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WORLD'S BEST SELLING CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

APRIL, 1957

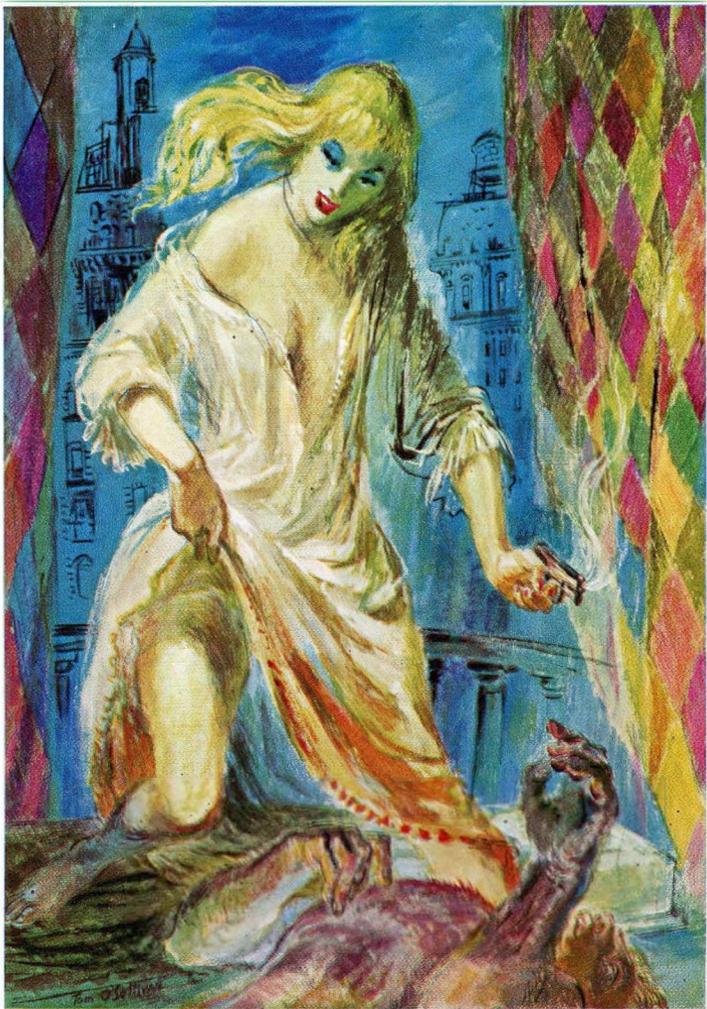
35 CENTS

Body on a White Carpet

BY
AL JAMES

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MANHUNT



VOLUME 5, NO. 4

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APRIL, 1957

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BODY

on a white carpet

by AL JAMES

"Come to my place," the girl said. And, of course, Mac thought he was headed for an evening of pleasure.



MAC COULDN'T REMEMBER when he first noticed the broad. It might have been after the fifth shot of rot gut or when the muted juke box in the corner of the gin palace started playing something dreamy that made him think of his mother. Only she didn't look like his mother. At least not as he remembered his mother slobbering over a hot stove with five kids pulling at her skirt tails.

Mac dawdled over the colored fire in the shot glass and eyed the broad down at the other end of the wood. Even in the dim light of the bar she looked like the real thing. He shifted his bulk on the bar stool so that it rode easier and he could get a better look. Most of what he could see was white. He saw a white creamy face punctuated by

very juicy lips sucking in an ultra sophisticated manner at the frost covered glass she clutched in her gloved hand. And even at the distance of six bar stools he could see plenty of her breasts as she stooped low over the bar. Mac moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. Jeez, he thought, what a handful.

He drained his glass and dropped another fin on the bar as a hint to the barkeep to get going on another drink. Then he mentally calculated the dough he had left from the last job. Enough, he decided, to show the broad a good time and perhaps purchase a room for the night befitting her royal manner.

Then he made his move. Nothing subtle. He picked up his drink and change and moved to the

other end of the bar just in time to snap a light to her unlighted cigarette. He returned the gold lighter, he'd kept out of the jewelry store loot, to his pocket and smiled.

She smiled back.

"Another drink?" He indicated her empty glass. She continued to smile and nodded yes.

Mac snapped his fingers and the barkeep came quickly, like a well trained police dog, and refilled her glass.

She tilted the two ounces and drained it.

Mac smiled and pushed his long, black hair out of his eyes. Sliding easily off the tall bar stool, he ambled toward the multi-colored mechanical marvel that hid the cracked plaster in one corner of the bar room. He slid two bits worth of nickels in its giant maw and flicked his brown eyes over the choice of selections. Habit forced his finger to something soothing by Elvis Presley, but at the last minute he decided on some concert stuff. Over his shoulder, he noticed the broad looking interestedly at him. A high class dish like her would dig upper story music. He hated it, but figured it was a small sacrifice if it would help him make time with her.

He shuffled back over the sawdust covered floor and remounted his stool, giving her the eye as he settled into place. Close up she was all cream, ready to be lapped up. Every strand of the blonde hair hung in its proper place, the whole mop sweeping luxuriantly down across her naked shoulders. Mac wet his lips again because the low cut dress didn't cover much, just kept her inside the law.

She poised the cigarette in mid-air and again flashed her teeth in a smile. Mac tingled a little in the lower regions as he wondered what it would feel like to squash her lips with his. He snapped his fingers and soon two new drinks appeared.

"If I may be so bold," he began, swinging his eyes over the length of the crummy bar, "what is a dish like you doing in a joint like this down on South State Street?"

The gold headed broad put the rot gut right on top of the other in her gorgeous stomach and held her smile. "You might say I was looking for someone." Her voice purred like a caddy engine at low throttle. She shifted her shape so that her left breast ended up nudging Mac's arm leaning on the bar. He pressed and she didn't move by a hair's breadth.

"Have you found the joker yet?" he asked, trying to be casual and trying not to spill the drink halfway to his lips.

She pressed closer until he could smell the perfumed fragrance of her and that left breast threatened to burn a hole in the sleeve of his coat. "I don't know," she purred. "Have I?"

Mac needed air. He guzzled his glass and lit a cigarette. There was no doubt about it, he thought, that this doll was the champagne type and he was way out in deep water with her. But hell, it was about time he quit running around with chorus

floozy and climbed a little. He thought of Mabel and felt a little guilty. He'd just come into the bar to down a few while she finished her last strip across the street. But gals like Mabel were ten for a dollar and the price of a room. It would be a novelty to down a broad with five dollar panties. Maybe a little of her class would rub onto him.

