and arched her neck again and looked at me along her alabaster cheeks out of two clusters of black lashes. Then she smiled. And that was the moment. It was a sudden, breathless beauty like a falling star in a moonless sky. I should have been turning visceral somersaults. But I felt that her suddenly going radiant on me was a little unfair, like using a knuckle-knife.

She said: "Quite so, Mr. Bailey. Even if your tale about Martin is true, what is the point of talking with me about it?"

I said: "I know something even tougher than that to answer: Why haven't you had me thrown out before now?"

She raised the dark lashes and gave me a long stare out of the heady depths of her eyes. There was a primeval sexuality, and cold intelligence, in them. I couldn't tell what color they were. In that face any eyes would have looked like two dark pools of moonlight.

She said, with a slow languor: "You insisted on seeing me. That makes me curious. Then I find you are ver-ry tall, ver-ry handsome, and even genteel in a crude North American way." She gave me the arched neck and the smile again. This time she let a little pink tongue tip peer out of the smile in a kind of sultry invitation.

"Would you like a drink, Mr. Bailey?"

She didn't wait for an answer. She rose and stepped over to one edge of the fire place and pulled a cord. It brought the little dark girl in as if she had been hanging onto the other end of it.

They had a conversation in what sounded to me like Spanish and was probably Portuguese. The little girl dipped her head and skittered away again.

Mrs. Cabrillo stayed by the fireplace, standing and looking down at me thoughtfully. She said: "I should hate to lose Martin. Is this—this thing at all serious?"

"It's serious to me. I don't like to be told when I can or can't earn an honest dollar. Being a detective is my business. I earn my living that way—what there is of it."

She gave me a half-smile and tried it another way: "I mean—assuming your story is true, does it mean Martin might be involved in something serious and nasty? Or could he just be interested in the young lady you're investigating?"

I gave her a broad slow smile. Maybe it was a smirk. "Mrs. Cabrillo, it's hard to believe you're a newcomer to our shores. Nice clean accent on top of everything else, too."

"You disappoint, Mr. Bailey. You do not seem like a provincial. I assure you Brazil is a part of the New World, too. Rio is more like some parts of Los Angeles than Pasadena is." She smiled almost sweetly and added: "And my mother was British, from Guiana. I spoke English almost before I learned Portuguese.

The little maid came in with a tray and made two drinks without asking any questions about it. I got scotch and liked it. It was full-bodied and smooth. Mrs. Cabrillo sat down again and looked into her glass. The sun was dying slowly and the pinkness was ebbing away, and darkness was gathering its strength in the high corners of the room. Violence in such a setting would never do.

WE SAT and swallowed our drinks and looked at each other like a couple of tired jaguars sharing a waterhole. Then she leaned forward, still indifferently, and let go with the smile again. "You *Americanas* are so devious. Could this be another of the so flattering ways you use to try to know somebody?" She finished the sentence with a little tinkling laugh.

That sounded almost ingenous enough to be honest. I began to wonder if I was crawling out on the wrong branch.

I said: "Not that you wouldn't be worth doing something as complicated as that for, but I didn't just make Martin up. He was there."

She smiled again and wrinkled her nose. "I am glad," she said. "Impetuous men bore me. They are like little children. I have met too many."

I smiled. "About Martin . . ." I said.

"You've finished your drink. Give me the glass." I hadn't quite finished it but I gave it to her anyway. She rebuilt both drinks, handed me one, stood looking down at me for a moment, and went back to the love seat.

"Yes — about Martin. . . ." The tinkling laugh came again. "You say you talked to him. What does he say about all this?" She took a wholesome drink.

"That he was just hiring his gun to a mysterious gentleman from Chicago."

"Oh! That horrid place . . . I don't understand it. Martin has been so steady . . ." There was a lovely frown on her face.

I drank some scotch. Mrs. Cabrillo slung a rugged highball. I said: "I wouldn't worry about it. Martin and his principal—if he has one—are about as professional as a pair of pop-guns."

Mrs. Cabrillo smiled. I took another drink. She got up and stepped over to the chesterfield and took hold of my glass. The smile was getting sultry.

I held onto the glass and said, "I'm still nursing it."

She was still smiling, and it was still sultry. She put her other hand down on mine and tugged at the glass. I let go of it and her hand was in mine. It had just slipped in there accidental-like. I took hold of it. She set the glass on the table and then stood looking at me. Her attitude said I had the ball and what was I going to do with it?

I gave a little tug, about enough to pull the leg off a gnat, and she was down on the chesterfield beside me. She slid her hand up along my arm and dropped her eyes to my mouth. She was still waiting. She wasn't going to be forward about it.

I gave another tug, gentle and steady. That turned her half-way around and she was lying in my arms, her legs on the chesterfield, half-bent so that the loose dress fell away from them, the little pink tongue tip edging out from her upper lip, her heavy eyelids lowered.

I kissed her and her arms went around my neck and she came up hard against me and her lips found my mouth and her tongue was hot against mine. She shivered, and pulled back a half-inch and whispered huskily: "You know how ver-ry attractive you are—to a real woman?"

I drew my hand tightly across her back. The dress was cold and smooth. There was nothing under it. I didn't say anything.

She said casually: "Shall I discharge Martin?"

"Men like Martin are pretty hard to find, beautiful. And there's no future for him in crime."

"Then it isn't anything really serious that he's involved in?" She brought

her hand down across my neck and played with the muscle at the side of it.

I squeezed her a little. "Does Martin have a day off?"

"Of course. Thursday." She played with my hair.

"Does he hang around here?"

"No." Cautiously. "He always goes away and doesn't usually return until quite late."

"Do you always let him have the Packard limousine on his day off, beautiful? Or just on special occasions like last Thursday?"

She sat up, leaning across me on one hand. Her upper lip raised for part of a second and then settled down again. "I suppose he could take it easily enough without my knowing. It is my car and I don't drive." She gave me a ruby glare and pulled herself up from the chesterfield.

I stood up with her and shook my head. "We're a sorry pair," I said. "A couple of suction pumps, attached to each other, working like hell, and getting nowhere." I turned and started for the door.

I heard a noise and turned around and looked back at her. She was watching me go, and the lip was up now, quivering like a nervous rabbit's. I went out the door and down the hall. The little dark maid caught up with me like a mislaid shadow when I was half way down the stairs and followed me silently to the enormous front door.

CHAPTER XII

I HAD dinner at El Lobo's, bought a pint of whiskey that was mostly neutral spirits, picked up two afternoon papers and a copy of *Time*, and went home to relax and try to find out a little bit about the world I live in.

When I let myself in, the phone was ringing. It had a feverish sound to it, as if it had been ringing a long time and was getting tired of it. There was no one there when I answered it, but the line had the open, windy sound of a completed connection. I said hello a couple of times across the hollow distant silence and hung up.

I showered, put on my slippers and towel robe and mixed myself a tall drink with lots of ice and soda. I picked up one of the papers and looked to see what Dick Tracy was doing. He had just discovered the incinerator where Four Ears had been hiding for a month. The phone rang again.

It was Johnston asking me where I'd been all day and if I had anything to report.

"Yeah, I was going to call you in the morning. I overlooked something somewhere along the line and all hell's broken loose—I'm giving you back your retainer . . ."

"Why!"

"Because it hasn't been a satisfactory job. And because a man was shot yesterday. That sort of limits my usefulness. The man was the one who brought your wife to Los Angeles six years ago."

Johnston didn't say anything for awhile. Then tightly: "Who did it?"

"I don't know. But I'm afraid some bright boy is going to trace it to me and stop there."

"Does that mean you'll have to say what you were working on?"

"It could. I'll give you all the breaks I can. I'm staying with the case, but I'd rather be on my own till I know where I stand."

"That won't be necessary. Keep that retainer, and send me a bill the end of the month."

I didn't say anything.

Johnston said: "Have you learned anything?"

"Yeah. But I couldn't tell you what any of it means. I've been threatened

by an amateur trigger man, conned by a local lovely, and pumped by an international beauty. Your wife took the demure name of Gloria Gay and went on the bump and grind circuit. I got as far as a bubble dance in San Pedro in 1939 and lost track."

Johnston made a noise into the phone. It didn't convey anything to me. Then he said:

"That's the answer to the phone call. Keeping people from knowing Margaret once did a strip tease would be worth quite a bit. . . . In fact, it would be worth as much just to keep Margaret from knowing that I know."

"I'm afraid it's not as simple as that, Mr. Johnston. . . . What kind of voice did this fellow have? Anything particular about it?"

"No-o. It wasn't high or low especially. It was rather harsh, almost hoarse. Why?"

"Just checking. I'll keep in touch with you."

"I'll expect you to."

We hung up. My hand was wet with sweat. I went in and washed it and mixed another drink, with less ice and less soda, but just as tall.

At nine o'clock Norma Shannon called. She had worked late and was at the Zero Room on Wilshire. Why didn't I join her?

I told her I was giving myself a facial and was going to bed in a minute.

I finished the drink and pulled the bed out of the wall and crawled in. I slept a sleep as dreamless as death.

HAZEL was busy at the switchboard taking messages, and two of my fellow tenants were sitting at desks reading their mail. There was nothing for me in the box, so I got the newspapers out of the files and started in where I'd left off. I didn't know what I expected to find, and I didn't find anything. At twelve-thirty I went out and ate lunch, and while I was eating, I suddenly realized that I really was waiting for something to happen. I didn't like that.

At four o'clock the door opened and John Vega Cabrillo came in, holding a brown hat in his hand, and looking like a lost Sealyham. He was wearing a dark brown business suit that had forgotten who it had been tailored for. He saw me and came toward me hesitantly, as if he were afraid of intruding.

I decided this was an occasion that called for using the conference room. I got up and shook Mr. Cabrillo's hand and invited him into the private office.

It was a small room, with an east window, a desk, and two chairs. I got behind the desk and Cabrillo took the conference chair, laid his hat on the desk and clasped his hands together beside it. They were small hands, and looked fresh-scrubbed. The veins stood out on the backs of them like knotted ropes. I tried to guess why he was there while he made up his mind how to get started.

Finally he said: "Have you been able to discover Martin's connections, Mr. Bailey? Or any explanation for his unusual behavior?"

"I'm just representing a client, Mr. Cabrillo. I'm afraid I can't answer that."

His fingers tightened and one of the veins moved suddenly under the skin like something alive. "I should be willing to pay you a considerable sum, Mr. Bailey, for your agreement to bring anything of concern to me directly to me before taking any other action." He raised one hand and added: "I'm not asking that you do anything unethical, but I'm not just sure I understand the ethics of your profession." Com-

ing from anyone else that last would have sounded like slick sarcasm. Mr. Cabrillo was just being himself.

"In this profession ethics are where you find them, if you're lucky." I thought that might be obscure enough to bring out whatever was on his mind.

He thought it over for awhile and said, "Mrs. Cabrillo has decided not to discharge Martin. She feels that you are . . . mistaken."

"There wasn't any mistake."

"I hope you'll forgive me, Mr. Bailey. I had my lawyer look up your record. I am inclined to believe you." He looked at his hands, and the lines around his mouth tensed and deepened. "Mrs. Cabrillo is passionately, almost childishly, enthusiastic about us here in the States. She is ready to accept and to like almost anyone because he is an American." His eyes came up again and met mine. "I'm afraid it makes her a prey to the viciousness and cupidity that are always around people like me." Then he added gently: "Like wolves around a fire . . ." as if he were just a little sorry the wolves wouldn't learn to behave so they could share the fire.

"You feel that Mrs. Cabrillo's involved in something I'm working on?"

"It is only apprehension, Mr. Bailey. But I feel I could forget the whole matter if I had your assurance that anything that may develop—that I would be interested in—will be brought to me first."

"Don't you mean brought to you and to no one else?"

He closed his eyes and then opened them again. "Yes," he said.

"I don't believe I could promise that, Mr. Cabrillo, but we may be able to do business."

He looked at me again and waited. Through the thin walls came sounds of departure, and Hazel's "Good night, sir," and laughter.

I SAID: "I want to have a look at Mrs. Cabrillo's and Martin's rooms. For that privilege, I'll agree to give you first call on anything I find that concerns you. I can't promise to stop there, but if it's something that isn't anybody else's business, we'll keep it that way."

It took him no time at all to say: "I'm afraid that's out of the question." A frail little frown tugged at his eyebrows for a moment and then gave up. He stood up.

I said: "You came in here offering to buy me off with a lot of dollars and a few appropriate lines about ethics. That makes my proposition sound like an invitation to a *Christian Endeavor* weinie roast." I stood up with him. "If your wife isn't involved, it won't matter. If she is, I might be able to help by finding out how she's involved."

He picked up the hat and mashed it out of shape. "There seems to be no point in it; that is, looking at my wife's rooms. I shall be glad to let you look at Martin's."

I shook my head. "You may be right. But I want to look anyway."

He stared at the hard brown of the linoleum for a long moment. I thought I could feel the little room shake under the struggle between crude circumstances and some ancient Cabrillo code. Crude circumstances won, as they always do.

"I have your assurance, then? Anything that may develop that does not have to be passed on will go no further. And in any case, you bring me the information first?"

I nodded.

He put the hat on his head, backwards. The white hair edged up from around the brim like smoke from a banked fire.

"Don't tell your wife about this," I said, and smiled. "But of course you wouldn't do that—unless you just came here to find out how much I know, and to size me up a little."

He lifted his head, and his eyes were twin corridors of sadness. Not the hat, nor the tendrils of hair, nor the necktie hanging two inches from the collar made any inroads on his gentle dignity. He said: "I shall not tell my wife, Mr. Bailey."

He opened the door, and turned and gave me a melancholy smile. "I shall call you when . . . the coast is clear."

He went on out and I followed him. Except for Hazel, typing now, the large room was empty. Mr. Cabrillo went to the door. Hazel looked up at him. He opened it, tipped his hat to Hazel, and went away.

She looked over at me, and her eyes were large. "He was a beautiful little man," she said simply. "Is he in trouble?"

I looked at the door. "I don't know," I said. "I think he is."

CHAPTER XIII

I WENT over to my desk and sat down. A breeze had come up from the desert, putting a dry sharpness in the air and softly blurring and hiding the mountains off to the east. I could see them dimly through the open window, maybe only because I knew they were there.

I counted the lights in the building across the way and listened to Hazel's steady clacking, and to the warm impatient sounds of homeward traffic on Olympic Boulevard. And I tried to think my way into the shifting intangible problem of Gloria Gay. Lights went off, and more came on, and pretty soon Hazel was standing at the door telling me the night line was on my phone. I said goodnight, and went on chasing my thoughts around. I came out with a disjointed pattern of blind alleys, of contradictions and irrelevancies, that left me staring into the sudden darkness, a blank uneasy feeling crawling slowly over me. But the pattern was real enough. There were people in it, and movement, and goals with the strength of murder.

The phone shrilled in the dry darkness. I got up and walked over and turned on the light. I could hear better that way, maybe. It rang again and I picked it up and grunted into it.

"Your phone's ringing." The voice had the round bright fullness of a summer's day. It was Norma Shannon.

"I'm wondering why," I mumbled.

"My. We're grumpy again."

"I'm hungry," I said. "I haven't had my four pounds of raw beef today."

"That's what I called about. Beef. I owe you a dinner. Do you like onions with your sirloin?"

"No."

"Neither do I."

"Then leave out the onions. And I don't like nutmeg in my drinks. I'm funny that way."

"Then you *will* come? Tonight?" There was a plaintive anxiety in her voice, as if having me out for dinner was what made life worth living.

"Can I have tapioca pudding?"

"No!"

"Well, I'll come anyway."

. . . I counted the stairs this time, and she was worth all one hundred and sixty of them. She opened the door before I had a chance to catch my wind, straighten my tie, or think up an appropriate wise crack. Her face looked small and firm and white against her auburn hair. And her cobalt eyes smiled at me gently as if they were glad to see me.

She said: "Hello, Gus," and took my hat out of my hand as I went in and stood there looking around.

She had what looked like two rooms and a kitchen and bath. But it wasn't what she had, it was what she did with it. There was a large oval hooked rug on the living room floor full of bright colors. There was a little fire-place with a few copper pieces around it that looked as if they were actually used for something. And there was a fire in it, lapping around two little eucalyptus logs. Two wing chairs upholstered in a deep comfortable red were on either side of the fire-place, with a little Victorian sofa facing it and looking smug about facing it.

She put my hat on a table with a phone on it and said, "Everything's ready. Give the fire a poke and I'll be right out with the martinis. You do drink gin—without nutmeg?"

"Uh-huh," I said, and looked at her slim-hipped figure. She had on a white silk blouse gathered in a lot of loose string low at her throat, and the skirt was the deep red of the wing chairs and had two pockets in it large enough to hold the week's laundry. She liked big pockets. I wondered if anything could be made of it. She waited until I was through looking and then walked to the kitchen with a clean slender stride.

The room was lighted half-heartedly by student lamps on two little pine tables. By a twelve-foot window that looked out over the county *bistros* on the Strip there was a linen-covered table set for two. And there were sprigs of ivy and philodendron growing in odd places on the walls and tables. It was a cozy room, a room that wouldn't mind the odor of a pipe, a place where you could catch up on your back-scratching and listen to the gas company's evening hour.

I POKED the fire and tried to see Norma Shannon being briefed for her trip to my office. I tried to see her folding the money for the job and putting it into one of her enormous pockets. I couldn't see it, but it was two-dimensional and her face was blank, like something cut out of cardboard.

She came in and we drank the martinis sitting by the fire in the two red chairs. It was a good martini, and we talked about gin and Hollywood and how I got to be a detective. It was a scintillating conversation. We were both thinking about something else.

Then she disappeared again into the kitchen and came back rolling a little pine tea-wagon. She put everything in its place on the table without any wasted motion.

"You sit over here, Stu," she said, and pulled out a chair for me. "I may call you Stu, mayn't I?"

I went over and pulled out her chair and crooked a finger at her. She came over and sat down.

"Except when you want to be formal," I said. "Then you can call me Gus."

I sat down and we ate silently for several minutes. I was as hungry as a crow in December.

After awhile she looked up and said: "You know, it was two hours past my dinner time. I'm just beginning to feel human again." She smiled her too-wide smile, and her eyes, black now in the dim light, sparkled at me. "In fact," she said, "I'm feeling normal enough to ask you why in hell you're having me followed."

I looked up. The little sounds and movements in the room hung suspended. No matter what evil might dog her footsteps and make her peer over her shoulder as she walked, it would take a special kind of girl to spot Lee

Martinez while he was on a job.

I said: "Don't swear. It doesn't suit you at all."

She gave me a level stare that had more of hurt, or even fear, in it than anger. "I seldom swear," she said, "except for emphasis, or when I'm mad. I'm mad."

She lowered her chin a little. "At first I had the girlish idea you might be protecting me or something. Then I got a good look at your stooge Ugh!"

I grimaced. "He's not that bad. And he's a darned good man. How'd you happen to spot him so close?"

She smiled. "Believe me, he's not a good man. I haven't even seen him today."

That picked me up a little. Lee wouldn't have left the job voluntarily without calling me. I looked at her and tried to find something more in her face—or perhaps something less—than there appeared to be. The fear and hurt in it had deepened a little, that was all I saw. She leaned toward me across the table.

"Please," she said. "You didn't believe me when I told you what I know about Gloria. Then I thought you changed your mind. You didn't. And you think that I'm up to something. What is it? What's the mystery?"

I said: "If you told me a straight story, why don't you just forget it and let me go snafu in my own way. Why let it worry you?"

She looked at me and didn't say anything. I took a bite of steak and listened to the logs smoldering in the fireplace and smelled the clean fragrance of the room.

Then she said: "For one thing, you had me followed. Am I supposed to ignore it if you choose to hire scrawny little men to trail me around?" She paused.

"And for another thing, I liked you. You're probably a heel like most men. But you managed to give the impression the other night that there was something rather decent about you." Then she said quickly: "But it was probably just the reaction of an impatient maiden to those shoulders of yours."

A slow flush ebbed upward in her face and she picked up a tall silver shaker and grasped it as if she were going to throw it at me.

"That was a silly thing to say," she whispered bleakly, and managed a smile, most of it on one side of her face.

IF IT was just an impromptu script she was writing, it had me whipped. I didn't want to be tough any more. Taking that room, with its reflection of long fond hours given to making it the kind of room it was, and taking Norma Shannon's flushed face, and adding them up to a cold and simple plan to throw me off the trail of Gloria Gay took more steel and more imagination than I had to give to it. I looked at her and opened my mouth, and the phone rang.

She got up and ran to it as if she were welcoming an old friend. She answered it and put it down. "It's for you," she said.

I picked up the phone and Norma went into the kitchen.

The voice at the other end said, "When you didn't come out in half an hour I went home. Will you put her to bed or shall I?"

"I will," I said tonelessly. "What's the dope on the case?"

"Practically nothing. Models clothes at one of the conspicuous consumption emporiums on Wilshire. Goes out almost every night, usually with the same guy. Sleeps alone. The guy is a director at Fox, name of Howland Bachman."

"That's a lot to learn in a couple of

days."

"The manager's apartment is at the bottom. I'm a guy looking for a place to live. The manager, she enjoys a drink, and she likes to talk."

"Any other people?"

"She either contacted or just ran into some gigolo at the Zero Room last night. Tall, dark, and handsome—not the director."

"What time did she get together with him?"

"Should I know? Sometime between 9:30 and 10:30."

"Before or after she made the phone call?"

"What the . . . ! Chum, you don't need me. . . . After."

"Leave with him?"

"Yeah. They made the rounds. She still slept alone"

"Anything else?"

"Jus' a little thing. She's being tailed. Some skinny little gunsel that ought to be selling pencils on Main Street."

"Thanks, Lee. You can pull off. There'll be a bonus for you."

"What the hell for?"

"I'm damned if I know. So long."

NORMA was putting coffee and some little cakes on a table in front of the fireplace. It was good coffee.

I said: "Did you happen to notice what kind of car this fellow was driving?"

She thought for a moment and said, "It was a green coupe of some kind."

"Dodge?"

"Yes, it was. Why?"

"It wasn't my man," I said slowly. "It was a clumsy little fellow who's put in a little time trailing me in the past week or so. He must have picked you up when you left my office."

Her eyes widened and asked for help.

I said: "If you've told me a straight story, I don't think you have anything to worry about."

Her mouth drew tight at the long corners and her lower lip curled in under her teeth. "Do you enjoy slapping people around? Women, maybe?"

"I haven't slapped any for almost a week now. Why?"

"Every time you make with that 'if I told a straight story' and look at me as if you know damned well I didn't, you slap me across the face." She took a deep breath. It shivered a little on the way down. "I don't lie, Bailey. I don't have to. It's one of the few things I have to warm myself by on the long winter nights."

I waited until her eyes came up from my chin and met mine. Then I said: "Remember the picture you saw on my desk?"

"Yes," she breathed.

"That was a picture of Peggy Bleeker—Gloria Gay."

She went on looking at me for awhile as if I hadn't said anything at all. Then a tight little line creased over her nose, and she said, putting a lot of breath into it, "But it couldn't——"

I kept on giving her the beady eye. "But it was," I said. "I happen to know that."

Her eyes looked at the fire. It was just a warm red bed of coals now. Her full brows pulled together. She was thinking again. Then she looked up.

"That girl was a bleached-out blonde. Gloria had dark red hair. Beautiful hair."

"She changed the color of her hair like you would change your lipstick. She was a blonde when that picture was taken."

She was still frowning. "I remember looking at the face, and then at the legs. The hair must have thrown me off. . . . ." Then, slowly, the tension unwound in Norma Shannon's face, and

she looked at me almost gently again. "So that's it. That's what made you think I was a fraud."

I didn't say anything.

"And the jaunt to your apartment was a set-up to have me see the photograph?"

"Something like that."

"My," she said, and tipped her head at me. "I thought you were going up to see how far you could get with me."

I looked at her, at the soft wide mouth and the freckled nose. I said: "I know how far I could get with you." I just said it. I didn't let it mean anything.

She flushed again, and brought her eyes up. They made it as far as my chin and stopped there. "I think you do," she whispered.

I stood up. "Let's go to my place and look at pictures."

She looked around at the dishes on the table and made a little face.

"We'll come back," I said.

She went into the bedroom. She came out with a silver fox jacket and went over to the little table and picked up my hat.

We didn't say much driving over. There wasn't anyone in the lobby, and the elevator was waiting for us. We lurched up to the fourth floor. We were half way down the hall when I saw it. My door was open and it looked like every light in the place was on including the one in the refrigerator.

I said: "I think I have company. Wait here a minute." I walked on down and went in with my arms hanging conspicuously at my sides.

The place looked like the Broadway bargain basement after Dollar Day. And in the midst of it, sitting in my favorite armchair, there was a brick-faced fellow in a wrinkled grey suit. I had seen him before. He was Detective Lieutenant Quint from Central Homicide.

He said: "Bailey, you're a hell of a housekeeper." Quint talked like a man who was afraid you might hear what he said, mumbling his words into a kind of verbal nut sundae. He was known to have smiled twice and frowned four times in his twenty years on the force. But on the whole, expressions came and went on his brick-red face with the infinite variety of the seasons in Death Valley.

I said: "If I produce the body will you send the boys back and clean the place up again?"

"Not lookin' for a body. Came up to see you. Door wide open so I came on in. Kinda messy, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, and looked out and saw Norma edging down the hall toward me. When she saw Quint she jumped, but not much. I introduced them and Quint pulled his stocky frame up from the chair and almost smiled.

"I'll be going," he mumbled.

"Stick around," I said, and went over to the desk where I put the pictures of Mrs. Johnston. The drawer was pulled out. There were a couple of bills in it. The pictures were gone.

CHAPTER XIV

NORMA helped me clean up a little and then I sent her home in a cab. I told her to call me if the man in the green coupe showed up again.

Quint had sat in the chair while we worked, looking at nothing in particular and smoking a mangled cigar.

I went into the kitchen and opened some beer and brought it in in a couple of highball glasses. Quint took one of the glasses and mumbled something I didn't hear. He didn't expect me to.

I sat down on the sofa across from him and said, "You boys haven't looked under my rock for quite awhile. Is the

crime wave over?"

"You must be working on something hot." He swung his head in a little arc to take in the whole room.

I didn't say anthing.

"What did you have against Buffin, Bailey?"

"His clam chowder. It was too cold."

"Still being a smart guy, huh? Do you know how you stand down at Central?"

"Yeah. Good with some, bad with others. Like most private eyes."

"Right now it's mostly bad. Walking away from a stiff is bad business—for you."

"So now I didn't kill him?"

"Not unless we can't find anyone else for the ticket."

"What makes you so sure I found him?"

"How do you think we got a line on you at all?"

"He kept his phone in the ice box."

Something glinted behind Quint's eyes that looked like an emotion wanting to get itself expressed. "That just about sums up your opinion of the force, doesn't it? Let me tell you something:

"You were right when you decided he didn't have a phone. But you were wrong when you decided we'd never trace him to you because of it. It's probably a good story from your point of view; from ours it's just routine detective work."

Quint was in a mood for talk. I got out my pipe and lit it and got comfortable on the couch.

"About three or four days ago the State Vehicle boys got a call from a guy claiming to be Sergeant Mike Moran—he's one of our boys on the narcotics detail. This guy says he's checking a hot car and wants to know who belongs to a certain license number." Quint took a long drink of beer and belched quietly through his nose.

"Well, the State man did just what he's supposed to do. He asks for the guy's number to call him back. Then he calls us up, but Moran's out and nobody knows where he is. So the State man goes ahead and gives out the information. The answer being the car belongs to a guy named Bailey who resides right where I'm sitting."

"I said: "What d'ya know!"

"But the State man don't like it. So he calls back when Mike's in. Mike takes the phone number and goes out to look into it—on his own time."

"He'll get ahead, will Mike."

"He finds it's a drug store pay phone, down at Venice. The druggist don't remember anyone in particular using it that day. Then two days later we find this bird Buffin shot dead just a block or two above this place where the phone is. So . . ."

"So Mike tells you his story and you say 'it must be one and the same man'! You're a better man than I am, Quint. I'd have told Mike to go back to the griffa hunt."

"Thanks," he said solemnly. "We took some pictures of this Buffin up to the drug store and the druggist recognizes him. Then he remembers that the guy made another call the morning of the day he was shot. There was only one call made from that phone before noon that day. That was a call to you."

"How does that get me to Venice to play ghoul?"

HE TOOK a folded sheet of paper out of an inside pocket. "We already had a statement from one of the scrub women at the dance hall. She saw a guy leave the place about eleven o'clock. Here's the description she give us: 'Tall, broad-shouldered, with dark hair parted like Cary Grant's, and a lean, criminal face.' That's better'n

a photograph."

I got up and went in and refilled the glasses. When I came back I said: "Not in my book, Lieutenant. I didn't go down there." I sat down.

"Buffin called me and said he had a proposition for me that he couldn't talk about over the phone. He wanted me to come down. I told him it was his proposition; he could come up and see me. He said he would. But he never did make it."

"Okay," Quint said. "We've pussyfooted around for about a half hour; now let's get our feet under the table. He had your license number. That's got to mean something."

"Maybe he got it playing bingo."

"He's got something to do with this fancy case you're workin' on." He jerked his thumb toward a corner of the room that hadn't been cleaned up very well yet.

"It could be," I said.

"Tell us about it." He blew smoke at the stand-lamp and watched it funnel up through the shade and wander around looking for a place to settle.

"You know better than that, Quint."

Quint sucked his teeth for a while, quietly. "You boys used to get by with the works," he said. "Know why?" He didn't wait for me to tell him why. "It was because the top-hats in the department were afraid of you. They had such dirty noses themselves, they figured they had to let you private boys get away with a little murder now and then to even up the score."

"Mayhem, Quint, not murder."

"But they don't give us that kind of orders anymore," he went on. "You guys are finding out the law applies to you just like any other Joe Doakes."

"Yeah. The millenium. The trouble is there aren't any cops named Joe Doakes."

Quint stared at me for a long time out of eyes as full of expression as two peep holes in a circus tent. "Don't be wise, Bailey. I've got enough to wrap you in cellophane right now if I get in the mood—and make it stick."

"You'll have to try harder, Quint; I'm still breathing. . . . If I uncover anything that might help you it's yours. Is that good enough?"

Quint stood up, slowly drank the rest of his beer, tossed a half inch of soggy cigar into the tray, and mumbled: "Maybe you think that license of yours came in a cracker-jack box. Maybe it did."

"Huh-uh. It came from the State Detective License Bureau. I was there the other day and Mac was complaining about you City boys. He seemed to resent your thinking you had something to say about our licenses."

Quint gave me a watery look and shook his head slowly. "Too bad, Bailey," he said. "Too bad." He put on his hat and walked out.

It was ten o'clock.

I undressed and went in and got under the shower. I let it run hot on my shoulders, then I turned on the cold and made noises like a floundering porpoise. When I got out and put on my towel robe the phone was ringing.

It was Cabrillo telling me the coast was clear. Martin had driven Mrs. Cabrillo to an after-the-show jive session put on by the stars of the Benveniti Opera Company. It sounded exciting.

"Come to the laboratory."

"Shall I leave my car outside?"

"Not at all. This isn't a conspiracy." It was a gentle reprimand.

THE air had grown cold, and the little dryness was gone from it. And there were odors of night-blooming jasmine and sage chasing each other

across the night sky. It seemed like no drive at all to Pasadena.

The gate was open and I drove in past the great house, the drive gleaming like a moat in the darkness.

I walked down a flagged path to the laboratory. Cabrillo stepped out of the shadows and walked toward me, his white hair shining like a desert candle in the hard moonlight.

He said: "We'll go in the rear, Mr. Bailey," and walked down a little gravel path to the house.

He opened a door with a key and said: "We'll go to Mrs. Cabrillo's suite first and get that over with."

We went up a thinly carpeted flight of stairs and then up another. We walked down a long wide hall. We were approaching the suite at the opposite end from the wide stairway at the front of the house.

Cabrillo stopped and opened a door and silently switched on a light. It was a bedroom. It was a blue room. The rug, the drapes, the chairs, even the tile of the fireplace, were blue. Everything but the bed, which was a sterile white. It was canopied in white organdy and spread with stiff white lace. It was a room without warmth, a room in which passion would be as welcome as Worcestershire sauce on a marshmallow sundae. I didn't think it would tell me a thing.

There was a long wardrobe closet across from the bed. I started there. There were enough shoes, coats, dresses, costumes, and such to set someone up in a nice business. Cabrillo watched me silently while I felt in the pockets. There were very few pockets and I didn't find anything.

There were two high chests of drawers. I felt between and under the soft fluffy things in them and left them pretty much as they had been.

There was a dressing room, leading into the bathroom, that was as large as my whole apartment. I spent some time on it, but I didn't find anything there either. There wasn't anything in the bathroom I hadn't seen before, but I'd have to get used to carpeting on a bathroom floor.

In a dark corner of the bedroom next to a tall window there was a little antique French desk with legs like a newborn colt. The middle drawer was locked. Mrs. Cabrillo had a good supply of razor blades in the bathroom. I got one and went to work. The drawer gave up without a struggle.

There wasn't much in it. A fountain pen and some stationery. Far back there was a little pink-leather book, worn and a little faded, about the size of a folded wallet. I took it out and riffled the pages. It was full of names and addresses.

I went over and sat in one of the blue chairs while Cabrillo stood by the cold fireplace and looked gloomily down at me. Most of the names at the front of the book were Spanish and Portugese, with the addresses written in Portugese. Toward the back I began to recognize a few names here and there old-time Angelenos. One name was interesting enough for me to get an envelope out of my pocket and write it down. It was "A. Northwick," with an address on Hollywood Boulevard and a Granite exchange telephone number. Northwick is an unusual name. I had known a top-drawer grifter named Barky Northwick several years back. I hadn't heard anything about him for a couple of years.

Another name was interesting, too. It was "Mrs. Ralph Johnston, 1104 Duare Road, Los Angeles." The names weren't listed alphabetically. I copied the names that came just before and just after Mrs. Johnston's just in case

they might mean something.

Cabrillo said: "Did you find something?"

"Just a name I recognized. I don't think it means anything." I read him the name that came just before Mrs. Johnston's.

He looked bored and said: "That's her voice teacher."

"When did she start going to him?"

"About a year ago. Yes, a few weeks better than a year ago. Why? Is it important?"

And some time after that Mrs. Johnston's name had gone into the little book. A little less than a year ago, Margaret Bleeker had suddenly disappeared from U.C.L.A. and married Ralph Johnston. "I don't think it is," I said.

THERE wasn't anything else for me in the little book. I put it back in the desk drawer and shut the drawer. Unless she noticed the scratches on the latch she'd never know the difference.

I spent another half-hour in the room with the rose drapes, but it didn't yield anything except a handful of mixed nuts. I was glad to get them. I was hungry again.

Outside I said: "I'd just as soon skip Martin's rooms. I don't think they'll help us."

Cabrillo shrugged lightly. "Are you disappointed?"

"Well, I'm afraid it hasn't helped me very much. Do you know anyone named Northwick?"

"Was that one of the names in the book?"

"Yeah. Another one was Mrs. Ralph Johnston."

He shook his head, and the moonlight played in his hair and cut deep shadows in his face.

"I don't know either of them," he said. "Does this affect our arrangement in any way, Mr. Bailey?"

"That must have been some report your lawyer gave you on me," I said. I turned and walked down the gravel path to the garage, got into my car and drove away. I didn't think about the little pink-leather book, or about Mrs. Johnston because I didn't know what to think about them. I thought about Cabrillo and his gentle quietude, and about his wife and her labored beauty. And about the sterile white bed in the blue bedroom.

I drove in on the Arroyo Seco Parkway. The night had made the world its own. The breeze was a stranger to the warm day's fragrance, and the stars burned low in the sky, still and frosty, like watchfires on distant hills.

I cut off to go into town on Broadway. That would take me by the Pacific Building. The bars were closed. I wondered if I needed a drink bad enough to bother to stop. I wondered if I wouldn't find my liquor poured down the sink anyway if I went up, and my files spread out on the floor like a Fifth Avenue snow storm. It wasn't the pictures they had been looking for. They probably found those in the first five minutes of the hunt. Whatever it was, I didn't think they had found it.

I crossed Olympic Boulevard and started into the block the Pacific Building is on. There were only a few cars parked along the curb, looking like something left on a doorstep.

One of them was a green Dodge coupe.

CHAPTER XV

I PULLED in behind the Dodge and jumped out. The lights came on as I jerked the door open and the little fellow at the wheel was fumbling with a key in the ignition lock.

I sat down and said: "Let's talk."

He looked at me and said: "Who the hell are you?" in a ragged voice that sounded as if it needed a good burring job.

"I'm a guy who wants to talk. I'm lonely."

"Beat it," said the little man. "I gotta be at the shipyards at seven o'clock."

There are a lot of green Dodge coupes in the world. I said: "What are you doing up here?"

"If it's anything to ya, I been havin' a drink or two at the Figueroa Club."

"What are they serving with the rust-remover up there? Your breath isn't pretty, but it wouldn't keep you out of a W.C.T.U. rally. Let's talk."

He looked at me and licked his upper teeth with his tongue.

I said: "Maybe you'd *like* a drink. I've got some upstairs. Okay?"

The little man smiled with the right half of his face, and said: "Pal, you're strictly from the squirrel's nest. But if it's liquor you're talking about, let's go." He was rather happy about the whole idea.

We went into the lobby and I pushed the night button on the elevator block. While we waited I looked him over. He was like a thousand other little men that you might see in any back-street from London to San Diego. He had the hard, bony-chested, stringy thinness of a jockey who's a little too tall for the game. His cheeks pulled in tight against the bone in his face as if there was a vacuum in his throat. He had a grey hat on, and the suit was gray and tailored to fit him. His eyes were a dull gray too, and they were looking me over as if there wasn't anything to look for above my necktie.

The elevator came down and we got in and I said: "Four, Joe." Joe knew better, but he was tired. If I wanted to ride past my floor, that was my business. But the little man stiffened when I said it and began abusing his lower lip with uneven discolored teeth.

We got out on four and I took hold of the little man's right arm in a friendly way. Joe dropped back down to the second floor where he'd left his magazine and his bottle of beer. But I made a mistake. The little man was left-handed, and he almost had the automatic out of the holster under his right arm before I could do anything about it. I managed to freeze it where it was by pulling him tight against me so the gun pointed sidewise and would blow as big a hole in him as it would in me if he pulled the trigger.

We stood like that for a while breathing into each other's faces. On that basis he would win hands down before long. I started to squeeze my right hand down between us to where the gun was. He suddenly became a dead weight, as heavy as a load of coal, and I dropped him. I jumped and swung out with my right fist. I heard a yelp and something m e t a l l i c clattered against wood.

I stepped over and picked up the gun and the little man got up and brushed himself off. Then he described me with a series of filthy names and tried to kick me from five feet away. He couldn't, so he spit on the floor.

I said: "I suppose the lights you left burning down there have tipped the boys off by now."

He thought of some more things to say about me. The little man had a creative talent.

I TURNED him around gently and we walked down to the next floor and along the dim corridor to my office. The window was dark. The door was locked. I gave him the key and told him to open it and do whatever he

thought was smart.

He unlocked the door, opened it a little way, and said: "Hey. Nix, guys, he's got me covered. Turn on the light." Sweat was beginning to bead on his crevassed neck.

The light came on.

"Tell 'em I'd like to hear some guns drop."

"Shed the heaters, guys. He wants to talk."

I heard two loud thuds, as if the guns had been thrown into a corner, and I came on in with the little fellow in front of me.

There were two of them standing in the middle of the room with their hands raised peacefully, and one of them was giving me a grin as wide and bright as the Hall of Mirrors. He had red hair, a flat face, and white elk's teeth. He looked like a kid who's been caught stealing raspberry jam and didn't really care. He wasn't more than half an inch taller than I am, and he wasn't quite as broad as a Sherman tank. The other one was lanky and sallow with a long face and plucked eyebrows and a thick mouth. The room wasn't as messy as I expected. There were several places where the linoleum showed through the papers covering the floor. They had cased the place carefully. The papers were from my desk and files.

I closed the door and said: "Go on over and sit on the desks and put your hands on your knees."

The little fellow walked over and sat down on the desk in front of mine and the sallow man slid in beside him. Red took the desk next to the door, and it groaned when he sat on it. They put their hands on their knees and looked at me.

I went over and sat in my chair, waved the automatic around carelessly, and said: "I'm all ears."

They sat and looked at me like a first-night audience watching a bad first act. Even Red looked bored.

I picked up the phone and said: "Who would you rather tell it to, me or the law?" They looked at me.

I started to dial with the hand that held the phone.

They kept on watching me with all the interest of three men listening to a radio commercial.

I hung up, looked at them for a couple of minutes, and reached over and picked up the phone again. I dialed my own number quickly, held the receiver tight to my ear, and let the busy signal sneer at me for awhile.

They still waited for the second act. I hung up.

Red grinned at me and said: "We can go now. Huh?" He had a wheezy, hollow voice like someone talking into a half-full crock of yeast.

"Yeah," I said. "You can go pretty soon now."

Their guns were in the corner by my desk. I picked them up and took the lead out of them. I threw one to Red and the other to the man with the eyebrows.

"Sure you wouldn't like to talk this over?" I said. "I could get out the bottle and we could spare ourselves any more of the melodrama." They filed out the door without looking at me. I stepped out and watched them walk away. "Whatever it is you're looking for," I yelled, "I haven't got it!" They disappeared around the corner where the elevator was. They didn't seem to have heard anything I said.

I SAT down and got out the bottle and had me a drink. I felt like a man who had just finished fifteen stiff rounds of shadow boxing and found the decision was against him. I heard the elevator door clank open and shut, and the great empty building seemed to close

in around me. I took another drink and decided it had really been a draw. I washed out the glass and put it away and picked some of the papers up from the floor and put them in one of the empty file drawers. Then I walked to the east window and looked down onto Broadway. The lobby lights showed me three men getting into a car. It drove up to Eleventh and turned right. I figured they might be going around to the alley, but it didn't really bother me. They hadn't tried to pick me up, and any time they wanted to, they could do it. I couldn't afford a body guard.

I picked up the phone and called Lee Martinez. He wasn't in bed. There was a record playing a song in Spanish about four generals. I told him I wanted him to get onto Mrs. John Vega Cabrillo. I described her and gave him the address. He wanted to know if there'd be a bonus in it. I hung up and picked up the rest of the papers and put them in the file drawer with the others, turned off the light, and went out the door.

The corridor had a bright hard sheen in the dim light and my footsteps echoed hollowly against the silence. I looked at my watch. It was one A.M.

I turned at the end of the corridor, and Red stepped out and pushed his big elk-tooth grin at me and stuck a gun in my ribs. It was the gun I had just given back to him. I pushed it away.

He laughed amiably and put it back again. "It's got real bullets in it, Cholly. I carry extras." The tall sallow man was standing behind him raising his plucked eyebrows at me. I didn't see the little man.

Red put his flat, grinning face, like the open end of a landing barge, up close to mine. "You ain't real smart," he cooed, "but I kinda like you. The car's down in the alley." His hand moved with a sudden swift precision and the gun came up hard against my head. I reached out . . . but there was nothing there and something broke in white heat at the back of my skull. Then darkness began to stretch away again, unfolding with an endless acceleration. . . .

CHAPTER VXI

SHARP fingers probed and went away and came again, ferreting deep into the soft corners. The fingers were white beams from headlights rolling by on waves of nausea. Two hands came up from a long way off and explored the darkness and pulled the eyes away from the jabbing fingers. The hands reached up and touched a head. It wasn't a head; it was a sticky sickening fluff, without substance, a ball of cotton candy with a core of pain. I knew those hands. They were my hands. They formed themselves into hard fists. Then words smothered them like slow deep drums. *He's at it again!* The hands were pulled down into a flailing pounding silence.

The movement and the darkness, and the sudden wrenching blows seemed to have set a pattern for eternity before my mind began to move, like a rock moves in the wind. Sluggishly I fixed the day, the hour, even the dark crew I was riding with. But I wasn't riding. I was being carried. The sudden wrenching blows were someone's conscientious efforts to get a firmer hold on my sagging shoulders. He was using a thin sharp knee to help him.

The movement stopped. The knee came up, agonizingly, and hands moved quickly under my arms. A door squeeked open, there was almost gentle movement, and then a bed was soft beneath me. A light came on. It was a thousand prongs jabbed into the cush-

ions of my eyes.

I sat up and looked at the three of them through a red haze and their faces merged into one and looked back at me with the open sympathetic stare of a beach-club bouncer.

I said: "Thanks for carrying me up. I been sick."

Red stepped out of the mist and I could see him clearly. He smiled at me pleasantly and said: "Lock the door, Herb, Cholly wants to put in some overtime."

Red came over close to me and leaned over, his legs stiff and set apart. "I like a guy like you," he said. "It keeps everything so nice and pleasant. Just like a director's meeting." He reached out and slapped me across the face with his open hand and then with the back of it. It wasn't a full swing, just a little warm-up slap. But his hand was the size of a bear trap, and twice as hard. My stomach curled up tight like a frightened sow-bug and stayed that way.

Red took off his coat and pulled a white envelope out of one of the pockets. I turned so that I was sitting on the edge of the bed, my feet planted firmly on the floor.