The blonde broke the long silence by pointing a long, well manicured finger nail at her empty glass. "May I have another?" she said sweetly.

Mac snapped his fingers and the barkeep raced down to the end of the bar and slopped the glasses full.

Mac noticed the glare of her diamond incrustated hand. "It looks as if you've found your boy," he said.

"It could very well be," she agreed. Her sullen blue eyes turned up to full candle power and hit Mac dead center. "What I want is a favor," she went on. Then added, "A very small favor."

Mac placed a calculated hand on her knee. "Sure," he said. "You name it. I'll do it." He slid his hand upwards over her skirt, feeling the heat of her leg. "What's the reward?" he chuckled.

The juicy blonde leaned toward Mac until he caught the scent of her lipstick. With her left hand she snuffed out her cigarette, with the right she pulled his hand in a massaging motion over her torso. Mac's temperature shot up to the danger mark.

He found his voice after awhile. "Good enough," he said huskily, descending from the bar stool. He held out his arm and the blonde, flashing teeth, eased down to the floor.

He and the girl side-slipped out of the bar onto State street. And before Mac could determine the direction he wanted to go, Brogan, the local cop, strolled up to the couple. His eyes were chipped stone as they mentally frisked Mac.

"Well if it isn't the boy delinquent," he sneered, his eyes moving to the girl and over her. "You're out of your class tonight. What, no jewelry stores available?"

Mac sniffed in contempt for the man in blue. The truth was he'd had a place cased and ready to push over, but other interests had come along. The cop didn't know how lucky he really was.

Mac flagged down a cab and pulled the girl into it before the cop could make any more observations.

She crossed her legs, flashing the white of her thighs. Mac put his arm around her bare shoulders. She leaned against him. "Well?" he asked. "Where to?" He was feeling like one of the big number boys with this girl at his side. It was about time he was getting up in the world, he thought. Instead of a fast heist, maybe next time he'd do a bank job. Another year and he'd be pushing twenty-two. A man had to improve himself. This blonde was a good omen.

"I'd like to have you do the favor first," she said sweetly, rattling her silver arm bracelet as she fumbled for a cigarette.

"Okay," Mac said. "Anything you want." He lit her cigarette for her and lit one of his own. "Where to?"

She snuggled closer. "Come to my place."

Mac choked on his cigarette. It was going to be quite an evening.

The cab played football through the loop, place kicking a few pedestrians and then scoring a touchdown as it slid over the Michigan Avenue bridge, finally, making the extra point by skidding up to the address the girl had given the driver.

They got out and the yellow roared back into the game, leaving Mac and the girl at the bottom of a building with clouds for a top floor. Mac whistled and followed the broad. This was grade 'A' class, having an apartment in a section like this. She punched a button in the glistening, marble lobby and they slid through the door that obeyed the command of her finger. She punched another and the elevator hummed up and up and up.

"I appreciate this," the blonde purred, moving in on the sweating Mac. He came to life and put his palms on the small of her back and started drawing her nearer. She beat him to it, plastering her size nine figure to his body and closing in on his mouth. But her lips touched his only briefly, tantalizingly. Then she pulled away and turned her back to him. "Unfasten my blouse," she said.

Mac hopped his rib cage would manage to hold his pounding heart. He dried his hands down the sides of his pants. "Hadn't we better wait until we're in your apartment?" he asked, a little surprised at his sudden timidity. The doll was a little fast for him. He liked speed but . . . The rest of the thought dropped to the floor.

"Silly," she smiled. "This *is* the apartment. It's my private elevator to the penthouse."

"Oh how stupid of me," Mike chuckled. He wiped his hands again and unfastened the four buttons that held the back of the blouse together. He wondered how many thousand feet the elevator had traveled.

The blonde slipped out of the thin piece of black and let it fall to the floor. And what Mac saw sent his heat up again. The tiny net brassier didn't cover anything. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, while she whipped off the remaining covering.

He was about to go for her when the elevator doors slid open.

Mac followed the blonde as she waltzed into the dimly lighted, plush living room. The girl, calmly oblivious of the naked front she was exhibiting, plucked a pastel colored cigarette from the gold case on the ebony black coffee table and struck a silver lighter to it. She offered Mac one, but he refused. He didn't go for green cigarettes. Instead, he stuffed a white one in his dry mouth and shakily succeeded

in lighting it. Then, once again, he started for her.

"Not yet," she told him. "You promised to do me a favor."

Mac wet his lips with the tip of his tongue and slipped back into first gear. "Yeah," he said. "I did. Well let's go to it so we can begin the party. What have you got?" He glanced around at the lush layout. "A leaky faucet?"

She smiled at his joke and led the way down a long carpeted hall to a door with a silver plated door knob. Reaching inside, she flicked on the light. "In here," she said.

Mac slipped by her and stopped cold, his scalp trying to crawl off his head.

If the man wasn't dead, he was giving a mighty convincing performance. The naked corpse was spread like an eagle in flight on the white carpet and a small red hole neatly punctuated his forehead. Next to him, a small caliber, ivory-handled gun was almost lost in the deep nap of the rug.

With an effort, Mac started breathing again and about faced. "Ugh, ugh, baby. This is my stop. I think I heard my mother calling."

The girl pouted, "But you said you'd do me a favor."

Mac wiped the sweat from his dripping forehead. "Look, honey. A leaking faucet is one thing but . . ." He waved helplessly in the direction of the corpse.

The blonde walked into the lighted room and sat on the bed. Mac couldn't keep his eyes off of her. She smiled and flicked the zipper on her skirt, tossing it and her half slip into the corner of the room, followed by her spiked shoes. She stood up and dropped her jewelry on the bed and slowly retraced her steps toward the perspiring Mac. She encircled him with her arms and pressed her open mouth to his, breathing, "I've a lot to offer as a reward."

And the poor fish was hooked. Mac wanted her bad. She was class and that was what he was after. When he came up for air, he asked, "Friend of yours?"

She drew away and a frown crossed her face. "No," she said shortly. "He was blackmailing me."

"For what?"

"Something I did a long time before I met my husband," she said.

Again Mac approached the girl, but she drew back. "After you've dumped him." She pointed to the body as if it were a hunk of something that had spoiled.

Mac sighed and ripped the sheet off the bed and wrapped the body in it. "Where are his clothes?" he asked.

She jerked them off the chair and she stuffed them in the sheet. Then he hoisted the bundle on his shoulder and headed for the elevator. He turned before he entered the cage. "By the way. Where is your husband?"

The girl laughed a musical tinkle. "He won't be here when you get back for your reward, don't worry."

Mac didn't miss an alley in East Chicago. He staggered through the darkness with his heavy load trying to figure out the best place to get rid of it. He finally wound up in Lincoln Park amongst the shrubbery, as good a place as any, for his burden, he decided. Mac folded up the sheet and checked the man's pockets for any loose change. Nothing. Tucking the sheet under his arm, he ambled back to the apartment house, planning just how he would make love to the blonde.

Whistling, he punched the elevator button and was lifted towards his evening of love. It hadn't been hard at all, he thought. Just getting rid of a body for a chance in bed with a dish like the blonde. He nearly drowned in his own saliva, before the doors opened again.

The girl was sitting on the couch, fully dressed in a high necked blouse, when he strode into the velvet-lined love nest. She looked up from her magazine as he approached. "May I ask what the big idea is, barging in here at this time of night?" she demanded haughtily.

Mac stopped like he'd hit a brick wall. "We have a date," he said when he'd recovered his voice.

The blonde put down the magazine and stood up. "A date?" She said it like she'd just discovered a cockroach in her perfume. "I'm afraid you are mistaken whoever you are."

Mac stood frozen to the small square of rug.

The blonde continued staring through him as though he were window glass. He shook his head to clear away the fog. "Yeah," he said. "A date. I dumped a body for you in the park less than half hour ago. When I left here you was ready to trot when I got back."

The blonde reached for the small white phone. "You're drunk," she accused. "If you don't leave here this minute, I'll call the police."

"I get it," Mac said. He wasn't quite sure of what he'd got, but he had one hell of a good idea. "You needed someone and I was the holder of the short straw." He laughed mirthlessly and retreated to the elevator as she picked up the phone and began dialing. On the way down he grew hotter with every floor. By the time he hit ground, steam all but streamed from his ears. With determination he began walking.

The apartment was dark when the elevator doors opened. Mac sweated through the blackness and felt his way down the long hall, opening the doorway at one end and feeling around for the light.

The sudden glow flowed over the girl in bed. She opened her eyes and sat bolt upright, staring at Mac and opening her mouth to scream.

"Ugh, ugh, baby," Mac warned. I wouldn't do that if I was you. We got company." He tugged his bundle over to the bed and spilled it out onto the floor. The body rolled a few feet and lay face up on the carpet. "You better get dressed, doll," Mac said, "and go hunt up another sucker."

Mac turned then and went quickly out the door, slamming it after him.



Sista

Police in Springfield, O., raided a poker game. But they found all the players sleeping in chairs and on the floor. No charges were filed.

Right From the Chair

In Akron, O., Dorothy Frient was left in charge of her father's market where she was alone when a masked man entered. Dorothy fled from the store and called the police. When the officers arrived they found the girl's bewildered father holding his handkerchief over his mouth. He had just returned from a dentist's office where he had had some teeth pulled.

Turned Tables

It happened in Camden, N. J. A patrolman gave a motorist a ticket for speeding, then threw the carbon sheet of the summons on the highway. The motorist immediately filed a citizen's warrant against the officer for littering a public thoroughfare. When their cases came to court, the motorist was fined \$14 and the patrolman \$25.

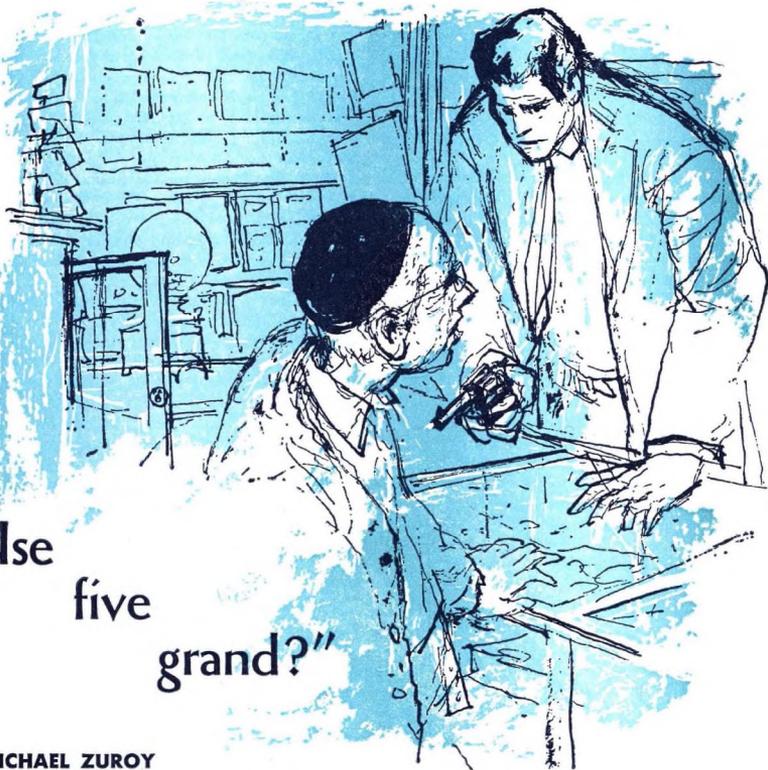
AFTER MAKING FAST his dory, Andy climbed the ladder from the dock to his shack and found a stranger on the couch. The stranger stated his business briefly: he wanted Andy to kill a man.

Screwball, thought Andy, giving him a quick answer, waiting for him to go.

"Just relax a minute," said the man quietly, without resentment. He was a squat fellow with black hair streaked with grey and eyes like tacks that held Andy fast. Leaning forward, thick, hairy wrist stretching out from his sleeve, he placed a rubber-banded sheaf of bills on the table. "Five thousand dollars there. Now will you listen?"

The sight of that much money was worth a listen, thought Andy. He waited.