Red said: "You asked for this. You don't play right when we try to tail you. You don't leave nothin' lyin' around that tells us what we wanta know. These pitchers—" He grimaced and threw the envelope on the bed beside me—"we could do without."

I looked up at him and said: "Did any of your boys manage to tail me as far as Venice last week, and then follow me back?"

"Not us, Cholly. You never give us more'n a one-way ticket."

I opened the envelope. The two pictures of Peg Bleeker were in it. I looked up at him again.

Red said: "I'm lookin' for her too, Cholly. Who you workin' for, and where'd ya get the pitcher of her with the cheaters on?" He sat down on the bed with me and grinned.

That was fine, more than I'd hoped for. I hadn't been listening to him very carefully, just measuring him and wondering if I had anything that would really hurt.

Then he said: "Sharpy, come and take his coat off and go through it again. Look real good. Maybe you'll find some invisible writin' in the linin'." His hollow laughter hit me and filled the aching void of my head with pain. The little man came and took off my coat and went away with it. Things were looking up.

I ROLLED over off the bed and brought my fist up from the floor. It moved with the speed and power of a salted slug and landed in the center of Red's enormous palm. There was a sudden fury of movement and I was standing looking into his face. He was holding me up by my shirt and hair. He was grinning broadly, but his eyes weren't sharing the fun. They were dead raw eyes with a brittle look like a mule that's been hit over the head with a lead pipe.

This was what he'd been waiting for. This was what he'd had Sharpy take my coat off for.

"She's missing," I said thickly. "That's why the guy hired me. She's gone."

The hollow laughter broke in my face, high now and wheezing, with a tone of idiocy. Something exploded against the side of my head and lifted me and rolled me, and I clattered against a cold wall with the warm salt taste of blood in my mouth. My stomach still lay tight inside me like a cold rock. The nausea was gone, and the pain. But time had rolled to a stop.

I was bending to pick up the gun when she whirled around, the picture raised

My knees moved through an eternity to come up under me, and suns broke in bright fragments, and universes lived, and thrived, and died in a glory of fire in the time that passed while I raised my head and stood up against the wall.

"Talk, Cholly."

I opened my eyes. The room danced and then was still. I could see the sallow man leaning against a wall across the quilted untidy bed.

"Talk to me, Cholly." The bear-trap hand fell across my face and the room tilted and slipped suddenly and sickeningly.

Little rats with cold little feet ran across my back and down my chest. My breath caught and scraped downward and my eyes came open. I was on the floor.

Knuckle-bloody hands held a soggy weight, and cold water was pouring from it down across my face. The water made my eyes feel clean again. A face like a shell of death leaned above me and clucked its tongue.

"And he was so pretty, too. Remember?" The voice was ragged and needed a shave. It was Sharpy's voice.

The hands moved away and Red's face was there. "Wanta talk now? Or shall I waltz ya around some more?"

"About what?" I said thickly. "The girl's missing. I don't know where she is." It was hard to talk, like walking on two broken legs. My tongue and lips got in the way, and my jaw worked like a rusty hinge. "The guy I'm working for doesn't know either. That's why I'm working for him."

Red leered at me. It wasn't even a grin any more. "You're out of order, Cholly. I ast you who the guy was. Where'd you get that pitcher?"

"In Portland."

"Not that one. With the cheaters."

I closed my eyes. I felt there should be something in that little exchange for me to think about.

"Who you workin' for?"

I didn't say anything.

"See, Sharpy. Cholly here is a fanatic. He probably goes to Beat-me shows for his fun. Who you workin' for?" The voice took on a hard edge, and I heard a sudden intake of breath.

Red kicked me in the face. It was a poor kick. It glanced off my jaw with a loud crack and seared and burned the side of my face. But it left me hearing the quiet noises in the room and feeling the warm blood staggering across my lips and down my chin.

"Christ, Jake. You tryin' to kill 'im? The boss wants to talk to the guy."

"Won't do no good." The hollow voice was taut now. The breath was coming in short gasps. "The guy's a fanatic. You can't do nuthin' with fanatics."

Fat fingers reached into my hair and lifted my head and let it drop again. "Put 'im on the bed and tie 'im up."

"What with?"

"Hell, ain't there no rope?"

"Get Gracie up. Her stuff'll keep him quieter and safer. Guys get out of ropes." It was a voice I hadn't heard before, a steady sneer. It would be the man with the eyebrows.

"Yeah. Yeah. Go get her. Tell her the gee's big, and thinks he's tough. Tell her we wanta keep him outa mischief for a long time."

HANDS went under me. Just two hands, that lifted me and carried me and put me on the bed, almost gently. A hollow voice spoke quietly over me: "Yeah. He's pretty tough at that. But he'll loosen. I never saw one that didn't."

It grew quiet in the room. Somewhere near, a cold engine was being kicked into life. A peal of high drunken

female laughter sounded far off yet close by. More cars stuttered suddenly and distantly out of the silence and then droned into it again.

The door clicked open and there were sounds of movement again.

"Here he is, baby. Pretty, huh?"

A husky sleep-filled voice with a querulous twang in it said: "Is he out?"

"Yeah. Like a string of Christmas lights."

"I can't give him all this, then. It might kill him." It was an irritable uneven voice. It would go with a bony, ugly face. "I'll give'm a little over half. It'll keep'm out at least five hours. Prob'ly a week."

"Hey. Don't do that." It was Red. He sounded concerned. "He's gotta talk to somebuddy tomorra. I mean today."

The twangy voice said, "Roll up his sleeve. Don't worry about wakin' him up. I got something for that too."

Hard sharp fingers pressed into my arm. There was a jabbing clumsy pain and then a duller one.

Someone sneered: "How soon does it work?"

"If he was wide awake and full of pearls, anywhere from thirty seconds to two minutes."

"Fine. We can go get some breakfast."

"Sharpy stays here."

"Nuts. I'm gettin' a drink and some hot food."

"Okay. You can have a half hour. Here, take this roscoe."

The needle left my arm and the dull pain stayed there. The twangy voice said: "If he should start to turn blue call me."

"Hear that, Sharpy? We can't leave this here gee. Get back in ten minutes."

There was more of the quiet feeling of movement and the sound of a door closing. I ground my teeth and counted to ten. I opened my eyes. The light was still on. The room was quiet and empty.

I pulled myself up from the bed. It was easy. I was beginning to feel fine. I walked fast to a window at the far side of the room. There was an ancient dresser next to it, black and glossy. I made a lot of noise getting the window open fast. I didn't seem to care about the noise. I looked down. Twenty feet at least. Gravel underneath. It was gray, the color of the gray dawn. I ran back to the bed. My head and my face felt fine. I wanted Red to come back. I could take him easy. I ripped back the quilt and pulled the sheets off and tied two ends together tight with hands that didn't seem to belong to me. I floated back to the window and tied one end of the sheets to a leg of the heavy dresser and tossed the two lengths out the window. I pulled a handkerchief out of my pocket and threw it out. Someone in the room was giggling, a wet untidy giggle. I gave the dresser a pull toward the window. It moved about six inches and stopped. I started back to the bed. My feet had become strangers. I fell on my face.

I wanted to talk to somebody. Somebody nice, like Red. I wanted to tell Red about Ralph Johnston and about Gloria Gay. I crawled on my elbows and knees. My head hit the edge of the bed. I thought that was funny. I ducked down, laughing, and crawled under the bed and stretched out lengthwise. I drooled and licked some blood from my lips. I slipped down into a soft velvet darkness that folded over me and hid me from the world.

CHAPTER XVII

HEAT lay over me like a thick web. I grunted and reached for the covers to throw them off. There weren't

any. I started up, and my head moved eight inches and hit a steel brace in lint-filled springs. I lay back and remembered, and grinned without opening my mouth. I giggled and decided to yell "Hi yo, Silver!" Just to see what would happen. Then I moved my head to look out across the floor. It made my head hurt and I decided to keep quiet. Sunlight was hot and motionless on an ancient red-and-green patterned carpet, and lying on the carpet by the edge of the bed there were a pair of lace panties and some high-heeled shoes. I thought about that for awhile, then I heard a moan, and the springs creaked. Probably quietly, but where I was it sounded like an elephant walking through a greenhouse. I took another look at the panties. They didn't seem very large. I looked at my watch. It was nine o'clock. I rolled out from under the bed and stood up.

There was a woman lying on the bed, the covers pushed into a twisted pile at the foot. She wore two rings on her left hand, a nice-looking single rope of pearls, and nothing else. She was tanned all over as if she was used to lying around with nothing on. She was breathing heavily through her mouth and she looked like someone about to give birth to a nine-pound hangover. A tangle of blonde hair with the wet gold brightness of a new-peeled willow branch lay about her shoulders.

There was a long blue evening dress draped over a chair and a beaded bag lying on it. I walked over to it. My legs moved lightly, and I felt like twenty pounds of feathers. I opened the purse. There was a driver's license in it issued to Miss Irene Neher, with an address on Buckley in Brentwood. There were also three plastic blue chips with a complicated design on them. I dropped one of the chips in my pocket and put the license back and closed the purse.

My coat was lying on another chair near the window. The window was still open, but the knotted sheets were gone. I put on the coat and walked over to the door. It was bolted on the inside. I went over to the bed and untangled the thin cover and pulled it over the lovely brown body, then I went back and unlocked the door and stepped out. The hall was empty and dark. It was an old house with high ceilings and colorless wall paper and a broad circular stairway going down. There was a warm droning quiet in the place like the quiet of a summer meadow. I walked down the stairs into a circular hall with a high white door leading to the outside. On the right there was another opening, closed now by heavy sliding doors. I walked quietly toward the white door. I heard a noise and stopped. The sliding doors on my right opened, slowly. They were being opened by a bald man holding an oily gray cloth.

He said: "Good morning, sir," cheerfully, and then turned back to his work. He was polishing a large roulette wheel. It was an enormous room with more roulette wheels and other assorted equipment for separating money from people whose chief problem is finding new and more exciting ways of getting rid of money.

I said: "Good morning," and turned and went out the front door and down a wide paved walk to a drive. There was a man there trimming a hedge that ran along the drive down to a street about fifty yards away.

He looked at me and said: "Good morning," and went on with his work.

I said: "Good morning," and walked on down the drive to the road where there were two concrete pillars with a number hanging on one of them. I glanced at the number and then hit

off to the right at a brisk trot. I was beginning to feel normal again, and that made me want to get away from there and back to where there were people I didn't mind knowing.

IT WAS a canyon road with only private drives going off from it. It looked like Stone Canyon, but the houses seemed a little older and more solid than in the Bel-Air Brentwood district. I decided it was Cheviot Drive in Glenview. It was. I walked about a mile before I found a road going off up the hill to the left. There was a post there with the names of the two streets on it. I stopped and wrote the number of the house down on the envelope I had used at Cabrillo's. Then it suddenly occurred to me that the boys should have taken that envelope. I shrugged it off. There were a lot of things I had to think about. This one could wait.

I heard a car purring softly down the grade behind me. I stepped back and waited. It was a convertible with a chubby blond man at the wheel. I stepped out and flagged him and he pulled up and opened the door for me.

He said: "Jump in, neighbor," and smiled at me.

I got in and he looked at my face, and the smile sagged and became a bitter thing. He drove very fast into Glenview and pulled up at the first street in the business area.

"I stop here, neigh—Uh . . ."

I got out and thanked him and he drove off. He was half way to Los Angeles before he got out of second gear.

I looked in a sidewalk mirror and decided I didn't blame him. My left eye was set in a swollen socket of corpse-blue flesh. Half my upper lip was turned inside out and there was dried blood covering my right cheek. I went into a drug store and washed my face. Then I called a cab and went home.

When I walked into the lobby I was already feeling the warm water pouring across my shoulders and smelling the coffee building up its strength in the black and battered percolator. Mrs. Hechtlinger, the manager, was sitting in a soft chair by the desk, and I waved at her cheerfully.

She jumped up and said. "Oh yes, you're here to look at that room. I'm sorry, but the tenant hasn't gone out yet." She had stepped in front of me and was looking at me blankly and moving the right side of her mouth like someone with a tick. I knew Mrs. Hechtlinger didn't have a tick.

"You told me I could look at the room at nine o'clock," I said, hurt. "It's almost ten." I glanced to my left. There were two men sitting on the couch against the lobby wall. One of them was getting up.

"Well," I said, and turned back toward the door, "there are other rooms."

"Hey, wait a minute, you."

He was tall, young, and lean with a prairie stride and a steely glint in his eye.

"Yes?"

"What's your name?"

"Why?"

"Other rooms!" he said. "What other rooms?" He spread his hands in a burlesque gesture. He looked at Mrs. Hechtlinger. "Are you willing to swear this guy isn't the man we're after?"

She looked at him and then at me to find out what to say.

I smiled at her and said: "Never mind." Then I looked at the tall man. "My name's Bailey."

"Lieutenant Quint wants to talk to you." The other man stood up and came over. He was about five feet nine, as short as cops come in Los Angeles.

"Any charges?"

"No. We'd just like you to come down for a little chat."

"To the yes-room, huh?"

The tall man turned and looked at his companion. A grin played on his face as fleeting as a humming bird's shadow. "Coming?" he said to me.

Then suddenly I saw it for the fine opportunity it was and almost laughed. "Sure," I said. "Let's go."

THE "yes-room" is on the Temple Street floor of the City Hall. They took me in and sat me down in a straight-backed battered chair by an old walnut table. The table had an empty wire waste basket on it. There were four walls with an orange-varnish sheen and no windows. There were no low-slung bright lights, just the table, four or five solid armless chairs, and a single light burning in an inverted bowl close to the ceiling.

The short man stayed with me. He leaned a chair back against the wall near the door and sat in it and looked at me vacantly. After fifteen minutes I began to want to know what he'd do if I got up and tried to walk out. But I didn't try to find out. I wanted to stay right there, the longer the better. More time passed and I began to get worried. I thought back over everything I'd done during and after the time I found Buster Buffin's body. I began to think of the places where I'd left prints: on the floor when I leaned down looking at the pictures. No. That was on a rug. They couldn't get them off that rug. On the door at the head of the stairs! No. No, I wiped those off. A drop of sweat fell on my hand lying on the table in front of me. I wiped my forehead and then I laughed. That's what I was supposed to do: get worried, sweat.

I stopped sweating and started to think about Red and the house on Cheviot Drive. The short man pushed forward with the back of his head against the wall and his chair came down with a sharp sound that echoed and thundered in the empty room. He got up and went out the door.

I went on thinking about Red. His boys had had their finger on me from the day I got back from Portland. Before I saw Buffin. Before I went hunting for Gloria Gay.

I counted on one hand the people who knew then, or could have guessed, who I was looking for: Johnston, Mrs. Johnston, Keller, the man on the telephone. Then I remembered where I had found the picture, and added another, the short man, Keller's boy with the bulge. If Red had been hired by either Johnston or his wife it was too subtle for me, and Keller's boy was just a hired hand. I could think about him along with Keller. And Johnston's gentle blackmailer was still as meaningless to me as on the day I first heard about him.

The door opened and another cop came in. He was in uniform. He turned the chair next to the door around and straddled it, facing me and resting his heavy arms on the back. He watched me with his lips compressed, his neck stiff, and a set, glassy look in his eyes. The eyes were set close to a long nose. He didn't look quite bright.

I went back to my fingers. I had two of them sticking out in the air. Who were they? Oh yes, Keller and the man on the phone. Between the two Keller won hands down. Red had wanted to know who I was working for. The man on the phone knew Johnston, could make a good guess who I was working for. And Red knew without thinking about it which one I meant when I had said I got the picture in Portland. . . .

It spelled Keller, and yet Keller didn't make sense. Peg Bleeker had left Portland six years ago. Keller knew

who she left with and where she went. I questioned fifty people about Gloria Gay, and all of them said that no one else had ever asked about her before. Why should Keller have to find her through me? Why would he wait six years?

The blank uneasy feeling began to crawl over me again and I decided to stop thinking about it. I would think about Irene Neher's long brown legs and her hard round breasts instead. There was no confusion there, the pattern was clear, the vectors straight and true.

"Nice day today, isn't it?" The words echoed hollowly in the room like a voice in a radio nightmare. He was smiling at me with his mouth, the eyes still glassy, still close to his nose.

I didn't say anything.

He compressed his lips, blinked, and settled his eyes on me again.

After about five minutes of that I said, "I confess . . ." and stopped. His mouth came open and he started to get up slowly. I went on: "Yes, I confess I really don't know what kind of a day it is."

He settled back, blinked a couple of times and went right on looking at me. I looked back at him then and we sat that way for awhile, staring at each other like a couple of bored game cocks. He blinked again after several minutes of that, and his eyes began to water. He licked his lips. He blinked some more, and a tear dropped down onto his cheek. He got up and went out. He knocked the chair over on his way.

I WAS alone for another twenty minutes before the door opened and four of them came in, the two plain-clothes men who brought me down and two men in uniform I hadn't seen before. They found chairs and started having a little conversation about baseball, the fights, what Captain Bowling said at the rape trial, as if they had just happened to wander into an empty room.

Then the door opened suddenly and Quint walked in and came over to the table and leaned on it and shoved his big red face at me.

He said: "All right, Bai——" and then his mouth closed slowly and he came around and looked at me. He touched the caked blood on my head.

"Who did it?" he said. His voice was small, choked, and chilled.

The tall man stood up. The glint was all gone from his eyes. They looked like a couple of butter balls.

"He was like that, Lieutenant."

Quint rounded the table and stalked back to the door. His face was pale and stiff. "And you brought him in like that. Devlin you're . . ."

I was grinning a broad and loutish grin.

Devlin said: "But you told me to . . ."

"Get him out of here. And then come in and see me." Quint walked out. He had got through the scene without frowning, without raising his voice. But I noticed his hair was gray around his ears. Maybe it was that way earlier.

I got up. The four of them stayed right where they were, looking at me. I opened the door and went out and shut it behind me. I waited a minute, then I opened it again. Devlin was staring at the short man in plain clothes, who was cleaning his finger nails with a large knife. I closed the door again and walked away, down the broad marble stairs and out onto Main Street.

CHAPTER XVIII

I WALKED four blocks to a clinic where there was a doctor I knew. He looked me over, cleaned me up a bit, and told me to go home and go to bed, I

might have a slight concussion. I asked him to give me a report in duplicate describing my various contusions and complaints.

He gave it to me with the date and the exact time on it without asking any questions, and I went by the post office and dropped a copy of it to Quint, with a note stating that my landlady, Mrs. E. Hechtlinger, saw me arrested, and noticed nothing unusual about my condition at that time. That would get Quint off my neck for a while; but not for long.

I took a street car on Broadway and went up a where my car was. It was parked in a forty-five minute zone. It didn't have a ticket on it. I drove it into the parking lot, and then went over to the little lunchroom in the Hart Building where I had seen Mrs. Johnston watching the entrance of the Pacific building. A long, long time ago.

The place was packed with girls with ink on their fingers and haunted eyes on the clock over the door. I sat down and ordered hash and eggs. The girls ate hurriedly, and when they were through they sat back and smoked, and looked as relaxed as the pictures in the *Weight Lifter's Journal*.

In a half-hour the place was empty. I was smoking my pipe and drinking the last of my second cup of coffee, and the manager was behind the counter poking and smelling at things with an expression on his face that said the place would never get through another lunch hour.

I said: "Have you got a minute?"

He looked up at me and said: "Huh?"

"I'd like to ask you a question if you've got a minute."

"Shoot. Shoot." He went on poking and smelling.

"Remember a woman sitting at your window booth Monday before last? She probably sat there quite awhile, until just before the noon rush, maybe longer."

He came over and leaned on the counter and looked at me. A couple of Mexican boys slouched out of the kitchen and started stacking up dishes and making a lot of noise at it.

"Who might you be?"

"I'm a detective. Shall I get out my buzzer?"

"Naw. It's all right, I just wanted to know. Sure. I remember her."

"I'm not questioning your memory," I said, "but how do you happen to recall her? I just want to be sure."

"Sure. Sure. Kinda plump. Glasses. She came in eight, nine o'clock and had something, toast maybe. At 'leven o'clock I tell the girl to go shake her, and the girl says she gave her a buck tip an' she don' wanta shake her. So I go out an' explain the noon rush is comin'. She gives me a buck and says she'll order some lunch soon. So I left her be."

"Then," I said, "about eleven-thirty someone came in and sat down with her."

He laughed, and showed a line of uneven, yellowed teeth. "But she wasn't expectin' him."

"Ha," I said meaninglessly.

"Tried to act like she didn't know the guy. Then they got to talkin', an' pretty soon they get up and go out together. Without even orderin' no lunch."

"Was he a big man?"

"Hell! A pee wee."

"Pale skin."

He had to think about that. "No-o. Dark complected, or tanned maybe."

That was that. It wasn't one of Red's boys who followed me from Buffin's that first day. It was Buster himself. It didn't tell me much, except who killed Buster Buffin.

I DON'T remember whether I thanked him for his help or not. If I didn't, it only strengthened his conviction that I was a cop. But pretty soon I found myself in the phone booth in the lobby of the Pacific Building. I was dialing the number of Johnston and Forbes. I asked for Johnston and gave the girl my name.

"Just a moment, please."

There was a long silence, then: "Hello, Bailey."

"Can we talk on this line?"

"Certainly. What's up?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I've got to break this thing. I want to talk to you about it first."

"Why!? I mean, why do you have to break it?"

"Your wife killed a man—Buffin."

Silence.

Then: "You can't know that, Bailey. What right have you got to——"

"That's a long story to get over a phone."

"If you've got more than a bad guess, I want to hear it—now."

"Okay. That first day I saw Buffin he started off talking peanuts. For fifty bucks he gave me the only tangible lead I've had. Then a few days later he calls me up and throws out a lot of vague remarks that add up to his having something he thinks I'll pay for in three or four digits. I figured the same way you're probably figuring now, that he was going to tell me where I could find her. But—and this is probably the key to this whole problem—he laughed that off. He said he didn't know where she was."

"Did you believe it?"

"He implied that what he had didn't have anything to do with finding her—if that makes sense."

"It doesn't."

"I think it does. But don't ask me why." I shifted the receiver to my other ear. "Just a few minutes ago I learned that Buffin saw your wife between the first time I saw him, and the time he called me."

"How do you know that?"

"He followed me after I left his place. If I'd know it was Buffin, I wouldn't have done it, but I'd been followed down to the beach. I thought I'd got clear, but when I saw the tail coming back I figured they'd had two of 'em on me and let it go at that."

"That was smart."

There wasn't anything for us down that alley. I went on: "On the way to my office I walked by a restaurant. Your wife was sitting in the window-booth with her eyes glued on the entrance of my building. Buster was probably right behind me. He saw her too, and went in to talk over old times."

"You're just guessing at that, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I guessed at it. But I checked it, too. The manager of the place remembers both of them."

There was a distant, airy silence, and Johnston said: "That doesn't really prove anything, but . . ." He paused, and lowered his voice. "She's gone! I was supposed to drive over and take her to lunch today; it's the help's day off. I called her at ten to tell her I'd be a little late and she wasn't there. Then I drove over at noon and her car was gone. And . . . I'm not sure, but I think two of her bags are missing, and some of her clothes."

"That does it," I said.

"God, Bailey, wait! At least give her time—if she did do it—to get away."

"She can't get away."

"Listen to me!" There was a sudden trembling urgency in Johnston's voice that held me, and I listened. "We both owe her more than we can ever make up to her now. I, because I was damned fool enough to think I could help her in

spite of her not asking me to. You, because you handled this case like a two-bit skip-tracer. Give her twenty-four hours, Bailey. You owe me a good deal more than that."

"Sure," I said softly, "I made mistakes on this assignment; it was that kind of a set-up. But it's out of our hands now. Sooner or later the law, or her shady past, will catch up with her. She's running again. She was running when she married you, Johnston. Something scared her and she left her hiding place on Sorority Row and took up a new one with you. Now she's running again. The trouble is . . . while she runs she kills. I'm calling Homicide. I'm sorry."

There was another silence, and then there was a plaintive, gentle click, and I suddenly felt very much alone. I put the receiver back on its hook and stepped out and paced around the lobby for awhile, thinking about nothing at all. Then I went upstairs. I used the old you-ought-to-see-the-other-guy gag when Hazel saw my face.

I called Quint at the City Hall. He was at Georgia Street, and the operator got him for me over there.

I said: "This is your latest Brutality Victim, Quint. Where does the line form for complaints?"

"I wouldn't want to tell you. Not over the phone."

"Don't thank me—I'm not in the mood for it—but I've found your killer for you."

"Who?" He wasn't interested. He was just playing straight man.

"Her name is Mrs. Ralph Johnston. Lives at 1104 Duarte Road, but I think she's skipped out."

Quint was interested now. "You found my killer for me. And you think she skipped. . . . You didn't give her all the damned time in the world, did you? Shamus, this is it. Your number's up. You'll be looking for a job as a bell hop next month—if you're not working hard to become a trustee."

"Take your foot off my neck. As far as I know she's only been gone a few hours, and in her own car."

He was settling down again. "You got evidence? Or are you just getting rid of one of your women?"

"Nope. No evidence. Just a hunch. I could be wrong."

"Naw. None of that. You wrong!"

I hung up and stared at the phone for awhile, then I got an envelope out of the drawer and dropped a business card into it along with the blue chip with the elaborate design. I sealed the envelope and put it in my pocket and went out the door.

CHAPTER XIX

THE address on Buckley was a white colonial house with two high columns on either side of the front door holding up a porch roof about the size of a bridge table.

An old woman with a face like clabbered milk opened the door and said "Yes?" at me in a sour voice. She was dressed in white, and she had a straw hat on her head with a string around it tied under her chin.

I tried to smile but my lip wouldn't let me. "Is Miss Neher in?"

"What's your business?"

I took the envelope out of my pocket. "Would you give this to her—and ask her if she can spare a couple of minutes of her time?"

She took the envelope, looked at it, looked back at me, and closed the door.

I waited. A couple of sleek cars drove by, rolling down the hill toward Sunset. From somewhere up the hill came the noise of a radio on full volume, and there was a heady scent of magnolia

(Continued on page 112)

They Played Too Rough

By LARRY HOLDEN

For a man who was no more than a meek little hardware merchant, George Grobe really ran a rugged race for mayor!

Before I could duck, he laid the flashlight alongside my chops

THE sweat came down his forehead like rain off the eaves, and it wasn't all humidity and fat. He had something inside that was scaring the pants off him, and his tongue tripped every time he tried to let it out. He had changed his mind a dozen times since he came into the office, and right now he looked as if he wished he were safe at home, locked in a nice dark closet. I had to squeeze him like grapes to get anything out of him.

"Okay," I said, setting my teeth, "so this guy came in and started to blackmail you."

"Oh, no, no," he interrupted hurriedly, "it wasn't exactly blackmail. Not exactly."

"Wonderful! So he didn't exactly blackmail you! How the hell do you go about a thing like that? I'd like to know because there are a couple guys I'd like not exactly to beat the heads off!"

He got red and stammered and fumbled, and finally said in a low voice, "My name is George Grobe."

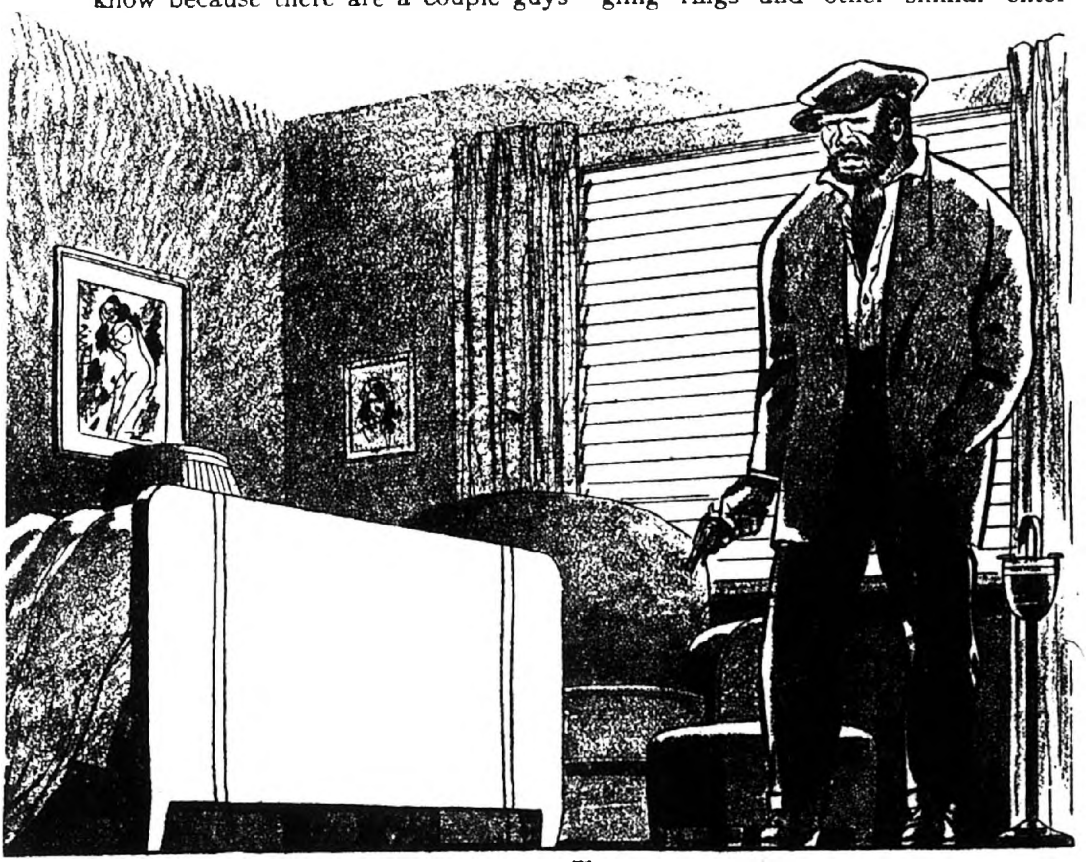
"Again? Okay, I'm convinced."

"And I'm the Citizens Group candidate for mayor of Gansville."

"Gansville!" I whistled. "That's the little burg down the coast they call Gangsville!"

That got me, because he wasn't my idea of the kind of rabbit that gets elected mayor of a tough, muscular town like Gangville.

It had a couple gambling ships anchored off the coast that were mounted with everything but anti-aircraft batteries. The city fathers were sitting in the laps of the guys who ran the numbers rackets, protection agencies, smuggling rings and other similar enter-



prises. And them being the kind of guys hospitality goes to the heads of, they showed their high spirits by letting off a salute of gunfire from time to time, and if someone happened to get knocked off by flying lead, as seemed to happen pretty regularly, who was there to say it was on purpose?

It would take a lot of sinewy persuasion to get me to run for anything except cover in Gangville.

I leaned forward and looked pityingly at the squirming little man across the desk from me.

"Tell me," I asked, "what does it feel like to be the sacrificial goat?"

He jumped and turned white, and when I saw that look in his eyes, I was sorry I had made any cracks.

"I . . . I was talked into it," he said feebly. "It sounded fine at the meeting when everybody made speeches and said it was our patriotic duty to run the hoodlums out of town and clean up the town hall, and I felt mighty proud when I was selected. I didn't mind so much the threatening letters and telephone calls and the rocks they throw through the windows, but . . . but last Tuesday night they broke into my house and tried to kidnap my wife and she . . . she . . . shot a man."

"Maybe she should run for mayor," I grinned. "Why don't you just drop out?"

HE PAID no attention to me. "Then on top of it all, the police fined me for not having a license for the gun, and the opposition paper wrote a nasty editorial, saying I and not my wife had shot this Joey Smeck, who had the nerve to claim he was innocently passing the house when he was shot. Drop out?" he said, looking surprised, as if it had just penetrated, "Why, I couldn't do that. I'm the leading hardware merchant in town, and it would ruin my business. Those people have put their trust in me. And my wife would be pretty mad, too. She's got her mind set on being Mrs. Mayor. And in the third place," he finished indignantly, "I don't want to. I'm scared, but I'm mad, too!"

That's the kind of stubborn guts that gives me the prickles.

"Brother," I said, "don't say another word. I think you're nuts, but I admire you. Okay? But now, for the love of God, let's get back to the guy who didn't blackmail you. What do you say let's go."

"Oh, him!" He looked surprised again. "Well, all he did was come in and say someone had offered him a sum of money to get information about me. He said that was his business, getting information about people for other people, and he wanted to know how much I would give him not to get this information."

"You would have been nuts to go for a song like that," I said. "He would have peddled it anyway."

He had the damnedest way of ignoring you. "I got a little excited," he rambled on, "and threatened them with a gun. That was the same gun my wife used, but I had taken a license out for it," he said earnestly. "I wanted to keep them until I could get Hugh McDowell—he's president of the Citizens Group—over and talk to them. But they just gave me a look and walked out."

"Them?" I said. "So he brought a friend!"

"Of course. There were two of them," he said, as if astonished I hadn't known that all along. "This old man and the girl. She did all the talking. He didn't understand English and she interpreted."

"A sort of Hearing Ear dog, eh?"

"What? What? Oh, yes." He gave

me a suspicious look. "Well, anyway, I want you to find out what information, if any, he has. I've lived a very upright life, and I don't like this kind of thing." He gave me another suspicious look. "You understand?"

I stood up. "See this neck?" I tapped it. "It's still the original shape because I've kept it unstuck-out. I have a nice little business here, and I'm going to stay alive and enjoy it. I'm not going to play with Gangville politics. The answer, brother, is no!"

He stood up in a fumbling, shambling kind of way and muttered, "I don't know as I blame you."

"But," I stuck out my hand, "I want to shake with you. And sometime I'd like to meet your wife—the one that shot Joey Smeck."

"But there is only one. . . . Oh. A joke." He hadn't practiced that grin much. "Well, goodbye."

He gave my hand a quick little shake and walked out.

I looked at the door and shook my head. I felt sorry for the guy. I walked to the window and watched for him to come out on the sidewalk, because the chances were this was the last time I'd see him alive. I heard the door open behind me and I thought he'd come back.

"No, brother," I said. "No!"

"What 'ave that man ask you to do?" demanded a furry feminine voice.

I TURNED and there she was, standing at the desk with this big swarthy boogus behind her. He looked like the under side of night life in Bucharest. He had a very wide, greasy face and out of the middle of it stuck this nose that was about as big and the same shape as a shark hook. But she was a different story! She was almost as dark, but her features were perfect, and she had a full red mouth that promised another kind of Bucharest night life. She was something!

"What 'ave that man ask you to do?" she repeated urgently.

"He wanted me to paint his flagpole," I said.

She frowned and looked at Eagle Beak, who took a Luger from his pocket and let it dangle at his side. She stared at me as if she were trying to look right through to the back of my neck.

"Believe me," she said, "I am not fonny. What 'ave that man ask you to do?"

I shrugged. "He wanted me to pluck a duck. Maybe you like that better."

She stamped her foot and looked at Eagle Beak again. "Shoot him," she said.

He raised the Luger and my stomach went up with it. His forehead creased into a frown. He raised his left hand and scratched his ear.

"I theenk," he said slowly, "we 'ave better go talk with your 'usband first."

She drew herself up and her eyes flashed. "Shoot him! Now!" she ordered imperiously.

He shook his head. "Your 'usband will be ill-tempered. I theenk maybe we shoot him later."

She screamed at him in a language that sounded like a string of firecrackers, then spit at his feet and turned and walked out. Eagle Beak showed his white teeth in a grin.

"She 'ave a bad temper," he said. "Now we go?"

That stubborn look must have come into my face, for he reached inside his coat and pulled out a sap as long as his arm.

"What the 'ell?" he said in a friendly voice. "Why 'ave a fuss?"

Sure, why?

But I walked toward the door. He came up behind and fanned me. He should have known better, but he

reached over my shoulder to slip the gun from under my arm, and as he did I grabbed his wrist and slid my other hand under his armpit and heaved. He hit the wall with a crash that could have been heard in the Plasterers Union. I kicked the gun out of his hand and fell on him with both knees. His hands clawed strongly at my throat. All I wanted to do was fix his nose so he'd have to breathe out of his mouth for the next few months.

Then something got me on the back of the neck and I went roaring into that black tunnel.

WHEN I came around again, I was lying on the floor. She was sitting on the edge of the desk, looking sullen. She had the Luger, but Eagle Beak had clamped his hand over it and was lecturing her angrily. She gave me a venomous look, but surrendered the gun. He turned and gave me a grin and a wink.

"Why 'ave a fuss?" he repeated.

I sat up and tried to shake the anchors off the back of my neck. "Go to hell," I said thickly.

"Now," said Eagle Beak, "we go?"

This time I didn't argue. They took me downstairs and bundled me into a paintless sedan so old it looked as tall as the Empire State Building. She drove and he sat in the back with his Luger nestled in my navel. She muttered and fizzled under her breath all the way.

. . . We stopped in back of an old shack at the edge of the city. She jumped out of the car and scrambled into the house. Eagle Beak and I followed more slowly. It was dark. The shades were drawn and I kept tripping over objects like boxes I couldn't see. We wound up in a big, empty-looking room, lighted by a five-branch brass candelabra that stood on a small table beside a wing chair. In the chair sat the oldest and greasiest guy I have ever seen. His chins came down like a bib.

She was standing in front of him with her hands on her hips and rattling away in that firecracker language. When we came in, she pointed an accusing finger at Eagle Beak, then at me, then bent forward and hissed into the old man's face. His eyes half opened and his fat fingers began playing with a string of jet beads that rested in what might be loosely called his lap. He purred something at her. She screeched and raised her clawed hands and shook them at the ceiling. She turned and showed her teeth at me, then walked over and leaned against the wall and watched us with her head lowered.

The old man purred something again. Eagle Beak touched me on the shoulder.

"Ee theenk you are American gangster and are hired to kill him becuzz of the mistake ee make weeth George Grobe," he said.

"I'm a detective," I growled.

"Police?" he asked quickly.

"No."

He grinned and gobbled at grandpa, who nodded slowly several times and grunted an answer.

"Ee say," said Eagle Beak, "ee apologize to you for thees inconvenience."

The girl growled and spat on the floor in front of her.

"Ee say," Eagle Beak went on calmly, "George Grobe 'ave not to worry about the information as ee is honest and upright man, only stupid."

I laughed. "That's right out of the book!" I said. "Who do you think you are—Roumanian angels of mercy? What are you doing, holding out for a bigger shakedown later? Hell!"

Eagle Beak shrugged and translated. The old man mumbled a short answer and closed his eyes.

"Ee say ee is tired and he is going to sleep," said Eagle Beak. "Ee is old. You can see how old ee is. Now we go?"

"Wait!" The girl pushed herself away from the wall and marched up to me. She looked at me thoughtfully, then raised herself on her toes and kissed me on the mouth, holding the back of my head with her hand. She held it so long that I began to feel as if I were gliding in concentric circles into a pit of darkness, soft and enveloping. Then, just as suddenly, she pulled herself away and stared at me with a tight little smile.

"That, you will never forget," she said in a husky voice, "but you will always remember it is never for you!"

She slapped me twice across the face, hard, and turned and walked out of the room, her heels clicking sharply on the bare floor.

I STUMBLED out of the house after Eagle Beak and climbed into the car. He sat at the wheel and looked at me, scratching his ear.

"She is right," he said, "you never will forget. I theenk she love the old man very much. Well," he wrinkled his nose, "now we go?"

"Drop me at the 7-11 Club," I muttered. "Business."

When we stopped in front of the club, I got out and walked around to his side of the car.

"Take a look at this," I said.

When he stuck his head out the window, I let him have it. He flopped back on the seat like a rubber glove. I felt sorry right away, but it got something out of my system.

I walked into the club. The bar was open—whoever closes a bar, anyway?—and I ordered a scotch and said to the barkeep:

"Gus up yet?"

"He's always up," he grumbled sleepily. "He never sleeps, and he thinks other people—"

"Hi, Gus," I said.

The barkeep jumped and looked wildly around. There was no Gus. He looked sheepish, then sore. He wouldn't talk to me, which was of course my loss. I tossed off my drink and walked back to the grimy little room Gus sometimes called his office. He was sitting there filing his nails. He was like a cat. He was always doing something to himself—combing his hair, fondling his black moustache or flipping invisible specks off his suit. He looked like the leading man in a dirty movie, but he was all right.

"Hello, Keogh, my friend," he said loudly. "Have a drink. The best. Gin." He laughed. "What's news?"

I straddled a chair. "I want you to tell me a story."

"Sure. One day there was a smart detective and somebody cut his ears off."

"A friend of mine is running for mayor of Gangville."

"Gangville!" He gave me a sharp look. "Remember what I said about the ears."

"Hell, that's off my beat and you know it. I'm just worried about my friend."

HE WENT back to filing his nails. You could practically see him turn it over in his mind, like a flapjack. "We-ll," he said slowly, "maybe if you kind of whispered in your friend's ear the fix is in and the boys are out, maybe he'd kind of get some sleep nights, if he didn't fall under a trolley car or something."

"The old double X!" I said. "Now what the hell do you know about that?"

He snorted. "You could see it coming like an earthquake. What could

you expect? The town hall crowd was getting awful big pockets, Keogh, awful big pockets, and they was growing all the time. Hell, you don't mind a few ducats here and there now and then. It's an investment. But it was getting so bad the boys even hadda pay off the street cleaners, then they hadda pay off the street cleaner's broom." Gus shook his head. "Keogh, you know as well as me, that's no percentage."

"So they're going overboard!"

"From X to Z."

"Then the boys must have made a deal with this Citizen's Group crowd. That's the only way it figures."

Gus tilted his head to one side and looked at me. "You know," he said, "they never was pretty ears, anyway. Let me know when you're ready and I'll get you a pair from a St. Bernard."

I stood. "See you at the polls," I said.

"Tell your friend not to sleep too tight," he called after me, "them big pocket boys ain't happy."

"I'll tell him."

I went outside and looked around but couldn't find it. Gus had it moved every time he redecorated, and he redecorated every month to hide the bullet holes.

"Where's Gus keep the phone booth now?" I asked the barkeep.

But we still weren't speaking. He gave me a look and jerked his thumb grudgingly at the dark corner behind the juke box.

I got George Grobe and said, "This is Keogh. I got a line on that business we were talking about if it's still worth money to me."

He said, "Oh," then, "Just a minute." Then came that mumble-jumble you get in a three-handed phone conversation. He came back again. "Could you come over to my home, Mr. Keogh?" he asked.

I didn't like the idea of exhibiting myself around Gangville, because some of the boys maybe had grudges from little things here and there, but I said okay and hung up. I had the choice of going back for my jalopy or taking the bus, which wasn't much of a choice, at that.

As I passed the bar, I said, "Why don't you try Snooker's Charm Drops? Did wonders for my uncle. Developed his bust in twenty-four hours."

He said moodily, "Wise guys I get."

We were speaking again!

THE bus let me off in the middle of Gangville. What a town. I saw Legs Moran walking the open streets and Ruby Joe Cartucci buying soap chips at the corner grocery. The cops stood around as if they were waiting for somebody they didn't expect to turn up. On a side street, with his coat half torn off, one of them was desperately battling two drunken plugs he should have been able to take with his toes. Nobody seemed to care.

I got to Grobe's house as quickly as I could. He was waiting there with a big, outdoorsy kind of guy he introduced as Hugh McDowell, president, who shook hands like wrestling.

"Well, Mr. Keogh," said this McDowell in a voice he maybe used for moose calling. "What's your news? We've been on tenterhooks."

"We'll talk money first," I said, "then unhook you."

He gave a big, hearty laugh and clapped me on the shoulder. Grobe smiled faintly.

"Don't worry about money," McDowell boomed. "We'll be more than generous. Fight fire with fire."

I grunted. "The last time I heard talk of firing, there wasn't any money in it."

He guffawed more than it was worth and led us into the living room as if it were his instead of Grobe's. A motherly kind of blonde was crocheting in a chair by the fireplace. Grobe introduced her as his wife, and she gave me a smile that was like home fries with bacon and eggs on a Sunday morning. I told her I was pleased to meet her, and meant it.

"No more kidnapers?" I said.

She smiled again and flipped a gun out of her crocheting bag in a way that showed she knew more than something about handling it.

"George doesn't like me to carry it, but it's safer, isn't it, Hugh?" she asked sweetly.

"Of course, of course," he said hastily, as if he disapproved. "Suppose we get down to business, Keogh."

"I hope you like it," I said. "But it's hot enough to be worth five C's—on the line."

They gaped at me. Maybe they thought they were getting it for forty-nine cents. McDowell and Grobe went into a hurried huddle over by the window. Mrs. Grobe didn't look as if she liked being left out of it.

"Mr. Keogh," she said, "whatever the men decide, I will guarantee the five hundred dollars if your information has an important bearing on my husband's election. I have over seven hundred in the bank, and I don't think this is a time to economize."

Grobe turned red and said, "Alice!"

"Now, now," said McDowell smoothly. "It won't be necessary, Mrs. Grobe, I'm not a believer in false economy. Fight fire with fire. Now what have you got, Keogh?"

"We'll take the Roumanians first," I said. "They said Grobe is clean, but they've got something on somebody and they're saving it. I can maybe find out what it is, but it'll cost money because I'll have to have some help."

McDowell waved his hand carelessly. "If they don't have anything on George, we're not worried."

"How could they have anything on George?" said Mrs. Grobe reproachfully.