"This Ben Fuller," the man said. "He's on the Island for the summer, renting the fifth cottage down the street. Lives alone. Doesn't go to business. In fact, doesn't go anywhere, but hangs around the Island and the beach and the Sound all day getting brown and fat and watching the cute girls in the bathing suits and not going in the water much because he can't swim. You've been out on the Sound with him fishing two, three times. One day soon, you two will be out there again. Accident. The boat overturns. Poor Fuller can't swim, but



"Use
five
grand?"

by MICHAEL ZUROY

Andy didn't care about money one way or the other, really. But what the hell, they were going to knock off Ben Fuller anyway . . .

"USE FIVE GRAND?"

you're an expert swimmer. I don't see why there should be any trouble, do you?"

"Look . . ."

"Jack. Jack will do."

"I'm no hood. Why pick on me?"

"The people I represent don't want a hood," said the man. "You've been a resident of City Island most of your life and your record is clean. It'll look like a legitimate accident. Also, you couldn't ever sing to the law even if you tried because you don't know anything."

"Sure," said Andy, "but the same goes for most of the other people on the Island. Other guys have the same opportunity. Why me?"

The man looked Andy over deliberately; he looked at the dark red hair and the hard, careless face showing a few freckles under the tan; his eyes went over the light, poised body in slacks and sport shirt. "Listen, war hero," his thick voice dropped a note, "how many men you killed? Twelve? Fifteen? More maybe?"

It slipped in under Andy's guard. He didn't like going back, but now it was with him. The faces . . . that guy on the bayonet . . .

He looked past the heavy silhouette out the wide window at the glistening Sound, shaking it off quick. "You know a lot about me, don't you," he said in a flat tone.

"Oh, we checked you. We checked you plenty. I didn't come in here cold. You're kind of a shiftless, restless guy. You can use money. You work some over at the boatyard, but only when you're strapped. You don't like anyone telling you what to do with your time. Okay, five thousand will buy you a lot of time. You've killed men before."

"That was war."

"Don't give me names," Jack said, contemptuously. "You've killed guys you didn't know, guys that never harmed you, and never got a damn thing for it. So knock off another one and you've got five thousand." He rose and went to the door, leaving the money on the table. "Do it in a week and keep the roll."

"Suppose I don't. You going to play rough?"

"You been reading too many bum books, Maynor," Jack said, smiling. "Look, understand this. This whole deal is strictly business. I'm not giving you any details, but Fuller's got to die because that's good business for certain people. You don't want to accept our proposition? Okay, that's a business man's privilege and no hard feelings. Someone will drop around next week to pick up our money. We'll find another way. But Maynor," Jack smiled again, "don't spend any of that money if you don't come through. Not a dime. And I don't expect you to do any talking."

Just before he left, Jack turned once more. "Be smart, boy. There won't be any publicity or complications. Just another boating accident, and you've made an easy five thousand."

Alone, Andy counted the money and put it in the refrigerator behind the beer cans. Stretching out on the couch, he looked up at the ceiling and waited for things to fall back into place, but they didn't, quite. Everything was disturbed now. He felt unhappy, bothered. He didn't like that. He liked feeling easy and sure, like when he was working on one of his boats, or sliding over the Sound in the yawl with a stacked babe sitting close, or working up a good boiler-maker drunk at a table with guys he knew in one of the Island bars.

It would be better, Andy thought, if he could talk to somebody. But since his mother had died eight years ago and left him this shack, he hadn't been able to open up to anybody. Mom, dear, this man wants to pay me five thousand dollars to kill Mr. Fuller. Should I do it?

Andy shook his head impatiently against the rough pillow and jumped off the couch. Thinking too much was bad. All these gooky thoughts and memories went running around in your mind.

He went back to the refrigerator and took the cold weight of the money in his hand again. More than he had ever had at one time before, he thought. How about it, Ben Fuller, with your bald head and lumpy pleasant face and shapeless build, do you weigh more than that roll?

Knock it off, Andy told himself. For a couple of days, anyhow. No rush. But he knew he was going to pass up this deal.

Around the third day, Andy knew it wasn't any good. He couldn't let it ride any longer. It was a spoiler. He hadn't made any time with that sweet-faced Brunette on Orchard Beach because it had been stirring around way back deep, keeping him dead-pan and dopey. Two, three guys had passed remarks about him being touchy lately. He'd caught himself thinking again about that soldier on the bayonet, a memory he'd thought had been shelved, only he kept seeing Fuller's bald head on the body. No use kidding himself, avoiding Fuller, taking a coy look at this deal once in a while, shaking a finger at it, and putting it back until next time.

Drag it out, Andy told himself. Make the decision, and that's it.

All right, then, the answer was no. He wasn't going to do it. Glad, Mom? The hell with the five thousand.

After that, it was good. No worries, no thinking, and spit in anybody's eye; nod to Fuller when he saw him.

On the sixth day, though, when Fuller asked to go fishing with him the next morning, he felt a deep reluctance. "I don't know, Ben," he said. "I'll be pretty busy."

"Cut it out, Andy. You know I have my best luck with you."

"Oh, all right."

So here they were, thought Andy, way out on the

Sound, the outboard pushing the dory along over a choppy sea. Slap-slap on the hull, the tiller hard in his hands, spray in his face and in his nostrils and the blue, bright sky that went to China and back. Everything here to make a man happy. Lucky, thought Andy, that he had made his decision. He could feel at peace now and watch Fuller sprawling over the bow like he was made of potatoes, and not worry about killing.

They were going to get Fuller though, soon, Andy thought with a stirring of pity. He wondered for an instant whether he ought to warn the man. No, that would be looking for trouble.

He cut the motor. "This ought to be a good spot for flounder."

They fished from the bobbing dory, lazily serene, Fuller puffing on a fragrant cigar, growing talkative, describing the more expensive resorts he usually went to: Palm Springs, Las Vegas, Miami.

Sure, thought Andy, City Island wasn't much to a guy with Fuller's money. A jolt of resentment went through Andy, and he tried to change the subject, but Fuller bulldozed along.

He looked at Fuller, thinking, dead man, you talk too much. But Fuller kept on, getting to horses, and then cars, with Andy hardly answering, feeling the resentment jolting him again and again. Here was this guy, alive right now because Andy was turning down five thousand dollars, bragging about his money.

"A Caddy anytime," said Fuller, puffing on the cigar. "A Jag's all right; had a couple of them, but you can't beat a good Caddy convertible. What do you say, Andy?"