"Check," I said. "Now for part two. The boys have put the double X on the town hall gang, and you," I jabbed my finger at Grobe, "are in. But there's a catch to it. Somebody in your crowd is making a deal with the gorillas, so you'd better call the roll and pick out the termites."

GROBE jumped to his feet, his face flaming. "I can't believe that!" he cried.

McDowell's jaw fell. "Our own crowd?" he stammered. "The Citizens Group? Our own club?"

Mrs. Grobe looked horrified. "Not *those* nice people!" she gasped.

McDowell mopped his face with his handkerchief. "Some of them might," he said in a shaken voice. "Some people will do anything for money, Alice, even betray their friends." He sat down in a chair as if pushed. "This is a great shock, Keogh, but," he rallied, "forewarned is forearmed."

"Yeah," I said, "fight fire with fire." I stood. "Now if you want me to go after those Roumanians. . . ."

McDowell was writing out a check. "Your services come a little high," he said with a wry smile. "We'll try it our own way first, then if we can't handle it we can always call you in. This is my personal check," he said, handing it to me if that upped it fifty percent.

Grobe slumped in his chair like a piece of old celery. His wife put her hand on his cheek, then bent over and kissed his forehead.

"Don't worry, George," she said softly. "You don't have anything to reproach yourself with."

Grobe patted her hand and grinned at me. "We're practically on our honeymoon, Mr. Keogh. I met her at Hugh's birthday party last February and we were married three weeks later." He jumped up. "I suppose you're anxious to get back. I'll drive you to the city."

"Uh-uh, George," said McDowell, "you're speaking at the Union Club dinner and you can't tire yourself out."

"That's okay," I said. "The bus is just as handy anyway."

They were in another huddle before I was down the front steps.

I GOT the bus almost immediately, which was a relief. I looked in at the office for mail, then went to the apartment and threw together a dinner of french fries and sea bass with a pint of cold slaw I picked up at the delicatessen. Afterward, I went to bed and read until my eyes wouldn't stay open. It had been a busy day.

It was dark when I awakened. The oblong of window was faintly luminescent from the street lights, and bulked against it were these head and shoulders. I blinked into a sudden flashlight.

"Okay, bud," said a hoarse voice, "no noise. Just get up and put your clothes on."

"Hell," grumbled another voice, "now we get fancy. Now they gotta have their pants on before we give it to them. Go ahead and give it to the old grunt in bed where he's comfortable."

"Shuddup!"

I sat up slowly. "You boys are fast," I said. "You must have taken the next train."

"Get dressed." He went over and pulled down the shades. "You can turn the light on."

I switched on the light on the night table. There was a young guy by the window with his arm in a sling. He held a big flashlight. The other one was by the door, holding a short-barrelled .38. He was squat and hairy and had a big mouthful of black teeth.

The guy with the sling rang a bell in my head and I exclaimed, "Joey Smeck!"

The squat one grinned. "See, Joey," he said, "you're a success. The grunt knows you."

"Shuddup." then to me, "Get dressed." He was one of those who could talk without moving his mouth.

"Me," complained the squat one, "I remember when a tub of cement was enough clothes. Now they gotta have pants."

The young one looked hard at him and said in an even voice, "How would you like this flashlight down your goddam throat?" then to me, "Come on, Nosey, crawl into your drawers."

I moved very slowly. "He's a regular bowl of wheaties," I said to the squat one, "A real bundle of energy."

"Him!" he laughed delightedly, "Him! Cream of mush. Mashed potatoes."

The young one walked over and without a word dragged the rough end of the flashlight down my face. I felt the blood dribble off my eyebrows. He brought it up and caught me under the chin. I kicked for his groin, but he slid easily aside and cracked me across the knee. While I was still groggy he slapped me across the eyes.

"Take him the way he is," he said.

The squat one waddled over and grabbed my arm and jerked me to my feet. "No pants," he said. "Nobody gets the old bumpus-dumpus these days without his pants."

THEY dragged me down the stairs and out across the sidewalk toward a car that stood at the curb with its motor humming. The only other car in sight was an old heap skating down the

middle of the road as hard as it could go. It sounded like a tank running over an acre of plate glass. As it reached us, it swooped suddenly for the curb, breaks screaming, and crashed into the other car.

Out jumped my Roumanian sweetheart, wild-eyed and panting, her black hair tumbled, and with not a stitch on except a camels hair top coat she hadn't bothered to button. She shrieked something in that language and let go with the Luger she had in her hand. Joey Smeck grunted and stumbled foreward. The squat one let go of me and grabbed Joey and dragged him into the car. I rolled into the gutter. The car roared off and she stood there, with her back to me, pumping bullets after it. I grabbed her and pulled down her arm.

"Hold it," I growled. "You'll have every cop in town on your neck."

When she saw who it was, she went mad. She must have thought I was in the other car. She snarled and tried to get the muzzle of the gun into my belly, but I held it down—and believe it, it wasn't easy for several reasons, not the way she was dressed and me in nothing but pajamas. I may have been scrabbling for my life, but she had me going all the same. I finally quieted her down to where she was only spitting.

"Now," I croaked, "tell me what the hell this is all about."

"What the 'ell! What the 'ell!" she snarled. "Oh, notheeng—except you have kill my 'usband and Anton. Cut!" She stretched back her neck to demonstrate a cut throat.

"Nuts," I said, "I didn't kill your husband *or* Anton. Now for God's sake, quiet down."

"Now you 'ave to kill me," she shrieked. "Kill me!"

"Will you shut up about killing? Nobody wants to kill a nice girl like you, anyway."

I felt her go soft. "You theenk I am a nice girl, eh?" she purred.

"Hell, yes," I said thickly. "Hell, yes!"

I should have known what was coming. She jerked her hand loose and got me across the face with her nails. My cheek looked like peppermint candy. She triggered the gun at me, but it went click-click. She grabbed something from her coat pocket and made a cut at my head. I caught her wrist with the edge of my hand and the knife clattered to the sidewalk. She made a dash for the car. For all I knew she had another gun stashed away, so I dived for the doorway. But, instead, the car backed up with a roar and swooped down the street. I ran out to the curb and watched her swing into the road that led to the shoreline highway. I looked at the knife in my hand.

It was an ordinary kitchen paring knife, ground to an edge and on the handle it had stamped in black letters—George W. Grobe Hardware Company, Gansville.

DRESSED as I was, I galloped across the street to the lot where my car was parked and fought to get it started. It sprang out into the street. I was half way down the shore road with the accelerator to the floorboard before the motorcycle trooper could catch me.

I leaned out and yelled, "Police. Emergency. Follow me!"

He nodded and fell back a little.

In twenty minutes I roared down the middle of Gangville and spun into Grobe's street. Her old skyscraper sedan was parked in front of his house, half way up the lawn. I could hear the crackling of her voice as I ran up the porch step, the trooper right with me. We hit the front door just as the shooting broke out. We rolled into the hallway. I sprang for the living room.

She was down on her hands and knees, shaking her head slowly from side to side, and I could hear the blood hit the hardwood floor like water running from a faucet.

Mrs. Grobe was sprawled across the rug on her face, one arm doubled under her, a puddle of blood as big as a soup plate at her head.

McDowell was holding himself erect with his hand on a chairback, and as I watched, he pumped two bullets into Mrs. Grobe's back. He swung the gun around and tried to steady it on the girl, who had started to crawl blindly toward him. His face was screwed into a tight grimace of terrible concentration.

I snapped three fast ones at him, and his face seemed to come apart. He drew himself up very stiffly and fell straight foreward.

As we started through the doorway, Grobe staggered in from the dining room, holding himself up with his back against the wall. A shawl of blood spilled over his face from a gash in his forehead. He held a double-barrelled shotgun that wove to and fro in a widening arc.

"Don't move," he mumbled.

"Put it up," I said wearily. "It's all over."

He nodded twice, and the gun fell from his hands. He slid sideways down the wall and crumpled on the floor.

I jumped for the girl and held her in my arms. There was a terrific hole over her left breast, and she was losing blood fast. I tore off my pajama top and plugged her the best I could. I carried her to the sofa and laid her gently down. I buttoned her coat. The trooper was staring over my shoulder.

"The guy with the shotgun will live," he said, "but the other two are dead. For God's sake, what was it?"

"A double-cross with legs," I said in a tired voice. "That guy McDowell over there promoted Grobe, the other one, into running for mayor of this burg. He brought in that blonde dame, who married Grobe just to make sure he'd stay put. Then, when he was put, McDowell wanted to cut the dame out and he sent over a hood named Joey Smeck to snatch her, but she put a couple slugs in him and he ran. She must have been wise, because when I was here this afternoon she let McDowell know she was packing a rod.

"In the meanwhile, a trio of Roumanians—this girl's one of them—got something on the dame, who probably had a record, and they started to put the screws on Grobe. He scared them off.

"Then they found out about the McDowell set-up. McDowell was selling this Citizens Group gang out to the local gorillas, and after election he and this dame would collect plenty. The Roumanians wanted a slice of that, which would be bigger than anything they'd get from Grobe.

"I got a line on it and like a dope I came over here this afternoon and spilled it. When I got back to my apartment, who walks in but this same Joey Smeck. That added up to McDowell right away. It was too quick for anyone else to know I had my nose in, and he had used Smeck once before on the dame.

"In the meanwhile, someone was busy cutting two of the Roumanians' throats—with a paring knife stamped Grobe Hardware Company. And that added up to the dame. But she was too modest. She should have gotten all three of them, because this one came over and shot the hell out of them."

The trooper said "Whew!" and looked around at the carnage.

The girl stirred and opened her eyes.

"How do you feel, honey?" I said.

"I 'ave kill her?" she whispered. "She was the one . . ."

"She's dead."

"Good." She closed her eyes.

I heard the thunder of feet in the hall, but I didn't look up. I bent over the girl and said, "Just take it easy, honey. The doc'll be here and you'll be okay."

She suddenly raised herself in my arms and her eyes blazed again. "But I 'ave not kill you!" she cried shrilly. She tried to spit, but her head fell limply forward. She was dead.

A sloppy-looking lieutenant of police with egg down the front of his coat leaned over the back of the sofa and glared at us.

"What the hell's going on around here?" he roared.

I laid her down very gently. I got up and looked at him.

I spat.

THE END

DETECTIVE WITHOUT A HEART

WHEN Sherlock Holmes' methods fail and underworld information does not provide the answers, police authorities in many states turn to a harmless-looking gadget for the solution of their most puzzling crimes. It is the polygraph, popularly known as the lie detector machine. This super-detective functions by means of a rubber cuff, an apparatus fastened around the chest, and a needle that records blood pressure and breathing. It is credited with the solution of more than 650 cases in Michigan alone. Suspects walk brazenly into the test room, scoffing at the supposition that science has provided a means of distinguishing truth from falsehood—and defy the solemn detective in charge, to prove their guilt. Yet only a half hour later, when the test record is produced, the suspect wilts and confesses. His lie usually sticks out like a sore thumb.

The polygraph, invented by Prof. Leonard Keller of Northwestern University, operates on the theory that the lie is accompanied by physical reflexes that cannot be controlled. Falsehood is a conscious act accompanied by an emotional disturbance betrayed by a jump in pulse and blood pressure as the heart beat is quickened, and by shallow breathing. A sudden pyramid in the blood pressure graph and a series of short fidgety loops in the breathing record—and there's your lie, according to the silent evidence of the graph, the guilty usually "come clean" in their subsequent grilling, thereby saving the authorities the expense of trial.

Determination of guilt or innocence is preceded by a control test made with ten numbers printed individually on cards. The subject is asked to select one number of the ten, and to answer "No" to the question "Is this the number?" as the printed cards are displayed one at a time. The test provides a basis for comparisons, since on of the suspect's answers must be a lie.

Lulled into security by the simplicity of the control test, and confident that he will be able to deceive the machine, the subject is told he will be asked eight questions in the second operation. The first and second questions are designed to maintain his ease and usually consist of "Did you have breakfast this morning?" and "Did you smoke?" The third question is "Were you born in Michigan?" or something similar. Then without changing his voice or manner, the detective asks, "Did you kill John Doe?"

If the subject is guilty, the question is an emotional bombshell; his heart jumps violently, and he catches his breath. To make good the intended deception, he tries to regain his composure immediately, thereby betraying himself to a greater degree. If he is innocent, his calm "No" produces no marked change in the graph. Several more irrevelant questions follow, and then comes another bearing upon the crime. The average test contains three questions pertinent to the case.

The lie detector fills a valuable purpose by clearing persons who might be under suspicion for the remainder of their lives. It enables authorities pursuing the wrong leads to revamp their theory of the crime, and look for the truth elsewhere.

In 1942 the lie detector was directly responsible for the solution of a triple murder after authorities partially accepted the story of Mrs. Julia Kulanich that her husband, Peter, killed her two small children and then himself in a jealous rage. She said her husband shot at her as she ran out the back door of the home, and then turned the pistol upon the children and himself. But Mrs. Kulanich was unable to explain satisfactorily the cause of a fire that destroyed the house immediately after the shooting. She was held as an arson suspect.

Well-dressed, she came into the test room without an apparent care in the world. She joked with the detective as he adjusted the blood pressure cuff and pneumograph. His third question "Did you kill your husband?" produced such a violent reaction on the graph that he asked two more on the killing. They showed a similar reaction on the graph. When her lies were pointed out on the recording, Mrs. Kulanich confessed the triple slaying. Today she is serving a life sentence.

—Leslie Anderson

The man was buying a paper as Sam's heavy hand fell on one of his shoulders

SAM VARDEN turned around slowly before the clothing store's triple mirrors, surveying himself from all angles. From swingy snap-brim to the glistening black lancepoints of his shoes he was brand new. The blue-gray double breasted flattered the long lines of his body and the tie added just the right kicker of color. The clerk's face, perching on his shoulder in the mirror was approving. Sam grinned.

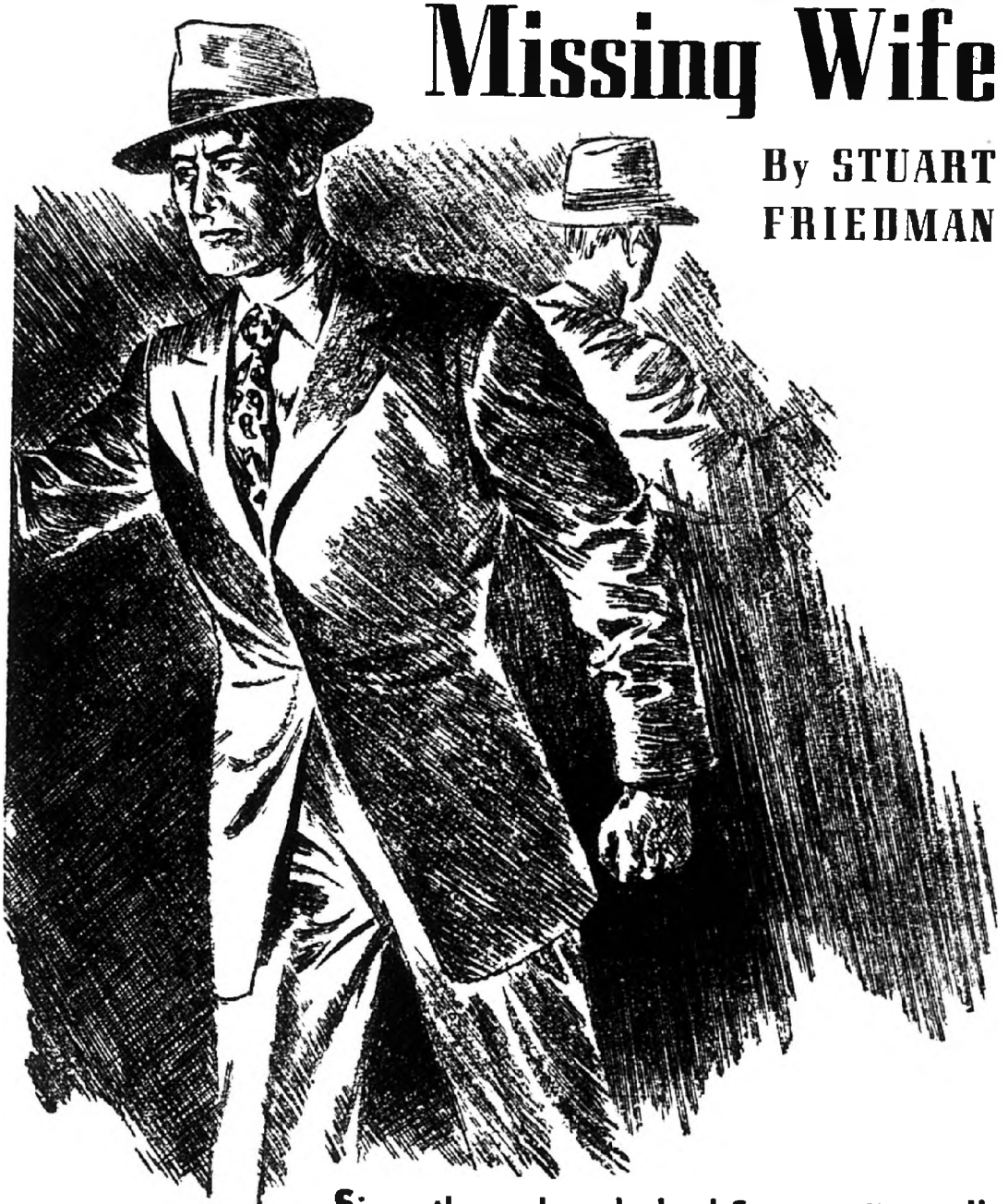
"This was my one and only post-war project," Sam told him. "To get into civvies." He placed his discharge pin tentatively on the lapel. He shook his head and pocketed the pin. He was suddenly dog-tired.

There had been another post-war plan. Doris. But then, she was probably married again. At any rate she hadn't been at Grand Central to meet him. He had wired, in care of her lawyer, his time of arrival.

Sam walked a couple of blocks down the Broadway side of Times Square. He was free for the first time in thirty-seven months. He wanted to revel in

The Case of The Missing Wife

By STUART FRIEDMAN



Since they already had Sam pretty well tied up on a charge of stealing his own wife, why should somebody plant a corpse in his hotel room?

a bright, noisy chaos of planless existence; to gorge on days and nights that made no sense, that had no hint of discipline. The prospect had exhilarated him. Now he was in the heart of things, and it was dull. *He* was dull. Maybe it was because it was afternoon and the Great White Way was alien to daylight. Its magic was gone. Sam Varden was just a guy again. A dressed up heel.

What he needed, he told himself, was a drink. A few drinks and he wouldn't be a heel. That was past. Maybe Doris didn't know or care that he was somebody a little better than the guy she'd been married to. But *he* knew. What did it matter why he'd enlisted? Only the results counted. He'd earned two citations. There were battle stars on the service ribbons of his discarded uniform. In combat a man's past was past. Doris only knew that he'd pulled a nasty trick. She had decided on divorce—with justification, Sam conceded—and he had rushed down to enlist. Then he'd laughed at her lawyer. A serviceman's wife couldn't divorce him without his consent.

Sam Varden found himself not in a bar but in a cigar store consulting the classified phone directory. A moment later he was in a booth dialing Anson Mervey, Doris's attorney. Waiting, Sam studied the vaguely familiar profile of a tall, thin man at the counter.

"Anson Mervey's office."

"This is Sam Varden," Sam began. "I—"

"Oh!" the secretary said. "Mr. Varden! One moment. I'll connect you with Mr. Mervey."

"Where are you, Varden?" Mervey's voice came in sharply. "Where's Doris? Just what do you hope to gain, Varden?"

"Information," Sam said belligerently. "I wired Doris in care of your office. Did you forward—"

"Certainly. Yesterday," Marvey snapped. "Where are you two?"

"I'm alone."

"You haven't been with Doris?"

"I haven't. I don't even know where she lives. I don't know her name—"

"You're smooth as ever." Mervey's voice was contemptuous. "But we won't hold still for a shakedown. Get that. You'll find yourself in jail, sharper!"

"I'm coming to see you, *Mis*ter Mervey."

SAM was trembling when he pushed out of the phone booth. He stopped and bought cigarettes. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He was wax pale under his tan, and his black eyes were fever bright. As he leaned toward the jet of flame for a light he again noticed the tall thin man idly looking over the display of candy bars. Again the face seemed familiar.

Sam remembered. He'd seen him studying a display poster under a movie marquee next door to the clothing store. Later, the same fellow had been one of half a dozen people caught on the traffic island in the middle of Times Square. Sam went outside and along the line of cabs waiting for the traffic signal along the side-street. Sam got into the first empty cab, watched the cigar store entrance.

In seconds the man came out, walking hurriedly and puffing on his cigarette. He looked absorbed with some private, urgent matter. The sudden urgency didn't match his lingering casualness back in the store. Apparently he was unaware of Sam Varden as he passed his taxi and got in the one just behind. There was little about the man to make an impression, Sam decided, leaning back against the seat. He had a wide mouth and somewhat sharp chin,

but nothing unusual. His clothes were an inconspicuous dark. But Sam was positive that he had seen the man first when he came up from the train at Grand Central.

"Thirty-fourth and Broadway," Sam told him driver.

Mervey's office was at Fiftieth and Madison. Sam noted that his cab was being followed. At Thirty-sixth he told his driver to cut across, turn back north to 50th on Madison. The other cab made the turns right behind.

Sam Varden was standing at the building directory when the tall man came in the lobby, bought a paper at the newsstand. Sam tugged slightly at the brim of his hat, then walked over to him.

"Did you want to see me?" Sam said levelly.

The man stared at him, frowning. The frown changed to a grin. "Why should I?" He glanced toward the elevators as two women office workers got off, then back at Sam. "You'll excuse me now? . . . And take it easy, huh?"

Sam watched as the man and one of the women greeted each other. Sam grinned at himself in the elevator, glad that he hadn't been wearing his discharge pin. That lanky civilian would have had a delicious morsel to add to the "Are Vets People" controversy.

Anson Mervey was alone in his outer office.

"Don't try any rough stuff, Sam Varden."

THE lawyer stood with feet braced apart, and one hand lightly touching the phone on the typewriter desk. Whether it was to be used as weapon or call for help, Sam wasn't sure. Sam laughed at him. He had recalled a formidable man, but Anson Mervey seemed smaller; just an ordinary, neat man in a pin-stripe black suit that camouflaged the mellon growth under his belt. The tough Mervey jaw was fatty. But the eyes and mouth were the key, and they were neither weak nor stupid.

"Get this straight, Mervey. I'm not taking anything from you. I don't like to be called a sharper. I don't like your hints that I'm up to something."

"Aren't you?" Mervey countered. "Haven't you persuaded another man's wife to come to you? I grant she was once your wife—"

"I don't know anything about it."

"John Alwing is aware you have been corresponding with Doris. He understands you've got a grudge against him. But she's his wife now, and he loves her. He'll fight for her."

"I haven't been corresponding with her," Sam said. "This is the first time I knew she'd married a guy called Alwing. But you can tell him to stop shaking. I've got only one interest in Doris . . . and not what you think. I want to explain something to her . . something she never understood. . . ."

"She understood you. I did too. You were always a tinhorn wolf, and she had every right to ditch you. And the final cheap, lousy trick you pulled off," Mervey said, his words scathing, his face flushed. "When she had a chance —and a *right*—to free herself, to try and find a little happiness, *you* ran out and—"

"I did it," Sam cut him off, his voice dangerous. "And then I undid it, didn't I? Didn't I write and tell you I'd changed my mind? Didn't I sign what had to be signed?"

"Yes. So you did," Mervey admitted. "There was shame left in you, I'll concede that. But *now*—do you deny she is with you? Do you, Sam?"

"Absolutely."

The outer door opened. Sam glanced at the woman who entered.

"Say! You're the woman who met

him—"

"This is my secretary."

The secretary looked at Mervey an instant, then turned a blank face to Sam.

"Met whom?" she asked. "Whom did I meet, Mr.—"

"Varden. Mr. Varden, ma'am. It's all a mistake. You didn't meet a man downstairs in the lobby five minutes ago. Oh, no! Listen, Mervey. You're smart. But you're not getting me involved. You picked the wrong man!"

SAM left the office and took the elevator down. He headed for the street, watching for the man who'd been trailing him. He saw him in the drugstore to the right of the building entrance. He cut across, entered the drugstore and went to a phone booth. He called the police, told them the whole story.

"We'll send a detective to your hotel."

The police detective was waiting when Sam's cab pulled to the curb of the sidestreet hotel off Times Square.

"Are you Sam Varden? I'm from the detective bureau," he said. "My name's Walsh."

"I'm Varden," Sam told him. "The fellow who was following me got off at the corner. He probably guessed I was coming to my hotel—see him? The tall fellow angling across the street there by the Chop Suey joint?"

"Yeah. I know him. Nick Elster's his name. A private detective. He's okay, Varden."

"Well, I demand to know what he's doing tagging me."

Nick Elster, the private detective waved and called. "Hello, Walsh. On a case?"

"Yeah. We had a complaint from Mr. Varden that you was annoying him. Let's go up to his room and talk about it."

"As you will, Mr. Walsh. *And* Mr. Varden," the detective said, shrugging. "I'm Elster. I'm also slipping."

"What's it all about, Elster?" Sam said.

"You look natty in the outfit," Elster said, blandly. "Better than in uniform. Does she like it?"

"Who?"

"Haven't you got a girl friend?"

They were in the elevator. Walsh looked from one to the other suspiciously. "No, I haven't got a girl friend," Sam said. "If I did have, you know she hasn't seen the suit. You should know."

"Who you working for, Nick," Walsh asked Elster.

"Isn't this your floor, Varden?" Nick Elster said as the car stopped.

"I could book you, Elster," Walsh said. "A citizen has made a complaint."

"Mr. Varden wouldn't want to sign such a complaint."

Sam keyed open the door. He stood frozen. A man lay in the middle of the rug, motionless. Walsh thrust past him. The man on the floor, Sam saw, moving into the room, had been middle aged, with gray hair. He was, or had been a fat man, and he wore glasses. There was no sign of blood or of violence. But the man was dead.

"Who am I working for?" Nick Elster said, staring fixedly at Sam. "I will tell you. I was working for this guy on the floor. John Alwing."

"John Alwing!" Sam cried. He looked down in horror at the flaccid dead flesh of the fat man's face. "*That's* John Alwing? That's the man Doris married?"

Nick Elster laughed harshly. "Listen to this guy, will you Walsh? He don't know Alwing. He never saw him," the detective said. "He knew Sam Varden, though. Had plenty pictures of him.

Sammy used to be married to Mrs. Alwing. Mr. Alwing knew that Sam Varden and Mrs. Alwing were going to get together. That's why he hired me. To get the facts. To watch this guy. He was afraid of a shakedown. Only this guy's slick. He knew how to lay low, and keep the girl out of sight."

"Knew how to get rid of the hubby too, looks as how," Walsh opined. "What's it all about, Varden? Why'd you kill him? Revenge?"

THE room phone rang. Sam sprang toward it. Walsh leaped after him, grabbed for the instrument. Sam hung on.

"Hello!"

"Sam, this is Doris. I'm in trouble. Meet me at the Broadway Newsreel. Will you?"

"I—I'll try."

Sam yielded the phone to Walsh. The detective glared at him as he called headquarters. Finishing, he said to Sam:

"Who'd you talk to?"

"Mrs. Alwing," Sam said. "My ex-wife. She wants me to meet her at the Broadway Newsreel."

"She'll be met," Walsh said darkly. "But not by you."

"Why not let him go?" Nick Elster said. "He knows her, which would save time. I'll tag along with him."

"We'll wait. A department man will go with him."

"That wouldn't be a crack at me, would it?" Elster said.

"Sure not. I just wouldn't put such responsibility on you, Nicky," Walsh said sarcastically. "Seeing as how this is murder."

"How do you know?" Sam asked.

"Great detectives," Elster said mockingly, "have an extra sense. Like another nose. If you'll be attentive you'll note that they smell different."

"Fresh today, ain't you?" Walsh said. "How come you want to get out of here so bad, Elster? Maybe the pair of you have got an angle together."

"Sure. That's why I had him call the police on us. But tell me, how was Alwing murdered? Drowned?"

"The medical examiner will settle that."

TEN minutes later Sam pushed through the turnstile of the Newsreel Theater, a plainclothesman back of him. He started down the stairs toward the lounge, his heart beginning to pump fast. He paused on the landing before turning down the final steps. The plainclothesman looked at him with suspicious, lowered lids. Sam gestured as though to explain the magnitude of this meeting. The mere sight of Doris after so long would be enough to upset him. And under these conditions it was something violent. Agony or ecstasy—he wasn't sure.

He went swiftly down the last few steps. He saw her at once. She rose from a settee against the wall, dropped her cigarette in the ashstand, and hurried to him. He stood, paralyzed before her. It really seemed like shock, for his jaw went slack and his lips parted. There was a constriction in his throat. She was beautiful.

She stood very near and whispered "Sam!"

Her blue eyes were moist and tender, and her mouth and chin trembled. Her perfume was in his nostrils, and for an instant all the tantalizing blonde loveliness of her bleared his senses. The instant was gone. A long time ago she had loved him. Now—Dance music was playing over the radio. The men, and a woman or two, on the chairs and sofas throughout the lounge had shifted their grinning attention to them. The detective was saying:

"All right. Let's go."

"This is a detective, Doris," Sam said. "Your husband is dead. He died in my hotel room."

"Died! John died? How?" Her fingers gripped Sam's forearm. "How did he die, Sam?"

"They don't know."

"Not yet, lady," the detective said. "But you better come along. The Inspector's waiting."

"He threatened us, Sam."

"Us?" he said. She was genuinely agitated. He looked at the flawless white of her breast in the low square cut dress, saw the rise and fall of her breathing. Yes, it seemed genuine. "How do I come into all this, Doris? And how—" he took a breath "—how did *you* know where to phone me? You knew where I was staying."

"My husband told me," she said. "He phoned more than an hour ago and told me. He said he had everything ready to do as he'd threatened. You see, I hadn't been living with him—as a wife. He thought you and I were going to make up, and that you were the reason I wanted a divorce from him."

"So you wanted a divorce," Sam said. They had been moving up the stairs. At the top he stopped before going outside, and faced her. "Who was the reason?"

"There's no who to it," Doris said. The detective stood facing her from Sam's side, and she looked at him, including him in what she was saying. "But he thought you and I had been corresponding, and that I wanted to remarry you. He threatened to kill himself—in such a way as to 'hang the pair of you' as he put it. He hated you, Sam, more than he ever loved me. . . . Not that he ever loved me really."

"Not like I did," Sam said quietly. "I want to say it now, Doris. Because your husband may have been murdered. One of the detectives is certain of it. And you're going to be a logical suspect."

"I can see that," she said slowly. "And you, Sam . . . you, too. Maybe John managed to kill himself in such a way as to look like murder . . . and in your room at that. . . ."

"So right now I want you to know the truth about what I did . . . when I went in the Army."

"Let's not mention that, Sam," she said. "You made it right, afterward. I haven't held it against you. I've forgotten . . ."

"I didn't want to whine after I pulled such a trick," Sam said. "So I didn't write to explain my side of it. I figured I deserved your contempt. I didn't want you worried that you might have given me another chance. But the fact is I pulled that trick because I would have done anything to hold you. I loved you so damned much . . . it's true. From your standpoint I had a helluva way of showing it, but . . ."

DORIS, Nick Elster and Anson Mervey had given their versions privately. Now Sam, alone with the Inspector and a plainclothesman in the hotel manager's office, told his story. The detective took his words in shorthand. The Inspector asked him to repeat the conversations with Mervey, the one over the phone and in the lawyer's office. Otherwise Sam talked without interruption. The Inspector sat reaming the dead ash from his pipe, letting it sift into the wastebasket in front of the chair he was using. When Sam finished, the Inspector slid the wastebasket back in place with one foot and began to repack his pipe.

"You know," he said, looking up into Sam's face, "that the lawyer Mervey and Nick Elster both testify that you and Mrs. Alwing were corresponding."

"She didn't say so, did she?" Sam

said. "Because we weren't. The telegram I sent in care of her lawyer was the first time I got in touch with Doris."

"Your story and hers check together pretty nicely," the Inspector said. He paused and lighted his pipe. "For instance she claims that she wasn't missing: that her husband knew very well that she was in her own apartment as usual. You claim you didn't see her until you met at the Newsreel Theater. However, John Alwing notified Mervey that Doris was gone, that he suspected she was with you. Alwing also hired a detective to trail you, hoping to locate her through you. Hoping also, I gather, to get evidence that would enable him to divorce her."

"He wanted a divorce, you mean?" Sam asked in surprise.

"Put it this way," the Inspector said. "She was living apart from him. She wanted a divorce. He wanted her back—but if there was to be divorce he wanted to be the one to get it. He didn't want to have to pay her anything. We now consider it possible that he got his evidence, that he came to the hotel here to make a deal. He was in a position to divorce her so she wouldn't get a cent alimony or settlement. Seeing that she was beaten, he hoped she would consent to come back to him—possibly for some cash consideration. But she wanted bigger money, and she didn't want him. As his widow—" The Inspector shrugged.

"It *was* murder," Sam said. "That's what you're driving at. Do you think I did it for her?"

"John Alwing was murdered. He came to this hotel. He was admitted to your room, by someone who had a key. Which would be—"

"Not I! My time's all accounted for," Sam protested. "I can prove where I was. Listen, Doris told me that her husband planned to kill himself so as to involve me and her. A suicide to look like murder."

"Why then would he hire a detective to trail you and provide you with an alibi?" the Inspector asked quietly. "No, Varden. You provided the key to the hotel room. Doris Alwing was the one who used it. During the hour you spent buying clothes. It should be obvious to you by now that she's using you as her fall guy. So why not admit that the two of you had been corresponding and had planned to remarry?"

"ANSON MERVEY lies," Sam said. "I swear to it. Nobody can prove I wrote her. . . ."

"Oh. It's come to that. You're challenging us to prove it. In other words, you think you covered your tracks. . . ."

"Not so fast, Inspector. I don't have to answer anything. If you've got something on me, shoot the works. Otherwise I'm getting out of here."

"This is a murder case, Varden."

"That's the first time you said it," Sam said. "Why so coy? Was he poisoned, or what?"

"His heart quit, Varden. A severe strain was put on it, in some manner. And though John Alwing always carried emergency adrenalin, he didn't take it. His killer knew all about his weak heart, and somehow prevented him from taking his adrenalin."

"No sign of a struggle," Sam said. "How did this killer manage?"

"Simply took it away from him. Alwing wouldn't have had the strength to put up a fight. He was fighting to stay alive," the Inspector said. "But he had adrenalin with him when we searched his clothes. Alwing had collapsed on the bed. He'd had the strength to get up, get to the middle of the room—probably in the futile attempt to retrieve the adrenalin."

"But you said he had it with him,"

Sam said. "Oh—I understand. The killer took it from him."

"Then put it back in his pocket after he was dead," the Inspector said. "If it hadn't happened something like that Alwing would have tried to use his strength to inject the adrenalin while he was on the bed. Instead, he got up —and collapsed dead in the middle of the floor." The Inspector looked to the plainclothesman. "Get the maid and the switchboard girl."

"I had nothing to do with it. The detective Elster knows I wasn't in this hotel since morning."

The switchboard girl and an elderly, uniformed maid entered. The Inspector pointed at the girl.

"Tell Mr. Varden about the call you received at 2:20."

"He called and said he'd noticed there weren't any towels in his room. He said he was on his way over and wanted them in there by the time he came."

"I didn't call you," Sam said.

"We'll get to that," the Inspector said. He looked at the floor maid. "You took towels to room 708 at about 2:30. Tell me again what happened."

"There was already towels in there," she said. "I hadn't hardly got in the bathroom before I heard a fellow puffing and panting. He had come in the room. He's the one that was dead. He give me a dollar and went over and set down on the bed. Not knowing it wasn't the regular occupant of the room, I didn't think about it."

"There was more. On the stairway."

"Oh—yes. Like I said I walked down to the sixth floor. But I got on the landing half way down and happened to glance up. And there was a fellow going out the stair door into the seventh floor hall."

"A young man," the Inspector prompted.

THE elderly women adjusted her glasses and looked sadly at Sam. "I'd not say," she said primly. "I'd not give such testimony. When first I told you I reckoned the fellow was a young one since he moved awful fast. And the light was such I don't rightly know if he was in gray clothes or not."

"At 2:30 I was in my underwear," Sam said. "In a fitting room in the clothing store—as Elster will vouch as well as maybe half a dozen store employees. Besides, I wouldn't have had to go through such antics to get into my room. I had a key."

"Why don't you talk to me over the phone?" the switchboard girl said. "I could tell your voice."

"Never mind," the Inspector said. "You ladies can go . . . and thank you." He waited till they were out, then pointed his pipestem at Sam. "How long were you in the clothes store?"

"From a little after two till about 3:15."

"You check," the Inspector said, grinning. "And you're accounted for by eight employees to be precise. You're alibied good—civilian. And good luck. I didn't think you'd go in for a shakedown and killing, Varden. But we never know."

"A shakedown?"

"Ten thousand dollars cash," the Inspector said, gravely. "Alwing was robbed. The killer may not know we're aware of the money angle. But we checked Alwing's bank, and found he'd drawn the money this noon. We'll find the money and a killer with it. Don't tell any of the others."

Certainly not, Sam thought wryly. I won't tell anybody. It was clumsy of the Inspector. The pretended air of taking him into his confidence was far from subtle. The police would know every move he made.

The hotel manager appeared. "Mr. Varden, we have placed you in another room—a nice accommodation on the fourth floor . . . oh, and here is a message."

Sam read Doris's note on the elevator. Would he have dinner in her apartment? He would. It would be interesting, he was sure. She was a girl full of angles. He had had no conception of her depth. A pretty young woman married to a rich old guy. And presto! a pretty young widow. Rich. He wadded her note, started to throw it in the ash receptacle when he stepped into the fourth floor hall. Instead, he slipped it in his pocket. He needed the address. His fingers touched the gold discharge pin—and something else. He withdrew a small key and looked curiously at it as he went to his new room.

He had never seen the key before. It was from one of the ten cents for twenty-four hours baggage lockers at the Times Square Subway Station. Someone had slipped that key in his pocket. There was one person who could get it back with the most intimate ease. Sam set his mouth, keyed open his room. Well, she was a delicious creature, but he wasn't stooging for a killer. He went to the phone. His hand froze. It would be stretching the Inspector's credulity a little to claim he had just discovered a stray key in his pocket. If that key led to the $10,000 Sam thought it did he would have to talk faster than he knew how.

No. He'd let her get the key back one way or another—and *then* let the police know. It was tough. He had loved her—and maybe he still did. But he had a life to live, and he'd never appreciated it so much.

IT WAS dark when he left the hotel. A cab pulled up at once. He got in, then caught his breath as a hand clenched his lapels, yanked him forward. The taxi sped forward. A gun jabbed into his side as he was thrown against the seat.

"Damn you, if you want the key, take it, Elster, and stop this stuff."

"Shut your mouth and listen. You are taking the key, and you are getting the money and bringing it back—and if you're picked up by the cops, you'll keep your trap shut."

"Like hell!"

"Lean forward. Pick up that blanket and see the nice bundle I've got under there. You sure as hell wouldn't want luscious stuff like that tossed out on a sidestreet to get mashed by a cab."

It was Doris, bound and gagged. Sam caught only a glance at her wide, frightened eyes before Nick Elster pushed him back. The cab didn't stop at Sixth, but ran the sign, turning right. The gun stayed in Sam's ribs. The private detective's features were strained. The cab turned back toward Broadway.

"We're not followed," Nick Elster said after a few moments. He glanced back once again. The pressure of the gun shifted slightly. Sam twisted and smashed down at the weapon with his left hand. With his cupped right palm he drove upward violently against Nick Elster's chin, knocking his head back. Sam's outstretched fingers clawed at Elster's eyes. Elster screamed, and brought his gun up, tried to club Sam, but Sam caught his wrist, shoved the hand back against the seat cushion.

"Drop the gun, or so help me God you won't have any eyeballs left."

The gun thumped onto the seat, and Sam had it in an instant. Sam leaned forward and tapped the driver sharply on the skull with the gunbarrel. "Stop at the first cop you see—and be sure you look close!"

Nick Elster was holding his eyes and

(Continued on page 100)

PASSAGE TO BEIRUT

By H. B. HICKEY

The crooks were doing fine until they tangled with Uncle Shpinay, the smooth-spoken Syrian peddler

"Leave us not be hasty," said Uncle Shpinay as he plucked a shotgun from under the cloth.

"MONSIEUR, I queet! Eeef I am not supply with the finest eengredients I cannot accept responsibility for resolts. I queet!"

Pierre's moustache quivered in righteous wrath and his chef's hat jiggled from side to side.

I tried to calm him. "Whoa, Pierre. I'm no goof. I wouldn't hire a chef for twenty G's a year and then try to skimp on a couple of bucks and ruin his cooking. But I'll be goddamned"—my own voice rose to a shriek—"if we haven't got the fanciest garbage this side of Buckingham Palace!"

My anger seemed to have a soothing effect on him. Pierre's voice dropped three octaves.

"Then eet is settled. I shall preside over the kitchen, and you, monsieur, over the gaming tables." He bowed himself out.

Licked again. I hadn't won an argument with Pierre since I'd lured him away from the Ritz. I buzzed for Diane and in a second she bounced in. Right away I felt better. I made a tentative pass at her and she ducked.

"What'll you have?" she wanted to know.

"Do me a favor, hon: take these lousy grocery bills out of here and tell that auditor not to bother me with them again unless we're losing dough on the food."

Sometimes it got me down. When I was running that little book joint I was happy and when I finally worked my way up to a commission office and made

four bills a week. I thought Rothstein wasn't in it with me. Now nine times four was a bad week and I had a headache all the time. Still, it wasn't too tough to sit behind this big desk and have a gorgeous doll to take letters, and in the evening I could go downstairs and mingle with the ritzy mob who came to eat our "cuisine" and stayed to drop their dough at the tables. Hell, some of those guys ran steel mills and didn't make my dough.

Diane gave me a buzz and I flipped the switch and asked her what gave. "There's a gu— a gentleman to see you. The name is Antonelli."

"Send him in."

One look at the mug who walked in and I could tell grief was right behind him. I got up fast and took the hairy hand he shoved at me. He was about my height but a lot heavier, maybe two-twenty, and he had a real gut on him. His clothes were expensive but loud.

He gave me a quick once over and grinned. "My name's Antonelli. Maybe you heard of me. From Detroit."

I nodded. "I've heard of you, all right. What brings you to this part of the country?"

He sat down. "Mind if I sit?" He smiled with his mouth. "Nice spot you got here. Oughta be doing good for yourself." His mouth quit smiling. "Tell you, fella, I got kinda tired of Detroit and figgered to come down here and see if I couldn't do me some good. Maybe pick up a nice spot—say like this—and settle down."

I said nothing.

"I see you catch on quick, pal. That's good. Let's talk business. I'm willing to *buy* this joint, see? I got one offer. Hundred grand. Take it or leave it." Antonelli looked down to flick off an imaginary piece of lint.

"You know it's worth five times that. What if I leave it?"

HIS eyes came up slowly and he showed me his teeth with that phony grin. "You wouldn't want to do that, pal. I like this town. I'm moving in."

I wanted to kick his teeth down his fat throat for him. "Yeah. I catch on quick all right. Now I know how come Eddie Gray got his head blown off last week. And how come that dope mob the F.B.I. was looking for was shot to hell. And how it happened Galler from the West Side was found full of shotgun slugs the other day."

"You got me wrong, pal. Me and the boys have been in Detroit for months. We can prove it."

I was getting wound up. "You listen to me," I said, "I happen to be in with the chief of police in this town, and with everybody else who's got anything to say. You lay off me or you'll catch grief!"

He got up. "We'll see, pal." I got the grin again. "Took it easy."

He closed the door gently and I heard him say goodbye toots to Diane.

Well, there it was. Take it or leave it. True, Gorren, the head copper, was on my side. Still—he could be bought out. If there ever was a corrupt character it was Gorren. Better to make sure about him before I went any further, so I asked Diane to get him on the phone for me. But he was out. I sat and moped awhile. What if he wouldn't go to bat for me? I was cooked. Not that I was afraid of my skin because there'd be an awful stink if anything happened to me, so they wouldn't knock me off. But there were ways, all right.

Diane stopped my worrying by giving me a buzz. "Your uncle wants to see you." She gave a squeal. "Now I know where you learned to be so free

with your hands." A deep chuckle came out of the box.

A second later my uncle bounced in. That's no exaggeration, either, because at sixty-eight, which he was, he still bounced. His shoulders filled the doorway and every inch of his six-two was straight as one of the spits he broiled his beloved lamb on. Pink scalp glowed under a thick shock of white hair and his seamed, good-humored face was a permanent bronze.

"*Keefik*, my boy!" he greeted me.

"Hello, yourself," I grunted.

"And how is your father, that prince?" he wanted to know.

I nodded: all right, and he went on. "And your mother, that angel? And your brothers, those charming fellows?"

His Syrian formality could go on indefinitely I knew, so I cut him short. "You see my mother every day, and my old man and you spend most of your time playing *towlay** at Sam Nazare's coffee shop. What are you leading up to?"

My Uncle Shpinay beamed at me. "You have such insight, my boy. I always said you would do great things." Like filling a concrete cream puff, I thought.