"Sure." Andy looked down at the white-painted gunwale glaring in the sun, noticing a spot that was beginning to flake. It was slipping in. Maybe if he'd been on guard he would have slapped it down. He'd thought it was all decided and wasn't watching so the impulse came in easy and strong. His hand on the fishing line was gently trembling.

Andy looked around, at the City Island shore, low and misty in the distance, at the line of Long Island hazy in the south, at the faint, stretching Connecticut coast. Hell, this guy was as good as dead anyway. Why let someone else get the five thousand?

He half rose, let his shin hit the seat in front of him, as if by accident. He grabbed for Fuller as he went over. The cold shock of the water moved over Andy's head while the sound of the splashing and Fuller's yelling continued to ring in his ears. Andy came up first and stroked over to the overturned hull and waited. Fuller appeared, floundering, face terror-stricken, yelling, "Andy, help, help!", floundering towards the boat. He was making it, thought Andy, so he intercepted Fuller, meeting the look of the bulging eyes an instant, caught him and took him under again. Andy stayed as long as he could.

But Fuller's blubbery face came up once more. "Andy, for God's sake, Andy!" But the boat was too far away now and drifting further. Andy hung on, drifted with it, watching the waves swallowing at the head in the ring of white, splashing water, until it disappeared.

No more Fuller, thought Andy. Just like that.

Suddenly, he wanted Fuller to come back. He watched the water, wanting to see Fuller's head appear again. He watched a long time and then began to kick the boat along towards the Island, knowing he'd be spotted pretty soon.

It was pretty much like Jack had said. There wasn't much publicity, a few questions by the local police who all knew Andy anyway, a short paragraph in the afternoon editions of some of the newspapers and that was it. The body was washed up at Kings Point and claimed by a well-to-do Detroit family. Unfortunate accident, Andy Maynor, fishing with his back to Ben Fuller, trying, too late, when he did hear Fuller's call, to save the man. Some inferred suicide.

There were some police questions, of course. But no matter what they might be thinking, they could never prove it hadn't happened as he described it.

Five thousand, carefully hidden away, should keep a guy from worrying for a long time. Andy didn't worry exactly, but he was thinking too much. Better not to think; he'd known that a long time, but little crazy thoughts and ideas wouldn't stay out of his head. Like, suppose the cops ever could prove it was murder? Things sometimes came out years afterwards. And, suppose Fuller had friends or associates who didn't believe Andy's story and might try to even it up? Foolish to wonder about every stranger on the Island; a guy couldn't enjoy life walking around suspicious and afraid. Noises around the house at night were ordinary noises; no sense jumping up to investigate each one.

And, what if Jack's bunch decided he might get embarrassing some day? No chance of that, he knew; not those smart operators, but still the thought occurred to him.

And there was Fuller. The guy was dead; let him lay. Why drag back that tanned bald head and potato face with its blubbery mouth? Forget it. Forget the whole thing.

There were days when he did. And days when he couldn't. But there weren't any days anymore when he had a good feeling. Getting boiler-maker drunk or any other kind of drunk didn't help. "You're getting ugly tempered lately," the boys were telling him. "What's the matter, Andy? Why'd you rough up that guy in the bus?" "Your play, Andy. Andy, for chrissake, pay attention! You in or out?" Or Johnson over at the boatyard where he still went sometimes to make it look good: "You're planing that board down to tissue paper, Andy! That's enough now! Will you have the kindness to think about your work?"

It was mostly Fuller, Andy found out. Kissing a babe, he'd think about that blubbering mouth and feel sick. On the beach, there'd be a thousand middle-aged fat guys that looked like Fuller. Fishing or boating on the Sound wasn't any good anymore; that brought everything back. There was always this sickness in the pit of his stomach, always this low-down blackness in his head; always this heaviness in his chest. Mom, I made a mistake. I killed Mr. Fuller. What do I do now?

One night Andy came home to his shack, and there was Jack again, smiling his thick smile. "Hello, Maynor. You did a good job. Want to take on another one?"

"Get the hell out of here."

Jack's smile narrowed, but he held it. "What's the matter, Maynor, that last job bother you? Going soft?"

"Damn right it bothers me. Go on, get out."

Jack leaned back. "Got the jitters, boy? What's the matter, you think you're the only one ever had the jitters? I've seen lots of guys had the jitters, especially after the first job. There's only one good way to get over it."

Andy waited.

"Do another job. Get used to it. After a while, it's no big deal any more. Didn't you find that out in the army, war hero?"

Sure, that was the way it was, Andy thought. Killing became routine; then it went deep into your memory and you didn't think anymore. Besides, he could be no worse off for killing two than one. Yes, maybe another job could chase the jitters. He'd try anything now.

"Okay," Andy said. "I'll go along."

Jack reached into his breast pocket and handed over, but first, a small automatic. Then he gave Andy a written address and a photograph. "There's your man. Case it a day or so, making sure you've got the right man. Then do the job your own way, but quick and neat. Snake back here and dump the gun in the Sound. The job pays a thousand."

"A thousand? I got five thousand for Fuller."

"That was special. This guy's not important."

The job was over in Teaneck, New Jersey. After casing it, Andy picked his night and followed the guy from his bus along the dark suburban streets. It didn't go right at first, though; too many people out. Andy caught up to him under a street-lamp finally, where nobody else was close enough to see anything, and showed him the gun.

The man had dark curly hair and scared eyes. He began talking fast, begging, but he went along with Andy down the side street which petered out to a dirt road and then some vacant lots. Good thing he didn't have to shoot him in the street, Andy thought. The guy said, "Please . . ." but Andy didn't let himself listen. He fired four fast shots and ran.

He ran through the lots, down an embankment, across a highway into some brush, coming out in the deserted parking lot of a plant closed for the night. From there he eased into a brightly-lit shopping street, and walked slowly down it to the bus stop, feeling the automatic in his pocket. He made the ride to Fort Lee and across the George Washington bridge all right, sitting with the other passengers, wondering how come they couldn't tell he had just killed a man.

Once in New York, he felt safe. It was still a long bus ride home, but he didn't mind that. He dozed a little on the bus, looked out the window a little, watched the blazing streets of Fordham Road and the pretty dolls shopping, surprised that he was interested.

He slept soundly for the first time in weeks, and awoke feeling pretty good. He rowed out on the Sound and dumped the gun and sat there thinking under the hot, comforting sun. Not bad, Andy thought, not bad at all. Maybe that Jack was right.