He went on. "But not to waste your precious time, it is about this same Sam Nazare that I come to see you. The poor fellow is in difficulty. Those grasping fellows at the city hall are demanding license money of him again. As you well know it is but a meager livelihood he ekes from his little shop and he cannot pay the few dollars necessary. They will close him up." He shook his head sadly. "My boy, you are a man of affairs and have influence. You must help him."

"It's only twenty-five bucks. Why don't you help him?"

"You know I would but it is against my principles to give those grafters money. Come now, it will take but a word from you to fix it."

I gave in, like I always do. I got Harry Grieg at the license bureau on the phone and told him to take care of it. It would cost me fifty in free meals to square it with Harry but it was true that my uncle would rather lose an arm than pay money where he could avoid doing so.

MY UNCLE SHPINAY walked into the outer office while I was calling and came back with a suitcase. He listened to me and Harry and then borrowed the phone to call Nazare.

"It is arranged, my friend," he told him. "Ay, ay, he is indeed a prince." He beamed down at me, then talked into the phone again. "And how is your charming daughter, Sam?"

"Hang up!" I yelled. "You saw him half an hour ago so you don't have to give him the business!"

My uncle put the phone down. "Sam sends you greetings and many thanks. His son Skondor wishes to thank you, too, on the matter of the parole."

"Tell Skondor to stay away from other people's safes and he won't need any help."

"It is true. Ay, ay!"

He smiled benevolently at me. "While I am here you may wish to see some linens which have just arrived from the old country."

He started to open the suitcase but I stopped him. The last linens he had sold me had fallen to pieces the first time they were washed.

Before he could start his spiel the door opened and Gorren came in. He could serve as the model for corrupt politicos. Behind his good-humored exterior he was murderously ambitious and from a lowly ward heeler he had bribed, wheedled and beaten his way

* Syrian backgammon.—Ed.

to the top spot for graft in the city's machine. The pig eyes in his fleshy face were hard as agate.

My uncle slid out of the room behind Gorren and closed the door.

"Look," I said, "Antonelli's in town."

Gorren nodded.

"He wants to take over my business for peanuts and if I don't go for it he'll muscle me out. I want you to get him out of town in a hurry, see."

Gorren shook his head. "I got nothing on him, Sid. I can't do a thing."

"Get something. How about all these guys who's been knocked off the last few weeks?"

"I checked on that. He's in the clear."

"Will you give me protection?"

"Are you gonna try to fight him?"

"You're damn right I'll fight him! Think I'm going to sit here and let that lousy greaseball chase me out?"

Gorren shook his head. "Look, Sid, I don't want any trouble. I can't stand for a war."

I could feel myself getting red in the face. "So you're in with him! Well, I'm no fool either. I got enough on you to have you thrown in the can for twenty years. You stay on my side or else I'll raise a stink that'll finish you!"

Gorren gave me an oily smile and I could tell he thought he had me in the bag. I began to get scared. He was too shrewd to have left himself open. I wondered what was coming next. I didn't have to wait long.

"You listen to me, Sid. Don't start anything you can't finish. We always got along fine but now you're out. Be smart and take what you can get." His voice got hard. "I'm warning you, don't start anything!"

"And if I do?"

He thought for a moment. "How long you been in this country?"

"Since I was a kid. What's that got to do with it?"

"Plenty. Know how you came in?"

"No."

"Well, I do. I just happened to find out a little while back. Your old man came in illegally. I got the papers to prove it, too. If you don't play ball I can send you back to Syria. Get it?"

"I don't believe it!" In my heart, though, I could tell he wasn't lying.

"Ask your old man." He turned to go but looked back over his shoulder. "I wanta know tonight."

THE door opened behind him and my uncle walked into him. Gorren flew backward five or six feet. Uncle Shpinay jumped forward and kept him from falling. "My dear sir, please excuse my clumsiness." He turned to me. "I forgot my suitcase," he apologized.

A thought snddenly struck him. "Perhaps this gtntleman would be interested in some fine imported linens. Mr—ah—"

"Gorren," the police chief supplied.

"Gorren! Of that fine family, the Caxton Park Gorrens, no doubt!"

"I live on Ainsly street."

"An aristocratic neighborhood indeed! And now . . ."

"My wife buys the linens," Gorren cut him off and stalked out, holding his side.

"Tsk, tsk! A most impolite man." My uncle turned to go.

"Wait a minute," I told him, "I want to ask you something."

He nodded.

"You came over here from the old country with us. Was there anything wrong with our immigration papers?"

He thought for a second. "Not with our papers here but it was necessary to obtain our passports—ah—how shall I say? . . ."

"You don't have to say. Could they send us back?"

"Perish the thought! Who would be

so unkind?"

"That guy who just walked out. If he could prove it. Could he?"

"It is possible. There was a rascally fellow . . . he emigrated to Detroit and died there recently, I have been informed . . . who assisted us in obtaining the necessary papers. If he—"

"I'm afraid he has."

"I'll undeen!" he cursed. "Well, that is fate!"

"Don't take it so well," I told him. "All I can remember about the old country is heat and sand. I don't want to go back if I can help it."

He shrugged philosophically. "Well, life must go on. I have business to attend." He picked up the phone and called Nazare.

"My dear friend, I must see some customers this afternoon. Would you be kind enough to assist me in displaying my wares? . . . Ay . . ."

He put the phone down. "Sam wishes to thank you again. And now, good day." He left.

I got hold of my lawyer and he came over. The rest of the afternoon was spent looking for a loophole. We couldn't find one.

"The thing is this, Sid," he explained, "if you were an ordinary working man we could probably straighten it out but as the owner of a gambling establishment you can't be considered an exemplary citizen. Since there will be a lot of pressure, besides, my candid opinion is that you haven't got a chance."

"I'm not so sure. If I really haven't a chance why should they be willing to give me a hundred G's?"

"If they didn't give you anything you'd fight. And if people found out a gangster like Antonelli was running it they'd stay away. They want to take it over as a running business. Also, by giving you a halfway reasonable remuneration it makes everything legal."

I looked at him in disgust. "So what should I do?"

"My advice is to take what you can get and forget it."

I shook my head. "Damn it! I hate to have those vultures take away something I've spent years to get. I got a notion to blow their brains out when they show up tonight!"

Phelps waved me quiet, and sat and thought for a while. Then he said, "Listen to me, Sid, don't do anything foolish. They've got you licked. What you want to do now is to pull out with a whole skin."

I nodded miserably.

"All right, then," he continued. "When Gorren and Antonelli show up tonight I'll have all the necessary papers ready. We'll demand that they produce whatever proof they've got that your passports were obtained fraudulently and hand them over. Then at least you'll be safe and you can go somewhere else and start over if you want."

He looked at me. "Isn't that more sensible than what you had in mind?"

"O.K. I won't start anything."

"Fine. I'll be back in a couple of hours. If they show up before I do tell them to wait. It's my opinion you're getting out pretty well so we'd better not give them a chance to change their minds."

HE LEFT, and I sat for a while doing nothing. Then I began clearing out my desk, but I couldn't go through with it. So I slammed the drawer shut and sat and thought some more about how it had been to start as a sheet writer in a bookie joint and work my way up to a spot like this. Why, the Villa Rouge was nationally famous! *Life* magazine had even had a story and pictures about it once. The finest food and a square game. That was my motto and I'd always stuck to it.

I did a lot of thinking. Phelps was right. Where but in these United States could a guy like me do that? The more I pondered the less I liked the idea of going back to Syria.

After a while the room got dark and from force of habit I got up and went downstairs to count the house. It was the same as usual. The early dinner crowd had filled the dining room and some of the very early birds were hanging around waiting for the gambling rooms to open. I knew a lot of the customers so I walked between the tables and said hello to them and here and there I told the waiter to bring champagne for one who was a big bettor. As for myself, I wasn't hungry.

It was about eight o'clock when Phelps got back. I saw him come in and waved to him to go up while I signed a tab for one of the boys from the city hall. A few minutes later I joined Phelps in my office. He had his brief case open and had already taken out some papers.

He looked up as I came in. "There really isn't so much," he said. "Just a bill of sale and a few other things, like transfer of title on the property. I can clear up the rest when Antonelli takes possession."

I snorted. "A fast finish to years of work. I'd like to get that fat slob alone in here for a few minutes. I'd give him a working over he'd never forget."

"Sid, I told you, for your own good, forget that stuff!"

"Yeah! It's easy for you to tell me to forget it. It's not your business I'm going to be signing away in a little while!"

He looked at me queerly. "I want you to know, Sid, that when I got back to the office I found Antonelli. He wanted me to handle his legal work. I turned him down cold. I'm on your side but as your attorney it's my job to get you out of this in the best possible shape."

I guess I must have looked ashamed and he reached out and gave my shoulder a pat. But still I had to let off a little steam.

"I'm sorry. But damn it, Phelps, you can't imagine what it's doing to me to realize that in a few minutes I'm going to take everything I ever dreamed of having and turn it over to those lice. It wasn't so bad before but now that I see these papers in front of me I think I'll go nuts!"

The more I talked the hotter I got and then my tongue got so thick I couldn't talk any more. I got a terrible urge to smash things and grabbed up an ash tray from the desk and started to fling it against the wall. As I turned to throw, someone grabbed me from behind.

AT FIRST I thought it was Phelps but when I tried to struggle and found I couldn't move I realized it couldn't be he. My next thought was . . . Antonelli! There was a red haze obscuring my vision as I managed to swing myself around and got an arm free. I threw a wild roundhouse that connected and received a terrible slap across the face in return. It slammed me half across the room into a corner. I shook my head to clear it. The room stopped whirling and I could see again. I looked for Antonelli. A voice stopped me. Uncle Shpinay!

"My boy!" he was saying, "You must calm yourself!"

I was calm all right; that slap had certainly slowed me down.

"So impetuous!" he said to Phelps. "In Syria we call it 'heavy blood'."

I introduced him to Phelps and grinned as Phelps winced at the handshake he got. "This is my lawyer," I told my uncle.

He beamed at Phelps. "A friend of

Sidney's is a friend of mine," he told the lawyer. Then he turned to me.

"I have brought with me something you will wish to see . . . from the old country." He let out a bellow. "Sam! . . . Skondor! . . . bring in the suitcases!"

Before I could protest both of them came in lugging two huge sample cases. Skondor looked much like his father, short, dark, thin. They were an unprepossessing pair but my uncle introduced them to Phelps proudly and with great formality. They nodded silently to the lawyer, then to me.

Uncle Shpinay bent and opened one of the cases and dragegd out a huge damask cloth. He half turned and looked up at Phelps whose mouth was open in astonishment. My uncle smiled. "Perhaps this fine gentleman would be interested in some imported linens which I have by chance with me?"

Phelps shook his head groggily.

"Please!" I begged my uncle, "we've got business to attend to. We'll look at this stuff tomorrow."

He was pleasantly tolerant. "This, too, is business, my boy," he told me. He grunted and came up with what he'd apparently been looking for right along. It was an envelope which he had wrapped in a large napkin. He handed it to me with a flourish. I opened it and took out the contents, several sheets of official-looking paper. One look and I hopped out of the chair I'd just sat down in.

"This is it!" I yelled at Phelps. "This is it!" I couldn't say more.

Phelps ran around the desk to see what I was so excited about. Then he got excited.

Uncle Shpinay was radiant. "This is indeed it, as you say. That scoundrel, brother of fifty goats, son of a camel, would have betrayed us. It was as you suspected. The papers are signed, attested, notarized. May the dog know no peace!"

Sam gave him a hearty "amen."

My uncle looked at me. "I would suggest you burn these at once. Your friends may be here soon." He watched approvingly as I put the match to them, then opened the other case and began to empty it of its contents. He soon had a pile of assorted linens on the floor.

A LARGE cloth had just made its appearance and as he straightened up with it the door opened behind him. Antonelli came in first and was followed immediately by Gorren. The gangster cast his eyes about suspiciously. "What's goin' on here?" he wanted to know.

Gorren reassured him. "This old guy's just a loony linen peddler." My uncle gave him a sweet smile and inquired gently, "And how is your wife, that angel?" Gorren grunted disgustedly.

Antonelli was still suspicious. "What you been burnin' there?" He stared at the small pile of still smoking ashes in the tray.

Gorren laughed shortly. "Probably some old love letters."

Uncle Shipnay thought that was very funny. Deep laughter rumbled out of him. "You have guessed closer to the mark, my friend, than you think." He threw Sam Nazare a huge wink. "It was necessary to keep the most charming lady occupied in order to give Skondor time for an investigation. It fell to my lot to furnish the diversion."

Gorren and Antonelli were bewildered by the merriment. If they had thought I'd take their grab lying down they certainly hadn't expected me to make a joke of it. I hastened to enlighten them.

"That was your evidence that just went up in smoke," I told them.

Gorren looked dazed. "No . . . it was in the safe . . . !" He began to catch on "My wife!" he screamed. His hand flashed toward his coat pocket. "I'll kill you!" he shrieked at Uncle Shpinay.

My uncle dropped the cloth he'd been holding and revealed a sawed-off shotgun in his huge hand. He held it as one who was accustomed to weapons. "Hold on, my friend," he cautioned Gorren. Gorren froze. "Something else Skondor found in Mr. Gorren's safe," my uncle explained to me. "I thought it might prove useful."

Gorren looked at the gun, then at Antonelli. "That's it!" he told the gangster. Antonelli understood him for he was shaken.

At last I began to catch on. So that was how Antonelli had been able to stay in Detroit and still get his work done. I turned to Gorren.

"You dirty killer!" I yelled. "I'm gonna see you fry!"

He woke up. "It's not loaded!" he hollered to Antonelli, "Grab it!"

The gangster lunged at my uncle as Gorren's hand came out of his pocket with a rod. Antonelli got to my uncle just as Gorren swung the gun to cover my middle. Then Uncle Shpinay went into action. He ducked down and got a hand into Antonelli's gut. Then with a tremendous heave he catapulted the hoodlum into Gorren. Gorren's shot at me went wild and he and Antonelli were rammed into the wall.

I got around the desk fast and caught Gorren as he started to rise. My foot smashed into the side of his head and he went back down. Antonelli was digging at his pocket as he tried to get up. I gave him a knee right in his fat face. His nose turned into a red blob and he went back, this time for keeps.

For a moment the room was quiet. I looked at my uncle. There was one thing I wanted to know.

"How did you find out about all this?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "I listened at the door. Please forgive me."

"You're forgiven. Don't worry about it."

"Thank you, my boy. Now I suggest you call the authorities."

"I will. I think the F. B. I. will be interested in these two. They'll want to know all about that dope racket Antonelli was going to take over." I got busy on the phone.

When I hung up Uncle Shpinay started stuffing his cases. Suddenly he paused and looked up. "Perhaps," he said, "while we are waiting, you would like to look at some of these lovely linens which have just arrived from the old country?"

THE END

THE CASE OF THE MISSING WIFE

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 91)

breathing with long quivering moans. Sam yanked the blanket off Doris and pulled the gag from her mouth. She sat up and he started to untie her wrists, while she shivered violently and finally burst into angry, frightened tears. The taxi stopped in the middle of the block. The driver scurried out and ran across the street.

"I'LL go after the police," Doris said as she finished untying her legs. Nick Elster had his chin on his chest, his hands covering his face.

"You've still got eyes, Elster," Sam said harshly. "But I'm going after them again unless you talk."

"I can't see! I can't. Damn you. I didn't kill Alwing. Nobody can prove I did," Elster snapped.

"You did lure him to my room," Sam said. "You telephoned about the towels

in order to get the room open. And you made him climb seven flights of stairs at gunpoint. You probably made him run."

"You fool! He hated your guts," Elster cried passionately. "He wanted to frame you with that money—pay you, and have me break in to witness it so he could send you to prison. He thought you'd be in your room. He was going to swear you were holding Doris prisoner somewhere and had demanded the money."

"He phoned Doris and told her where I was," Sam said. "He knew about that from you. Why did he let his wife know? He wanted to keep us apart."

"Like hell!" Elster protested, looking at Sam, his hands protectively near his eyes. "He wanted to catch you two together and bring divorce action. He figured if he couldn't stick you with taking kidnap ransom, he could still beat her to divorce—and see she didn't get his money. You should be glad he's dead."

"You knew I'd be in the clothing store quite a while," Sam said reflectively. "It was during that hour you killed the man. But after—in the lobby of Anson Mervey's office building you met Mervey's secretary."

"That was pure accident," Elster said firmly. "I've done work for Mervey, and I know the woman. That was all."

TWO hours later Sam and Doris left the Inspector's office together.

"I'll buy you a drink," Sam said. "We need one."

"I feel lost," she said, settling back against his arm in the cab. "Come to my apartment."

Sam didn't answer. Two points hadn't been cleared. Nick Elster was in jail. He'd confessed robbing Alwing. He was charged with kidnapping Doris. Alwing's death during commission of the robbery, and as result of it was sufficient for first degree murder charges. But why had Elster needed to kill? He could have pulled the robbery without murder. And it seemed odd that the detective had known beforehand about Alwing's dangerously weak heart.

"He did it for you, didn't he?" Sam said quietly.

"Don't say such a thing. I knew Nick. He liked me. But if he had any ideas—well they were all his. Do you mean *I* put him up to murdering my husband? Sam!"

"No," Sam said. "Why should I? Besides it's not my business. Even if he did it with the idea of getting you for his pains, it wouldn't be your fault."

"Certainly not. Now, let's forget him and all the rest, Sam. I've got you back now. We've got everything ahead of us. Things are as they are and we'd be fools not to take advantage of them."

"I think I'll pass the drink, Doris," he said. "And the rest of it."

"No you won't, Sam. You'd like to feel I'm worse than you ever were by thinking I'm really a killer. But I won't let you. I love you. You're coming back to me. I admit you're right. Nick Elster killed him on my account. But I didn't know that—or even that he planned—until it was done. The Inspector knows. I gave him the information tonight—that Nick had confessed he did it for me. But the Inspector didn't tell you, for one reason . . ."

"Such as . . ."

"I asked him not to tell you. Because I was afraid it would turn you against me. And it has—Oh, Sam! Sam! What's there for me now?"

"We'll talk about it in your apartment," he said. He drew her in his arms and kissed her.

IT'S TIME TO GO HOME

By WILLIAM G. BOGART

SANDY SWIM, at the moment, did not resemble an officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Clad in windbreaker and blue denim pants, he appeared more like one of the lobster fishermen out of Cape Sable Island.

Sandy stuck his leathery face above the cuddy of the broad-beamed fishing boat, breathed deep of the crisp salt air whipping past the home-made windshield of the small cabin. His eyes dropped to the small compass located just above the wheel which he held.

He brought the thirty-five-foot craft back on her so'east course, then stared ahead into the brilliant glare coming off the choppy water. Sandy Swim figured that he should pick up the hazy, vague outline of lower Pubnico—where, it was said, they caught the biggest tuna in Nova Scotia—at any moment now.

For the first time in a year, Sandy Swim forgot that he was an officer in Canada's finest. Again he was a fisherman out of Clark's Harbor; again he was just a guy who loved the sea and who thrilled to the roll and pitch of the

A broken clock couldn't tell Sandy Swim the time. But he wasn't interested in the clock's hands; its eyes were what he needed

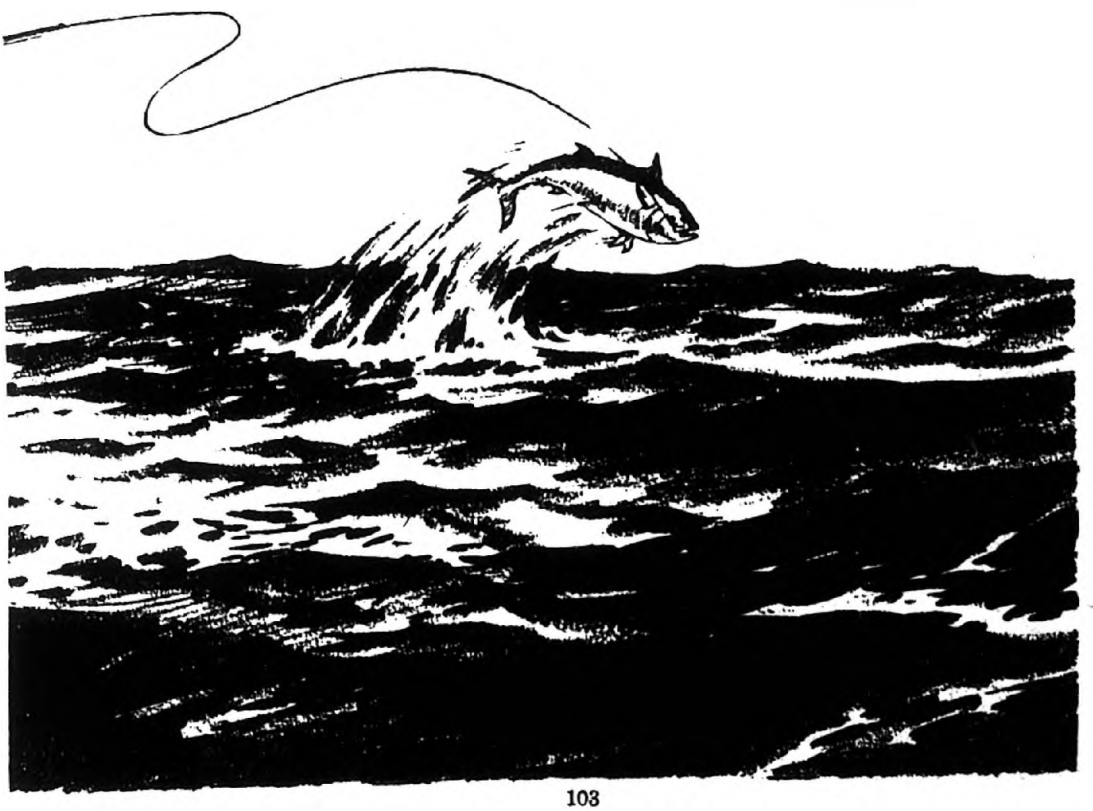
gas-engined powered boat. He braced his feet, took the roll of the boat with bended knees, and wished that this vacation of his could last another month.

That is, he wished it until he finally came upon the tide "rip," where everyday they pulled in giant tuna running up to nine hundred pounds.

Five fishing boats were out in the rip this morning. Waves—choppy sea that tossed the boat up and down like a matchbox—sent salty spray flying over the little forward cabin. The salt stuck in Sandy Swim's bleached pale hair, and made little beads on his eyelashes. He grinned as he cut down on the gas throttle and kept the boat headed into the rip. It was going to be fun watching someone get a strike.

Sandy lay off, parallel with the line of tuna boats. The powerful engine in the covered pit almost at his feet kept turning over easily, just enough to hold the boat headed into the running tide. In the next boat nearest him, helpers

The giant tuna, fighting the hook, surged mightily against the line—and jerked the fisherman overboard!



in the stern were "chumming" out herring in an attempt to lure a tuna.

You could tell the regular fishermen, who operated the boats, from the men who came down here for the sea's greatest sport. The fishermen themselves wore old jumpers, or perhaps a frayed sweater open at the neck. The breeze was strong, and quite cold. But they did not seem to mind.

But the anglers were dressed in oilskins, or perhaps expensive duds put out by New York's highest priced equipment stores. Sandy squinted his blue eyes and watched.

APPARENTLY there were three men, outside the helpers, in the party. One was sprawled out in a chair in the middle of the heaving boat. Another staggered to the rail, leaned over a moment, then swayed back and sank to the floor just behind the chair. Sandy grinned. Evidently this second one was already seasick.

The third man was in the chair itself. Sandy Swim well knew the setup. This "chair" was a clumsy-looking wooden affair located toward the stern. It was set in the center of a frame structure that looked not unlike a miniature motordrome. The idea was to brace your feet on this thing when you got a strike. The chair itself swiveled around to give you a chance to play the tuna.

And to the angler himself was attached the gear which held the heavy tuna rod. There was a reel at least a half foot in diameter. Straps went from pole and reel to a harness around the angler's chest and shoulders. Another harness securely tied the man to the chair.

The helpers in the very stern of the boat kept feeding out the large herring. Another fisherman was forward at the wheel, uninterested in the proceedings going on behind him. It was his job to merely keep the pitching boat headed into the heavy rip tide.

Again the one who was seasick staggered over to the rail. A moment later he returned to his position in the very bottom of the boat, gripping the foot rest of the man in the chair as he swayed past.

Suddenly there was a yell from one of the boats beyond the one which Sandy watched. The R. C. M. P. man quickly saw the reason for the shout.

A giant tuna had cut the water close to the boat. Water swirled and a fin flashed. A fish that moved with the blurred speed of an express train had passed between the first two boats in the line. Excitement followed.

Men in the boat nearest Sandy were suddenly throwing more herring overboard. The man in the chair sat up alertly, working his pole up and down.

And then it came. The strike!

There was the whine of the reel as the monster tuna took the bait. It was a thing, Sandy Swim knew, that could happen so quickly that several hundred feet of line would go out before you hardly realized it.

But apparently the angler in the boat knew his business. For Sandy Swim saw the man's left arm move to the brake on the big reel. He was ready to throw it on, as soon as the streaking fish slowed its first run.

Sandy's sharp eyes told him other things. The man strapped in the chair weighed all of two hundred. He had powerful shoulders. He should be able to land this one in less than an hour. He should be—

Sandy Swim gasped, and stared for an instant in frozen awe. For the man in the chair had slapped on the brake which held the powerful tuna from running out.

And then he was yanked bodily overboard!

IT WAS a thing that occurred almost too fast for the eye to follow. One moment the broad-shouldered angler had been in the chair; the next, just as though some great unseen hand had clutched him, he had rocketed over the stern of the pitching fishing boat. And just as abruptly, he was gone.

There was only a foamy swirl of water to show where the man had gone beneath the surface. He did not reappear.

Sandy Swim whipped into action. He threw the wheel over, opened the gas throttle wide and swung his craft in a direction the mammoth tuna had momentarily taken. But at the same time, Sandy realized, the fish, at that very moment, might be headed in an altogether different direction.

The other boats were also following, each taking a different course.

After five minutes, Sandy Swim's hard jaw set grimly and he gave a sigh. The man had not reappeared. He had been under long enough to drown three times over. Sandy heeled his own boat over until he came alongside the craft from which the man had been yanked.

He noted that even the seasick man was on his feet now. The man was short, stocky, with high-colored full features.

Sandy Swim hailed: "Only chance of ever finding that poor devil is when the tuna breaks that line with his tail."

The fisherman at the wheel of the other boat nodded. It was ticklish business jockeying the two pitching boats alongside in the running rip tide. Sandy was careful to keep at least a dozen yards from the other boat.

He added: "Who was he?"

Faces of those near Sandy Swim looked startled. Someone called: "Hell! That was Jimmy Martin!"

The words gave Sandy a start. Jimmy Martin! Present holder of the world's largest tuna catch!

Swiftly Sandy Swim's eyes narrowed and became thoughtful. He was staring at the big, safely anchored chair from which Jimmy Martin had been pulled to his death. And at the safety belt which now dangled from the back of that chair. Even from where he was, Sandy could see a detail about the heavy belt.

It was unfastened!

And yet it was hardly logical that an experienced fisherman like Jimmy Martin would sit there waiting for a strike with his belt unfastened.

And so Sandy Swim, on a sudden impulse, called out: "Pull out of that rip. Then tie up alongside here. I'm coming aboard!"

The short man of the red face, the one who had been seasick, looked at his partner, a man almost as big as the one who had disappeared overboard. The second man yelled back:

"What's the idea, stranger?"

For answer, Sandy Swim pushed back his windbreaker. Beneath it he was wearing his R. C. M. P. uniform shirt, and it was immediately recognized. He saw the short chunky man's lips pucker out in a surprised whistle.

A FEW minutes later both boats had pulled ahead into more calm water, clear of the dangerous rip tide. Sandy was able to ease his craft against the other boat without too much danger of the two smashing themselves to bits against each others' sides. He swung agilely aboard the second craft.

There was something awesome about seeing the big swiveling chair there in the tuna boat, empty of its occupant, swinging grimly left and right with each pitch of the boat. Sandy looked at the remaining occupants.

There were the two helpers and the

man who had piloted the craft; all French Canadians who, Sandy knew, operated out of Wedgeport. But the red-faced short man and his burly partner were typical New Yorkers, up here on a holiday.

Sandy said: "Both you men knew Jimmy Martin?"

The big fellow nodded. "Hell, yes. We were associated with him in New York. We were all partners." He nodded at the red-face man. "He's Lou Golden. I'm Smith. We—"

"I see," Sandy Swim cut in. Disregarding the two, he turned around to examine the big chair set in the center of the large circular foot support. He picked up the safety belt, noting it carefully. The strong snap fastener was in perfect working order—but free of the ring which would have kept Jimmy Martin from going to his death!

Sandy Swim might have been clad in old clothes suited for the sea, but as he swung back to the group of watching men, he was again a grim-jawed, alertly trained officer of the Mounted.

He said in a strangely quiet voice: "Jimmy Martin, as I recall, had an unbeatable record at tuna fishing. He was hardly the kind of person who would have left his safety belt unhooked. Even an amateur would have known better!"

The big man named Smith frowned and asked evenly: "Just what are you getting at, sir?"

Sandy Swim jerked his head toward his own boat. "Just this," he stated, "I'm taking you two in for questioning. Climb over!"

Sandy knew that the tuna boat itself belonged to the French Canadians. Tackle and boat were usually rented by the anglers. And so he directed briefly to the man at the wheel:

"Take her in. I'll be responsible for these partners of Jimmy Martin."

The short, red-faced man—Golden—looked aghast.

"You mean," he demanded, "that you're not even going to *look* for Jimmy Martin?"

Sandy Swim smiled tightly. "Perhaps," he said, "after that tuna breaks the line, we'll find Martin on the shore somewhere. But I'd say it will be at least a week—and then only if the right tide carries him to one of the islands around here. The mainland itself is quite a few miles off."

"But—"

"Get going!" Sandy Swim finished.

WHEN he had cast off from the fishing boat, with the two partners of the drowned man on his own craft, Sandy took the wheel and ordered his two captives to take seats atop the wooden covering over the engine. This was close beside where he himself stood at the small wheel.

The one named Smith was protesting: "I don't get this, officer. Certainly Jimmy's death was an accident . . . a terrible accident—"

"Terrible," Sandy Swim rapped, "—but no accident. That safety belt was unhooked—deliberately! I'm thinking one of you had a reason for—"

Suddenly, husky-looking Smith exclaimed, "Yes! Yes, there *could* have been a reason!" He glared at his short, red-faced partner. "Golden, here, owed Jimmy a lot of money. For some time now, Jimmy's been trying to buy out this man's interest in our business, but Golden won't sell. And so Jimmy beat him in a card game last night, to the tune of three grand. And now he hasn't got it, and Jimmy had him right in a position to force him to sell out. You see, we don't like his business methods, and—"

Suddenly, with swift and surprising movement, the smaller man came up

off the motor housing. His hand had whipped from beneath his jacket, and in it there was a lot of gun.

"All right," he sneered. "Then how do you like this!"

Swiftly the man's red features had changed from that of a worried frown to twisted, leering fury. He held the gun trained on Sandy Swim and the big man, and he shouted: "Sure, I did it!" He stared a moment at the lawman. "I can tell from your actions, mister. You're wise to me, but if it hadn't been for this fool talking—"

Golden's gaze shifted back to the heavy-set man's, and there was murder in his eyes.

For a moment, Sandy's hands had left the wheel. Then his eyes clouded and he gripped it again, watching the man with the gun. He was unarmed himself; it would take some subtle trick to fool this killer—

Sandy Swim said flatly: "I had it just about figured, fella. That time you lurched away from the rail and near the chair. That's when you unhooked his belt. Furthermore, you were never seasick in the first place. A guy sick gets white, or maybe green, but you never lost that color of yours, and—"

Stocky Golden laughed harshly. "Fine!" he sneered. "Now figure this!"

And he fired point blank at the big man who had been his other business partner!

THE big man screamed, clutching his stomach. The shot had been fired from less than four feet away. The gun was a .38, and the mess it made of Smith was not pretty as he sprawled writhing to the deck. A moment later his motions stopped and he lay still.

But Sandy Swim did not wait to see that. He let go of the steering wheel and almost flew across the intervening motor housing in order to tackle the glaring eyed gunman.

But little Golden was too quick. Obviously he had been expecting the attack. He fired again, jumping back toward the opposite rail as he did so.

It was a wild shot, grazing the back of Sandy Swim's left hand. But it was enough to make him pause. He realized, tensely, that this man planned on burning all his bridges behind him. He had killed a man and been suspected, and for this he was now taking no chances.

He kept the gun lined on Sandy Swim's chest. The Mountie waited, his brain racing. Though his eyes never left those of the killer, he almost could see the short length of heavy baseball bat lying near the man's feet. It had been in the bottom of the boat when Sandy left Clark's Harbor. It was a bat used for hitting large fish over the head when they were hauled aboard.

He saw Golden's crazed gaze shift momentarily. The fellow chanced a glance across the water, just to make certain that no other boat was close.

And then, swiftly, Golden's eyes looked startled, fearful.

Sandy Swim understood instantly. A Nova Scotia fisherman could have told blindfolded.

The wind had suddenly changed. It had changed as swiftly as it does around the Cape; and with it there was the thick fog from further out to sea. The fog that lay out there constantly, and which would completely envelop you five minutes after the wind shifted.

As though someone had dropped a curtain all around them, they were shortly in a bleak, chill world that was wet and drab with the fog that swirled like smoke.

SANDY SWIM stood motionless, a peculiar half smile touching his rugged features as the fog closed in.

And he was suddenly thrilling to the salty, sticky smell that came with this fog.

For he was still watching the gunman's eyes, and the terror that was deep within them. For one who was not raised by the sea, Sandy knew that there was something mysterious, terrifying about the gray thickness that was as impenetrable as night.

Golden abruptly cried: "Grab that wheel, damn you! In this fog, we're liable to pile up on rocks. We'd be pounded to death!"

Sandy nodded. "Yes, we might," he said.

He took the wheel, noting that he was warily covered with the automatic. The gas engine had been turning over, the craft moving somewhat aimlessly through the rough water. He held the wheel steady and looked back at Golden.

Fear was still on the man's red face.

Somewhere off in the thickness, there was the mournful *bong-bong* of a buoy bell. Golden's face whitened a trifle. He said:

"How . . . how are we going to get *back* in this fog?"

Sandy Swim nodded to the small compass near the wheel. "With this," he said, "and by using the chronometer."

"You mean," the gunman asked doubtfully, "you find your way back to the mainland with just those things, in"—he waved an arm to indicate the gray curtain that was all around them —"in *this?*"

Sandy Swim nodded. "You'd better hurry up and get that chronometer before we *do* crack up. It's right here in the cuddy." Sandy made a slight movement toward the small doorway near him. "Or I can get it myself."

"Wait!" exclaimed Golden. "*I'll* do the getting!"

Sandy shrugged, held onto the wheel. Golden moved forward, still keeping him covered. The doorway to the cuddy was only a few feet from Swim, and his right hand was out of sight as the gunman stepped dangerously close to him.

Suddenly, Sandy's right hand moved swiftly. He threw the wheel around, kicked the boat over at a sharp angle. Golden momentarily lost his balance, staggered.

In that instant Sandy Swim moved with lightning speed. His left hand shot out, grabbed the man's gun arm, knocked the weapon to the deck.

They went down in a fighting, clawing heap. Stocky Golden was quick and wiry. He flung the Mountie off, came to his feet and shot forward in a smashing drive.

Sandy Swim was knocked through the door opening to the small cabin. Golden landed on him before he was completely on his feet. Both men started swinging blows that were somewhat wild with the pitching of the boat.

A right landed Golden up against a narrow seat that angled forward inside the cabin. Force of the man's fall knocked an old battered alarm clock from a hook nearby. The clock was rusted, faceless, and its hands were stopped at two-thirty.

Sandy leaped in to finish the job, but Golden's feet doubled up, straightened, sent the law officer hurtling back toward the small doorway. Sandy hit the one short step and fell backward.

And in that second Golden had scooped up a heavy lead weight and swung. It caught Sandy Swim dangerously close to the ear. He went down —and stayed down.

WHEN Sandy Swim came to, he knew that he had been unconscious only a matter of moments. For

Golden was just pulling tight the last knot that bound together the officer's hands and wrists. From a length of heavy cod line, he had cut some of the brown cord. In fact, he was just on the verge of frantically shaking Swim when the lawman opened his eyes.

Golden yanked Sandy Swim to his feet, pushed him toward the wheel. "Damn you!" he snarled. "Now get back there and get us to land. Here!"

He had found the chronometer in its neat black case, and he placed the instrument near Sandy on the motor housing top. The device was one for measuring time accurately. With its use, in conjunction with the compass, a man who knew these waters could chart his way back through the fog.

"Now," Golden snapped, "you get us back near Wedgeport. There's an old dock a mile away from the regular pier. Take me there—"

But Sandy Swim was shaking his head.

"Only know the way through to Clark's Harbor," he said truthfully. "Getting *there* is bad enough, but I think I can make it."

Golden stared worriedly. Obviously he, too, knew something about the two hour trip that angled between dangerous reefs and uninhabitated islands. A safe journey meant careful figuring of minutes, as various points of the compass were followed in order to hit the narrow entrance to the harbor. And around Clark's Harbor lay more outer islands that had been the ocean graveyard of larger craft than this.

His face tight with worry, Golden rapped: "Okay. And you'd better make it good." He waggled the gun which he again held.

Checking his minutes with the chronometer, Sandy Swim held the fishing boat on its course through the fog. It was uncanny, in a way. There was nothing except the thick fog. It might just as well have been night. Vision extended only a few feet to the threatening waves that composed the Atlantic around them.

Through the wall of gray occasionally came the toll of a bell, faint and echoing weirdly. To Golden, the sound might have come from a dozen various directions. And he knew that each toll meant warning of reefs and shoal water. The way the sea was running, the least error meant death on jutting rocks.

Terror, therefore, still was mirrored in Golden's eyes.

Time passed, and they were the only two men in a world set apart. From time to time the law officer glanced at Golden, only to be reassured that the automatic was still trained on his back.

Then, after a while, his ears strained and he listened carefully. He could hear the bell through the fog, a sound that was slightly different than the others. Anyone who had ever lived on Cape Sable Island could have told you that it marked the entrance to Barrington Passage.

They were entering the smoother waters of the harbor!

Sandy Swim cut down on his engine speed, and watched ahead through the thick grayness. After a while he said: "We should be picking up the black-can buoy any moment. Then we'll be almost in."

Golden, however, had glanced over the side of the boat. He let out a sudden outcry.

"Wait!" he half screamed. "There's rocks just beneath us!"

But Sandy nodded quietly. "I know," he agreed. "But they're down a good dozen feet. We only draw three. I'm following the shoreline to the pier."

Golden stared. "You mean," he questioned, "we're right off shore?"

Sandy Swim motioned to his left. "It's only about a hundred feet away, here."

Suddenly, a crafty smile flickered across Golden's face. He swung the heavy gun barrel. Sandy went down on his face.

And then the killer was ripping off part of his clothes. Next, he scooped up a fish net, entangled it over the officer's limp form, then jumped toward the gunwale.

But he paused, returning and picked up the delicate chronometer and threw it overboard. Next, he picked up a length of fish line, pulled the wheel over until the boat was again headed *away* from shore, out toward the dangerous and narrow channel through which they had entered the harbor. Then he lashed the wheel so it could not move.

Yanking wide the engine throttle, Golden again stepped to the gunwale. Just before he dived overboard, he said with a leer: "See you in hell, brother!"

THROBBING of the boat's engine pounded through Sandy Swim's brain. He stirred, groaned with the pain that surged through the back of his skull. He opened his eyes.

Many men might have been panicked had they seen that heavy fish net tied about them. Too, somehow, Sandy Swim realized the trick the killer had used. He knew, instinctively, that his craft was headed at full speed out toward open sea—and toward the dangerous shoals that marked the entrance to Clark's Harbor.

But Sandy Swim had been in tight spots before. He worked with the net slowly, patiently. He tried not to think of what might be ahead of the moving boat.

But when he was finally free, he whipped into flashing action, got his hands untied, and then loosened the line from around the steering wheel.

He stared around for the chronometer, then suspected what had happened to it. He took a quick look at the compass.

Before hurrying into the small cabin, he cut the motor, just to be safe. He was out on deck again in an instant, listening tensely.

Far off, he heard the deep sound of the lighthouse "growler" on the Cape. Off to his left, Sandy Swim heard the faraway, toylike bonging of a bell. Some of the tenseness went out of his face.

He started winding up the old alarm clock in his hand. . . .

Half an hour later, as though it might have been clear sunlight instead of impenetrable fog, he eased the fishing boat up to the pier at Clark's Harbor.

Men were waiting on that pier. Fishermen with strained faces. Others were already putting out in boats. They paused at sight of Sandy Swim.

Sandy tied up and was on the dock in an instant. He asked hurriedly: "Was there a man who swam ashore a little while ago? A short man who —"

Someone spoke up. "Sure thing, Sandy. Good grief, we figured you were done for. The guy said you and his partner and him cracked up, and then he just managed to swim ashore. He—"

Sandy's eyes flashed. "Where'd he go?"

"Headed for the ferry at Barrington Passage. Got a ride in a car. Must be almost up there by now, but the next ferry ain't for half an hour yet."

Sandy swung toward one of the fishermen he knew. "Get up to the hotel," he ordered. "Call them at Barrington and have them hold that fellow when he gets off the ferry. There's never

more than one or two passengers at any time. Also call the R. C. M. P. and tell them to have a man waiting. But I'll be along in a moment."

Sandy's man was trapped. The ferry only crossed to the mainland once each hour. It was the *only* means, other than a small boat, by which you could leave Cape Sable Island. And these men had said that Golden had asked for a ride to the ferry crossing.

Briefly, Sandy explained what had happened. Among the men he knew, he saw a couple of strangers who were here on vacation. They understood something about chronometers, and they stared in wonder when Sandy Swim told how his own had been pitched overboard.

One said: "But I don't understand! Without it, how did you *know* your course? How did you get back here?"

Sandy smiled, gave his fellow men a knowing look.

"Mister," he offered, "fishermen raised on Cape Sable Island can't afford chronometers. They use alarm clocks to time themselves on their course. My chronometer was a gift, but I never used it. I'd rather have this old clock."

Sandy still held the clock in his hands. "Lucky thing it was stopped," he explained. "Or Golden might have guessed that I could use it." He indicated the half rusted hands and the broken face.

"You see, the darn thing always jams up at two-thirty. You have to remember to reset it when you're using it on a foggy day."

One of the visitors to the Island whistled. "Brother!" he exclaimed. "That's what I call navigating."

An old-timer spoke up. "Friend," he said, "I guess we can sort of *smell* our way home in a fog!"

Sandy Swim smiled again. Then his face set in grim lines. He said: "I've got to go. There's *one* fellow I know who's going to learn clocks can do more than tell time!"

THE END

THE MOUNT OF THE MOUNTED

HAVE you ever watched a police horse stand quietly on the same spot where his rider had left him even though he was left untied? You must have wondered how and why he didn't move away. The answer is simple—good training over a long period of time.

The police horses of the New York City police force are among the best trained horses in the world because each horse is given from three to four months of intensive training at a special school for traffic horses. Here they are given a tough workout daily in galloping, trotting, climbing, jumping, and turning around under the close supervision of a top-notch instructor. The instructor watches for any signs of fatigue and when he determines that the horse would like a rest, he gives the command to halt, dismounts, and walks away from the horse leaving him untied. The horse is very tired and since no one is around to bother him, he just relaxes and takes it easy on that one spot Soon the horse learns that when his rider dismounts and leaves him alone, he can relax and thus he doesn't waste this precious "off-time" moving about and using up the energy he will need sooner or later.

The horses are also taught, through experience, how to act in the rush hour traffic when they must stand quietly while cars whiz by them on either side. They learn how to act when helping to disperse a crowd. In this situation they swing their shoulders as they move through the crowd and thus disperse the people without trampling them. They learn to trust a person standing behind their backs and will even permit a man to lean an elbow on their rump. Of course, the horse also brushed up on his rein signals and also learns to obey signals conveyed by movements and pressure of the rider's feet.

Each horse that is chosen for training must meet strict requirements. They must be pure bays or at least part bay, weigh about 1200 pounds, and stand about 15 hands high. They must be saddle-type horses between the age of four and eight years old.

Once they are properly trained, these fine horses turn in many years of faithful service and deserve their share of the credit for maintaining an orderly, efficient, and safe city.

—R. Clayton

THE DOUBLE TAKE

By ROY HUGGINS

(Continued from page 69)

in the still air.

The door opened and the sour voice told me to come in. I stepped into a cool hall and the old woman pointed at some French doors leading outside and said: "She'll see you. She's in the yard."

The yard was what nice people would call a garden. It was a kind of flowered atoll, stretching greenly downward and ending at a thick long row of red geraniums that grew in a circle and came around along the house. The only break in the thick growth was at the French doors. Beyond the red bank of flowers, the hill continued upward and became part of the rolling green waste of Brentwood. There were no other houses beyond this one.