It seemed as though finally things were falling into place again. The pieces were coming together. The pattern wasn't the same as it had been, but still it was forming.

In the days that followed, he found the sick feeling was gone. Fuller was gone. The fear of strangers and cops had lessened. There was still a dull something down deep, but he was living with it as if with a slight toothache. It was like before; he didn't have to think much.

Andy cut out working at the boatyard. Hell, he had plenty of money to keep him going, and there was more where that came from. The quick, easy money, that was the only kind worthwhile.

So he was surprised when Jack dropped in one night, and said: "Andy, do me a favor. I got a job here that only pays two hundred, but it's got to be done. How about it?"

"Two hundred," said Andy slowly. "Two hundred for murdering a guy?"

"I know, I know, Andy. It's not much, but that's all that's in it. We'll make it up on something else. Okay, boy? What do you say?"

"Well . . . all right."

"Atta-boy! This jerk owns a little candy-store in Brooklyn. It won't be bad. Just pick the right time and knock him off. Here's the address and the gun. Know how to get there? Take the Independent to Thirty-Fourth Street, pick up the Sea-Beach B.M.T., and get off at that station."

It was a long subway ride, but Andy started late because he wanted to get there a little before they closed up the store. Even so, he had to while away an hour while customers drifted in and out, drank egg-creams at the counter, and just hung around. He had to walk around the block at least ten, twelve times, and he was feeling pretty nasty when things finally quieted down, and the couple inside began preparing to close the store.

In and out, thought Andy. Get this over fast.

He stepped into the dingy little candy-store, pulled out the gun, and got a good face-to-face look at the victim.

The storekeeper was pitifully small and old, with white hair covered by a cap. His little wife was white-haired too, and when she saw the gun, she screamed, "Papa!" and pushed him behind her, offering her body as a shield.

Feeling sick, Andy lowered the gun, thankful that he hadn't fired. Why would anybody want to harm these people? Unless maybe they knew something they shouldn't? It wasn't his lookout anyway, and this was one deal he wasn't buying. Andy began to back towards the door and something in the old man's eyes made him turn and there were two cops coming fast.

Andy's gun went up. He'd get the first shots in and he couldn't miss, he knew. His eyes caught the leading cop's face. It was a clean, young face, not a

hating face, but set with a duty that had to be done. The sickness deepened and he knew that he didn't want to shoot this cop, and at the same instant he became aware of everything in him and around him, clear and sharp like under a lightning flash at night on the water: there was the guy on the bayonet, Fuller's blubbery mouth, the fear, the curly-headed man under the street-lamp, and everything was falling into place. The pattern was clear now, and it was clear that it was no good.

What have I turned into? he asked as he raised the gun, fired well over the policeman's head.

He didn't feel the bullets hit, but saw the door glass shatter. The store spun slowly upside down and he felt his mouth and nose against the hard, cold tile floor in the darkness, and the cold began seeping in . . .

The two cops looked down at the body. The older cop prodded it with his toe and put his gun away. "Just another hood," he said.



Stolen Stones

In Detroit, police stopped two young hot-rod drivers and checked their cars. Inside the trunk of one car was a stolen tombstone. The other car had two inside. "It gives the cars a low-slung, dragged-down look," one of the youths explained.

Peck Pursuit

Joseph Bommarito was arrested in St. Louis, Mo., for drilling 33 holes through 32 doors in four apartment buildings. When he appeared before Judge Louis Comerford in the Court of Criminal Correction, Bommarito explained that he had been driving around in the vicinity of the buildings and had noticed a beautiful girl.

"I didn't know exactly where she lived," he continued, "and I just had to see her again." The judge sentenced Bommarito to three consecutive 60-day terms in the workhouse, then placed him on parole.

Billy With a Blast

A dispatch from Tokyo reports that Japanese police are considering adoption of a billy with a kick. The proposed stick contains two batteries and a coil that delivers a 60-volt jolt.

A Friend In Need

Nathaniel Poole, of Charlotte, N. C., told police that his \$100 diamond ring had disappeared from his finger. He said the vanishing act occurred during a round of handshaking with friends in a restaurant.

Overdone

In Princeton, N. J., Frank Rechif fastened his \$1 fine to a parking ticket with 55 staples. He said he wanted to make sure the money got to court. The judge ordered him to remove every staple on the ticket and pay additional \$3 court costs.

All in the day's work for Detective Sanders: death and destruction . . .

NIGHT JOB

by **ROBERT PLATE**



Anthony D'Adamo

DAY WAS BREAKING and the stocky figure continued moving through the black ruins of Lou's Gent's Furnishings Shop. The ashes were still warm, but Detective Sanders sniffed through them. Sniffing and searching.

He paused to look at the ring he'd found in the backroom, shaking his head as he returned the ring to his coat pocket.

He paused again at what remained of a corner of the front display room. Ashes of cardboard cartons lay here in a gray heap on a floor reduced to charcoal.

Sanders took a piece of bread from his pocket, put it in his mouth, and chewed slowly. He waited until the flavor of the bread suffused his mouth. Then he rubbed another piece of bread over the charred floor. He chewed the blackened bread, then spit it out.

"Kerosene," he muttered.

Hunched over, still searching, he walked slowly

through the debris. When he found a small pile of feathery paper ash, he looked closer. Neat rows of figures were still visible on the ashes.

Sanders picked his way out of the burned shop and headed for his car, from which he took two sheets of glass and an atomizer. He walked back to the ashes of the bookkeeping records.

Delicately, careful not to touch or crumble the ashes, he fanned them onto one glass plate, using the other as a fan.

With the ashes spread across the glass, he gently squirted fluid from the atomizer over them, to wet them down. Then he firmly pressed the second sheet of glass on top of the first, sandwiching the ashes between them.

Stony-faced, he again picked his way out of the dead store. He stamped black footprints on the sidewalk, brushed ashes from his cuffs. It wouldn't do much good, he knew. He'd smell like a bonfire for the rest of the day.

He got into his car and drove to the tiny cottage on the outskirts of town where Lou Billows lived. It was the only house on the street, part of a development that had never developed.

Billows, haggard from loss of sleep, was sipping his morning coffee on the porch. He rose nervously.

"Any news? Have a cup of coffee?"

"Coffee'd be fine."

Sanders sank into a wicker chair and gloomily studied the surroundings while Billows made noises in the kitchen. Through the front door he saw that the cottage's furniture was rickety, the upholstery shabby, the carpet worn.

Sanders sighed. He leaned back and closed his eyes; he had not slept all night.

Billows returned with the coffee, the cup jangling faintly on the unsteady saucer. Sanders swallowed the steaming coffee greedily.

"Tough break," he said, between sips.

Billows looked at the scuffed tips of his shoes. "Twenty years gone down the drain."

"How was business?"

"I couldn't complain."

"Why not? Everybody else in town does. When the mill moved south, retail sales dropped a third."

"Not mine." Billows still studied his shoetips. "I made a living. Too bad you can't check the books."

"We will."

Billows looked up. "You can't. They were destroyed in the fire."

"A miracle of science, Billows. We'll check them."

A hunted look brightened Billows' eyes. "You'll find I made a good living. Not a good one. But sufficient."

Sanders dug out his little black memo book. "You have a daughter, Cecile. Age sixteen."

The lines of strain in Billows' face softened. "She's in Norwood Academy. I haven't told her yet."

"Why do you send her to such an expensive school?"

"With her mother gone, she deserves the best."

"Sure. I understand." Sanders frowned at more figures in his book. "Costs a couple of thousand a year at that place."

Billows stood up. He took a few quick nervous steps. "Are you insinuating I throw money away on Cecile? What of it? Is it your business?"

Sanders made a sour face as he drained the last of the coffee from the bottom of his cup. "Sure, it's my business."

"The fire is your business. Not my daughter. Now get to the point or—leave."

"You gave her lots of spending money. Sometimes she'd treat her friends to a fling in town. Did you see her on those occasions?"

"If Cecile has a good time, that's okay with me." Billows managed a smile. "Any time she enjoys herself, I'm happy."

"Ever think she might need more supervision? That discipline at Norwood might be too loose? That she slipped away from the academy too often, drank too much for a kid of her age?"

"Nonsense," Billows said. "She's a good girl."

"But expensive. Too expensive." Sanders riffled through his little black book again. "Your business well insured?"

"I suppose so."

Sanders had found the right page. "Very well insured, I'd say."

Billows moved jerkily, aimlessly. "You'd better go. I'm not up to chit-chat. After I heard my store was burning, I didn't sleep all night."

"Neither did I, Billows. How come you didn't show up at the scene?"

"To watch my life go up in smoke? No thanks."

"I've seen many of these cases, but this one—"

Sanders hesitated. He seemed to feel a great weight pressing down on him. "Why not come with me to headquarters, and get this thing off your chest?"

"That's plain stupid. Plain stupid!"

Sanders shrugged. "Listen," he said, with no triumph in his voice, "I can prove all this: The fire was deliberately started with kerosene. You were in debt from spending money on your daughter. Your store was losing money. I've got a glass sandwich in the car. After some chemical and photographic treatment, the lab boys will read the accounts you carefully burned."

Billows seemed to collapse. He stood silently, pounding a fist against his open palm.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I'll be right with you."

Sanders wearily closed his eyes and waited. When he heard the creak of the floorboards before him, he opened his eyes. The black hole of a revolver was pointed at his forehead.

"I bought it to blow my brains out," Billows said. "There comes a time when bills pile up and all the breaks go against you. It's just like drowning. I've got to live for Cecile." He hesitated, gulped.

"Got to kill for Cecile."

"It won't help."

"It will. You've got the evidence. I'll get rid of it."

"And me?"

"Get rid of you, too."

"Not easily."

"Nobody knows you're here. The house is isolated. I can push you and the car off into the lake, where it's a hundred feet deep. They'll never find you. They might suspect me, but they'd never prove anything."

Sanders wiped his damp face. "All this is for your daughter?"

"Stand up," Billows said. The hand holding the gun was steady.

Sanders stood up. Billows gestured at the interior of the house. Sanders stepped into the living room.

"Into the bathroom," Billows said.

"So the blood will flow into the bathtub?"

"Right."

Sanders paused outside the bathroom. Billows prodded him with the gun.

"Do you know your daughter had a key to your store?" Sanders said. "Do you know she had a boy friend she'd get tight with, and sometimes she'd sleep it off in your backroom?"

"That's a damn lie!"

"Oh no. I talked with the boy friend. He was ashamed to talk at first because Cecile paid all the bills."

Billows drove the barrel into Sander's backbone. "Liar! Go ahead and try to talk me out of it!"

Sanders swallowed hard. He took the deep shuddering breath of a man about to jump into icy waters.

"After all these years," he said, "I'm still a sentimental dope. I still try to get around the dirty work in my job."

"Into the bathroom," Billows said.

Sanders didn't move. "Cecile was running wild, Billows. She *did* get drunk. She *did* sleep in your backroom. You didn't even glance in there last night, did you?"

"What's your angle?" Billows voice shrilled, on the edge of panic. "Don't try any fast ones."

"She was there, Billows. She must've been out like a light." Sanders swung around, compassion heavy on his face. "She didn't hear a thing. She never knew what happened."

"No!" Fury swept over Billows. The gun shook in his hand.

"Steady," Sanders said. "Steady now, Billows. I'm going to reach slowly in my pocket for something. It's not a weapon. Watch me carefully. I've got to show you something."

Slowly, carefully, he lowered his hand into the right hand pocket of his jacket. He withdrew a small package of tissue paper, unfolded it.

Resting on the paper was a smoke-blackened gold ring. The dark stone it held might have been a pearl. "My God!" Billows said. "Oh, my God."

"I was hoping that at least *you* hadn't done it," Sanders said. His face was grayish, sick with sympathy. "But I guess I knew from the start."

"She's—"

"Yeah. Dead."

Billows did not move. The revolver dangled from his limp hand. Sanders stepped past him.

"I'll wait for you in the car," he said.

Once in the auto Sanders reached for a bottle in the glove compartment and took a long swig. A minute later the sound of a shot echoed from the house.

Wearily, Sanders stepped from the car. "Could lose my job for this," he muttered. "Kind of wish I would."

Inside the house he looked in the bathroom, hastily closed the door, phoned headquarters.

"Yeah," he said into the phone. "Billows did it. But I got here too late. . . Suicide . . . Of course I sound tired. I'm getting too old for this kind of thing."