In the center there was a little grouping of canvas beach-chairs around a low redwood table, and there was a large green mat on the grass beside the chairs. Irene Neher was sitting in one of the canvas pieces that was almost like a chaise-longue. When I got close she stood up, her fists clenched at her sides. She wore a white halter and shorts that made the tan of her skin deeper than I remembered it, but she was one of those rare women clothes don't help a bit. Her face was a little too thin and hard around the mouth, but the hair still held its new-peeled willow beauty, and the eyes said she was still young enough to walk away from a hangover. They were brown eyes, and they were afraid of something.

I stopped when I got to the table, and looked at her. I still couldn't smile, and I figured it was up to her to get things started. She just stood, a little

She lay there, holding the glass, and looked at the chip I was holding. If there was fear in her face, I missed it

stiffly, and apparently not breathing. She looked at me steadily enough, but there was a shrill scream lying somewhere behind her dark eyes. I was afraid it wasn't too far behind.

"What do you want?" Her voice was nice, but she slurred the words, and the question sounded more like "Whu' chew wawnt?"

The blue chip was lying on the table. I looked at it and said: "Not very much."

She sat down and folded her hands in her lap.

"Sit down, Mr. Bailey," she said in a stage whisper. "Were you . . were you the one in the room?"

I sat down. "How did you know anyone was in the room?"

"Why, I locked it! And those chips are worth fifty dollars apiece. I know how many I had."

I leaned back and looked at her admiringly. "You certainly keep your head when you have a snoot full. I didn't think the chip would mean a thing to you."

"I guess you know—or you wouldn't be here—how much it means to me to keep this . . .this episode of last night quiet. But . . . I can't pay you very much, Mr. Bailey. At least not at one time." She was leaning toward me, her long legs held tight together and her hands clasped on her knees. Her eyebrows were raised at the inner ends almost in a burlesque of tragedy. "Maybe we could agree on so much at a time . . . ?"

I scowled and said: "How much could you give me this trip?"

She caught her breath. "A thousand dollars?"

"In cash?"

She nodded her golden head earnestly.

I shook my head slowly and stared at her. She dropped her eyes to her hands and started playing with her fingers.

"Honey," I said, "You're the softest touch since O'Hoolihan bought Brooklyn Bridge. Who lets you play house out here all by yourself?"

SHE looked up at me and her slender face relaxed and the fright hiding in her eyes suddenly disappeared and something else began to dance faintly behind them.

"Then . . . then you aren't here to blackmail me?"

"No, baby. I should, just to teach you a lesson. But I don't want your thousand dollars. I think you ought to put it in a bank."

She looked at me for a long while. She dropped her eyes to my feet and started there, sweeping slowly up and bringing them to rest on my face again. Then she leaned back in the canvas chair and laughed. It wasn't pretty laughter, but it was loud and genuine. She raised one slender leg and slapped the thigh. Then she looked at me again, her eyes dark and shimmering, her face flushed and warm and pretty, but still hard around the mouth.

"But you really believed I had the grand. Didn't you?" The softness had gone out of her voice. It was almost raucous now.

"Why not?" I said. "It fit the rest of your screw-ball act. What was the idea?"

She stood up and yelled: "Hey, Jesus, bring us out some liquor." Jesus was somebody's name, and she gave it the English pronunciation. She sat down again and let her legs fall where they might.

"Was it fun?" I said.

"No. You got out of character too soon."

"What if I hadn't? It might have made me mad when the sweet touch turned sour."

She reached under the chair. A Luger was large and ugly in her tiny hand. "This was for when I got bored with you." She laid it on the table.

A little Filipino boy with a round Cherub's face brought out ice, whiskey, glasses, and White Rock on a large tray. He put it down on the redwood table and went away again.

She mixed a couple of judicious drinks, gave one to me, and sat the other on the grass beside the green mat. She gave me a level stare and said. "All right. How in hell did you get into that room?"

"Secret." I tried to grin.

"You might at least have had the decency to cover me up. When I woke up there were two flunkies in the room drooling at me."

"I did. You probably kicked it off again."

"Oh," she said softly and cocked her head at me. "You know, you interrupted my afternoon communion with Sol. Is your business going to take very long?"

"It shouldn't."

"Well." She gave me a slow smile. "I guess I haven't anything to hide from you anyway. Have I, darling?" Then she turned her back to me and stepped over to the green mat. She untied the halter and dropped it on the grass, unhooked the white trunks, dropped them, stepped out of them, and without coyness lay down on her belly, her blonde head toward me.

I said: "Do you have much trouble here with low-flying planes?"

She took a long drink from her glass and ignored the question.

"Now," she said. "Just what can I do for you?"

I DECIDED not to make anything out of that. I said: "It's kind of simple. I was away from Los Angeles for over a year. Just got back about six months ago, and I've sort of lost touch with the fringe-boys. Would you like to tell me who operates the Cheviot Drive place?"

"Why?"

"Do you have to know?"

"And even then, I doubt if I'll tell you."

I half-smiled. "It's nice to know that you can tell me—if you decide to."

She looked up at me and squinted one eye against the sun. She said: "I like you. I think you're a square guy, even if you do look like a punch-drunk pug. If you work it just right, I might tell you a lot of things." She smiled, then she put her face down on the mat and pulled back her hair so that her shoulders were bare to the sun.

"I'm really a very handsome guy," I said. "I just got worked on last night—out at the Cheviot place."

Her head lifted a little and then settled down again. "Go on," she said.

Without going into too much detail, I told her about Red, and how I happened to be in the room with her.

"You mean they fell for that hoary gag?"

"You've got to admit it had several new twists this time."

"Yup. I guess it did." She had raised her head again and she was chewing on a piece of grass and frowning. "Something's funny there. I don't know any of those guys."

"Go out there often?"

She squinted at me again, took a drink and said nothing. Somewhere in the house a vacuum cleaner throbbed rhythmically, and I could still faintly hear the sound of the radio up the street.

Finally she said: "I think somebody's cutting capers out of school. I know a party who wouldn't like that at all."

"You mean someone else runs the

place for the man that owns it."

"Uh-huh."

"Know the guy? The owner, I mean."

"Kind of."

"Could you sort of let his name drop. I'll forget where I picked it up."

She put her head down. "I'll do more than that for you, Mr. B., but first I must get in my half-hour, back and front."

"Listen, honey, there's nothing I'd rather do than sit here watching you lap up vitamin D while I do the same with your liquor. But I've got a lot to do yet today. Be a nice girl and do your good turn first."

She looked at me again with her mouth open and both eyes squeezed almost shut. "Well I'll be damned," she mumbled. Then she rolled over, pulled on the shorts, picked up the halter, tied it on without turning her back and strode into the house. I followed her.

She went to a phone in the hall and dialed a number.

"Bruno? . . Thiz Boots. Know anyone named Stuart Bailey? . . You do . . You want'm for something? . . . Really? Well. Spiros must be renting concessions. Three guys had him out to the Cheviot Club last night and tried to kill him. . . . Yup. Sure."

She pushed the phone at me. "He knows you."

"That wouldn't be Bruno Des Noyers?"

"None other."

I TOOK the phone and said into it: "I don't know why I didn't look you up in the first place. But I thought you got religion."

"I did, Stu." The voice was high, sharp. "Got a nice little legitimate investment firm."

"Uh-huh. Three floors of the Easterbrook Building."

"Hah, hah! What's this about Spiros?"

"I don't know any Spiros. Has he got red hair?"

"No. He runs the joint out there for me. Boots says he went over you."

"A big red-headed guy did. He had a couple of torpedoes with him, but he didn't really need them. I'd like to get a round-trip ticket into the Club. Tonight. How about it?"

"Uh . . . sure, Stu. I owe you something for that Markham deal, but I wouldn't want any rough stuff out there."

"You don't owe me a thing, Bruno. But if you can fix your end of it, there won't be any trouble from me. I just want to find out what it's all about."

"So do I, brother. Consider it fixed."

"I'll rely on that."

"Don't worry, slug. Thanks for the chance to repay you. I'd just about given you up."

"Thanks. By the way, what became of Barky Northwick?"

There was a little pause that might not have meant anything. Then he said: "He drew a couple of years at the College. Don't know if he's out or not."

"Oh."

"Lemme talk to Boots. Good luck, Bucko."

I handed the phone to the girl. She said: "Thanks, honey. . . . Huh. . . Oh. Why, he saw my car out there when he was getting away. He got my name off the steering wheel. . . . What for? . . . well, if you say so. . . . G'bye."

She hung up and grinned at me. "He wants me to go with you tonight to make sure Spiros behaves."

"That'll be fine," I said. "Promise me something."

"Sure. What?"

"That you'll keep your clothes on."

She made a face at me and said: "What have you got on Bruno?"

"Nothing. He was being framed for

something he didn't do a few years back and I turned up the man who actually did it. I was working for someone else, and I got paid for it."

She smiled and made a little noise in her throat. "You're a sleuth, huh?"

I headed for the door. "That I am, baby. And I better get to sleuthing. Got lots of work to do."

"Wait! Where'll I see you?"

I turned and looked at her. "Hm. I guess I have to take you. They'll be expecting you with me probably."

She put out her under lip and glared at me. "You don't have to if it's going to kill you." She walked over to the door, one finger in her mouth, her head down so that she looked at me from under her golden eyebrows.

I patted her on one firm little hip and said: "Be ready to go early. I'll call you."

She smiled and took the finger out of her mouth. "You don't have to come way out here. Where do you hang your sack?"

I wrote my address and telephone number on a slip of paper for her, and then, as an afterthought, asked her the phone number of the Cheviot Club. She gave it to me and I left. I drove too fast into Hollywood. It was past three o'clock.

CHAPTER XX

THE Northwick address in Hollywood turned out to be a liquor store. I parked in a ten-minute zone and went in. It was a large store with a long counter at the back, and a gray-haired man in a dark suit sitting behind it. I didn't recognize him until I was up to the counter and he was standing up and coming toward me.

His face and body, even his hair, had grown thin, and he was an old man now, although I knew he wasn't much over forty.

"Greetings, Barky. Remember me?"

He looked at me, his face as gray and bleak as the tall rocks at Laguna, then he gave me a tight-lipped smile and said: "Sure. What's it with you?"

"Same old thing. How's the world treating you?"

The smile pulled down a little at the edges and he moved his head to take in the liquor store. He said: "Not as good as when I used to sell the stuff wholesale." Then he laughed, a dry cackling laugh that stopped as abruptly as it began. "What'd you like? I got some imported Scotch. Seein' it's you, I'll give it to you at the ceiling price."

"Thanks, but I dropped in to see you, Barky. I don't like Scotch anyway."

"Yeah? What about?"

"I'm running something down for your friend Mrs. Cabrillo. I thought you might like to help me."

The smile dropped and his eyes went blank. He didn't say anything.

I said: "You were out of these parts for quite awhile, Barky. They tell me you were at Quentin. Is that right?"

"That's wrong," he said quietly without moving his lips.

"Don't want to help me out for Mrs. C., huh?"

"How can a guy be a shamus for as long as you and still live?"

I smiled. "I used to worry about that myself."

"Anything else on your mind?"

"I guess not, Barky." I turned and started back to the door. Half way back I stopped and said, "Ever know anyone named Gloria Gay?"

He licked his lips and said nothing.

I was out the door when I heard his, "Hey, Bailey."

I went back in and stopped at the door.

"Com'ere," he said, and jerked his head toward his right shoulder. I went

back over to the counter and leaned on it.

He looked me over carefully and said: "What's this about Gloria Gay?"

"What about her?"

"I used to know her. In Long Beach. She danced in a couple of my clubs."

"That's nice."

"What's up with her?"

"Nothing, if that's all you know about her."

"I might know a little more."

"I can't promise you anything, but there's a chance the dope might be worth something to you."

He didn't say anything, just looked at me for a long while. Then he said: "I'm gonna tell ya, just because it's so screwy. Been botherin' me all day."

I waited. I could feel my mouth getting a little dry.

"She called me up this morning. About nine o'clock." He stopped to see how I would take that.

I nodded and said: "When was the last time you heard from her before that?"

"That's the funny thing. It's been years. Before I . . . went out of the state."

"Sure it was her?"

"Hell, yes. She's got a voice you couldn't forget. She sounded excited, scared. Said she was in trouble and needed some help. My kind of help—that's what she said." He pulled his mouth down in a kind of grim smile and his eyes became slits for a moment, as if he were remembering better days, and enjoying it.

He went on: "She asked me if I'd meet her in one hour, ten o'clock. I said sure. Then—of all the damned things—she asks me if I'll meet her at the bench by the swan pond in Westlake Park. Can you imagine that?" he scowled at me.

"Maybe she likes swans."

"Well, I was there anyways. But she wasn't. She never showed up. Hasn't called again."

"Where'd she call? Here?"

"Sure. I own the joint. Can't get any honest help to run it."

"Listed in the phone book, huh?"

"Sure."

I STOOD there looking at a grease spot on Northwick's lapel and trying to make something out of what he'd told me. We stood silently for what seemed a long time, then from somewhere down the counter came a dull ring. Northwick jumped a little and moved to his right, then he turned and went the other way and disappeared through a door behind the far end of the counter.

I don't know what it was, maybe I was tired, maybe I'm not very bright, but it was several minutes before the meaning of Northwick's reversing his direction hit me. When it did I practically leaped over the counter. There was a phone under it to the right. I picked it up gently like someone handling a land mine. I heard Northwick's voice saying: "Okay, Gloria, ten o'clock tonight. But can't we make it some other place?" Then there was a little click and a dead silence. I put the phone back, gingerly, and jumped back over the counter.

I just made it. Northwick came through the door, his complexion muddy, his gray brows pulled together. "Goddamit," he said. "You picked up that phone!"

I looked blank. "What phone?"

"Somebody did, and she hung up."

I looked surprised. "You mean you were talking to Gloria Gay?"

His face relaxed. "Yeah," he said, and grimaced. "She called to say she'd managed to settle the beef. Then she hangs up before I get a chance to find

out where she lives or anything." He glared at me again. "Someone got on the line."

"That's a hell of a note. Must have been on her end."

"Yeah."

"Well, if you get a line on her it might be worth your while to get in touch with me."

He gave me a cool stare. "Where'll I find you?"

"It's in the phone book."

He nodded and I went out and drove away. A high gray fog had rolled up between the blue sky and the wide scattered city. And a cold wind was fingering down the broad streets and keening softly. I wondered if it was a lamentation for the dead that were, or for those that were yet to be.

CHAPTER XXI

THE office was warm and crowded and smoke-filled, as if someone had just been fixed up with the Presidential nomination. One of my fellow tenants was standing in the middle of the room saying good-bye to two corpulent gentlemen who smelled of dollar cigars and good Scotch. Another man I'd never seen before was reading mail at the desk in front of mine, and Lee Martinez was standing at my private window gazing out at my private view. Hazel was fighting the switchboard, but she found time to slip a note into my hand. I read the note and then went over to the desk and sat down.

Lee saw me and turned and went around the desk and sat in the conference chair. He ran his sharp black little eyes over my bruised face and said, "Don't tell me you didn't know she was married?"

"Don't be old-fashioned," I said. "I've been accepted by Hollywood's upper classes—you'll have to get used to this."

"Speaking of the upper crust—I'm not doin' so well on Mrs. Cabrillo."

"I figured as much. What's wrong?"

"If you don't want that dame to know she's being tailed, I can't do the job for you. I'm not the Man of Tomorrow. She went to the beauty parlor this morning. Eighty miles an hour there, eighty miles an hour coming back. She's a regular junior Doolittle!"

"She driving herself?"

"Yeah. If you can call it driving."

"Where else'd she go?"

"I wouldn't know. I been trying to get hold of you ever since. You can't tail anyone who drives like that without they know about it."

I leaned across the desk and said: "Lee, this is important: What time was it when she left the house this morning?"

"After ten."

"How much after ten?"

He looked at me blankly and said: "Six and one-half minutes after ten."

I grinned. "Okay. I apologize."

He got out a package of Bull Durham and some brown papers and began to roll a cigarette. He smiled and said: "Do I tail her or don't I?"

"It isn't too important. Make it a night job. She won't do more than fifty at night and you can use more angles to cover yourself."

Lee lit the cigarette and said, "Okay," and we sat and thought our private thoughts for awhile. The man at the desk stood up and crammed his brief-case full of papers, put on his hat, and walked out without saying anything to anybody. I could hear Hazel going through the routine of quick little movements that meant she would be standing at the door in a minute saying goodnight and telling me the night line was on my desk. She did, and we had the office, and the empty desks, and the

drifting twilight all to ourselves.

I opened the liquor drawer in the file cabinet and said, "Five o'clock. Time to call up the reinforcements." I brought out a bottle and two clean tumblers.

Lee grinned and said: "I was wondering when you'd remember your manners. Besides it's good business for you. I'm charging you for my time. When the bottle gets out on the desk, I'm on my own again."

I poured two tumblers a third full. Lee drank some and shuddered. "I always said there's no bad whiskey—but some is better than others." He shuddered again and looked past me out the window. Sounds of tired laughter and the tail ends of conversation drifted into the room. The government office next door was closing for the night.

Lee said casually: "What's the grief, Stu. Anything you can tell me about?"

"It isn't anything I can't tell you about. But it won't make much sense. I started out with something that seemed fairly simple. An ex-showgirl was hiding from something. All I had to do was find out what it was. But it stopped being simple then." The frugal laughter and the words were cut off in the rumble of the elevator doors. "I've gone roaring down alleys with long shadows and familiar doorways. And then somewhere in the middle, I find that someone's changed the signs, shifted the meanings. I'm in the wrong town, a long way from home. And suddenly a gray face that I've never seen before hangs from a window and whispers my name."

LEE looked down at his cigarette and rolled it between a thumb and finger. "Did they work you over pretty hard, Stu?"

I grinned. My head was throbbing, and a dull pain was trying to lift me by my bootstraps.

"I could be closer to the answer than I think," I went on. "I may crack it tonight. A hunch has been prowling around the edge of my consciousness like a hungry jackal. . . . " I got out a pencil and paper and wrote the address and phone number of the Cheviot Club and pushed the paper over to Lee. "I'm going out there tonight. If I find a man named Keller there, the hunch is going to move in and take over. I'll know where to go from there."

Lee was watching me with a worried look on his hard brown face. "I know that place," he said. "Tailed a guy and his gal there one night. Need any help?"

"Yeah. I want you to call that number between eight-thirty and eight-forty-five tonight. If I don't come to the phone and tell you everything's okay, you call Don Giese in the sheriff's office and have him come out there and get me. Then you go out to Westlake Park. A man and woman will meet at the swan pond at ten o'clock. Tail the woman. Stay with her until you get a chance to call me."

He made notes on the paper I'd given him and said: "Do I do any of this if you give me the okay from the club?"

The phone rang. "No," I said, "I'll do it—you stay with Mrs. Cabrillo." I picked up the phone and answered it. There was a windy silence, and then:

"Bailey?"

"Yeah?"

"Listen, shamus . . . " It was a voice like nothing I'd ever heard before, a rasping whisper, wind rustling through a wet cornfield at night. "I wanta thank ya—for leadin' me to Gloria Gay. It's been a long hunt . . . but get her outa the water. I don't like her in the water. . . . "

"Sure," I said. "We'll get her out of the water. You bet. . . . " While I talked I wrote, "Trace—go to room 301" on a

sheet of paper and pushed it at Martinez. He was out of the room before the voice whispered:

"She's in the storm drain, shamus. Under the hills."

"Well, we don't want that. What storm drain is it? Out Sepulveda way?"

There was a tearing sound that may have been a laugh, and then a click, and a silence that was as hollow as death. I leaned back and stared at the blank wall, feeling as if some quick hand had reached in and pulled a string and I had suddenly unravelled. It was another fact that would have to go wandering.

LEE came in complaining. "You can't get a call traced if you let the guy hang up."

"I know. The man who called knew it, too." I pushed the bar down with a finger, then released it and called City Hall. Quint hadn't left yet.

I said: "Any luck on Mrs. Johnston?"

"What do you care? I got your message—that phoney medical report that you sent me. That kind of fun is apt to snap right back in your teeth, brother."

"You hurt my feelings. Pulling that infantile Yes-room technique on me wasn't nice at all."

"What's on your mind? If it's just the Johnston deal, I'll ask the questions. I've got plenty of 'em to shoot your way."

"Let me make just a couple of guesses. The boys went out to the Johnston house this afternoon. They found a gun."

"You're not just guessing."

"Where'd they find it?"

"Maybe you were just guessing. I'll let you guess where we found it."

"Kind of thoughtful of her, wasn't it," I said, "to pack a couple of bags and leave the murder gun behind?"

I could hear him breathing softly into the phone. Finally he mumbled. "Haven't tested the gun yet. I'll just keep it simple till I find her. What's on your mind?"

"I got a call about five minutes ago. A man—maybe disguising his voice, maybe not. He tried to act a little teched, but he wasn't too teched to hang up quick when I tried to stall him. He told me I'd find her in the storm drain, under the hills."

Quint mumbled something into the phone. He was talking to himself.

"My guess is," I said, "that the killer has some good reason for wanting the body found soon. He took her to some lonely spot to kill her, and he had to let us know where to look."

"Hell! Don't you know a crank when you hear one, Bailey? The disappearance story hit the P.M. papers. We get calls like that three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Storm drain under the hills!"

"The same idea occurred to me, vaguely. But you'll want to follow this lead, Quint. The man who called used Mrs. Johnston's stage name—a name only a few people know."

There was a short, lethal silence. Quint said: "A fact here, a fact there—if I keep in touch with you for about eighty years. I might learn something, huh?"

"Asking questions might help. You weren't interested when I called you today—remember?"

"The last time I asked you a question it was about Buffin. You didn't know a thing about him. You never heard of the guy." Quint's voice was still quiet, with a strained and deadly tension. "What was her stage name, and where and when was she on the stage?"

"I'm sorry about the Buffin deal, but I wasn't sure there was a connection, and I had a client. . . . Mrs. Johnston's

name was Gloria Gay. She was a stripper, Los Angeles, 1938 to 1939."

"Saving the last five years for the next installment?"

"That's the works. What happened between 1939 and when she showed up again you'll have to find out for yourself—I can't do all your work for you. She might have made a trip to Mexico, but I don't give it much weight."

"Bailey, that flip lip of yours has begun to charm me. I want to hear more of it—say at nine o'clock tomorrow morning at my office."

"I'll see what I can do."

Quint hung up noisily and I put the phone back on its cradle and looked at Lee Martinez. He was studying a long ash on his cigarette, turning it around carefully in his fingers.

"Skip your date with the swans, Lee, but follow up on the rest of it." He looked up from the ash and nodded. And then I found myself fingering the note in my pocket—the one Hazel had handed me. I brought it out now and read it again: "A character who wouldn't give his name called at four o'clock."

Hazel was implacable about names. Taking messages, complete ones, was her major service to most of her tenants. But not even Hazel could have pried a name out of frog-voice. And she liked people. A man would have to be quite a character before she would think so. Frog-voice would rate as a character even in Hazel's abounding world of good-will. *At four o'clock!* I picked up the phone and dialed Hazel's apartment. She wasn't home.

But some of the vagueness and blank unease were slipping away from me, falling away with a sudden buoyance. I got up and put the liquor and glasses away, pulled the shades, locked my desk, and grinned at Lee Martinez.

Lee looked worried again. It reminded me that my head still ached like the conscience of mankind. I said:

"I was wrong, Lee. If things don't go right at the Cheviot Club tonight, you still go to the swan pond. If a woman doesn't show up, forget it. But if one does, don't try to be subtle. Stick to her like a plaster cast—and be careful. Be very careful."

CHAPTER XXII

I HAD showered, changed into a dark blue suit, eaten some pork and beans, and was strapping on my shootin' arn when Irene Neher called. She would be coming by for me as soon as she could make up her mind whether to wear her yellow dress or just nothing at all. I told her it was a warm night; it wouldn't make a lot of difference. And twenty-five minutes later she was at the lobby phone downstairs.

I said: "Anyone who drives here from Brentwood in twenty-five minutes, I'm afraid to ride with. Lock up your car. We'll take mine the rest of the way."

She was a lovely thing, standing beside a low-cut Packard convertible, the dim light from the entrance-way softening the hardness about her mouth. She was wearing a cornflower blue dress under a nice set of furs—the furrier probably closed the sale and retired. The hair was somebody's eight-hour day, and it was as theatrical as a glob of grease paint. But I liked it. And there was nothing synthetic about the deep golden glow of her skin. I thought I could smell her all the way over to the steps. From there she smelled nice. She smiled, and said:

"Do you like me?"

I took her arm and we walked across the street to my car. "I'm trying not to," I said, "but it's a losing game." I helped her in. The furs seemed to re-

quire it. I drove up and turned right to Lucas. We drove north up Lucas, past the ancient willows, and then dropped down into the black shadow of the First Street viaduct. Lucas became Glendale Boulevard there and we were on our way.

She tucked her long legs under her and cuddled against me and began to hum an aimless tune. Her perfume clung to the air and cloyed it. The boulevard turned and twisted, past the tall bridges standing gaunt in the moonlight, and along the viaduct's deep shadows. At San Fernando we turned left, and the great Diesel's and the night traffic of the highway lumbered by, rumbling into the night.

With the wisdom born of her body, she didn't talk. She hummed, and cuddled warmly, and drove out all the subtle odors of the night.

At Cheviot Drive we turned again and left the traffic and the lights behind as the canyon darkness lifted around us. Over us was a narrow shaft of sky, and warm lights glowed distantly like campfires through the trees that lined the winding canyon road.

Irene Neher stirred, and murmured: "One more turn and you're there." I made the turn, and I could see the two pillars that marked the drive. I slowed and turned in, and a bright flash beamed into the car and waved us to a stop. A big man stepped out of the darkness behind the light and put his head down at the window. He wore the uniform of a special officer.

He had a polite soft Texas voice. "Good evening, sir. Are you a guest?"

The girl tittered beside me and said, "My, but you're polite to strangers, Bill. I think I resent it."

The big man pushed his face in at the open window and grinned. Gin was his drink. He snorted and said, "Hi, Boots! First time I ever seen ya 'thout . . . Say, maybe I'd best keep my big mouth shet."

"'Sall right, Bill. He knows about it. How's the baby?"

"Fine. Sets up now. Just sets and howls. Go on in, mister. You're in the right company."

I drove on up the drive and around the side of the house to a little asphalt parking lot. There were only a few cars and no attendant. I made a complete turn and parked facing the highway at the front of the lot. I wasn't sure just why I did it.

The house was a big, solid two-story affair built by a man who couldn't make up his mind whether he liked Dutch Colonial or Georgian. He got both. I had to remind myself that I had walked out of there less than twelve hours ago. It seemed a lot longer ago than that.

A SMALL compact man in off-the-rack evening clothes opened the door for us. He had a cast in one eye and a polite smile in the other. When he saw Boots his smile broadened and became less polite. "Come on in, Gorgeous," he said, and leered at me. "New blood, huh?"

"Take it easy, short change." Her voice was cool, the hardness about her mouth, granite. "We're here to see Spiros. Is he down yet?"

The man pulled up another smile. He had lots of them. This one was hard and nasty. "Yeah, he's down."

It was too early for business. The bright lobby was empty and the sliding doors of the profit room were closed. Boots took my arm and we rounded the broad stairway and walked to a shadowed door at the end of a dark corridor that ran beside, and then under, the stairs.

She knocked lightly on the door and then opened it a foot and said: "Can we come in?"

It was a harsh, ugly voice, a voice straining to get into a lower register than nature meant for it. It said: "You seem to be doing all right."

Boots opened the door wide and held it for me and came into the room behind me. It wasn't the kind of room I had a right to expect. The theme was Mexican. A huge natural fieldstone fireplace, Monterey furniture in Mexican white finish, upholstered in crash with a nice homespun effect, and orange rust and beige horizontal stripes. A lot of tin, and hand-forged iron, and Mexican pottery cluttered up the place. He was standing with his back to the fireplace warming his hands. He stared past me and said: "Put the board back over the hole, toots."

Boots went back and closed the door, a little emphatically, and came back to stand beside me.

She said: "This is Mr. Bailey, Spiros. Spiros Dorkus, Stu."

He kept his hands stretched out to the fire behind him and nodded at me distantly. I nodded back. He was a handsome man. Not tall, not short, but with a lean brown face and large dark eyes that were moist and sad, like the eyes of a salesman of Fine Funerals. The hair was too long and too shiny, like the lapels on his dinner jacket, but it was gray in just the right places. I decided it was his voice that lost him to Hollywood. It couldn't have been anything else.

There were two bright sofas on either side of the fireplace. He waved at them with one of his long hands. The nails on it gleamed with a pale translucence.

"Sit down," he said. "I've been expecting you." I sat down and Boots stretched out on the sofa across from me. She had taken off the furs, and she was wearing a little cat smile and looking eagerly from Dorkus to me and back to Dorkus. He was looking exclusively at me now, with a heavy brooding interest.

"I've never seen you before, fellow. What's your beef?" The tone was flat, neutral, non-committal.

"Do I have to have a beef?"

He glanced at me sadly, then stepped by us and sat down in a chair facing the two sofas and the fireplace. He put his elbows on the wooden arms and put his long beautiful hands together, lightly, just touching at the glowing finger tips. He pursed his lips.

"Yes," he said, "you do. I was told to let you in, cooperate with you, and let you out whenever you wanted to go." He paused and turned over a hand and admired the nails. "As far as I'm concerned, you can go any time. You're lucky I feel that way about it." It was still flat and casual, too elaborately casual, too studied. But it still impressed me. Hams can be just as tough as the earthiest of torpedoes, and lots more imaginative.

BOOTS stirred on the sofa and said, "Those are mighty big words, Spiros. I don't think Bruno will appreciate 'em."

Dorkus went on gazing at me sadly as if no one had said anything. "I asked you a question: What's your beef?"

"I don't think I've got one—with you. It's with your friend Keller. The one you lent the room to." I thought I had tossed out a bombshell. It went off with a whimper and crept out of the room with its tail between its legs. Dorkus didn't scream or turn green. He didn't even blink. He just sat and looked bored.

"I don't lend out rooms," he murmured. "I don't even rent them."

Boots sat up with a sudden wrenching movement. The cat smile was gone. It had curled up and died when Dorkus ignored her remark about Bruno.

She leaned forward and showed her little white teeth and rasped, "Listen Mister Dorkus. Someone had him here last night, in that first bedroom on the north side. I know because I went up there to pass out. Bruno wants to know why."

Slowly, Dorkus turned and looked at her. And just as slowly his lips curled up into a refined leer, and he said, casually: "You smell of the harem. I don't mind the smell of the harems. But I don't like it when it begins to make a noise."

She stood up quickly, and the hard little face grew tight, with a raw whiteness about the pinched nose. The red slash that was her mouth drew down and opened and a whine came up from it and became a thin and rasping scream that carried words on it as decayed and broken things are carried on a wind. They were not pretty words. They were words read from the grimy lavatory walls of America, stretching down into the dark alleys and back rooms. They told a vicious, sordid, and very sad story.

She stopped with a sudden intake of breath and turned to me. "Are you going to let him get away with that—and what he said to you?" She stared at me, her teeth clamped, lips apart, trembling. Dorkus sat watching her over his steepled hands, his face flaccid, empty.

I said: "Don't bear down on it too hard, baby. Wipe the sores off your mouth and sit down."

She didn't move, but her eyes widened a little as if she'd been slapped, and her face reddened. She turned and scooped up her furs and ran to the door and slammed it behind her with a sound like the percussion of a frontier Colt.

Dorkus got up and went back to the fireplace. He brought a silver, or maybe platinum, case out of a pocket and opened it. He put a cigarette in his mouth and stepped over and offered me one. I took one and he struck a match and lit it for me. We smoked for awhile, not saying anything.

Pretty soon I said: "Bringing her out here wasn't my idea."

"Don't apologize. Coming out at all was the feeblest part of your idea."

"Let's take our tongues out of our cheeks and talk about Keller. I'm ready to do business with him. . . . "

"We've got a wheel out there that doesn't seem to know who it's working for. Try your luck?"

I stood up and threw the cigarette into the fire and looked at my watch. "I don't think this is my night. But I'm getting a phone call here in about fifteen minutes. I've got to take it. Otherwise, embarrassing things might happen."

HE SMILED. It was a wide, pleased smile, with dimples. Hollywood's loss was probably nobody's gain at all. He said: "So you didn't feel any too safe with Des Noyers and his pet alley cat behind you after all."

"The phone call will cost about a dime," I said. "I'd rate the danger at a little more than that." I looked at him and added: "But not much more."

His pretty mouth puckered for a moment. Then he laughed and flipped his cigarette into the fireplace and started for the door. I followed him. At the door he said:

"No hard feelings?"

"I should ask you that. The little girl heaps a mighty hot coal."

A dreamy look came into his eyes and he said, "Maybe you'll run into somebody you know outside. Who knows . . . ? But Des Noyers ought to know I don't dance for anybody. Not anybody. . . . " He opened the door and waved me through.

There were a few people in the lobby, but I didn't know any of them. The sliding doors were open now and Dorkus walked with me into the gaming room. It was bigger than I remembered it, with a large space to the left of the doors for a dim-lit bar and several tables. There was only one wheel operating, with a few over-dressed people gathered around it. I didn't see Boots at the wheel or at the bar.

One player stood out because he was wearing a gray suit, and because he was rather large. Or maybe it was because he had bright red hair. I stopped and waited for him to see me, and Dorkus stopped too and looked absently around the room.

"You're on your own, chum. This is Des Noyer's party, not mine." He grinned. A cold sadist's grin. I decided I'd got in on the tail end of some very unhealthy job relations.

Red looked up and past me, and then looked back again quickly, with blank disbelief. He started dropping chips clumsily into his coat pockets, still looking at me, and then he lumbered toward me, stowing away chips, and letting the slow wide grin stretch outward across his enormous teeth.

"Cholly! What'd ya come back for this time, huh?"

Dorkus was watching us. Aloof, politely indifferent. Red glanced at him and then brought his sharp little eyes back to me. "Spiros, this is the guy I was tellin' ya about. The machine that walks like a man. He goes off with an arm full of dope and then comes back a coupla hours later for his coat!" The grin broadened. He wet the enormous teeth with his tongue and they shone like washed pearls. "He's quite a guy." His eyes brightened and he said: "I know. Ya come back for that handkerchief ya lost, huh?" He reached into a pocket and brought out a white ball. He pushed it into my breast pocket and fluffed it out and patted it. "There y'are, Cholly. All dressed up, and no place to go." He laughed the high idiot laughter, and his eyes began to lose their brightness, and the grin began to stiffen.

"Let's go upstairs, Cholly. To our little room. You'd like that, wouldn't ya?" He pushed me gently with his bear trap hands.

I leaned on them. "It might be nice—some other time," I said.

Red moved his right hand over a bit until it touched the .38. The smile faded and he looked puzzled. "How come the guy's heeled, Spiros? What's a matter with the gee at the door? Who brung him in?"

"He brought himself, but I don't think Des Noyers would like anything to happen to him. You can suit yourself about it, though."

Red took his hands away and the grin crawled back and his eyes gleamed amiably. "Did ya come out here to see somebody, sweetheart?"

I glanced at Dorkus and said: "Better check on that phone call or you'll have a lot of size twelve shoes messing up your nice carpets and making your guests uncomfortable." Dorkus turned around slowly, dimpling at me, and disappeared toward the lobby.

RED took some chips out of his pocket and began pouring them from hand to hand. He looked worried.

I said: "Yeah, I came out here to see Keller. I'm ready to tell him what he wants to know—for a price."

"Cholly, I'm surprised. I was tolt ya couldn't be bought off. It hadda be chiseled out." He clucked his tongue at me. "But I don't know nobody named Keller. Does he drive a dump truck? I knew a guy oncet that drove one, name of Keller, or was it Krantz . . . ?"

"My phone number's Prospect 4712.

Tell him to call me. I'll give him a reasonable deal."

"Sure. Sure. But I don't think I know this Kelly guy."

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was the small man with the bad eye. He told me there was a call for me on the lobby phone. Red followed me and when we got to the lobby I felt something hard poking me under the left rib.

Red said: "It's okay, Frankie. He'll take it in Spiros' room." The little man nodded and we walked on down the corridor and into the Mexican room. Dorkus was standing at the fireplace again, and one of Red's boys, the sallow man with the plucked eyebrows, was standing at a little white table behind one of the sofas. He had a phone in his hand. Red took a revolver out of his pocket and pointed toward a door in the far wall to the right. On a shelf next to the door was another phone. He took the phone away from the sallow man, put it to his ear, and motioned for me to answer at the other one.

I went over and said hello into it.

"That doesn't tell me much, Stu. Everything okay?"

"Yeah."

"How do I know they aren't holding a shot gun to your belly?"

I looked over at Red. The revolver was pointed at my heart and it looked business-like. "Hah!" I said weakly. "What would anyone be doing with a shot gun?"

"Maybe it's just a little belly gun," Lee said. "With a snub nose and freckles. I don't like the way you sound." Red moved the gun up to eye level and glared at me. Lee went on: "I'm at a drug store on Fair Oaks, Sycamore 96431. You call me here in ten minutes, and call from another number. Otherwise I'll put plan A-1 into effect." He hung up.

Red and I lowered our phones and looked across the room at each other. He lowered the gun.

I said: "What was that phone number I gave you?"

"Prospect four-seven-one— Nuts to you, sweetheart."

I grinned and walked across the room and out the door. I shut it behind me and went through the lobby. The boy at the door opened it for me and said goodnight and I went on out in to the gray canyon mist.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE moon was high now, and the drive and the lot and the rolling grounds were colorless and full of still shadows. The car gleamed in the moonlight as if it had just rolled off the line and was waiting for a paint job. I opened the door on the wheel side and peered in. I'd have been surprised if she hadn't been there. She was sitting in the front seat, one leg under her, and the furs pulled up tight around her face. Her hair glistened coldly like floss on an autumn morning. I slid in and put the key in the ignition lock.

"I'm sorry, Stuart. I guess I crabbed your act." The voice was soft, unctuous, penitent.

I coaxed the motor to life and switched on the lights. I turned out onto the drive and said: "Forget it. I don't think Dorkus has much connection with what I'm working on, and I'm pretty sure I got what I came out for."

When we came to the two pillars at the end of the drive I took the gun out and held it on my lap. But nothing happened. The man with the flash waved us out and called out a cheery goodnight as we turned onto Cheviot and started back toward town. I put the gun away.

Boots moved over close to me, squeezed my arm, and said hotly: "I

wish you'd let go and slap me good. Then we'd both feel a hell of a lot better."

"Maybe you'd feel better, angel. It would make me just a little sick. I'm funny, I don't like to slap women. It doesn't do a thing for me."

She squeezed my arm again.

A half mile down the road I picked up the headlights of a car in the rear-view mirror. I speeded up. In Glenview the car came up close, about a block behind. I turned left on Bryant and the car went on down Cheviot, probably going after some marshmallows for an evening snack at home. I stopped at a drug store and called Lee. Then we drove on into Los Angeles.

At Riverside and Los Feliz the signal was against us and Boots put her hand over mine on the wheel and said: "What were they trying to get out of you, Stu?"

"The address and phone number of an ex-showgirl I happen to know."

"My, what's she got that I haven't got?"

"I wish I knew, baby."

"Sorry I asked," she said, hurt.

"I'm glad you did. Your not asking any questions about this thing was beginning to worry me. Ever hear Dorkus mention a man named Keller, or a girl named Gloria Gay?"

"No-o. Never heard of 'em."

We didn't say anymore until I pulled up in front of the apartment behind Boots' Packard. She jumped out on the curb side and was waiting for me in the dim light of the entrance way, a coy, bad-girl smile playing around her mouth. I took her hard little chin in my hand and lifted her face.

"Listen, baby," I intoned, "with a guy like Bruno you play it without variations—and for all it's worth. That way you don't have to go back to Main Street so soon. Maybe not at all. But you play it straight."

The red mouth began to harden, and then changed its mind. "I can take care of myself, Stu," she whispered. "Makes me like you all the more for thinking of it, though."

"Yeah. I like you, too. You're cute. But you're poison. Not to mention that Des Noyers was doing me what he thought was a favor to send you along tonight."

She looked doubtful for a moment, but it didn't last. She said nastily: "Don't worry about Bruno. I can handle him." Her mouth hardened and drew tight at the corners. "He's nothing but a smooth softie, Bailey. I'm a lot more afraid of you than I am of . . ."

"Huh-uh," I interrupted, "don't chip off any of Bruno's smooth veneer, angel. You'll find a hard little guy underneath with a knuckle-knife in both hands. That body of yours is pretty special, baby. It'll bring a good price for quite a while yet. But with a man like Bruno—with most men who pay well for what they get—it's got to be a scarcity item. Go on home now. I've got work to do."

The mouth stayed hard and drew apart into a tight smile, a smile to carve diamonds with. She made a sharp noise in her throat and turned suddenly and ran down the four steps to the sidewalk. She looked back at me.

"You cheap gumshoe," she rasped quietly. "I fin'lly figured you out. You're yellow." Cold laughter. "You're too yellow to even live up to your own manhood." She turned and jumped into the car. The motor ground and roared, and then she leaned out the open window and screamed: "I'll send my houseboy around to see you. He's just your type." The car jerked, and jumped away from the curb and raced toward Wilshire in an agony of grinding gears.

I WENT upstairs and washed my teeth and rinsed my mouth out with S.T. 37. Then I mixed the drink I'd been wanting for the past two hours, turned off the light, and lay down with it on the bed. I closed my eyes, and a team of horses galloped through my head dragging a broken harrow. I opened my eyes. A heavy throbbing pain rode the void that dark had made. I got up and turned on the light. Now it was just an ordinary ten-ton headache. I looked at my watch. Nine-forty.

I was only five minutes away from Westlake Park. I had a few minutes yet. I picked up the phone and dialed City Hall. Quint was still there.

I said: "You boys need a good strong union. Your hours are worse than mine. Anything new on Mrs. Johnston?"

"Yeah. We just found her car. In the bushes off of Jefferson—out there where it runs along the foothills."

"Sounds like we've got the real thing. 'Storm drain under the hills' would probably mean Bellona Creek."

"Could be." Quint yawned. "It wouldn't be the first body we've fished out of there. I'm going out. Like to come along? I could ask questions, and you could answer 'em. Maybe we could work up an act."

"I'll come out later. You boys are never hard to find."

"Uh-huh. Car's a mile and three-quarters past where Rodeo runs into Jefferson." He hung up.

I put on a hat, got into my dark blue top coat, and went down to the car. At Wilshire I turned right and drove the mile or so up to Alvarado, where I parked. The night had turned cold, with great balls of fog rolling like giant tumble weed across the building tops and among the tall evergreens in the park. I turned the collar up and the hat brim down and went in at the Wilshire corner. A tall statue of Prometheus stood naked and gaunt to the right of the walk. He looked as cold and bare as Saturday's Thanksgiving turkey, but he was doing something about it. He had a fire brand in one hand and the world in the other, and he was trying to set fire to the place. He didn't seem to be getting anywhere with it.

AT THE end of the walk lay a bright-lit lunch-room where there were people and warmth and a smell of hot buttered popcorn. I could see the dark gleam of the lake through the open doors of the place, and the lights of the little rent boats, moving slowly, staying discreetly apart. The people were young and in couples, waiting in a state of suspended ecstasy for their turn at the boats. I didn't think they'd like to be bothered with questions about swan ponds, and I didn't want to ask the girl behind the counter. I took the broad walk that wound to the left among tall palms and weary pepper trees. Just outside the bright rim of light an old man was sitting on one of the gray benches that lined the walk. He was eating popcorn and gazing off across the lake. I sat down a couple of feet from him and got out my pipe. He stayed lost in the things he saw in the dimpled water or in the lights beyond. He was all alone and he liked it that way.

I said: "Excuse me, Pop, can you tell me where I'll find the swan pond?"

"They're all asleep." It was an Iowa voice. He didn't look at me.

"That might be fun to see. Know where I can find them?"

He ate some popcorn. "You couldn't see nothin'. Don't sleep on the water. Got a nest or somepin on the island."

I took a firm grip on the bench and said: "Just in case I was crazy about swans and wanted to be waiting for them with some breakfast, where would I find them?"

He turned his head a few inches and looked at me out of the corners of his eyes. He pushed the popcorn sack at me and said: "Asked you ta meet her at the swan pond, heh? Have some corn."

"Don't mind if I do." I took some corn.

"It's that part of the lake yonder with the planks across it. See the little island? The planks are ta keep the boats out." He was pointing to where the round lake nippled out briefly about fifty yards on toward Seventh Street.

He stood up and he looked up at me out of one eye. "Yer gona be disappointed, son. She invited 'nother guy, too. He ast me the same fool question you did. Better lookin' ner you—more matoore." He put some popcorn in his mouth and went back across the lake, to Iowa. I thanked him, but he didn't seem to hear me.

There were two walks now. The one I was on, and one about ten feet below, skirting the lake. At the swan pond there were benches along the lower walk, set close to the edge of the water facing the lake. I stayed in the shadowed darkness of the upper walk. There was no one there, and no one on the benches below. I walked quietly and in the deeper shadows, hearing the dark little mallards quarreling on the water, the trolleys clamoring by on Seventh, and an unbroken, shrill, keening sound in my ears, which I wanted to believe was the far-off plaintive piping of the night. But it wasn't. I'd been hearing it all day.

The walk turned slowly and was leading westward now, and on the last bench, where the pond broadened and became a part of the lake, there was someone sitting. He was alone, his cigarette tracing a repeated, impatient arc against the dark water beyond. His silver hair gleamed like pampas grass in the moonlight. I couldn't be sure, but I thought it was a safe bet it was Northwick. I went up on the grassy bank beyond the walk and sat down under a magnolia tree. The grass was damp, but I didn't expect to be there long. It was only a few minutes till ten. The distant sound of music danced across the water. It came from one of the boats on the lake. I wanted to smoke. I wanted to lie down and sleep. I wanted to go back and let Pop tell me about the things he saw across the water. Instead I sat and waited, and counted my pulse as it hammered against my skull.

I HEARD her before I saw her, because she was coming down from the Seventh Street entrance where the trees were thick with shadow. Then she stepped out of the shadows into the misty moonlight and walked toward the man on the bench. He stood up and she came close to him and put out a hand. He reached out and took hold of it for a moment.

I could tell now that it was Northwick, but the woman was wearing a heavy fur and a brimmed hat that threw her face in shadow. I couldn't hear their voices, but the woman was doing the talking. Northwick nodded from time to time, and finally his teeth gleamed in a broad smile and he put his hand on the woman's arm. She shook her head. They talked some more, Northwick now. Then he picked up a hat from the bench and abruptly walked away. The woman stood and watched him go. Then she turned and started back the way she came.

The walk she was on made a long arc and came out on Seventh Street. I got up and ran across the dark lawn, jumped the low hedge and walked up the sidewalk to the place where she would come out. The moon and a single electrolier with a rainbow of mist

around it lit the broad walk for about ten feet into the park. I stood in the shadow of a wide holly bush that marked the entrance and waited.

For a long moment a chilled and empty feeling settled over me. Something had gone wrong. She had gone out some other way. . . . And then I heard the quiet, unhurried shush of her feet on the untidy walk. She came up out of the shadow into the light and walked toward me slowly. She stopped. The hat still shrouded the face, but she seemed to be staring into the shadow where I stood. I stepped out into the walk and said:

"Keep coming, baby. For a minute I thought I'd lost you."

She said: "Who . . . who is it?" and one hand moved up slowly and disappeared into a dark bag she held in front of her.

"Don't take it out, angel. I've got one that's bigger than yours."

She caught her breath and said, "It's you!" with a kind of strangled relief, and ran toward me and lifted her face. The moonlight fell across it, across the wide mouth and the midnight eyes, eyes that were cobalt by daylight. Norma Shannon's eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV

I SMILED a parchment-stiff smile and didn't say anything. She still had the hand inside the bag. I reached in around the fingers, and down across cold metal. I took it out. It was a .25 caliber automatic. She looked down at it as if she'd never seen it before. I put it in my pocket and stopped sweating.

Slowly, words choked up from Norma Shannon's throat. Tight little words. "What . . . what *is* it? Why did you take my gun? What are you doing here . . .? Quit staring at me!"

"Sorry, it's probably shock. I'd like to play it like the bored detective who knows everything before it happens. But I wasn't expecting you. . . . I was expecting someone else."

Her eyes widened and she tried to put her fist in her mouth. She shook her head slowly and said, "This is getting g h a s t l y. You . . . you were right. I came for her." She took her hand away and bit her lip. "You won't believe me, though," she groaned. "I know it."

"There's a bright moon, and I'm a little crazy tonight anyway. Tell your story. I bet I'll eat it up."

She gave me a sharp look and let go of her lip. Then she turned and walked back into the park. She went back down to the first bench on the upper walk and put her fists on her knees and glared at the orange and blue lights of the swank hotels across Wilshire. I sat down beside her and got out my pipe.

She spoke slowly, like a witness repeating a story. "She called me up tonight. After all these years, she calls me and asks me to do her a favor—as if . . . It was queer." She shuddered a little.

"And you said you'd be glad to do her a little favor," I put in. "And she says will you deliver a little message to a guy in the park."

"That's right," she said, and the sharp line of her jaw grew sharper. "She told me she had this meeting arranged and she wasn't going to be able to make it. I was to ask the man to come back here every night at ten for the next week until she could get here."

"This fellow didn't have a phone, huh?"

"I asked her the same question. She said it was too late to get him. And someone had listened in the last time she called and she was afraid to talk to him by phone."

"What time did you get this call?"

"Five-thirty."

"That's interesting."

"What is?"

"You know the exact time she called. Do you always know what time it is when people call you?"

She looked at me bleakly and didn't say anything for awhile. Then, irrelevantly: "So you smoke a pipe? All the men I've known who smoked pipes were stuffy." She shuddered slightly.

"So she just called you up," I went on. "Let's see. According to your story, she saw you about five times when you were sixteen. But when she needs an errand run five years later, she gives you a buzz."

Norma Shannon stood up. The wide mouth was taut and grim, and almost black against the cold camelia whiteness of her face.

She said: "I asked her that too. . . . She needed a friend who had known her, as she said, 'from before.' And she had seen me dozens of times modeling clothes. She said I looked right at her once and didn't recognize her. . . . Now give my gun." She pushed her hand at me.

I stood up with her and tried to stare her down. I'd have done as well with the statue of Lincoln in Washington. I laid the gun on the stiff little palm and started to sweat again. She took hold of it carelessly.

"Why the gun?"

She looked down at it, put it into the bag, gave me a black glare, and turned and strode up the walk toward Seventh. "You know the answer to that," she threw back at me. She was in the shadows now.

I stood and listened until I couldn't hear her footsteps any more. I walked back through the park toward Alvarado. I lit my pipe and let it go out again. It tasted like sour peat moss. Pop was gone from the bench, and Prometheus was still cold and still getting nowhere with his fire brand.

I TOOK Rodeo Road out from Crenshaw. It was a new road, oiled and smooth, cutting a straight, bright path past half-built houses and great empty fields planted with soy-beans that lay along the broad slope of the Baldwin Hills. Rodeo Road ended where Jefferson jogged south and went along the foothills. Here there was nothing but charred and empty fields. A hundred yards up Jefferson a narrow nameless road cut off toward Culver City, crossing Bellona Creek over a sturdy concrete bridge. White-sided police cars were parked along the way here, lighting up the gray and dusty brush.

I parked in the low grass at the side of the road and walked down to the bridge. The fog was heavy and motionless and there was a faint odor of wild licorice in the damp air. A patrolman flashed a light on me and wanted to know what the hell I thought I was doing. I told him Quint had asked me to come down. Any friend of Quint's was a friend of his, so he let me look over the rail at the things below.

It was probably a fifty-foot drop to the broad concrete invert of the drain, and the black slime trickling slowly down the center of it looked only a few inches deep. On the right bank a dark huddle of men held light on something lying on the hard clay, lying in the sprawled, deflated aspect of sudden death.

"I like them kind of legs," the patrolman said, and whistled between his teeth.

I turned and went to the corner of the bridge and half-walked, half-slid down the brush-covered bank to where the lights were.

Someone said, "We can all go home

now, boys, Mr. Vance has arrived." The voice was Quint's. He got quite a laugh from the boys around the circle of light.

One of the men in uniform made room for me beside Quint, and I stepped in and looked down at the thing on the ground. She wasn't crushed, or bleeding, or visibly broken. She was just flat and heavy and very, very dead.

QUINT stared at me with an owlish, I-know-everything look and said: "Know her?"

"Yeah. It's the right party."

"Mrs. Johnston, huh?"

"Uh-huh. How long ago'd you find her?"

"Not long. The photographers and surveyors haven't managed to get here yet."

"Then she wasn't in the water?"

"She hasn't been touched."

"Medical examiner here?" I looked at the faces above the lights.

"You been reading detective stories, Bailey. The County just sends out a couple of boys with the dead wagon. We get our autopsy next week, if we're lucky . . . but she's dead all right." The boys chuckled again. "Someone hung one on the side of her head and then shoved her over. I think her neck's busted."

"We don't need an M.E. with you here," I said. "How close to five-thirty do you think it was? That's about when I got the call."

Quint looked down at her and scowled. "She's stiff as a nine-trey. Of course, it's a cold night and that would help. But she's fat, and that would make a difference the opposite way. . . . I can't see the guy doing it in broad daylight though."

"It was daylight when I got the call," I said, "but that doesn't mean anything; there isn't any foot traffic around here at all, and not much of the other kind."

Quint gave me a cold hard stare and said: "It was too dark for me to be sure of that."

"I've been here before," I said. "But not today to throw any bodies off the bridge."

"Uh-huh. Well, my guess is she's been dead more than eight hours. That would make it around three o'clock this afternoon." He put his hands in his pockets and shuddered. "Kee-rist it's cold. Don't make any bets on that time —I could be off by hours." He jerked his head and said: "Come on over to my private office and straighten yourself out, Bailey. Let's see how you'll stack up when I toss you to the D.A." He walked away, over to the shadow of one of the concrete piers that supported the bridge. I followed him and he sat down against a slanting bulkhead and fingered out a couple of cigars and pushed one at me.

I unwrapped it and lit it. It was probably a good cigar, but it tasted like John Brown's beard. I let it smolder and waited for Quint to carry on.

He cocked his head up at me and said, "Two murders in the same week, Bailey. Both connected with a case you're working on. But the information you give out could be written up on a grain of rice. What happens between bodies?"

I sat down beside him on the bulkhead and said: "Wrong, Quint. I'm not working on a case. Her husband got worried about her. He didn't know anything about her and he knew she was afraid of something. He hired me to find out what it was. I never found out. After Buffin was killed I pulled out of the case. I knew you'd connect me with it."

"Thanks," he drawled. "But you were playing it kind of loose weren't you? When I talked to you, Buffin was

just a guy on a telephone. I thought you were too smart to pull a dumb trick like that. Your cigar's out."

"Yeah, I'm saving it. I had a client yet when you talked to me. I wanted to let him know what I intended to do. After I talked to him I called you and told you who killed Buffin."

"You had a client. Man, you talk as if you thought that meant something. Murder isn't for private eyes. I thought you knew that." His cigar glowed brightly for a moment and he let the pale smoke drift out of his mouth while he talked. "And I think I could stand it if you'd just give me facts, and let me decide who killed who. . . . You were right on it though. The gun had her finger prints on it, and it checked with the slugs we got out of Buffin. Why?"

"I don't know why. Were there any bags in her car."

"Yeah, two. But I meant why did she kill the guy? Keep in mind that I don't know a damned thing about this case. Johnston was pretty broken up. I haven't questioned him yet. I wish to hell you'd either light that cigar or give it back to me."

I PUT the cigar in my mouth and chewed on it. "It's a simple story as far as I know it," I said. "After that it gets complicated. She's an ex-showgirl. She came here from Portland in 1938 with Buffin and took the name Gloria Gay. In 1939 she disappeared. She appeared again two years ago. I got her name from Buffin and then Buffin found her by accident. He was tailing me and found her that way. She was afraid of something, and apparently Buffin knew what it was. He put the bite on her probably, and it was a bad time to do it. She was being crowded. She knew I was looking into her, and she probably found out from Buffin that he hadn't told me anything yet. So she fogged him before he got a chance to."

Quint was listening. I could tell because he let his cigar go out. He lit it again and said,

"What were they after?"

"Who?"

"Maybe you'd rather talk downtown under the bright lights."

"You haven't got any bright lights. You're just showing off."

"I'm trying hard to give you a break, Bailey. What were they after? From the way your dump looked I don't think they found it." He stopped suddenly. He was thinking. "In fact, I know they didn't. That's why they put you through the meat grinder."

I grinned. "They were trying to find out who hired me to investigate her. I didn't get a chance to tell 'em."

"Know who they were or where they took you?"

"I can describe them—and will, with loving care. They took me to one of Bruno Des Noyers' niteries in Glenview."

"Cheviot Drive. That's his one and only joint. We closed the ones in L.A. What'd these guys look like?"

I told him.

Quint sat and smoked. "Who killed her?" he said suddenly.

"I thought you called me off that end of it. But let me go home and sleep on it. Maybe I can tell you in the morning."

"You're still holding out on me, aren't you, shamus? You guys never learn."

"It's nothing you can't get along without."

"It's nothing personal, but I guess you know I'm going to get your license on this deal."

"No, I didn't know that."

"Now you know. The fast days are

over. I know a guy has a peanut stand —I'll put in a good word for you."

"I know you could make a case, Quint, but you don't have to. . . . Where's Murdock? Doesn't he usually team up with you?"

"Yeah. He's home. Probably reading up on Police Administration—that's the way you get ahead in the Department these days."

"How would you like to have the answer to this tomorrow—before Murdock gets on it with you?"

Quint's face tightened and became almost foxy.

"Huh-uh," I said. "Don't get any ideas. I don't know who killed her, but a lot of things have been happening around me, and I think they'll keep happening. I might get lucky. . . ."

Quint closed an eye and cocked his head up at the patches of deep blue behind the fog patterns. "You know," he drawled, "you might get lucky at that —but you've been pressing it kind of hard." He got up and walked away, and after awhile the men with the cameras and string were sliding down the bank. I threw the cigar into the drain and went away.

Driving home, a lonely, terrifying idea rode me: That Mrs. Johnston was dead at five-thirty; that she was dead at four o'clock; that she had never called Barky Northwick at all; that she had never called Norma Shannon. If Keller stepped into the picture, that idea would become a conviction, it would be the piece that would make the pattern of meaningless things suddenly shift, and re-form, and take on a grisly clarity.

I left the car in the street and went up and brewed myself some coffee and opened a can of soup. I ate, got out of my clothes, ran a tub full of hot water, and stretched out in it with my head against a towel and went to sleep.

I woke with icy threads of sweat running down my face and chest, my mouth as dry as sage, and the telephone ringing, and sounding like a call to the last judgement. I got out and put a towel around my shoulders and went to the phone. I coughed a couple of times to make sure I could talk and said hello.

He still had marbles in his throat. All he said was: "Is this Mr. Bailey?" but I knew it was Keller.

"In the flesh," I said, and grinned at my racy wit.

"I'm told you want to do business."

"Yeah."

"Uh . . . no hard feelings? I hear Jake got a little exuberant."

"That was Jake," I said, and grinned some more. I was talking to Keller. I was feeling fine. I had murder by the tail.

CHAPTER XXV

KELLER coughed into the phone and said: "I've been trying to get hold of you. Is it too late tonight for some conversation?"

I looked at the clock on the bookcase. It was after midnight. "I've got an errand to run," I said. "Can you come up here in about an hour and a half?"

Silence and suspicion. "Why the delay?"

"If I was trying to run one on you, I'd be a wee bit more subtle. You can bring your boys with you, but check 'em outside. They can tell you the room number."

"All right. Ah—how much would you suggest I bring along—more or less?"

"You couldn't get enough tonight to cover it, Mr. Keller. Bring what you can." I hung up.

I got into some clothes, grabbed a coat and went out the door. Sixteen minutes later I was ringing Norma

Shannon's doorbell. She didn't answer. I looked in at the corner window. A light burned in the hall. A fire was dying in the fireplace. I tried knocking. Nothing happened. I began to feel like the Traveller in the poem, sensing the phantom listeners in the house. I turned and went down the stairs muttering: "'Tell them I came, and no one answered. . . .'"

Back at my door I fumbled for my keys. I didn't have them. I had gone off without locking the door. That is a bad habit. People might walk right in and make themselves at home.

Someone had. She was reclining lavishly on my sofa, a cigarette in her hand and a bland and lovely smile on her face. She was arching her neck for me and dusting her alabaster cheeks with long black lashes.

I took off my coat and put it in the closet. It was cold in the place. I set fire to the foul little gas burner by the kitchen door and stood in the middle of the room looking at her. She went on softening me up with the smile.

I said: "Got an aspirin on you?"

"Is that a nice thing to say?"

"No offense, Mrs. Cabrillo. I had the headache before I saw you."

She arched her full black brows, cocked her head, and patted the cushion beside her with wordless eloquence.

"Huh-uh. Anyone as beautiful as you, I'm afraid of—in my condition."

Her eyebrows dipped and turned up at the inner ends and she looked concerned. She got up in one slow effortless movement and came toward me. She came close and peered at my swollen lip, and then looked at my eyes as if she were counting the red blood cells in them. And for a moment she forgot to pose. Her head came forward, hiding the long neck, and her eyes opened wide and became just eyes, and her mouth puckered a little, and tiny even furrows formed in the satin skin of her forehead. But she was still the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen this side of the big gate at Warner Bros.

"I'll bet I'm real pretty," I said. "My eyes feel like a couple of knot holes in a charred stump."

"What has happened to you?" she murmured. "You look like a ver-ry sick man." One soft hand came up and touched my temple, and the vein there leaped to meet it and began to pound hysterically against her fingers.

I leered and said: "Did you come up to see me, or are you from the Visiting Nurse Association?"

She took her hand away and smiled. "If you'll sit down and stop chattering, I'll make you a hot drink and perhaps even tell you why I am here."

IT SOUNDED like a fine idea. I sat down on the sofa and closed my eyes. And after while someone was putting something warm in my hand. It was a tall glass with little pieces of lemon pulp floating on top, and steam curling warmly upward. I took a deep swallow. It was hot and mellow, and it gathered greater heat from somewhere as it went down. It had authority. My private wrecking crew laid down its pneumatic drills and pick axes and knocked off for the night.

I thanked her. She had squeezed down beside me so that the light was behind her. She was wearing black again, a soft, flowing stuff that clung to her and caressed her gently.

"Where's Martin?" I asked. "Under the bed?"

She gave me the raised eyebrow and the look of delicate alarm that she had used at our first meeting. But it didn't look genuine.

"Martin is my chauffeur, darling. Not my lover." She smiled again.

I drank some more of the hot toddy,

put it down on the side table, and said, "Shall we go right into whatever it is you're afraid of Mrs. Cabrillo? Or shall we have ourselves some gay repartee first?"

She didn't answer right away. I turned and looked at her. She was giving me a look of steady, cool speculation. But her eyes were bright with something that may have been excitement, or fear, or perhaps both. Or maybe neither.

She said: "I am not afraid of anything, Mr. Bailey. You are far too modest. But I am curious about something." She paused and said, with slow emphasis: "You see, I know Gloria Gay." She settled back against the arm of the sofa to wait for me to recover.

I went on looking at her. I reached for the glass and took another drink. She leaned forward again and frowned, and said:

"Perhaps you do not know that she spent some time in Brazil. I . . . I have a reason to be curious about your interest in her. We may be able to help each other . . ."

I was listening now. Not so much because I thought she would help, but because the theory that had sprung full grown to lusty life when Keller called was beginning to curl up at the edges and fall away in my hands. And I was tired.

"Let's start with what it costs me," I said. "How can I help you?"

"By telling me why you are looking into Gloria Gay's past."

"Why is it important to you?"

"A very important, but very personal, reason that couldn't be of help to you. But I have something you can use."

"I'd have to know what it was before I could tell you anything."

"Of course." She stood up and went over to the easy chair where she had put her furs and her bag. She took out a cigarette and lit it, standing in the center of the room near the foot of the pull-down bed. She blew smoke into the room and looked at me through it.

"I know where you can find her, where she lives," she said. "It would help you a lot to know that right now, wouldn't it?"

I sat up and gave her my knowing smile. "You know what I'm thinking, Mrs. Cabrillo? I'm thinking that my answer to that last question is really all you want to know. If I said, 'Nix, baby, I know where she lives', you could pick up your mink and walk out of here happy."

She forgot to smile for a long moment. But it finally broke through and she said: "You just can't help being clever, can you? But if that *is* all I want to know, it doesn't seem much to ask."

I stood up and stepped over beside her and she arched her neck and looked up at me warmly. She leaned closer. I put my arms around her and she lifted her head, and I kissed her.

"What was she doing in Brazil, angel?"

"Entertainer. She was trying to prepare a Brazilian act to bring back to the States."

"What's she hiding from?"

She looked up at me. "I don't know," she murmured. "Who is behind you? Is it her husband trying to find out about his wife's past?" Her voice was choked with an urgent pleading.

I didn't say anything.

She clung to me. "Please, it's so little to ask!"

I kissed her again and she pressed against me and kissed my mouth with a sudden desperate forgetting. But after while she remembered. She whispered:

"Can't you tell me just yes or no?"

I reached down and lifted her gently and stepped over to the bed. I said: "Sure, angel, I'll tell you." I felt her stiffen just a little and the long muscles of her legs hardened under my hand and wrist. But she still clung warmly. And as I put her down on the dark bed I thought I heard her murmur,

"Tell me now."

The muscles across her stomach crawled and tightened beneath my hand, and her breath slowed and grew silent. I looked at her face. I waited until I could see it clearly. It was drawn, the eyes open, watching me, the tiny nostrils wide and pale. I brought my hand down across her stomach and along her hard thigh. I made a febril animal sound in my throat and watched her fragile face.

The dark cherry mouth opened and she drew a sharp retching breath and pulled up suddenly like a sprung trap and clung to the post at the far side of the bed, trembling. Her eyes were wide and white-rimmed, and she stared at me over the edge of hysteria, like a cornered animal peering from a hedge.

I got up from the bed and leaned over and leered at her. "Take it easy, Gloria," I said. "You weren't in any danger. As your husband would say, I was just testing an hypothesis. I wanted to be sure you were Margaret Bleeker before I started talking things over with you."

CHAPTER XXVI

HER mouth drew down and came apart, and she hissed: "Crazy . . . you're crazy. What are you talking . . ."

"Huh-uh, Peg. Let's get together. I got it all figured out, all the main items. Let's sit down and fill in the interesting details."

She got off the bed and came around the foot of it and walked over to the easy chair. She picked up her bag and began to open it with fingers that trembled like the last leaves on a wind-blown tree. I stepped over quickly and took hold of it and opened it for her and looked in. No gun. She said thank you, politely, and took a cigarette out and lit it. She sat down in the chair on her nice furs and stared at me. There were little red lines about her mouth and the shadows were green under the high bone of her cheeks.

"What has my aversion to being seduced on a wallbed in a smelly room have to do with someone named Margaret Bleeker?" She was trying hard, but her voice was like a last leaf, too, a tiny leaf, trembling, and holding on by a little finger of courage.

"Stop it, Peggy." I looked at my watch. "Keller will be here in twenty-five minutes. You can waste those minutes trying to be foxy, or you can help me straighten a few things out."

"Am I supposed to know this man Keller?" Her lip curled weakly.

"Okay, baby. We'll wait."

I sat down on the sofa. She watched me blankly while I got out my pipe and filled it, and her eyes followed me with an empty concentration as I reached for a match and lit it and got a bright red coal burning evenly in the bowl. We sat and looked at the walls and listened to the heater hissing its nasty warmth into the room. She leaned forward suddenly and grasped her bag and looked around the room.

"The powder room's through this door," I said, and pointed with my thumb. When she came out again there weren't any signs left of the emotional wingding she'd been on. She picked up the fur coat carefully and sat down, holding it across her lap. She smiled without strain and said:

"Unburden yourself, darling. Your ego must need it ver-ry much."

"Wrong, angel. I wasn't trying to seduce you. I knew it couldn't be done. It was just one way of testing a hunch. Not the nicest way, but the only one I had on hand.

"There was a little thing about Peg Bleeker that people kept throwing at me, something they felt called on to remark about: She was a hard gal to make, impossible it seemed. And there were other things that tied into it. For instance, when she left here to go to Mexico, she went with a fellow who was teaching women to walk like ladies.

"It didn't mean a thing to me until it got to be obvious that Keller wanted to find Mrs. Johnston. That didn't fit my facts. If Mrs. Johnston was Peggy Bleeker, it didn't make sense for Keller to be looking for her now. He could have found her easy enough six years ago. And then there was your little friend, Norma Shannon. I've been wrong about people lots of times, but not that wrong. I wanted to find some facts that would fit those eyes of hers. And there were some telephone calls, too, that I didn't think a corpse could have made. But the really important thing was you. And that blue lace-covered iceberg you sleep on kept it from being too hard to guess where you fit in."

MRS. CABRILLO wasn't smiling now, and she didn't ask me whose corpse I had in mind.

"Tonight Keller called," I went on, "and I knew I was right. Mrs. Johnston wasn't Peggy Bleeker, or Gloria Gay, at all. She came from Portland, yes. She was an entertainer at the Hofbrau, too. Maybe she even went to Jefferson High School. But she wasn't the girl who came to Los Angeles in 1938 with Buster Buffin: she came down here only a couple of years ago. And she wanted to hide. She chose a college campus; but she needed a record, a transcript, so she sent for yours. . . . You were friends weren't you?"

She didn't answer.

"I tried to find Norma Shannon tonight. I was going to take her to Pasadena and show you to her. But she wasn't home. And when I got back you were here."

She stood up slowly and her eyes came up and met mine, shy and empty eyes.

"I'm sorry about the clumsy pass," I said. "But you were making me wonder about my theory. I was beginning to lose confidence in it; and Keller was on his way. I had to find out—in a hurry. I'm sorry it had to be done that way."

She rearranged the furs across her arm and managed a smile as warm and cheerful as a shot of carbon dioxide.

She said: "Have you talked about this fantastic notion to anyone else?"

"No. Too fantastic."

Her hand seemed to caress the furs. It disappeared into a pocket and then came up and out, quickly. There was a little revolver with an ivory grip in her hand, and it was pointed at my mouth.

"I killed a man with this revolver once, darling. In Acapulco. He was a Romanian. He tried to . . . to rape me." She still smiled, and she talked in a breezy voice, like someone discussing an indoor sport.

"You just thought he was trying to rape you," I said. "He was probably just taking a piece of lint off your bosom."

The revolver moved around a little, but with a purposeful attitude, as if it were looking for a likely spot to do business.

"I like being Mrs. John Vego Cabril-

lo," she purred. "I wouldn't want anyone to spoil it."

I lifted my arm slowly and looked at my watch, but I didn't see it. "Keller is five minutes over-due right now. There's only one way out of here, and he's probably just coming in the door. He'll have at least three of his hoods posted outside. . . ."

She laughed and walked over to the door. She turned and tossed the gun in the center of the rug with a gesture I envied. There was no sense to it.

"Wipe off the sweat," she sneered. "I didn't intend to shoot you. I didn't kill anyone in Acapulco either. I wanted to see what was under that tough-Tommy exterior of yours . . ."

"Sweat glands," I said.

She turned and pulled open the door, as I bent down to pick up her gun.

I said: "Hey." She turned and stared back at me from the dim hallway. The smile was all gone. "Why don't you give the old man in Pasadena a break?" I said, and leered at her.

She took a quick, almost stumbling, step into the room, and her face swelled and darkened. There was a picture on the wall beside her, a picture of Abe Lincoln, a mantle over his tired shoulders and the infinite wisdom of the common man in his eyes. She tore the picture from the wall and lifted it.

But it stayed there as I straightened up. And then, slowly, she lowered it, and dropped it on the floor. The color ebbed, and her eyes widened and became dark and shimmering.

"You're an inhuman thing, Bailey." Her voice was small and tight, and it trembled as her lips were trembling. "No one . . . no one has ever known it . . . or even guessed it." She raised her head and arched her neck. She wasn't posing; it was just a habit, because it wasn't the same face. It was a lost little girl's face. "I . . . I lived with an uncle . . ." Her voice fell away and she seemed to have forgotten what it was she was going to say, or maybe she was remembering. ". . . then there was another, a teacher, an ugly, twisted man . . ." She wasn't trying to tell me anything. I wasn't even there anymore.

I whispered: "Listen, angel. You can lick all that. I've got a friend. You'd like him a lot. He teaches psych at . . ." But I wasn't talking to any one either. She had turned and gone, and I could hear her, half-running down the dark corridor toward the stairs.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE polite knock sounded on the door about ten minutes later. I opened it and waved him in. He was wearing a heavy Oregon top coat and a wide cordial smile, and he brought the cold, timberline odor of the night into the room with him.

I took his coat and went to the closet with it while he stood and looked the place over. I had folded the bed into the wall, turned off the little oxygen burner, and put Abe Lincoln back. But he still didn't like what he saw. He gave me a sweet, heavy-lidded smile and said:

"I'm afraid I brought too much money with me, Mr. Bailey."

"I doubt it. Sit down."

He lowered his heavy frame onto the sofa, clasping his hands under his great belly. I took the easy chair and said:

"Since you brought up the subject, how much did you bring?"

"Where is she?" he said.

"Who?"

He blinked heavily a couple of times and said dryly: "Now, let's see. Where were we?"

"I was asking you who you were looking for."

"Ah yes. Peg Bleeker was the name, wasn't it?"

"It was. It isn't any more."

He raised his eyebrows and then brought them down and nodded at me. He reached painfully into a pocket and brought out a picture of Mrs. Johnston, the honeymoon picture with the glasses. He showed it to me.

"Where is she, Mr. Bailey?"

"First I want something. Who is she, and why is she hiding?"

"And when I tell you that, you can tell me where I'll find her, right now—no strings attached?"

I nodded. Only faintly, but I still nodded.

Keller leaned back and smiled. "All right, Bailey. But first, how did a bright young fellow like you get her all fouled up with Peggy Bleeker?"

I shook my head. "One of us is going to have to start packing this ball, Mr. Keller, or they're going to call time on us. How do you like your coffee?"

The smile broadened. "Cream and sugar. Plenty of sugar."

From the kitchen I said: "What's her name?"

"Is it really important?"

"It would make it a little easier to talk about her."

"Let's call her Ellen."

I put the pot on and went back in and sat down.

"Is that her name?"

He chuckled. "You're a man after my own heart, Bailey. You like to call a spade a spade."

"I call it a shovel, usually. Ellen will do. Did Ellen have any complexes about the advantages of higher education?"

KELLER looked puzzled. I was beginning to smell the coffee now. When the odor got so I could get up and walk on it I would go out and pour some.

Keller stopped looking puzzled. He gazed at me, and slow color darkened his face and his eyes gleamed from behind their layers of everhanging fat.

"So she hid out on some college campus, is that it?" His voice was bitter. "I spent over eight thousand dollars trying to find her. She used to get a jag on now and then and tell me how ignorant and uneducated I and my friends were . . . But it never occurred to me. Yes, it was what you called it, a complex."

I said: "Of course, it was a smart idea in any case. If you can look the part, a big campus is about the best place in the world to hide. Crowded but exclusive—sort of out of this world. That's how Peg Bleeker got into the picture. She and Ellen were friends, weren't they?"

"They hated each other very cordially, Mr. Bailey. But I see your point: they knew each other well."

"There's your answer then. Ellen had to hide, and she wanted to hide on a campus. To do that she had to have a transcript, and she wasn't going to use her own . . ."

"What's a transcript?"

"A record. Something showing you graduated from high school and took the right kind of subjects to get into college."

"She didn't have one—she never graduated from high school."

"She wouldn't have used it anyway. But she was pretty sure Peggy Bleeker had never used hers. So she sent for it."

"Is it as simple as that?"

"Yeah. An Oregon transcript, like most states, hasn't any kind of identification on it. She probably had to copy Peg's signature, but not too carefully. It was as simple as that. That's why I came to you talking about Peg Bleeker and taking pictures of Ellen off your

scrap pile."

Keller nodded again. "That makes me feel better about you, Bailey. I pride myself on my judgment of men. The coffee's ready."

I brought it in on a tray and we sat and drank for awhile and Keller said good coffee and I said thanks. Then he put the cup on his knee and balanced it there and said, simply and without emphasis:

"Her full name is Ellen Keller. She's my wife."

"I see. You don't have to tell me why she's hiding. We can do our business without it."

"No. No, that's the interesting part, Bailey. Don't deny me the pleasure of telling you about it. You see, a man in my business has a problem of what to do with his money. You can't bank it in the ordinary way—too many people interested in how you got it. Buying on the securities market helps a little, but you can't do too much of it. So you end up making a safe place for it yourself. I had a vault that could have held Houdini's ghost. Ellen and I were married for almost four years before I told her how to open that vault. That was over two years ago. Two weeks after she learned how, she opened it and went away. She took—well, enough to make it worth her while. I've been looking for her ever since. . . . Now, where is she, Mr. Bailey?"

I suddenly wasn't liking what I was doing. It had a nasty, ghoulish touch to it. There was an earthy feel of truth in Keller's story that would be hard to put there if he knew that Ellen Keller lay on a county slab with a broken neck.

But it could be put there, and Keller would be the man to do it. He would want to know how much I knew. And I knew enough to make it worth his while to put a little effort into it.

I said: "I want five grand for the information, Mr. Keller."

HE DIDN'T move. We sat and stared at each other with the mild hostility of a couple of strangers who just happen to be riding the same streetcar. Finally his heavy eyes closed and his mouth came up in a smile as sincere as a press agent's handout.

"You have an exaggerated idea of this thing, I'm afraid. She probably has little more than that left."

"It's just the money you're interested in, then?"

"Naturally. I don't expect to take her back."

"No hard feelings against her?"

Keller hesitated for a long moment, staring at me blankly, meaninglessly. "None at all," he said. "Name a reasonable price."

"I happen to know that she hasn't more than a few dollars to her name."

He shook his head. "She wouldn't bank it, Mr. Bailey. And she wouldn't throw it away. Never fear. She has sufficient left to pay well for my time—and yours. Let's say about two thousand for your share." He let me look at his eyes when he said that. He opened them wide and smiled at me. They were black, gleaming, and as sharp and hard as broken glass.

"Five grand," I said. "I don't want to haggle about it." I picked up the cups and went into the kitchen. I put them down and stood watching the spots swim in front of my eyes. When I thought I'd waited long enough I went back out, found my pipe, emptied it, filled it, lit it, and said,

"Yes or no?"

Keller stood up. He smiled benignly. "Yes," he said. He squeezed a fat hand into an inside coat pocket and brought out a thick and heavy packet of bills. "I don't think you'll refuse an occasional century note, will you?" He

turned around and started dropping them onto the sofa, one at a time, counting slowly. When he got to five thousand he still had half the packet left. He smiled again and tucked what was left into a pocket.

"You're a poor salesman, Mr. Bailey. I thought you'd put a higher price on that tortured integrity of yours."

I stood and looked at the money. It was green and cool-looking, and I found myself wondering who that was on the hundred-dollar bill. I looked closer. Franklin. I said: "I'm selling it cheaper than that. Pick your money up and put it away. It makes me billious."

"Welching?" he rumbled.

"No. You can buy the information in the morning paper for a nickel. The fast talk about money was supposed to tell me things. . . . Maybe it did." He was staring at me with a heavy, brooding menace, and there were tiny beads of sweat around his eyes. "I don't like to break it to you like this," I went on, "but she's dead. Murdered. She's at the morgue, down at Temple and Broadway. The name was Johnston."

I sat down in the easy chair and watched him. His face loosened, and he leaned over and began picking up the money. He moved his lips silently, counting it as he put it together. Then he tucked it into a pocket and went into the closet and took his coat off the rack. He stopped in the middle of the room and said:

"So you were playing shamus and deciding whether or not to tab me for the job. Is that it?"

"Something like that."

"How did I come out?"

"It's a hung jury."

"What was my motive?"

"The ten-cent-terror motive, vengeance, might do. Or maybe you found out where she kept her cache."

"So I lay out five grand to have you tell me where to find her—after I kill her."

"Yeah. You'd regard that as a pretty shrewd move—and just the right way to find out if I know anything you'd rather I wouldn't."

Keller pulled on his coat and hulked quietly in the center of the room breathing through his mouth. He patted the place where the money was and said:

"What *do* you know?"

"Nothing worth five or ten grand. That I'm sure of."

We breathed at each other for awhile longer and Keller turned stiffly and said: "I'm going out that door. Planning any trouble?"

"Not just now, but I'd like my sixty bucks back."

Keller looked puzzled. I didn't hold that against him.

"The money your hood took when he sapped me in Portland. He was supposed to have cleaned me, wasn't he? That was supposed to throw me completely off."

Slowly the sad smile crawled over Keller's face. "I shall have to speak to Delmer," he murmured. "Delmer said you had only twelve dollars on you." He pushed a fat hand inside the coat and groped for the money. He seemed to have trouble finding it.

"How did the blonde chick happen on to me?"

The money was out now. "In the usual manner," he replied. "The bell captain sent her. We didn't know about you then, of course."

"Like I said, you really work together up there."

He counted out sixty dollars and dropped it on the sofa. "Organization, Mr. Bailey, organization." He walked to the door and stepped out and closed it quietly behind him. I could hear him walking away. Not slowly, not quickly, just walking away.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I SAT and stared at the distorted, mirrored wall where the bed was. Sleep. It would be like walking softly among green forests. My brain throbbed and pounded and floated outward from me and I gripped the chair and went along with it like a character in a junker's dream. But some dissociated part of me was plodding painfully back, step by step, counting and classifying the pieces. And when the inventory was done, I grinned a tight and mirthless grin and nodded approvingly at myself in the warped mirror. I could keep that promise to Quint now. In the morning I could call him and tell him who killed Mrs. Johnston. In the meantime I could go down and put the car away and go to bed.

The car was wet with fog and there was a cold and distant smell of snow in the sharp air that cleared my head. I jumped in and started the motor, turned the windshield switch, and waited while the swipes made clear half-moons in the frosty coat of fog.

"What do you intend to do about me?" It was a voice without much fear, and without much hope. It came from the deep gloom of the back seat.

I could see her face glowing dimly in the far corner. "I can't see very well. Is that question served with or without a revolver?"

She lunged toward me and gripped the seat top. "Please. I was excited. It wasn't even loaded. What's going to happen to me?"

"Why should anything happen?"

"I saw Keller go in, and waited. Her voice deepened and she gave a short harsh laugh. "It's been Ellen all the time hasn't it? You just thought you were looking for Gloria Gay." She shook her head. "No one was looking for me at all! It's really funny isn't it? Nobody knew who I was! Now . . . "

"Take it easy, baby. You're safe. Where's your car?"

She stared at nothing for a long while, then said in the subdued monotone of shock: "Martin went off somewhere this morning in the station wagon. He didn't come back. I came in a cab. He's been upset about the way he balled up the thing with you."

"That why you didn't keep your date with Barky Northwick?"

She shuddered a little and sucked breath against her teeth. "So you know about that too. . . . Yes, I was being followed—by you probably—and when Martin didn't come back, I decided not to try to get there. I thought Barky could help. He was the kind of man who got things done."

I opened the door and said: "Yeah. Once. Come up front and I'll take you home." She climbed in and I pulled on the lights and made a U-turn. Lee Martinez was parked up the street a quarter block, under a eucalyptus tree.

I stopped and leaned out the window and said: "Okay, Lee. All's clear."

He growled back: "Nuts! Why didn't you give me your address? I didn't know that was your place!" He drove off without waiting for an answer.

Mrs. Cabrillo sat with her milky hands folded in her lap and her head resting against the closed window. She didn't have any comment to make about Lee. We were on the Parkway before I spoke again.

"Does Cabrillo know?"

"No," she whispered. "I was in Rio more than three years before I met him." Silence. "I'd taken a Portuguese name, and learned the language and the songs. . . . I was coming back to America and put Miranda to shame. Maybe I should have stayed with it."

"If you don't feel like talking, just skip this. But how did you get your line

on Mrs. Johnston?"

"Do you have a match?"

I struck a match with my thumb nail, burned my thumb, and lit her cigarette for her.

SHE was a long time answering. "It was some business at U.C.L.A.," she droned. "I heard the man she was with introducing her as Margaret Bleeker; then I recognized her. The man was a professor out there. I got away before she saw me and sent Martin around to find what it was all about."

"Uh-huh. And that's how this whole mess got started. She found out about Martin. She left the next day for Mexico and got married. You didn't really have to know why she was using your name."

"I thought I did at the time. I raised the ante pretty high before the professor came through. When he did, she'd already got married." She paused for a moment and said, thoughtfully: "How'd he get her married name?"

"She was too smart to disappear without giving it to the Dean's office—as confidential information. That would keep it from going to the Missing Person's Bureau."

She dropped her cigarette out the window and folded her hands quietly in her lap. We drove on to the big wrought iron gate without saying any more. I opened the gate and drove on up and stopped in the deep shadow at the front of the great dark house. I turned off the motor and the lights, and she took her head away from the window and looked down at her hands.

The night was quiet, with an empty desert silence. Even the breeze probing gently at the tall spruce beside the drive was timid and soundless. This was Pasadena at night.

Mrs. Cabrillo shuddered, as lightly as the trees, and said: "What do you plan to do about me?"

"Nothing. Is there supposed to be something I should do—put in for a spot of blackmail maybe?"

"You can't leave me out of it. They'll question you. Wouldn't it be withholding evidence . . . ?"

I stopped breathing, and the flesh at the back of my neck tried to creep up out of my collar into my hair. I tried to think. Then I knew I was right. I had mentioned a corpse, but I hadn't said whose it was. . . .

"Evidence of what?" I croaked.

She turned and looked at me questioningly. "Murder, of course—Ellen's."

I LICKED my lips and said: "Think fast, precious. How did you know about that?"

Her mouth smiled faintly. "Turn on your radio," she murmured. "It's on the local news. I listened while I waited for you to get through with Keller. Did Keller do it?"

I got out my pipe and lit the butt of tobacco left in it. "I'm not working on it," I said. "But I thought maybe you did it."

"Did you?"

"Why not?"

She shuddered again and sat up stiffly, staring at me out of black and empty eyes. She didn't say anything.

I said: "You get panicky. You do things that aren't very smart, like sending Martin to U.C.L.A. to find out why Ellen Keller was using your name. Or sending him around to scare me off when you heard I was hunting for Gloria Gay. Killing her would be one way of laying Gloria's ghost forever. . . ."

"No one would take that seriously." Her voice trembled, and was cold. "You don't believe it yourself. It's too far-

fetched."

"Murder is always far-fetched, baby. But a man called me. He went out of his way to tell me Gloria Gay—not Mrs. Johnston, or Margaret Bleeker—was lying dead in Bellona Creek. But maybe Martin did it all on his own, or your husband—but he doesn't know about you, does he?"

She shook her head slowly. It was a vague, lost gesture that was cut off abruptly as she brought her hands up and pressed them hard against her cheeks. "She. . . she walked the ramp on Main Street. I can hear them. . . . He doesn't deserve that. He's proud. . . . Maybe I'll make *Time*. Ecdyziast socialite . . . !" She sucked in breath and it seemed to claw at her throat. She stared at me, hysteria welling up, swelling at her eyes. She bit her finger and there was blood on her lip. Then she turned, teeth chattering, and stumbled out of the car and up into the great dark cave where the door was. I heard it open and then close again with a cold finality. Maybe I had seen the last of Mrs. Cabrillo.

I drove on around so that I could turn on the broad concrete drive by the garages. I noticed two things. The station wagon was missing, and the lights were on in the laboratory. I stopped and got out and went over to the building. The office door was unlocked, the little white room lighted and empty. I knocked on the laboratory door and heard a sound of metal clicking against glass, and the door opened.

It was Cabrillo, smelling of formaldehyde and looking like the tired hero of a Paul DeKruif drama.

He said: "Good morning, Mr. Bailey," and came on into the office and stood by the desk.

"I've more or less finished the case I've been working on," I said. "As far as I know, your wife hasn't any connection with it."

"I see." He lifted his head and gazed at me, not distantly, not vaguely, but with a steady softness. "I believe you to be a very competent man, Mr. Bailey."

"Thanks."

"And you feel you have cleared up the matter of this . . . showgirl, I believe you said she was."

"Yeah. It's all settled."

"You keep rather odd hours. It's almost three o'clock."

"The Research Zoologist's Union wouldn't approve of yours either." He waited silently, patiently, so I added: "Something happened tonight that made it important for me to find out whether your wife was involved or not. I just finished talking with her."

"I want to thank you. It's something of a relief to me."

I turned and went to the door and opened it. "Don't thank me. It was a fair exchange."

"I don't believe it was," he said.

I CLOSED the door and turned and stared at him. My mouth was open and I could taste the formaldehyde on my tongue. It was like a taste of death.

"Sorry you feel that way."

"I take it that you know who my wife is."

"No. Who is she?"

"I am a scientist, Mr. Bailey. Not to escape the world, but to know it better. Like most scientists, I try to know as much about the world around me as I know about the world under my microscope."

"All right. Who is she?"

"I would rather you would tell me."

"Her maiden name might have been Bleeker."

"And later it became Gloria Gay," Cabrillo added softly. "Am I to understand that you don't feel it necessary

for that information to go any further?"

"Not unless someone comes after it."

Cabrillo nodded slowly and turned and went back to the door of his laboratory. "Thanks again, Mr. Bailey. Now, if you'll excuse me. . . . " He stepped into his laboratory and closed the door, and I wandered out into the night and drove away. The station wagon, I noticed, was still out. At Fair Oaks I switched on the radio. The only news program on the air was telling about preparations for the next Big-Three Conference.

I suddenly felt as dry and parched as an Arizona rain barrel. I could get a drink ten minutes sooner by going in on Broadway, past the office. And ten minutes seemed a timeless desert. I took Broadway.

Joe rode me up to my floor in an elevator that smelled like Bradley's bar on a Saturday night. I went on down the cold corridor and let myself in and turned on the light. In the mail tray under the slot there was a single letter. It was addressed to me. I put it in my pocket, unopened.

I got out the bottle and a tumbler, and sat for a long time trying to tidy up the picture. It wouldn't be made pretty. At four o'clock I picked up the phone and dialed Johnston's home.

He answered it on the first ring.

"Glad I didn't get you out of bed. This is Bailey."

"I don't feel sleepy tonight," he said simply. His voice was slack and hoarse. He coughed, and sounded like an old man.

"I'm sorry about Mrs. Johnston."

He didn't say anything.

"I don't like to bother you with this, but I want to give you a chance to decide what's best. I came up to the office on my way home to get a drink. There was a special delivery letter for me from your wife—mailed yesterday."

Silence.

"Well . . . What's in it?" he said finally, but without sharpness.

"I didn't open it. It may be useful as evidence, so it ought to be opened with the law present. But I got to thinking that it might contain stuff that the police don't actually need, and that might be unnecessarily embarrassing to you. I decided the least I could do was tell you about it and let you——"

"Thanks. It was a considerate thing to do," he interrupted. "But I don't think it should be opened. Keep it and give it to the police tomorrow. Have you got a safe place for it?"

"I'll take it with me. I'm glad you see it that way."

"I'd like to be there when it's opened, if you don't mind. Will you see that I'm notified?"

"Sure. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

I hung up and called Central Homicide and got Quint's home phone. A female voice, thick with sleep, answered. Quint wasn't there. She thought he'd been called back to Headquarters. I filled my pipe, poured another drink and let time pass, as it is wont to do. I wasn't impatient.

I called Quint's office again. He hadn't arrived there yet, but he was expected. I left a message for him and started for home. I drove past my street, turned and coasted slowly one block, turned again and found it. It was parked under a jacaranda tree. No one was in it, but it was the Cabrillo station wagon all right. Black initials gleamed smartly on the door panel: J.V.C. I drove on home. I felt wide awake, in a numb, uncomfortable sort of way. Maybe a drink would help. . . .

I opened the lobby door and went in cautiously. There was someone there, waiting for me, but it wasn't any of the Cabrillos.

CHAPTER XXIX

HE NEEDED a shave and his round blue eyes were empty and washed our like the Mojave sky after a rain. He stood up slowly and walked toward me.

"I hope you don't mind my barging in on you like this, but I couldn't sleep. I—I want to talk to you about . . . this thing."

"Sure," I said, "I could use some company myself."

Johnston smiled ruefully. "I'm afraid we both look like fugitives from a vice raid."

I grinned. "Come on up. I'll make us a couple of phenobarbital floats." We went along the hall to the elevator and let it grind its way upward. There was no one waiting for me in the hall, and my door was still locked. Inside I asked Johnston to sit down and I looked the place over casually. I didn't find the Cabrillo chauffeur and there were no stray blondes in my bed, so I went into the kitchen and brewed some fresh coffee. I brought it in on a tray with cream and sugar and put it down on the table beside Johnston. He was lying back with his eyes shut, the bronzed skin drawn tight and gleaming across the bone in his face.

"Help yourself," I said, and took the chair across from him. He sat up stiffly, stretched a little, said, "Thanks," and put some sugar into his cup.

"Bailey, I just don't feel like I'm supposed to," he said hoarsely. "I . . . I don't think I care who did this thing . . . or why it was done. It somehow doesn't seem important. To me it would only belittle what we had together." He stopped talking abruptly and picked up his coffee and balanced the cup on his knee. His face reddened a little.

A punctual, weary dawn was putting frail fingers of light into the room, and in the kitchen the faucet dripped quietly, implacably, punctuating the cold silence.

Johnson said: "Do you keep a cat?"

"Now and then," I said. "Why?"

"You seemed to be looking for something or someone. If you'd rather I'd leave . . . "

"I'd rather you'd stay. But I should warn you there might be some activity around here soon. The principals in this case all work the graveyard shift."

Johnston looked up sharply and there was a strained intensity in his voice. "You mean Margaret's being . . . killed hasn't ended this thing as far as you're concerned?"

"Murder usually makes two problems where there was only one, Mr. Johnston. I'm afraid I'm in this one until it's written off the books."

"But Margaret's letter will probably do that, won't it?"

"I don't know. Would you like some brandy in that?"

"No. No, it's just right." He leaned back and sighed. The fingers of light were silver tipped now, and the orange glow from the standlamp had become nasty and unwholesome. I got up and turned it off.

Johnston made weary furrows in his brow and said: "I'm beginning to wonder if you didn't step out of line and call on my wife. I can't figure why she should send you a letter if she just suspected you were investigating her."

"Yeah. It was quite a surprise."

"Are you positive, Bailey . . . that the letter's from Margaret?"

"Yeah."

He took a deep breath and let it whistle past his teeth. He swallowed some coffee and said: "Maybe a spot of brandy would help at that."

I got out the last of my Christian Brothers and laced both cups generously, warmed them up and sat down

again and stretched out my legs.

WE SAT and drank and let our thoughts drift where they might. Outside, mocking birds were warbling inquiringly at one another, assuring themselves that this was indeed another day. Inside the building the night quiet still held. And then the sound came. I stood up and held out a hand and listened. Even the rhythmic dripping of the faucet seemed to halt, and wait. It came again, from the hall, a small, unhurried sound, carried on the morning stillness. Johnston sat up stiffly, alert, listening.

I said: "Think of something to talk about, will you—in an ordinary tone." I walked quietly as possible to the door and put my ear against it. All I could hear was Johnston droning monotonously, and with occasional uncertain pauses, about the art of influencing people through advertising. I couldn't hear anything in the hall. I slid the .38 out from under my coat, gripped the knob tightly, turned and pulled. There was no one in front of the door. There was no one in the hall.

I ran to where the stairs started downward and looked over. A shadow fell fleetingly, silently across the wall below. It was moving fast. I started down, touching a stair here and there, bouncing off a wall or two, and making a noise like a night on Bald Mountain. It didn't help. The lobby doors were swinging emptily.

I turned and ran back down the hall, unlatched the rear "emergency" exit and went out into the cold bright glare. I crossed the garage court at a run, rounded the incinerator, crossed the alley, and cut through a yard to the street where the station wagon waited under the jacaranda tree. There was no one on the street. I ran down to the station wagon and crouched by the rear fender away from the curb. That way I could watch both approaches.

I waited. A car passed doing fifty. The driver gave me a curious stare and went on his way. I was holding the .38 down in front of me. I began to get nervous. People would be getting up soon; the kids would be out. Then I saw him coming. He had taken the long way around the block. He was running with a jerky, punchy stride, slowing only to glance over his shoulder from time to time. Before he turned onto the street where the car was, he slipped up onto a lawn and took a furtive look down the sidewalk toward the apartment. That satisfied him and he trotted over and opened the door and slid under the wheel. I rose up and put the automatic in his face and said:

"Wanta buy a gun?" I thought it was funny at the time.

But Martin didn't think it was funny at all. Slowly he lowered his eyes until the dark pupils were almost covered. "You're not really smart, chowderhead," he mumbled. "You're just lucky."

"Who knows who's lucky? Me, I don't feel a bit lucky. Let's go back."

"Back where?"

"Back up to the fourth floor where you left your hat."

"I wasn't wearing no hat."

I grinned happily. It didn't even worry me that I enjoyed outsmarting Martin.

"Okay, wisenheimer, I'm leaving. Get that water pistol out of my face."

"Don't encourage me. I might try to drown you with it. We're going upstairs."

"You've got nothing on me."

"I want to talk to you—and I don't want you hanging around outside my door."

He sat for awhile thinking about it. Then he decided to come quietly. I

took an ugly .45 bull nose out of his pocket as he got out of the car. I tried to talk to him on the way back, but he seemed to have gone to sleep. I had warned him about that.

JOHNSTON looked over his shoulder when we walked in, started to say something, then stopped. He had been pouring coffee. He set the percolater down hard and said:

"Good lord, I thought you were just playing cops and robbers. . . . Who's . . . who's this?"

I pointed at the sofa and asked Martin to sit down. He looked around the room with bored contempt, let his eyes fall on Johnston without interest or curiosity, and sat down at the other end from where Johnston had been sitting.

Johnston stood uncertainly in the center of the room looking from Martin to me and back to Martin. He said: "You seem to have plans. Perhaps you'd like me to leave."

"No plans. And I hope you'll stay. I want to bring you up to date on things—now that Martin's with us." I sat down in the arm chair across from the sofa and laid the gun on the table where it was handy. "He won't be good company. He doesn't want to talk." Martin sat with his huge shoulders thrust forward, one knotted fist clamped tight in a hairy hand. He was staring at me with a mute, implacable hatred.

Johnston paced about the room for awhile, if what the space allowed could be called pacing. He looked down at me quizzically, one blond brow raised slightly, and said: "I suppose you'll answer my question about who he is when you get around to it; but if he's involved in Margaret's death, shouldn't you be calling the police?"

I said: "The police have a rather wonderful set of mores. The arrest in this case belongs to a man who works days. He wouldn't like it if I let somebody else get credit for it."

Johnston threw a doubtful look at Martin and sat down at the other end of the sofa. "All right," he said, "you had something you wanted to tell me."

I leaned forward and spoke softly, trying to choose my words. "I'm telling you this now because I don't think the police will tell a straight story when it gets into their hands. . . . There was only one person involved in your wife's death—that's the man sitting beside you there."

Johnston's face was abruptly empty, drawn, as if he were being called upon to express an emotion he found himself hopelessly incapable of expressing. And then as abruptly his mouth drew taut and the eyes seemed to darken and retreat into their deep shadowed clefts. He rose slowly and turned.

I put my hand on the .38 and said, "Hold it, Johnston. There's too much at stake to let anything happen to bring the law in here before I get hold of Quint."

Martin had stiffened and turned so that he could bring up a foot if he had to. Johnston's eyes dropped and he slowly put his hands into his coat pockets. Martin relaxed and looked over at me and drew his lipless mouth back from the angled, ugly teeth and growled:

"A murder rap! Keep throwing your weight around, shamus. With your luck you might hang me, at that."

Johnston sat down with a swift, impatient gesture and snapped: "I'm sorry, Bailey, I suppose you know what you're doing, but I'm not used to this kind of thing. If you've got anything to tell me, or if there's any way I can help, let's have it."

Martin was leaning back now, his hands open, drumming on his heavy knees. I looked at Johnston and said;

"I made a mistake when I told you your wife's name was Gloria Gay. Gloria Gay was someone else, someone who managed to get involved in the case." Martin looked up sharply at that.

Johnston's reaction was slow, but it was there. And then it suddenly ceased to be a reaction at all, and his face was just empty and tired. He said: "You made bigger mistakes than that. . . . I'd rather not dwell on the thing just now."

"You've got to know just where you stand, Mr. Johnston. They're pretty apt to suspect you of this thing . . . and the case against Martin here isn't airtight. He works for Gloria Gay. Of course she isn't Gloria Gay anymore, but she's rather sensitive about her stripper past. It seems that it haunts her. She sent Martin around when she heard I was looking into Gloria, and Martin did about as well as he could. He made matters worse. He tries hard, though, and it occurred to him that killing the woman who could be identified as Gloria Gay might be a fine way out, a solution, and a kind of ablution for past errors."

MARTIN sat up. He said hollowly: "Chowderhead, you're nuts; but nuts!"

Johnston said: "Why do you say they might suspect me . . . ?"

"You're the husband. When a wife is murdered, nine times out of ten the husband did it. The police know their statistics and they like to make something out of them. Then there was the gun she left behind. That won't look right to them. They won't understand her leaving a murder gun behind. They'll think you packed those bags."

Johnston brought up a hand and rubbed his temple slowly. "I wondered about that too," he murmured.

"Then there's you," I went on. "You want to be President maybe, or just state senator. . . . They'll find out you're politically active—that you're a Planning Commissioner, and they'll go on from there."

Johnston looked interested and puzzled. He smiled nicely. "You're right that I'm politically active," he said. "I think it's obvious that business is going to have to work through political channels as it never had to in the past. I saw that some time ago, and decided to get into politics. I ran for Congress two years ago. . . . But isn't that a little subtle for a cop? It's far too subtle for me, frankly."

"Don't ever underestimate a cop. And it isn't really very subtle. You ran for Congress two years ago. Six months later you marry a girl who appears to be everything a budding politician might want. Not too beautiful, but plump and homey looking, just the thing to stand beside you in the newsreels and look determinedly disinterested in Man's Affairs. She appeared to have a fortune when you married her, and that always helps, too. Politics are expensive. Then she turns out to be downright anti-social," I went on. "She won't join anything, seems to be practically hiding from the world. That's a bitter enough fate for a man with stars in his eyes. But to cap the climax, if I may coin a phrase, she doesn't have a cent."

Johnston was slowly milking his right ear and looking at me with a mild and bland curiosity. He laughed abruptly and said: "I'm afraid the part about the role of a politician's wife is a little old-fashioned, but it isn't a bad theory. It's almost frightening."

I laughed with him and took the letter out of my pocket. "Well," I said, "here's something that might help. We can be pretty sure this won't tell us any-

thing about Martin. I think it's safe to open it now, and it probably won't have to get into official hands." I started to tear the envelope along one edge.

"Is that Margaret's letter?"

I nodded and finished tearing off the end.

"Just a moment, Bailey!" Johnston stood up. His jaw was clamped tight and the round eyes, like Chinese agates, were hard and bright. A muscle along the side of his jaw stood out like a welt. "Don't open that!" he snapped. "I don't like the way you're handling this, Bailey. I don't like any part of it. The police should have been called long ago; and that letter won't be opened until they get here."

"The letter's addressed to me, Mr. Johnston." I put two fingers into the envelope. Johnston stepped toward me.

I picked up the revolver. Johnston stopped. Martin leaned forward, tense, expectant. I said: "I've got a man to cover, Mr. Johnston. I can't afford to squabble with you."

Johnston sat down.

I put the gun down and took out the letter. Johnston moved with quick, smooth precision. He was on his feet. The change in his face was hardly perceptible. A quiet suspension of mobility, a sudden withdrawal reflected in the glazed and empty brightness of his eyes. His hand had moved with the same precision. There was a blue steel Colt glaring out of it coldly. He stepped two feet to the side, his back to the door, so that he could cover Martin, too. He pushed off the safety without looking at it or fumbling. He seemed to know just what he was doing.

CHAPTER XXX

"GIVE me the letter," he said quietly.

I flipped the folded letter toward him. He let it fall obliquely to the rug at his feet.

"Stand up," he said softly. "Step over to the end of the sofa with your friend. He can stand up too." Martin got to his feet. His eyes were alive with something that was perhaps fear, certainly not disappointment.

Johnston gestured at Martin slightly with the Colt and said: "Come over here." Martin went over. "Turn around." Martin turned around. Johnston went over him. Not well, not too expertly. He pushed him away and Martin came back and stood beside me.

Johnston smiled. It was still a nice smile, framing a nice set of teeth. He said: "But of course. You would have his gun, wouldn't you?"

I nodded and lifted my hand.

Johnston's mouth tightened and he said, "Thanks, but I'll help myself. Come over here, slowly."

I went over, slowly.

He found it and put it in his pocket. I went back over beside Martin.

Johnston bent down without taking his eyes from either of us. He picked up the letter and waved it at me.

"You're an idiot, Bailey," he said pleasantly. "You go your sluefooted way, and now and then you stumble onto something significant—like this letter. And even then you don't know what you have, do you?"

"Vaguely. It probably tells us why you killed her. Maybe it outlines all the efforts you made to get rid of her before you decided to cook up a blackmail gag and hire yourself a cat's paw. I should have told you—I make a terrible cat's paw."

Johnston's face clouded slightly and his mouth, still smiling, pulled down spastically. He nodded slowly and said: "Let's find out what it says. I'd like you both to turn around. And fold your hands behind you where I can see them."

We turned and showed him our hands. I heard stiff paper being unfolded, a moment of silence, then: "Turn around!"

We turned around. He was slowly crumpling the letter into a wad in his hand. His face was mottled, with green-white spots like mold on a mocha cake. And his eyes were flecked with red. He started to talk but the pulling at his mouth stopped him.

"Take it easy," I said. "It's from a friend of mine. I haven't read it yet."

He dropped the wadded letter and kicked it under the sofa. In a strangled tone, he said: "So there wasn't any letter from Margaret. Is that it?"

"That's right. The case began with a gag—I thought I'd end it with one."

"You do things up brown, don't you?" he purred. "Props and everything."

"The letter was in my box tonight. Finding it there gave me the idea that got you on the prowl again."

Johnston stared at me for a long time, whitely. He took the bull nose out of his pocket and gripped it purposefully in his left hand. He didn't smile, and his wide mouth was slack. "You're s m a r t, H a w k s h a w," he breathed. "Much smarter than I took you for—that was my only real mistake. But how smart is a man who'd deliberately jockey himself into a situation like this? No one knows I'm here."

"Just one gun would be noisy enough for this time of morning. You'll have to use two."

JOHNSTON leaned forward, his legs set apart. He looked tough, mean, and competent. His words flowed like syrup, the kind you put out for ants. "It'll be a pleasure. People are a feckless lot. I won't even have to run. . . ."

I waited. Martin was breathing heavily and great drops of sweat gleamed at his temple.

Johnston moved forward a step, crablike. "Tell me about it, master mind. Where did I slip?"

"It's kind of hard to talk with a muzzle down my throat. Besides, it depresses me."

He pushed the guns a little closer. "Tell me how you did it. Go ahead, crow a little."

"You got off to a bad start," I mumbled. "That blackmail angle. I never liked that two-week trial period. The murder gun she left behind didn't help of course. To me it meant only one thing—someone else packed those bags. But mainly it was your last zealous effort to tie the murder to Gloria Gay." I coughed. My throat was hot and dry. "You see, you and I were the only people who dealt themselves into this game who didn't know your wife wasn't really Gloria Gay. . . . The man who called me wasn't just being clever. He thought he was really talking about Gloria Gay. That meant you."

Johnston nodded slowly. He even smiled. "Good," he murmured. "Good. But you're still rather an idiot, my friend, if you think I hired you as a prelude to murder. I didn't want to kill her. She married a hideout. She was ruthless, vicious, full of hatred, bitterness. But I didn't intend to kill her. I just wanted to be rid of her, free of her. A leech. I asked for a divorce. I threatened her. But she knew. She knew I wouldn't force her into the open. And I was respite, and she was tired of running. And she hadn't anywhere else to go. She liked it out there in the Holmby Hills. . . . Then I hired you to stir up whatever it was she was afraid of. That would start her running again." He lifted the guns and the sunlight glistened brightly along the barrels. "But you let her find out about you, and

she knew I was behind it. That was that. . . . Then you told me about Buffin." His shoulders convulsed and he seemed to be laughing silently, but his eyes were dead.

"I told you she had disappeared," he went on. "Well, she hadn't—yet. I drove over to the house and threw Buffin's murder in her face. I told her to pack and go; I wouldn't stop her. But she flew into a rage. . . . " The shoulders convulsed again. "She seemed to blame me for her whole rotten past. Gracious wife. She tried to kill me. That's when it happened." He lifted his head slowly. "It was an accident, you see. I didn't really intend to kill her. She was dead when I drove her to the bridge. I think it was her neck. It just snapped. . . . " The round eyes blinked, the lids moved with a tired reluctance. "It's going to be rather difficult for me, really . . . to kill the two of you."

"Noisy, too."

He raised the guns and his mouth tightened and pulled down.

"Wait," I croaked. "Use your head, Johnston. I planned this. I knew you'd feel safe as long as no one knew what that love nest of yours was really like. But I knew you wouldn't stop at anything to get hold of a letter from your wife—it there'd really been one. . . . Doesn't that suggest anything? Don't you know there are cops outside that door, and around the building? I knew you were coming, Johnston. I prepared for you."

He didn't say anything. The bright glaze was on his eyes again, depriving them of meaning, even of humanity.

"I counted on you," I went on, "to understand that no jury would give you too hard a time for your wife's death. She was a killer. But this only leads one way, Johnston—to the gas chamber. . . . "

He backed up slowly. Suddenly I knew what the empty brightness was. It was terror. I couldn't be sure anymore what Johnston would do. His hands were tightening, the knuckles white.

IT WAS in the shadow of the short hall, but it caught my eye. It was the door. It was swinging silently inward. I lifted my hand and put it against Martin's shoulder and gave it all I had. I pushed Martin one way and rolled the other. A shout sounded from the door: "Drop it, Johnston."

I started up on my knees. My .38 was on the table two feet away. A gun blasted the morning stillness and the sound rolled and roared again as another thundered from the door.

I dropped to the floor, and my stomach knotted up, hard and tight. The room was raw with silence and smoke and the odor of burned cordite. And perhaps with the odor of death. I stood up slowly. Johnston's terror had ridden over him. He had turned and fired. He was sprawled across the arm of the sofa, one shoulder at a cocked impossible angle, legs twisted in the alien unreality of death. Martin was getting up from near the sofa; and Quint, a tiny derringer almost lost in his hand, was coming in slowly from the door. A tall, high-hipped man stood in the doorway looking blankly into the room. Quint leaned down and put two fingers against Johnston's throat and held them there. He moved them slowly once and pressed again. He looked up at me.

"I got him in the shoulder. Must have got through to the spine. Guy's dead."

I said: "It didn't work out quite like I expected."

Quint shook his head. "He didn't mean to fire that shot. He just got scared. But we got down everything he said." His face was gray. "It's a nasty business, Stu. I don't think we'd ever

have got him any other way, but I prefer to let the state do the killing."

The high-hipped man in the doorway wheezed: "What the hell. Saved the state some dough."

Quint turned and said tonelessly: "The state doesn't like to be saved that kind of dough. Go down and get Parker." The man with high hips shut the door and went away. I could hear him shouting at my neighbors to get back into their rooms as he walked down the hall. Quint picked up the phone and called the dead wagon. When he was through I said: "I was beginning to get worried. Began to think you didn't get my message."

"I got it." He looked at Martin and said: "Who are you?"

"He's okay," I answered. "He's been doing some work for me. Don't worry about him."

"Okay, Bailey. I tell the story my way. All you have to do is breathe through your nose for awhile and maybe you'll stay in business long enough to buy yourself a new davenport. And don't expect any publicity. You're not getting any."

"I don't think I could use it. I only lost a couple of hundred bucks on this case. What was the name of that guy with the peanut stand?"

The door opened and Armand came in. There was another plainclothesman behind him, a balding man with wide gray eyes and a suit that looked as if it had been thrown at him.

Quint said: "You know what to do, Parker." He turned back to me, took out a couple of cigars, gave me a pained look, and put one back. He lit up slowly and said: "Here's how we tell the story. . . . "

In another hour the story was told, the men from homicide had come and gone, taking their weary burden with them. And Martin had gone too. I told him he didn't have to worry about Mrs. Cabrillo anymore, that it was all right for him to go home. He didn't ask any questions. He just went away. He took his gun with him. He seemed happy.

I was alone with nothing to do, nothing to think about, and a head that felt like the revolving barrel at Ocean Park. I cleaned the place up and lay down on the bed. The sun was clearing the tree tops now, bright and clean and full of hope and longing. I closed my eyes. I had to get some rest before I went downtown. . . .

CHAPTER XXXI

I WOKE up slowly and looked for the morning sun through the open window. It was still there, about an hour higher in the swept sky. I rolled stiffly off the bed and stood looking into Norma Shannon's clear blue eyes.

She was sitting in my deep chair, wearing a couple of large pockets with a nice crisp white linen coat around them. And there was a wide-brimmed hat sitting back on her head framing her smile.

"My," I said hoarsely. "I won't need that drink now."

The smile turned up another quarter of an inch and she said: "You don't believe in answering your phone, do you?"

I stretched politely, sat down on the edge of the bed and said: "Huh-uh. Only when it rings."

"I'm not funny before breakfast either. I came up because I thought it high time you apologized to me."

I grinned. I felt fine, as if I'd slept ten hours. My head didn't ache. It just buzzed a little, contentedly. But it almost always did that. I decided I was quite a guy.

I said: "I'll make it up to you some other way, angel. Humble pie gives me

hives."

"Not till you've shaved you won't."

"You won't be offended, will you, if I go in and take a shower?"

She arched a full dark brow and said: "I'd probably be offended if you didn't."

I went in and showered and shaved, got into pants and shirt and came out feeling like Atlas might if someone should take the world off his shoulders. Norma was smoking a cigarette.

I stood in front of her and said: "Let me just look at you awhile, angel. It's rather wonderful to be able to look into that face and know that I'm right about what I see there."

"How do you think I felt—having you think you saw something else?"

"I'm sorry, Norma. I'll tell you about it over some breakfast. Maybe you'll forgive me a little. . . . I still haven't decided whether your wandering through this case as earnest as a honey bee made things tougher for me, or simpler."

She took off the hat and shook her auburn hair so that it lay gently on her shoulders. The smile faded and some of the confusion I'd seen in the days before came into her eyes.

She stubbed out her cigarette and said: "Stuart, I tried to call you—and then came up—for a particular reason. . . . The police are wrong. The woman they claim is Gloria Gay, or Margaret Bleeker, the one who was killed by her husband—she isn't Gloria Gay. There was a picture of her in the *News*, and it wan't Gloria at all!"

I stepped over to the sofa and sat down. I looked at my watch. I shook my head at her. "Are you always going to plague me, baby? They just took the killer out of here not two hours ago! You could know about all that, but it doesn't make sense that you do."

She stood up and stepped over to me. She put a cool hand on my forehead.

"I'll bet you're hungry," she said. Her eyes were dancing.

I said: "Huh?"

She turned and went to the door and came back with three letters. She handed them to me and said:

"Go right ahead. Catch up."

An idea was slowly stealing over me. An idea I didn't like. Two of the letters were gas and light bills. I laid them aside. The other was from John Vega Cabrillo. I opened it. There was a check inside. A check for one thousand dollars.

I looked up. I said: "What day is this?"

She nodded her head at me and grinned. "Never mind. It's not every man who can sleep for a day and a night and not even have to take his shoes off. . . . And I'll tell you about everything over some breakfast."

I looked out the window. All right. It was a different sun. I could see that now. The hope and the longing were still there—but now there was promise, too.

SELF-EXECUTION

IN OUR so-called civilized society it is necessary for the state to try a criminal, and if he is convicted, to carry out the sentence. Among many primitive people in the world today, however, these formal proceedings are dispensed with. The individual must voluntarily mete out his own punishment, and never does he fail to do so. As a result, curious forms of self-punishment are prevalent.

A native of the Cook Islands of the South Pacific, guilty of a capital offense, paddles out to sea in a canoe which has a clay plug in the bottom. Eventually, the clay becomes saturated and crumbles, causing the boat to fill with water. Thus the offender meets his inevitable death by drowning.

In the Solomon Islands, a similar situation exists. No trial is held, and no sentence is ever passed, yet the guilty native always carries out the death penalty that tradition imposes. He climbs to the top of the highest tree and falls to the ground, committing suicide.

—*Rosetta Livingston*

The READER TESTIFIES

SHE MADE A MISTAKE!

Sirs:

Have just finished reading your new Mammoth Mystery, and would like to say that both my husband and myself enjoyed it very much. I purchased the magazine completely by mistake, as I thought I was buying Mammoth Detective. The story I enjoyed most was Bruno Fischer's "Bones Will Tell."

We say keep up the good work. It's a swell magazine.

MRS. CHARLES CUNNINGHAM
Hull, Ill.

Which proves that some mistakes are profitable! Although Mammoth Mystery has shrunk worse than a dollar shirt, as compared with the first issue, the quality is still up there. Let us hear from you again.—ED.

AN ADMIRER OF WILSTACH

Sirs:

As a reader of mystery stories, I wish to congratulate you on the initial number of Mammoth, which I was attracted to by seeing the name of John Wilstach on the cover. His yarn in the first issue would be the making of any magazine of this kind. It is well up to his best.

The entire contents of the issue are noteworthy in their line, and I doubt very much if you can keep it up regularly. I cannot forebear commending Robert Bloch as well, who can also be depended upon.

W. PAUL COOK
North Montpelier
Vermont

Almost without exception, the letters we received from readers of our first issue had nothing but praise for Mr. Wilstach's novel. We have other stories by him and they will come to you from time to time.—ED.

FROM A T.B.M.

Sirs:

To the tired business man such a relief as your magazine affords is of the greatest value. The choice of subjects for your stories is well conceived and attracts attention at once. I picked Mammoth Mystery up in New York and was well entertained, especially by John Wilstach's "Murder by Magic," which is told in a masterly manner with a rapid style that carries one along easily. Also worth mentioning were "Bread and Fury" by Frances M. Deegan, and "Why Pick on Me?" by William Brengle. With such authors you are bound to grow more and more popular.

I thought you might like to have this word of appreciation when so many people write only to find fault.

W. P. TUTTLE
Montreal, P.Q.
Canada

Since you liked Frances M. Deegan's story in the first issue, you will be glad to see that she is back again—this time with "Hattie Had a Hatchet." We think it is one of the best yarns she has written to date, and both she and your editor will be glad to get your reaction on it.—ED.

"TIMELY AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING"

Sirs:

I've just finished gulping down several of the "whodunits" in this new Mammoth Mystery of yours and sure want to congratulate you on gathering together in one issue so many thrill-packed, stimulating hair raisers. "Son of Rasputin," by Robert Bloch, is a beauty, as is also "I'll Dig Your Grave," by William Lawrence Hamling; but the prize of them all is "Murder By Magic," by John Wilstach, which you rightly featured. That one would certainly make a dandy movie and I hope to be able to see it in films soon. It is timely and thought-provoking.

Here's wishing you luck with your new magazine and do give us more by this bird Wilstach whom you obviously think well of since you gave him top billing.

LLOYD EMERSON SIBERELL
Box 83
Cincinnati, Ohio

For anyone who likes unusual novels, we can't say too much in praise of the one in this issue. "The Double Take" is far and away above the usual so-called "novel" found in the average pulp magazine. But let's hear what the readers say.—ED.

TIRED OF WAITING

Sirs:

I don't dig you guys at all. It has been almost a year since the first Mammoth Mystery showed on the stands, and ever since then I've been driving my newsstand owner nuts about getting number two.

What's the matter—was the first one a flop?

GEORGE SANKY
Midlothian, Ill.

It was no flop, George. Here's proof.—Ed.

HATTIE HAD A HATCHET

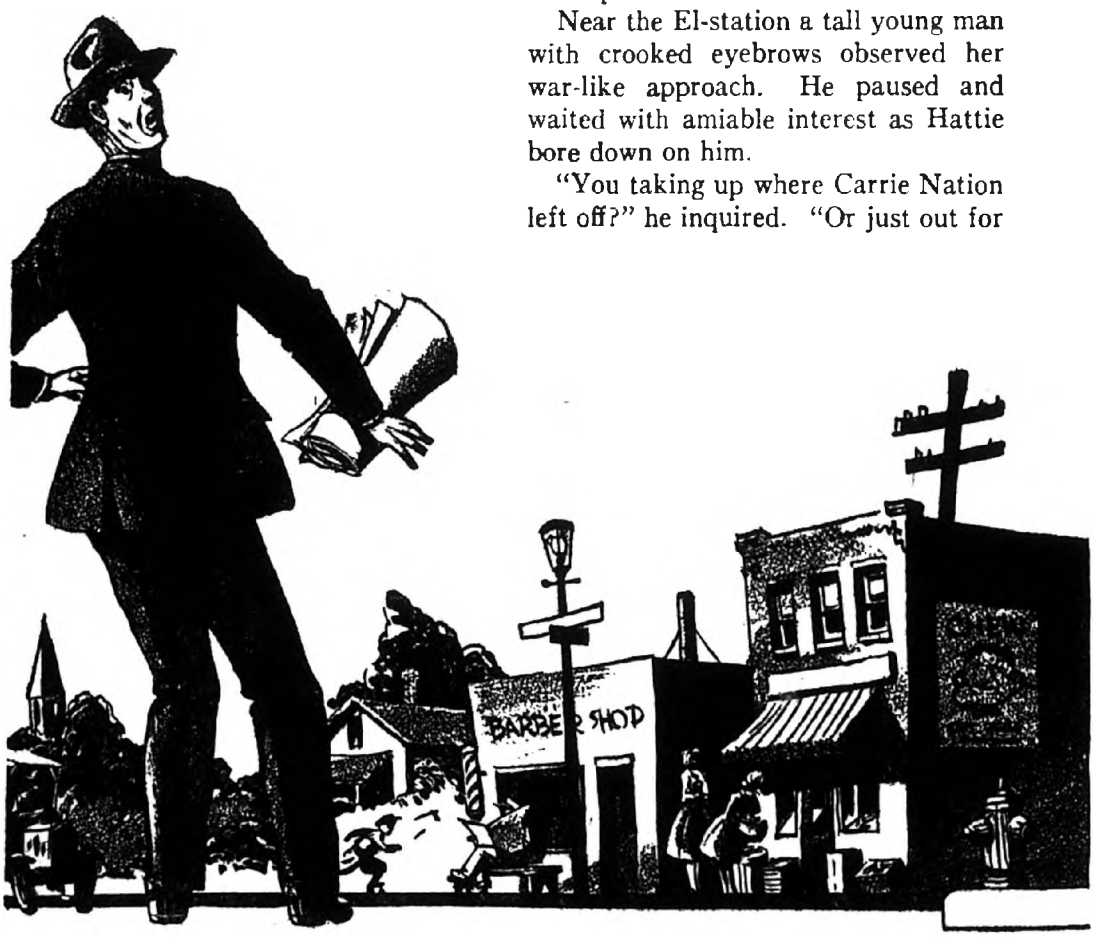
By FRANCES DEEGAN

HATTIE MOFFATT left her house that raw February morning with a hatchet in her hand. She plunged down the narrow brick walk in her customary aggressive manner, unlatched the gate with a stabbing finger, thrust her door key into the iron mailbox, and proceeded down the public thoroughfare.

In her left hand she clutched a shapeless leather purse. In her right hand she carried the hatchet like a tomahawk. An unfashionable purple hat sat forward over her bulldog face, and emphasized the determined thrust of her head. The rest of her followed in sections. The massive bosom, the thick waist, and the ample rear which caused her skirt to hike up behind and switch angrily, displaying surprisingly good legs. She walked with short, lunging steps as if her neat, well-shod feet were trying to keep up with the more forward parts.

Near the El-station a tall young man with crooked eyebrows observed her war-like approach. He paused and waited with amiable interest as Hattie bore down on him.

"You taking up where Carrie Nation left off?" he inquired. "Or just out for



Pedestrians and shopkeepers drew back in alarm at sight of the war-like figure

THERE was considerable alarm when Hattie came down the street waving that hatchet!

a morning scalp?"

"Geraldine Kelly is late as usual," Hattie puffed. "I have to do my own dirty work." She brandished the hatchet. "I want to talk to you, Bill Burke."

"Then lay that hatchet down, H. M. I'm the most peaceful guy on the reservation."

"I intend to," said Hattie, heading once more on her course.

"Need any help?" demanded Bill Burke, keeping pace with her.

"Certainly not!"

Hattie held an even keel past several neighborhood shops, came about abruptly, and thrust her prow into the establishment of one Henry Stearn, Hdwe. Bill stepped in after her, and remained unobtrusively near the door.

Inside, the place was a dusty clutter of tools, gadgets and household utensils. Pots and pans were stacked in inaccessible places, and the floor was littered precariously with bushel baskets full of crockery and glassware.

Hattie banged the hatchet down on a scarred counter and intoned peremptorily: "Hen-ry!"

Proprietor Stearn came from the rear, wiping crumbs off his mouth. His reading glasses were pushed up midway between a bald pate and small, sharp, black eyes. He was an angular man with a harsh voice and dissatisfied demeanor. "What you want?" he asked sourly.

Hattie raised the hatchet and he slewed to a halt, his mouth flapping open in alarm.

"This is the last time—" Hattie began forcefully.

"Now wait a minute, Mis' Moffatt! I ain't done nothin' yet. You don't need to get so mad. I was just talkin'. I never went near the police."

"This has nothing to do with the police."

" 'Course it ain't. That's what I'm tellin' you. I ain't going to have your brother arrested. All I want is for him to give me back my working model. That automatic pants presser is my invention, but you know what he done."

"I don't know anything about it," snorted Hattie indignantly.

"I told you on the telephone last night! He walked off with my working model. He can get somebody else to copy it. And leave me froze out. Me—that invented it! Sylvester Dunn promised he'd finance my invention. I never seen a nickel's worth of capital. And I ain't seen hide nor hair of Sylvester Dunn, nor my pants presser, since the day he walked out of here with in!"

"You know very well Sylvester hasn't got any capital to invest. You thought you could gouge some money out of me by using my brother. I want nothing to do with your silly contraption. You'll just have to get it back from Sylvester yourself. Here!" She shoved the hatchet at him. "The head of this thing is loose again. I wish you'd either put a new handle on it, or fix it so it won't fly off every time I split a piece of kindling wood. This is the last time I'm going to bring it in here!"

HENRY STEARN sagged in sudden, angry relief. "I told you it was worn," he grumbled. "What you need is a whole new hatchet. I'll see what I can do with it. I won't charge you for it, neither. And if you could just speak to your brother, Mis' Moffatt—"

"I haven't seen Sylvester for several weeks," said Hattie shortly. She buttoned her sealskin jacket firmly and slapped the collar into place. "I want that hatchet fixed today—right away. I need it."

Bill held the door wide as she charged out into the street.

"Fools!" she said heatedly. "Three-fourths of Chicago is fool, and the other one-fourth is parasite, and they are all trying to get something for nothing!"

"Did you wish to consult me in a legal capacity," Bill inquired, "or merely discuss the general run-down condition of humanity?"

"Both!" snapped Hattie. "Henry Stearn is threatening to blackmail me with a pants presser. Geraldine Kelly is jailed every Saturday night for being drunk and disorderly, and I have to pay the fine so she can continue her systematic destruction of my dishes and furniture. And," she added, "I've got a viper in my bosom."

"Ah, the charming Sylvester. What has he pulled this time?"

"I am referring," said Hattie coldly, "to a blond racketeer named Millie Herbst. She is ruining my business reputation. I," said Hattie, "have reached the end of my last straw!"

With which desperate declaration, she plunged headlong into the weaving traffic that seemed to come from all directions at once over a "Y" intersection of several converging arteries.

Bill overtook her with reckless strides, and was somewhat surprised to find himself on the far corner unscathed and still going.

Hattie was steaming full speed ahead toward an ancient building on which a modern face-lifting operation had been performed. Bill flipped his cigarette into the gutter and fell in behind her in close formation, to avoid the return wallop of violently shoved entrance doors. The glittering false face of the building served only to accentuate the decadent internal organism.

As they squeezed into the iron maiden that served as an elevator, Bill remarked critically, "This place is unsavory, uncomfortable and uncanny." The iron maiden staggered upward tipsily. "Also unsafe," he added. "I wish you'd let me find you a location in the Loop before this joint collapses on you."

"I will not!" said Hattie firmly. "I'm established. Been in this part of Chicago for over a quarter of a century. Your father drew up the original lease. There's never been anything unsafe about his judgment."

"T'ain't unsafe if you walk easy," declared the toothless pilot, bringing his charge to a shuddering stop. "Watch your step, now. Mis' Moffatt, you owe me a half-a-dollar."

"When was he here?" demanded Hattie, slapping her purse open.

"Sylvester? 'Bout ten minutes ago. Quick-tempered, as usual. Said he couldn't wait around fer you."

"H'mph!" commented Hattie, and jabbed a key at a worn portal entitled MOFFATT BUSINESS SERVICE. Underneath was a terse explanation of the kind of service. LETTER SHOP—EMPLOYMENT BUREAU.

Bill followed her through the clutter of ancient desks and equipment in the still deserted outer office, and entered her private lair. He removed an expensive camel's hair coat and placed it cautiously on a battered chair, balancing a silky Dobbs hat on top.

"Which of these catastrophies," he inquired, "shall we take up first?"

THE DOOR was flung open and an irate blonde marched in. A grotesque rose concoction spiraled upward from a carefully careless hair-do. Her squirrel coat was flung open to reveal frankly feminine architecture, encased in carnal pink. She was screeching like a wounded tom-cat.

"You'll pay for this, you old devil! Sending innocent girls out for immortal

purposes. I've been attackted, that's what! By one of your customers. I've got proof. My clothes were torn! I've got witnesses. I'll sue you! I'll swear out a warrant charging Saul Ginsberg with—with whatever they call it when—"

"This—is Millie Herbst," said Hattie grimly from behind her desk. "I expect we'll have to take her up first."

Millie's tense face switched to a sunny smile as her attention (NOTE: She really said immor*t*al" and "attack*t*ed.") was diverted to Bill. "Isn't this awful?" she remarked chummily. "To think that I should be permitted to such a terrible experience. I couldn't sleep all night. I was terrified, all alone. I kept thinking a man would crawl in the window."

"You live on the eighteenth floor," said Hattie flatly.

"How do you— Oh, so you don't miss anything when you pick your innocent victims, do you?" Millie demanded harshly. "Some organization you've got. Some racket!" She made another lightning switch as she turned back to Bill. "Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

"Frequently," said Bill genially. "The world is full of snares for the righteous."

"Isn't it the truth?" She flung her coat back with innocent abandon to adjust the faultless contours of her brassiere.

"You should know," said Bill. "You're cute, Millie. What you need is an experienced advisor."

"Do you really think so?" she asked breathlessly.

"Nothing could be more dubious," said Bill soberly. "Where do you live, Millie? My name is Bill Burke. Perhaps I could come up and see you some time."

"Never mind that now," rasped Hattie. "I want—"

"Why, Bill, of course I'd love to have you. I really need some one to—to advise me about this terrible experience. I have a little one room apartment in the Mercury Towers. I'm all alone, but I'd love to have you."

"I'm sure you would," Bill murmured. "And I'm sure this whole terrible *faux pas* can be wiped out discreetly—settled in a nice way, if you know what I mean. I couldn't bear to see a friend of mine mixed up in nasty publicity."

"Why Bill! How terribly sweet of you. I just knew I could trust you the minute I saw you."

"Trust my foot!" snorted Hattie. "I want this—"

"Shut up, you old bat!" snapped the volatile Millie. "I know the law, and I know my rights. And now I have a friend to protect me."

"You make friends too quick for your own good," said Hattie perversely.

"I resent your criticism of my methods," Bill told her sternly. "Did Elizabeth find fault with Raleigh?"

"Certainly!" retorted Hattie. "The fellow was a flighty jack ass. He wound up on the scaffold. I want this Circe exterminated, not encouraged!"

"Did you hear what she called me?" demanded Millie.

"She's mistaken," Bill assured her. "You would never be so foolish as to throw pearls at a pig, even if you caught a pig."

Millie giggled uncertainly. "You're being funny," she asserted.

"You're being much too generous." Bill took her arm gallantly and eased her toward the door. "When would you like me to call you?"

"Why just any time, Bill. Any time at all. But of course," she yearned toward him trustingly, "I'd like to get this terrible thing cleared up as soon as

possible. Why don't you run up to see me this afternoon?"

"How could a gullible male resist?" Bill thrust her gently into the outer office as Hattie made banging noises behind them.

"I'll be waiting," Millie promised moistly.

BILL closed the door firmly and strode back to Hattie's desk. They eyed each other antagonistically.

"I never heard of such asinine methods," declared Hattie belligerently. "That's no way to handle that vixen! I sent her out on three prospective jobs before I found out about her racket. She gets in for an interview and then hollers for help. Nobody complained until old Saul Ginsberg called me yesterday. The others probably paid off!"

"Why didn't you tell me that Millie was another one of Sylvester's little schemes?" Bill demanded coldly.

"Sylvester," said Hattie, "is weak. Any one can lead him into—"

"If you'd quit defending him," growled Bill, "he might develop some backbone and come out in the open with his monkeyshines where we can get at him. He belongs in jail, and you know it. If I hadn't remembered that he lives on the eighteenth floor of the Mercury Towers, I might never have connected him with little Millie. You're going to go on covering up for him until you get involved with the law yourself for aiding and abetting an habitual offender."

"I am not!" said Hattie stoutly. "I'll take care of Sylvester. You suppress that blond gangster."

"I'm getting a little tired of suppressing Sylvester's criminal associates, and leaving him free to turn up fresh ones." Bill touched his lighter to a cigarette and dropped into a chair. "I think," he said seriously, "the time has come for a show-down, H. M. Either you give up Sylvester or—terminate your long and—er—interesting association with the firm of Burke, Haenigstaffen, Burke and Burke. The choice is entirely up to you."

"I'll terminate Sylvester," said Hattie harshly. "I told you I'd take care of him. You jump at conclusions too quick, young Burke. Your father—"

The door wavered uncertainly, letting in the now busy clatter of the outer office. "Come in!" Hattie shouted angrily.

A vague and somewhat dilapidated female shuffled in and stood there blinking glassily.

"Geraldine!" barked Hattie. "What are you doing here? The laundry man is due at the house this minute. Now you get right over there!"

"Oh, m'God!" groaned the ill-assorted bundle. "It's my neurotics again. They're givin' me hell. I gotta have a couple dollars for that nerve tonic, Mis' Moffatt. Oh, m'God! I can't do nothin' without it."

"Not another cent!" Hattie slammed her hand down on the desk and Geraldine flinched. "I've advanced your wages for the next three months, and look at you."

"Look a' me, she says." Geraldine hitched herself up with blurred dignity. "Helpless as a babe, I am. With no one to take care of me. With my poor, dear Tom settin' in the can all on account of your brother. Just a-settin' an' a-settin'—an' me helpless."

"Don't be so pathetic!" snapped Hattie. "Your poor, dear Tom used to beat the living daylights out of you. I'll bet that cured your neurotics!"

"You got no right to talk like that about Tom Kelly, Mis' Moffatt. It was your brother got him to hoist that warehouse, an' I'm the one can prove it." She hesitated warily as Bill ex-

tracted his wallet from an inner pocket. "Ain't I always been your friend?" she wheedled, with one bleary eye on the wallet. "Ain't I left my old man take the rap, an' never said a word about your brother? Ain't I kept your house spic an' span these four years?"

"No!" said Hattie explosively. "You've been nothing but a bane and a nuisance. I ought to have my head examined for ever thinking I could rehabilitate a psychopathic—"

"Oh, m'God!" groaned Geraldine. "Them words ain't doin' my neurotics no good. The pain is somethin' awful. You wouldn't believe how I suffer. Why, it's all I——"

"Geraldine," said Bill, holding up two dollar bills. "I believe you. I wish you'd have a couple of slugs of that nerve tonic on me. I've had a touch of neurotics myself now and then."

"Ah, you're a God-send to me, Mr. Burke." Geraldine dived at the bills like a parched duck. "You're a gentleman after my own heart. I can't stay to thank you proper. I got to look after the house for my poor, dear Mis' Moffatt . . ." She scuttled out the door in awkward haste.

"There you go!" said Hattie waspishly. "Encouraging vice!"

"She really does need a nip," said Bill. "And she can't get very drunk on two dollars."

"You don't know Geraldine," snapped Hattie. "She can get soused with fifty cents. By the way, did you have something else to do this morning?"

"Several things, including a half million dollar mortgage," said Bill. "However, the mortgage requires the examination of five or six old abstracts, which I am only too glad to postpone. Let us proceed to attack your fascinating problems. . . ."

They proceeded.

BY NOON Bill had garnered some interesting facts via the telephone. They had to do with patented pants pressers, subsidized blondes, and outraged clients of Moffatt Business Service.

Hattie entered her office head-on, thumped herself down in the squeaking desk chair, and hitched forward to reach the desk.

"Look here, H. M.," said Bill cautiously. "Millie has indeed injured your business reputation to a certain extent. These quarters are obsolete anyway, and since you're in the mood to clean house, let's make a thorough job of it. Let's move your office down to the Loop under a new name." He waited for the customary explosion.

"I'll think about it," Hattie agreed absently, and sat there with her hands folded in unaccustomed silence.

"Hey, what's the matter with you?" Bill demanded anxiously. "Maybe you better have some lunch."

"I'll have to go home," said Hattie wearily. "I've phoned twice and Geraldine isn't there. Thanks to you."

"I'll go with you—"

"I can't offer you any lunch," said Hattie rudely.

"I'm a great hand at scrambled eggs," Bill said firmly. "I'll cook my own lunch. And yours, too."

Hattie plowed her way homeward in stubborn silence. She glared at her old-fashioned house balefully when she failed to find her key in the mailbox, and stalked toward the front door with menace prodding her. The door was unlocked, and Bill followed her into a narrow entrance hall that gave chilly evidence of a neglected furnace. Sylvester Dunn lay on the rose-patterned carpet of the small parlor.

Hattie walked toward her brother with short steady steps and stood there looking down at him. The left side

of his head had been split open. Blood had spattered everywhere and splashes of it mingled with the fat, red roses of the carpet. Bill reached a hand gingerly under the twisted coat and felt nothing but dead flesh. The head and handle of a hatchet lay separately in the welter. Hattie leaned forward to pick up the blood-smeared handle and Bill grasped her arm.

"No, no," he said gently.

"It's my hatchet," said Hattie.

"We mustn't touch anything in here. What was in that cupboard?" Bill indicated a built-in cubicle set high in the wall. Book shelves took up the space beneath. The thick, wooden door of the cupboard had been hacked and battered. A heavy brass lock of the kind installed on antique chests had been broken, the door hung ajar.

"My cash box," said Hattie mechanically. "It's gone."

Bill led her back to the hall, pushed her into an uncomfortable circular chair, and phoned the police.

Hattie's bulldog jaw jutted belligerently, her mouth thinned to a grim, tight line. But her eyes were confused and angry.

"It's Geraldine's fault," she said harshly.

"How much money was in that cash box?" asked Bill, in an effort to avoid the real subject.

"I keep about fifty dollars in it for expenses. That's all."

"How many people knew—" Bill stared at the hot air register. It emitted an eerie wail which resolved itself into words:

"Uf I ha' the wingus a nangel—Over these perizon walls I would flyee—"

Hattie boosted herself to her feet purposefully and made for the kitchen and the door leading to the cellar. Bill was close behind her, somehow relieved by the macabre interruption.

GERALDINE was reclining on the coal pile, her person liberally blacked out with coal dust. She clutched an empty fifth of what had been excellent gin.

"H'are ya, Mis' Moffatt, Mr. Burke," she grimaced jovially. "Jus' fixin' up the furnace."

"Get up out of there!" snapped Hattie. "Who hit Sylvester?"

"Sylves'er is upstairs," pronounced Geraldine carefully. "Sylves'er had a naccident."

"When?" asked Bill.

"Um . . . Today I guesh. I swep' the parlor yes'erday."

"Where did you get that bottle of gin?"

"You should ask!" Hattie snorted.

"She didn't get that for two dollars," said Bill. "Where did you get the dough, Geraldine?"

"A lady give it to me."

"What for?"

"Um . . . I don' know. Jus' goodhearted, I guesh."

"We won't get anything out of her," declared Bill. "Better leave her there for the cops. She won't run away."

Geraldine shuffled herself loosely together, causing a small avalanche in the coal pile. "I hate cops!" she announced. "You wanna know wha' I think o' cops? I think . . ."

Bill hastily took Hattie's arm and steered her back up the stairs as Geraldine delivered herself of a fulsome description.

"Let's have a look around," said Bill. "See if anything else was taken."

They went through the dining room, small study and kitchen on the lower floor. Nothing seemed to be disturbed, but on the drainboard of the sink lay two halves of a butcher knife. The blade had been snapped off close to the handle.

"Don't touch it," Bill warned.

"Looks like your burglar forgot to bring his own tools."

"Burglar," Hattie repeated tonelessly. Her lips set grimly and she turned and stomped toward the stairway.

Two of the three bedrooms upstairs had the impersonal neatness of unoccupied rooms. The third was a confusion of unmade bed, chairs pushed aside awkwardly, a small rug crumpled in a heap, and a slender stand overturned.

"Somebody," said Bill, "has been in here."

"Certainly!" snapped Hattie. "It was me."

"Oh?" Bill contemplated the violent results of Hattie's morning toilet, tried to picture the process, and failed.

He followed her down the hall and stood in the doorway as she entered the bathroom and poked among the bottles and jars in the wooden cabinet over the washbowl.

"What are you looking for?" he inquired at last.

"My pills," said Hattie. "They're gone."

"What kind of pills?"

"Physic pills," she snapped. "They're gone."

"Nonsense. Why would anybody take physic pills?"

The old-fashioned doorbell clanged a single loud peal. Hattie picked up her purse from the washbowl and faced about militantly.

"Your powder's leaking," Bill said and indicated a pale smear along one side of her jacket. Hattie peered down at it in surprise, snatched a towel and dusted herself and her battered purse vigorously.

THE doorbell clanged again and was augmented by authoritative pounding before Bill reached the foot of the stairs. Three plainclothes men and two uniformed cops pushed in as he opened the door.

"Burke is my name," Bill introduced himself. "Bill Burke. I'm this lady's attorney. Mrs. Hattie Moffatt. This is her house, and there is her brother. We found him like that. A cash box with about fifty dollars was taken. Which of you gentlemen is in charge?"

"Not so fast. Not so fast," said a wary-eyed detective. "I'm Sergeant Bray, and if you don't mind, we'll take it in routine. Meanwhile you and the lady go sit down—"

"Owr-r-r-r—Uf I ha' the wingus of a nangel," sang Geraldine dolefully through the furnace pipes.

The stocky sergeant glared at Bill with narrowed eyes.

"That," explained Bill, "is one of your suspects."

"What's she doing in the cellar?"

"Just resting," said Bill. "You don't have to worry about her, but there are two others I think you'd better pick up—"

"Now, wait a minute, fellow. Where do you get off—telling me how to conduct this investigation? While you're pointing out the suspects, I'd like to know how come you got here so quick to represent your client. Where did you say your office was?"

"I didn't say. I'm a member of the firm of Burke, Haenigstaffen, Burke and Burke—"

"You're not—?"

"I'm Bill Burke. My father is Will Burke. And my grandfather was Judge Willie Burke, the 'Big Noise.' Don't ask me how Haenigstaffen got in there. Nobody even remembers who he was."

"You're pretty flip," grumbled the sergeant, "for a member of a dignified law firm. Who did you say these other two—er—persons are?"

"One is Henry Stearn, who has a

hardware store four doors west of the Elevated station. The other is Miss Millie Herbst, who has an apartment on the eighteenth floor of the Mercury Towers. They each had connections with the dead man." Bill explained the connections briefly, and added, "They can be picked up as material witnesses."

"Humph!" grunted the sergeant. But he dispatched one of his men to look for Henry Stearn, and got on the telephone to place a pick-up order for Millie.

Meanwhile Geraldine was hoisted out of the cellar with a good deal of bumping and a loud monologue on the various aspects of her progress. She was planted firmly in a kitchen chair, still clutching her bottle, and focused a blackened mask on Bill.

"Nice how-de-do, ain't it?" she leered confidentially. "Cops in our hair again."

"Not nice, but necessary," Bill commented amiably. "What did Sylvester say to you?"

The two cops who had done the hoisting job were splashing busily at the sink. Hattie glared and moved her jaw ominously as they finished mopping up with her dish towels.

"Sylves'er? Now there's a rat for you," declared Geraldine oratorically. "I got a couple things to say to that guy. Where'd he go?"

"Shut up! You besotted fool!" grated Hattie.

"Maybe you've forgotten," said Bill. "But Sylvester is dead."

"I knew it!" Geraldine banged her bottle on the table. "Jus' as sure as my name's Ke-lelly—I knew poor, dear Mis' Moffatt would have to bump 'im."

THE cops dropped the dish towels under the sink and stalked forward. Bill held up one hand to stay them. "What did Sylvester say to you?" he demanded.

"When'd he say it?" Geraldine squinted thoughtfully.

"When he came in."

"Um . . . he didn't come in."

"Didn't come in?"

"Nossir. He was awready in—an' out. In like a breeze an' out like a light. If y'know what I mean—an' y'better! I ain't gonna stan' up here all day an' tell you . . . Wait a minute, who'm I fightin' with? I ain't even standin' up. I wish you wouldn't keep in'eruptin' me. What was I talkin' about?"

"Sylvester," said Bill distinctly. "Where did you see him?"

"Right where he was."

"Was where?"

"Who?"

"Sylvester. Where was he?"

"Right where she bumped him."

"Who bumped him?" cut in the taller of the cops.

"Her. Mis' Moffatt, poor, dear soul—"

"How'd she bump him?" snapped the cop.

"Wit' the B.B. gun," said Geraldine solemnly. "Yessir. I c'n see her jus' as plain, gettin' her paw's old B.B. shotgun down off the shelf, an' she says, 'I'd like to try this on that rat next time he pokes his nose in here,' she says."

"Stop this nonsense!" said Hattie briskly. "There was a rat in the cellar. I got him with a trap, not a shotgun."

"Ah, for—" The cop slapped at his pockets disgustedly. Bill handed him a pack of cigarettes, which he passed on to his rotund partner.

"How much longer," demanded Hattie, "is this army of policemen going to be tracking up my house?"

"They ain't even all here yet," said the round, happy-looking cop. "Like Sergeant Bray says, we gotta follow the routine."

SERGEANT BRAY at that moment was following an ashen-faced Henry Stearn into the roomy old kitchen. Henry swiped his warped hat off sideways, leaving an impish ruffle of hair standing out over the opposite ear. His bald spot glistened, in spite of the chill. He fixed his eyes on Geraldine in obvious horror.

"This man claims," said Sergeant Bray, "that he was following Mrs. Moffatt's instructions when he brought that hatchet to the house this morning."

"He was not!" snapped Hattie.

Henry Stein looked stunned. "Why —why—Mis' Moffatt! You told me yourself you had to have that hatchet fixed right away—"

"You didn't fix it," said Hattie.

"I did. Yes, I did! But I told you it was—was worn. I said I'd do the best I could with in. I didn't plan . . . I mean I wasn't expecting . . ." Henry Stearn looked suddenly very sick.

"Uh-huh!" snarled the sergeant. "So you did know all about it. You haven't had a chance to see anything since you were brought into this house, but you know what was done, and how it was done. So maybe that's why you were busy packing a grip when the officer came after you."

"No—Listen, you can't—I got nothin' to do with it, I tell you!"

"Nothing to do with what?" snapped Bray. "Why do you think you were brought here?"

"I saw him," the man blurted. His beady, black eyes looked pinched as he stared wildly about. "Yes—I saw him. I was scared. That's why—"

"You admit you brought the hatchet to this house?"

"Y-yes. I told you."

"And you admit you saw this man Dunn. Was he dead, or alive?"

"He was d-dead, of course."

"Of course," said Bray flatly. "And he was killed with the hatchet, so he couldn't have been dead before you got here. I have to warn you," the sergeant raised his voice as Henry stuttered hysterically, "that anything you say from now on will be used against you. You are not obliged to make any further statement right now."

"Listen—You got to listen to me," Henry squeaked in terror. "It was when I came back. I started up the street and then I remembered something and came back. That's when I saw him—like that." He fumbled his old hat with shaking hands. Nobody prompted him, and he went on. "I knew Sylvester Dunn was in the house, because I remembered that I smelled cigarette smoke when I came in the first time and left the hatchet. I left it right there on the telephone stand—"

"How did you get in?" snapped Bray.

"It—the door wasn't locked. I tried it. Nobody answered the bell and I thought she—" he indicated the solemnly leering Geraldine with a jerk of his head. "I thought she was maybe down cellar or out back, so I went in and left the hatchet. And when I got out in the street, I remembered the cigarette smoke, and I knew it couldn't be anybody but Sylvester Dunn. Mis' Moffatt nor Geraldine don't smoke, and Sylvester had good reason for not coming to the door if he saw it was me."

"You had trouble with him?"

"Not trouble—exactly," Henry faltered and looked at Hattie. "She'll tell you. He stole my pants presser."

"Your what?"

"That's the alleged invention," Bill put in. "I think I mentioned it when I told you this man had been associated with Dunn."

"What do you mean—alleged?" demanded Bray.

"I mean," said Bill, "that a fellow

with a legitimate invention would protect himself with a patent, so that it couldn't be stolen. As a matter of fact, I learned this morning that there are dozens of patented gadgets on the market for keeping trousers pressed, and the manufacturers are constantly prosecuting would-be imitators."

"Did you have a patent?" the sergeant asked the now thoroughly disorganized Henry, who shook his head foolishly. Bill hastily shoved a chair under him as he collapsed.

"He didn't kill Sylvester," said Hattie unexpectedly.

"No?" Bray cocked a sarcastic eyebrow at her.

"Certainly not!" declared Hattie firmly. "The man's incompetent. I've never known him to complete the simplest chore properly."

"That don't mean a thing, lady," said Bray with weary patience. "Some of the most inefficient characters turn out to be the most successful murderers. Right now I'd like to know what this specimen is doing here." He put his hands on the back of his hips and hunched his head between his shoulders to stare at Geraldine.

"How'd you like to take a runnin' jump?" Geraldine demanded raucously. Bill intervened hastily as one of the cops started toward her.

"This is Geraldine Kelly," Bill said. "She keeps house for Mrs. Moffatt."

THE sergeant squinted at the disheveled, black-face hulk sceptically. The rotund cop stepped to his side and imparted some whispered information. Bray glanced sharply at Hattie. "Uh-huh," he said.

Hattie bristled indignantly. "Never mind that!" she said bluntly. "You can't rely on anything this drunken creature says. She simply isn't responsible."

"She accused you of killing your brother?" Bray suggested.

"She has delusions," retorted Hattie.

"You been having trouble with your brother?"

"I haven't seen him for several weeks."

"That's no answer," said Bray with deceptive softness.

"Excuse me," said Bill politely, and moved to Hattie's side. She sat in a kitchen chair with uncompromising stiffness and glared at the sergeant.

"Look here, H.M.," said Bill. "In your office this morning I asked you to make a certain decision. Remember?"

"Certainly!"

"Okay. It still holds. You made your choice when you agreed to wash your hands of Sylvester and retain my services. The situation is far more acute now than it was then. Whether we like it or not, Sylvester's character and his—er—faults are going to be brought out in the open. With your permission, I'd like to give the sergeant a quick sketch of the background. He's going to get the whole picture anyway from different sources, but it will prevent a good deal of misunderstanding if he gets it first hand. Do you mean to say you want to go back on that decision you made?"

"Certainly not!" Hattie transferred her belligerent attention from the sergeant to Bill.

"Your question," Bill said quickly to the sergeant, "was whether Mrs. Moffatt had been having trouble with her brother. The answer is Yes. She's been having trouble with him ever since he was knee high." He proceeded to outline Sylvester's troublesome antics.

Bray's square face was expressionless. He listened without comment as Bill artfully brought in the explanation of his own presence on the scene.

"Uh-huh," said the sergeant noncom-

mitally as Bill finished. He pushed back his hat and wiped a palm across his face. "Looks like everybody preferred this guy dead. I think I better—"

There was a flurry of excitement at the front door, and a white-faced and very angry Millie was ushered into the kitchen. She had changed her costume and now sported a silver fox jacket with matching turban, and a tight-fitting, sheer, black wool dress.

"She's sore," her escort announced superfluously. "She was gonna go to Kansas City. On the 1:30 train. She just missed it. This is Miss Herbst."

"Of all the nerve!" shrilled Miss Herbst.

"What did you do with my physic pills?" demanded Hattie irrelevantly.

Millie's vivid mouth gaped ludicrously.

"You took 'em," Hattie persisted. "Out of my medicine cabinet. This morning."

"Why, you're—" Millie gasped. "She's crazy!"

Sergeant Bray looked a bit baffled. "Was she here this morning?" he asked Hattie.

"Certainly!"

"You're a liar!" shrieked Millie. "I was never in this house in my life! I went to her office this morning. There—" she jabbed a finger at Bill. 'He'll tell you."

"Thats' right," said Bill blandly. "Of course, that was quite early—" There was a clatter behind him as the gin bottle slipped out of Geraldine's grimy paw. Her head hit the table with a hollow thump and she snored comfortably. Millie stared at the spectacle apprehensively; but Hattie lunged to her feet, stumped across the kitchen and began shaking Geraldine savagely.

"Why," demanded Sergeant Bray, with a trace of annoyance, "don't you let her sleep it off?"

"Because I want to ask her something," said Hattie. "Geraldine! Wake up, quick! The police are here!"

"What—again?" muttered Geraldine. "Le's fight!"

"Listen to me!" Hattie gave her another shake as she sprawled across the table. "Do you know that woman?"

BILL glanced quickly at Millie who had turned away, pulling her fur collar closer about her face.

Geraldine screwed up her blackened owl face in an effort of concentration and peered blearily from one cop to another. "Whish one?" she inquired thickly.

"There!" Hattie directed her attention by force, and Geraldine considered Millie's rear elevation.

"Face is familiar," she decided.

"You can't see her face!" Hattie snapped angrily.

"How you know?" Geraldine demanded.

Hattie gave an exasperated snort. "Bill Burke, what are you standing there for? Can't you—"

Sergeant Bray took Millie's arm. "What's the matter?" he rasped. "What are you scared of?"

"Nothing," Millie quavered. "It's just—it makes me sick to look at her."

"Don't be that way," said the sergeant with false heartiness. He turned her about suddenly, and marched her up to face Geraldine.

Millie flung up her chin and stared haughtily over Geraldine's head. There was a silent wait while Geraldine conducted her scrutiny. Finally she thrust herself back in her chair and delivered her ultimatum. "She don't know me," she declared.

"Did you ever see her before?" asked Bray.

"What's it to you, sorehead?" retorted Geraldine.

"Is this the goodhearted lady you told us about, Geraldine?" asked Bill hastily, as the sergeant balled his fists and lunged forward.

Geraldine winked laboriously. "She's in the bucks," she confided. "She c'n afford to be goodhearted. Got more fur coats 'n you c'n shake a stick at."

"That's right," Bill encouraged. "She had a different fur coat on this morning." Millie glared at him.

"She's a decorator," said Geraldine with drunken gravity. "Tol' me so. She don't know me now, though. Prob'ly thinks I'm stiff."

Bill glanced at the sergeant and got a nod.

"That was pretty expensive gin you bought," Bill said. "How much did they charge you for it?"

"Four dollars an' six'y-five cents," said Geraldine proudly. "That's the kinda two-fisted sport I am. I blew the whole fin at one crack. Yessir."

Bill picked up the bottle and set it on the table. "You sure killed it in a hurry," he said. "Who helped you drink it?"

"Nobody," answered Geraldine promptly. "She run out on me. When I come back here she was gone. An' there was jus' Sylves'er . . . there was jus' . . ." A look of cunning flickered as realization penetrated the alcoholic fog. "No wonder she took a powder! No wonder she gimme five bucks—"

Millie was squirming in the sergeant's grip and beating at his hand. "Let me go, damn you!" she panted.

"Take it easy, sister," said Bray. "You'll get a chance to tell your story, too."

"It's a frame-up!" she choked. "Any dumb klunk could see that. I had nothing to do with it!"

"No?" said the sergeant suggestively.

MILLIE suddenly glimpsed Henry Stearn who had raised his head in renewed hope. "There!" she shrieked, pointing at him. "There's the man. I saw him!"

Henry cringed again in terror and his face became even paler.

"Where were you?" asked Bray.

"Upstairs," she gasped. "The whole time, I was upstairs in the bathroom. I saw him open the gate and start up the walk and I told Sylvester somebody was coming. He—he told me to get out of sight, and I ran upstairs."

"Why?"

"Because we—I didn't want his sister to know I was here. I'd just had a terrible experience. I think you should know about it—"

"Uh-huh," said the sergeant. "I already heard about it from Mr. Burke. So how long were you—"

"Oh, Bill!" Millie turned to him tearfully. "Then you really were helping me. I thought you were giving me the brush-off."

"You," Bill reminded her, "are the one who was running off."

"I was so upset—I didn't know what I was doing. When I came downstairs and saw Sylvester, I couldn't think of anything except to get away. And then that—that awful woman came in."

Geraldine was once more snoring contentedly.

"Why did you send her out for gin?" asked Bill curiously.

"I didn't. I simply wanted to get rid of her. Sylvester had told me about her—what a lush she was. So I gave her five dollars and told her to go and get a drink."

"Why were you so anxious to get rid of her?" demanded Bray.

"I told you! It was on account of his terrible sister. I didn't want her to know I'd been in her house. I just wanted to get out."

"Then why did you come here in the first place?"

"Because I—Sylvester was a friend of mine. He sympathized with me, even if I was going to sue his terrible sister. I ran into him after I left her office this morning. We just came here to—to talk."

Another disturbance at the front door indicated the arrival of the technical men. Sergeant Bray went out to confer with them.

"This is all nonsense," Hattie declared loudly.

"It's your brother, lady," said a cop sarcastically. "If you don't want us to fool around with it, just say so—and we'll pack up and go home."

"I was just wondering," said Bill pleasantly, "if any of you fellows know what makes a hot air furnace hot. If somebody went down and fired up we'd all be a lot more comfortable. Meanwhile, I'll volunteer for the coffee department."

An informal caucus ensued and a fat detective named Ham was delegated to deal with Geraldine's coal pile.

"You'll have to shake out the klinkers," Hattie cautioned. "And don't forget to open the draft."

"Yes, ma'am," agreed Ham amiably, disappearing cellarward.

Almost immediately the house was shaken with a deafening subterranean uproar.

Sergeant Bray came hustling into the kitchen and stared about in alarm. "What the devil is that?" he demanded.

"Nobody but Ham, the furnace man," said a detective. "He's disposing of klinkers."

"Wait a minute!" said Bray to no one in particular. He strode across to the cellar door and yelled: "Ham! Ham!"

The metallic uproar continued enthusiastically.

"Go down there," Bray directed a uniformed cop. "And tell him to examine that thing thoroughly before he builds a fire in it. Whose idea was this, anyway?"

"Mine," said Bill promptly. "Sorry, sergeant. It never occurred to me there might be evidence—"

"Uh-huh," said Bray as the clanking stopped.

THE furnace door slammed and two pair of feet came clomping up the stairs. Ham was in the lead with a blackened, warped, metal cash box held in a handkerchief-covered paw. The lid had been forced. The ends were twisted up so that it resembled a wide "V."

"Uh-huh," said Bray again, and yanked a long strip of paper toweling off the roller. Ham deposited the cash box on it.

Bray turned to Hattie. "You recognize this?"

"Certainly," she snapped. "It's my cash box."

"How can you be sure from where you're sitting? You haven't even looked at it close."

"How could anybody else's cash box get into my furnace?" retorted Hattie impatiently.

Bray gave her a long look and gathered the box up in the towel.

"All right, you fellows. You can go back down there and sift the rest of the ashes. See what else you can find." Bray disappeared with his parcel.

Ham stood with his hand on the cellar door and stared at Bill. "You think of the nicest things," he said mildly. "I hope your children grow up to be garbage collectors."

"Thanks," said Bill wryly. "I'll send down some Java every two or three hours."

Hattie was permitted to telephone

her office, but as the afternoon wore on she grew more and more restless and impatient with police procedure. Henry Stearn and Millie were apprehensively quiet and thoughtful. Geraldine snored in blissful oblivion. Bill sent out for two cartons of cigarettes, and brewed coffee at frequent intervals. The house got colder and colder.

Sergeant Bray approached Bill with a worried look. "Like to have a word with you," he said gruffly. Bill stepped into the hall with him.

"It's like this," said Bray. "Case of this kind—we got to satisfy a lot of people. It's not just a matter of making a pinch. We got to clean up all the loose ends. We got to have all the answers down pat. So that means we got to ask a lot of questions—"

"Wait a minute, sergeant," said Bill. "I think I know what's on your mind. I happen to belong to a law firm that wields a lot of public influence and political power. Don't let it throw you. I'm not going to take advantage of it, because it's not going to be necessary, as far as my client and I are concerned. We're both in the clear on this thing, and if you don't satisfy your Department and the District Attorney's office on that point—that's when I'm going to start kicking up a row. So you go right ahead and tackle Mrs. Moffatt with your questions."

Bray stared at him briefly. "Uh-huh," he said. "Ask her to step in here." He indicated the small study under the stairs.

Hattie entered purposefully and sat down in a worn leather armchair. "Well?" she demanded bluntly.

Bray wiped a palm down one side of his square face and up the other. Then he massaged the back of his neck.

"You claim this Henry Stearn couldn't have murdered your brother," he said without enthusiasm. "You claim he's incompetent. I guess he is, too. But that don't mean he couldn't hit somebody over the head. It just means he'd have to have somebody else do the planning for him. Figuring out the alibis, and setting the scene. Maybe even furnishing the weapon."

BILL touched his lighter to a cigarette and leaned back against an ancient roll-top desk. Hattie continued to stare at the unhappy sergeant.

"This fellow Stearn had a motive," continued the sergeant doggedly. "Or anyway, he thought he had. He thought he was going to get rich quick with this trick gadget. And he wanted to get it back before somebody else snatched it. Otherwise he was just out of luck, because he couldn't get a patent on an idea he stole from somebody else. So he was ripe for suggestions, especially if they included the payment of a tidy bankroll to him. And he fell in with the plan to get rid of Sylvester Dunn, because it looked fool-proof. I guess it pretty near was, at that. Only this Millie Herbst showed up.

"She seems to think," said the sergeant, "that Stearn didn't know she was in the house. But he must have found out all right, after he'd killed the guy. That's why he was in such a hurry to pack up and leave. He'd already notified his accomplice that there'd been a witness. How did you know," he asked Hattie grimly, "that Miss Herbst was in your house this morning?"

Hattie snorted contemptuously and glared at Bill. "I told you," she said, "that this was all nonsense!"

"Go ahead and answer the question," said Bill easily. "I'd like to know the answer myself."

"You were right there with me," she said indignantly, "when I told you my physic pills were missing. And when

I picked up my purse it was smeared with face powder. I don't use face powder. My pills are expensive. They're put up in a round plastic box with a tight lid. It would make an excellent powder container if somebody got nervous and broke her compact, and had to put the powder in something else."

"Wait a minute," said Bill, and disappeared toward the kitchen. There was a brief argument and he came back with Millie's black suede purse.

Sergeant Bray opened the purse and extracted a round, pink, plastic box with chaste lettering on the lid. Hattie nodded once. "That's it," she said.

"Uh-huh," said the sergeant, looking a little happier. "But there's a few other details—"

"Look here, H.M.," said Bill. "We all know that when the sergeant talks about Henry Stearn's accomplice, he means you. Suppose we ask him to state his case flatly and give us a chance to disprove it? Are you game?"

"Certainly! snapped Hattie. "Although it's a ridiculous waste of time."

"Uh-huh," said Bray. "Maybe you could save us some time. Maybe you could tell us who killed your brother. You claim it wasn't Henry Stearn. So maybe it was this Herbst girl, or the Kelly woman."

"Nonsense!" said Hattie.

"What do you mean—nonsense?" rasped Bray, his face getting red. "If none of you four people did it, then who the—Who did?"

"Sylvester did it himself," said Hattie quietly.

Bray pushed his hat back carefully and glared at Bill. "So that's it," he said with tense calm. "The guy commits suicide by chopping a hole in his own head with a hatchet. The guy deliberately—And the cash box!" said the sergeant with rising hysteria. "The cash box! He even fixed it up to look like a burglary—"

"Wait a minute, sergeant," said Bill, with a sudden gleam of excitement. "It's just possible—" He crossed to the leather chair and looked down at Hattie sternly. "H.M., have you been holding out on us?"

"Certainly not!" snapped Hattie. "The whole thing is right there in front of your eyes. You know Sylvester as well as I do."

"I know he came to your office this morning for money," said Bill. "He missed you because you had stopped to leave your hatchet with Henry Stearn, so he borrowed fifty cents from the elevator man. Why he needed fifty cents, I don't know—"

"For Geraldine," said Hattie. "He expected her to be at the house, and he intended to send her out for a drink, while he—" Her lips clamped together and a hurt look scurried across her eyes.

"I get it," said Bill gently. "He'd planned to help himself to the cash box. He and Millie must have come from the Mercury Towers together. We can verify that by checking the neighborhood. They'll have been seen together. Sylvester went to the office first, intending to make a small touch—just enough to hand Geraldine. He had to go back and tell Millie that you hadn't arrived yet. So she waited until she saw you go in, while Sylvester went on to the house. Millie was right on your heels. We'd no sooner reached your office than she bounced in to do her act, paving the way for the payoff she'd planned."

HATTIE nodded glumly. "That's how she knew all about Geraldine, and how to get rid of her."

"Just a minute," said Bray. "You're skipping a lot. I think you're both having a nightmare. Or else," he said

hollowly, "you're trying to make a monkey out of me."

"No, sergeant," said Bill soberly. "I'm beginning to get the picture now. And it is a freak, but—Look here, H.M., let's take it a step at a time. We both know that Millie and Sylvester were—collaborating. While Millie was in your office, Sylvester came to the house to get rid of Geraldine. She hadn't arrived yet, but Sylvester knew where to find the key—in the mailbox. Millie followed him here. Then Henry Stearn showed up, and they both hid. I think his story is substantially correct, don't you?"

"I do," said Hattie firmly. "Henry isn't smart enough to invent even a story."

"Here," said Bray, clearing his throat, "is where you both get stuck. You can't possibly tell me what happened from here on—unless you make it up."

"H'mph!" snorted Hattie. "Detectives!"

"Sylvester got to work on that cupboard right away," said Bill.

"Uh-huh," said Bray sarcastically. "With the hatchet, of course."

"Certainly not!" snapped Hattie. "Henry Stearn hadn't brought it yet. He used the butcher knife. You all assumed the knife was used to force the cash box. It wasn't. That box was strong. The lid couldn't have been bent out of shape with a knife. Sylvester broke the blade when he tried to open the cupboard."

"How do you figure that?" asked Bray.

"Because it was taken back to the kitchen and left on the drainboard of the sink," said Hattie tartly. "If it had been used on the cash box, it would have been thrown into the furnace with the box. The knife broke and Henry Stearn arrived with the hatchet." Hattie's jaw jutted a little more as she steeled herself to go on. "Sylvester took the hatchet and chopped at the cupboard door. It's thick, hardwood oak. It loosened the head of the hatchet again. Sylvester had a quick temper. He reversed the hatchet and struck at the brass lock with the hammer end. The head flew out . . ."

THERE was silence as Hattie kneaded at the bumps in her shapeless leather purse.

"The lock was smashed, all right." Bray cleared his throat again, and said apologetically, "But he was hit on the left side of the head. Was he left-handed?"

"He was ambidextrous," said Bill. "Used either hand with equal facility. But it seems to me it could have happened, no matter which hand he was using. If you pound a thing with all your might, you instinctively turn your head—one way or the other, depending on where you're standing."

"Uh-huh. I hope," said Bray, "that's the way it happened. But this Herbst girl, now—"

"She took my money," said Hattie firmly.

"Why her," asked Bray, "and not one of the other two?"

"Henry wouldn't have the nerve to nose around," said Hattie, "and Geraldine didn't get the chance. Millie Herbst was the only one who knew about it. When she came downstairs and saw—and saw Sylvester, she also saw the broken lock and found the cash box."

"And about that time," said Bill, "Geraldine came rolling in."

"Then or soon after," said Hattie, "while Millie was trying to find a way to get the box open. She was instantly reminded of the way Sylvester had planned to get rid of Geraldine."

"I can follow that," said Bill to the sergeant. "The fact that she was willing to part with five bucks shows that she was getting pretty anxious, and that she still had something to do before she got out of the house. In other words, she wasn't fool enough to walk down the street with a cash box under her arm, and she figured it was worth five bucks—"

"Uh-huh," said Bray. "So how did she get the box open?"

"With the big axe," said Hattie. "Down in the cellar. We use it to break up chunks of soft coal. Sylvester had already broken the butcher knife, the strongest implement he could find up here. He probably mentioned the axe, but before he could get it, Henry Stearn arrived . . . with the hatchet."

"That's right," said Bill. "An axe could have made that dent in the lid. And the furnace being handy, Millie chucked the empty box in. One good smash in the middle of the lid made the ends twist up."

"Be hard to prove," said Bray. "Unless we get fingerprints."

"Nonsense!" said Hattie. "My money was all in five and one dollar bills. If you find any in her purse that are stained with green ink, they're mine. I spilled my ink bottle the last time I was checking up."

The sergeant picked up the purse and pulled out a pin seal wallet. It was well stuffed, and he counted out thirty-nine dollars in fives and ones, each with a splash of green ink. The remainder, amounting to ninety dollars even, was in tens and twenties.

"Uh-huh," said Bray, and went to answer a knock on the door. The paunchy little medical examiner stood there.

"I'm f i n i s h e d," he announced. "There's one thing I thought you ought to know. About the wound. Whoever struck that blow must have stood on a stepladder. This man was just under six feet, but the wound clearly indicates that the blow came from above. It angled down and struck just in front of the left ear, with the deepest part of the incision at the top. He wasn't sitting down, because none of the chairs have bloodstains."

"May I ask a question?" said Bill.

"I'll ask it," said Bray. "We'd just like to get your opinion on this, doctor. Would it be possible for that man to stand in front of that cupboard door and hit it such a wallop that the hatchet head would fly off and split his skull?"

"H'm. I see what you mean, yes. The bottom of that cupboard would be about eye-level, with the lock a few inches above that. If he smashed at the lock with the hammer end, and the head of the hatchet was loose—"

"It was."

"Then I should think it would be entirely possible," said the medical examiner. "The blade of the hatchet had just been sharpened. The head was the old-fashioned type and quite heavy. If he struck a violent blow upward at the lock, I should say the head could fly off with enough force to inflict a wound of that nature."

"Uh-huh," said Bray. "Thank you, doctor."

"Good day," said the doctor cheerfully.

HATTIE MOFFATT left her house the next morning with an axe in her hand. She plunged down the narrow brick walk in her customary aggressive manner, unlatched the gate with a stabbing finger, thrust her door key into the iron mailbox, then backed up abruptly and took it out again. She looked at it with a puzzled frown, finally stuffed it into her jacket pocket, and proceeded down the public thor-

oughfare.

Near the El-station Bill Burke puffed an after-breakfast cigarette and watched her lunging advance.

"Morning, H. M.," he said, trying to ignore the axe. "Everything under control?"

"Certainly not!" puffed Hattie. "My house is a wreck, and I've got to find a new housekeeper, now that you've had Geraldine put away for the cure. I wasted half a day away from my business yesterday, and now I've got to fritter away more time appearing against Millie Herbst."

"Millie got quite a write-up in the morning papers," said Bill. "Now that she's in the klink, several people have got up enough nerve to come forward with complaints against her. She's been nick-named the 'blond screamer.' I guess that'll clear up the cloud on your business reputation, so you won't be contemplating a move to the Loop, after all."

"If," said Hattie, "it's too much trouble to find me a Loop location, just say so. I'll do it myself."

"Not at all," Bill protested. "I'll be delighted. You'll want something small to start with, I suppose. Rents are a good deal higher—"

"Certainly not!" Hattie's jaw jutted and she blinked once or twice. "I'm thinking of expanding. My personal expenses won't—be quite so heavy—"

"I understand," said Bill. "I'll look around and let you know in a day or two. You—er—you carrying that thing for protection?"

"It's blunted!" said Hattie indignantly. "And the head is loose, after all the experimenting those fool police did with it, trying to prove it was used on my cash box."

"You're not going to trust Henry Stearn to fix it?" Bill gasped.

"Certainly not! I'm going to trade it in for a new one. I'm sick and tired of patching and mending old things. I," said Hattie, "am turning over a new broom with a clean sweep." With which drastic resolution, she turned abruptly and charged headlong toward the establishment of Henry Stearn, Hdwe.

THE END

ANSWER TO BACK COVER PUZZLE

"IT IS evident," the detective said, "that you did not kill your employer, madam. The murder was clearly the work of a man."

He turned to the nephew of the dead man. "You killed him, didn't you?"

"You're insane!" cried the young man. "I didn't kill him! You can't pin this thing on me!"

"Let's look at the clues evident to the eye," said the detective calmly. "To begin with, the streaks left in the linoleum as the dying man 'crawled' to the phone. If he had actually crawled that distance, the lines would have been broken and uneven; the way they actually are shows he was dragged to his present position.

"Two: This frail woman could hardly have dragged the heavy body.

"Three: There would have been no point in the dead man phoning in the identity of his killer. He was shot at his drawing board; there are pencils and paint brushes with which he could have written the name of the killer. Since the killer supposedly made no effort to keep him from telephoning, the dying man would have been free to do the writing.

"Four: Take a look at the position of the telephone receiver under the hand of the corpse. It is reversed; he must have talked into the ear piece.

"Five: The position of the bullet wound shows the dead man was shot through the spine. People don't crawl around and make phone calls with a severed spine; that is physically impossible.

"Six: Both you and the housekeeper say you heard the shot and almost immediately came on the scene. That would make it impossible for the dead man to have done all the things he was supposed to have done after he was shot."

The detective pointed a finger at the nephew. "The truth is, you made that phone call before the killing; knocked your uncle unconscious, dragged him over to the phone, shot him and ran outside—look at your shoes!—hid the gun, then came back in here. When I showed up, you gave me your story. I'm arresting you on suspicion of murder!"

—Alexander Blade

HISTORY'S COOLEST SCOUNDREL

THOMAS BLOOD was born in Ireland. While the men of the land attempted to curry the favor of their flighty and extravagant monarch, Thomas Blood refused to rally in their ranks. Instead he plunged into the dangerous work of treason against the Crown.

This renegade came into the world in 1618, the son of a blacksmith. He rode to fame in the path of Cromwell who rewarded him with grants of forfeited estates. Naturally Blood was angry when Charles came into power, and he was thrown into poverty.

Colonel Thomas Blood had just cause to perpetrate his crime against the throne; whether his purpose was a patriotic one or purely selfish is still being argued by historians. Charles was a foolish and extravagant king. Financially the nation was being drained so that the court could furnish its extraordinary lavish entertainments and satisfy the whims of an egotistical and vain man.

The Crown Jewels were kept in the Tower of London . . . that is, all that were left of them. At the time of the Restoration when Charles II came to the throne the Royal Collection was rather scanty. The only pieces remaining in the collection were the jewels necessary for the Coronation Ceremony—the Crown, the Orb, and the Sceptre. They were left in the care of a Mr. Talbot Edwards—an aged man who kept them in a strong room in his official residence at the Tower.

On rare occasions Edwards would exhibit his precious charges to the public. Early in 1671 he received two visitors who were anxious to see the Crown Jewels before they returned to their country home. One was a swarthy country parson in the flowing cloak that clergymen then wore, and the other was his wife. The innocent-appearing parson was no other than Blood.

While the two were viewing the famous jewels, the parson's wife fainted. Edwards called his wife to administer aid to the poor woman. When the time came for them to leave, the parson was loud in his expression of thanks.

Extremely grateful, he stopped by several days later with a gift for Mrs. Edwards. With friendly relations such as these, another meeting was arranged. The parson suggested his young nephew as a possible groom for the Edwards' lovely daughter. The Edwards asked him to stay for dinner—and now that they considered him a friend, urged him to visit as often as he wished.

It was soon arranged that the nephew should pay a visit. The hour was fixed at 7 A.M.—May 9, 1671.

When the parson arrived with two "friends of the family," Mrs. Edwards and her daughter were still occupied in dressing for their guests. Mr. Edwards greeted the men, and when he learned that the nephew was still on his way, he suggested that they could while away the time in the Jewel Room. The old man innocently thought they would like a glimpse of the famous jewels.

AS SOON as the jewels came into view Edwards was seized and gagged. In spite of his shock and bewilderment at the sudden turn of events, he struggled to free himself. Blood, losing patience, drew a sword from under his cloak and ran it through the gasping captive. He fell as though dead. Blood seized the Crown and crushed it together to hide under his cloak. His accomplice, known as Parrot, was wearing loose breeches which formed a convenient place to hide the Orb. The Sceptre was to be carried away by the third man. It was too long to conceal, and Blood had thought of cutting it in half. They were cutting the gold rod when an alarm was raised.

Young Miss Edwards heard the feeble voice of her father calling from the Jewel Room—"Treason! The crown is stolen!" She burst in to find him lying in a pool of blood. The Sceptre had been cast aside but the men had made off with the rest of their precious booty. Instantly the captain of the guard was notified and the chase began. Blood had remounted his horse, set his spurs, and was almost beyond pursuit when the animal slipped and fell with his rider. Before Colonel Blood could rise to his feet he was seized.

Colonel Blood infuriated and bewildered his captors. He refused to state his case—in fact, to speak to anyone save the ruler of England. Accordingly, after special precautions for the King's safety had been taken—Blood was ushered into His Majesty's presence.

Any other man would have trembled with fear and acted in his most humble manner before the King. But this rebel chose a different mode of approach. The plan was his, he admitted, and he adopted it to avenge his wrongs. He refused to divulge the identity of his associates, but threatened Charles with their vengeance if anything were to happen to their leader. The risk was great, he admitted, but then the prize was a Crown for which a man might well risk his life. This kind of talk interested the King. Blood was a contrast to his friends who responded to his every nod.

Then he played a master card. He told the King that he had gone to assassinate him while he was bathing at Battersea, but had been restrained, though the King was at his mercy, because the sight of His Majesty had filled him with awe, and he was unable to do him harm.

This subtle bit of flattery struck the proper note. Charles admired this bold, crafty adventurer, and granted him a pardon for all his offenses. In addition, he restored to him the forfeited estates. Blood emerged from the ordeal a man of means.

—*Alexander Blade.*

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

MYSTERY MEN OF HISTORY

1 ONE OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY'S MOST COLORFUL CHARACTERS WAS COLONEL THOMAS BLOOD. AN ENGLISH RENEGADE AND REBEL

2

TOGETHER WITH ACCOMPLICES, HE WORKED OUT AN ELABORATE SCHEME TO STEAL THE CROWN JEWELS BY MAKING FRIENDS WITH THE GUARD

3

THE GUARD, LEARNING TOO LATE OF HIS "FRIEND'S" PERFIDY, RAISED SUCH AN OUTCRY THAT BLOOD HAD TO KILL HIM

4

PURSUED BY THE TOWER GUARDS, BLOOD, THE CROWN UNDER HIS COAT, MIGHT HAVE MADE GOOD HIS ESCAPE. BUT HIS HORSE SLIPPED AND THREW HIM, AND BLOOD WAS CAPTURED

5 SO ELOQUENTLY DID HE TALK THAT THE KING NOT ONLY PARDONED HIM BUT RESTORED BLOOD'S FORTUNES!

History's Coolest Scoundrel — Thomas Blood

GIVE THE TRUE ANSWER TO THIS CRIME