He hung up and began to brush futilely at his clothes, trying to rid himself of the dark, clinging odor.



the PERCENTAGE

Name it and Big Eddie had it. A blonde. A Jag. Deathly fear of the number 9 . . .

by
DAVID ALEXANDER

THE BLONDE'S FACE WAS VACUOUS as she stared into the blank, basilisk glass eye of the enormous television set. It was quite a piece of furniture, she thought. A combination color TV, FM radio and hi-fi phonograph all housed in a red-laquered Chinese cabinet. It was the kind of thing Big Eddie Scarsi liked to buy. It had everything but hot and cold running water and maybe there was even a gadget she hadn't discovered that would produce that. There was only one thing wrong with it. It didn't work.



Her dead green eyes with the black-fringe lashes stole a glance at Big Eddie sprawled in his favorite chair, the enormous carved wood chair upholstered in bright green damask that Eddie had insisted upon even though the decorator who did the place had objected to it petulantly. There was a lot of Eddie, she thought, just as there was a lot of the TV-radio-phonograph in its red Chinese pagoda.

Like the TV, Eddie had everything. He was big all over and he was still reasonably young. By the standards of the blonde world he was good-looking. The tall, dark, handsome and slightly menacing type with heavy brows and thick dark hair that smelt of cologne he bought for seventeen dollars. He had money, lots of it, money he hadn't even counted yet. He had a jag and he had this duplex with a river view. And in the mob he was a big wheel, a real big wheel, not just some punk gungel with padded shoulders making like a big wheel.

The blonde looked dumb, like a long-legged mannequin. But she knew the difference. She'd know the score on phonies since she was old enough for her first brassiere. There was only one trouble with Eddie. He was like the TV set. He didn't work. Not any more. He gave her everything she wanted, she supposed, and he never belted her one unless she asked for it; but he was always off in a world of his own, like he was brooding, like he had something on his mind. She couldn't get through to him any more, no matter how fancy a negligee she put on. Something was troubling Eddie. He had something on his mind. She wondered what the hell it was.

Big Eddie Scarsi sipped at the highball. The Scotch in the highball was 14-year-old premium stuff, but he made a face like it was castor oil. He looked at the blonde. She was everything he used to think he wanted. She glittered like something in Tiffany's window. She was long and slinky with thrusting breasts and she'd been a show girl, not a hooper, the glamorous kind who just stand around and wiggle a little bit and show themselves off to the customers with a basket of fruit sitting on their heads and not much costume otherwise except some beads here and there in important places.

Eddie was sitting in the chair that fit him, near the huge picture window. He could see the black river as it made its long, sweeping curve. The East River. That was the stylish river now. Big Eddie could see a long way down the river, almost to the teeming slums where he was born, almost to the piers he'd dived off naked as a kid when the cops weren't looking.

He had everything, because he knew how to figure the percentage. That was what counted now, knowing how to figure the percentage. The Syndicate wasn't just a racket any more. It was business, big business, like General Motors or Standard Oil. The day of the old goons was gone. The Syndicate

seldom had use for the muscles and the gungels and the cement-overcoat tailors. Rough stuff was for the punks, the jaydees in their black leather, steel-studded jackets. Rough stuff was strictly for kicks nowadays.

Eddie had no time for kicks. He was too big for that. He was too busy figuring the percentage. He had muscles if he needed them and he had a gun put away somewhere, but essentially he was a businessman in a \$250 suit and a Sulka tie and the doorman nodded to him just as respectfully as he nodded to the bank president who lived in the same apartment house. He had it made because he knew how to figure the percentage. He was the logical heir to the throne of Lenny Fassio, the big boss. Lenny wasn't going to last forever. Nobody was going to bump him off. You didn't do that nowadays. Sometimes mob bosses even retired and went to Miami Beach or Hot Springs to live their days out quietly.

Lenny wouldn't ever retire, but he couldn't last forever. He dated back to the Prohibition Days, to Madden and Schultz and Coll and Capone. He was one of the few who had managed to adjust. He could figure the percentage, too. That's why he'd lasted. But he was getting old now and he'd developed stomach ulcers and a bad heart when they had him in stir on the tax rap. There were six or seven aspirants to his throne, all younger men, in their thirties like Eddie. But Eddie would be it when they sent the black wagon around for Lenny's Big Ride. He'd be it because he could figure the percentage best.

Eddie Scarsi was set. And he was about as happy as a woman-chaser locked up in the YMCA. It was the percentage that troubled him. And percentage was one thing he knew from A to Z, because Eddie had figured it out a long time ago, right after the war when he came out of the Army and got taken on by the mob. The percentage meant everybody owed you something and you owed nothing to anybody. You kept it that way and your books were always balanced. Eddie had kept it that way. Except for a Polack named Pete Wladek.

It seemed almost impossible that a meek little guy who had to stand on tiptoe to reach the bottom shelf and weighed about 130 pounds when he was soaking wet could be the thing that was wrong with Eddie Scarsi's percentage. In a way, it was a laugh. Only Eddie wasn't laughing. He owed a debt to little Pete Wladek. For years now he'd tried to pay it off. The percentage wasn't right when you owed anything to anybody. But he couldn't pay the debt. He couldn't pay because he couldn't find Pete Wladek. Little Pete had disappeared. Scarsi tried to comfort himself. It made his stomach nervous to think about Pete Wladek. Maybe he's dead, he thought. He looked like he would die real easy. But he knew that wasn't true. Like many small

men Pete was tough. In some ways Pete was the toughest man Eddie Scarsi had ever known.

Certainly Pete had been tough enough that winter night in '44 when they were serving in the rifle company at a place they called the Bulge. That was the night that Eddie Scarsi's guts had turned to jello. That was the night he had contracted the debt he couldn't pay off, the night that made the percentage all wrong. Scarsi had been a sergeant then, a staff with three stripes and a rocker. The Army was his meat. He was big and tough and tireless and he gloried in his power over little jerks like Wladek who didn't have even one stripe on their sleeves. He'd loved every minute of the war, up to then.

They'd gone out on the five-man patrol, seeking the infiltrating Germans who had ringed Bastogne and were headed for the Channel ports. The patrol had been spread out in the black fearful night with Scarsi leading and only the Polack close to him and suddenly Sergeant Scarsi had seen the enemy. They were on all sides of him, it seemed, terrifying shapes moving stealthily forward to kill. Maybe it was the suddenness, or the number of them—Eddie Scarsi was frozen, paralyzed. Then he turned and ran.

Only he didn't run far. His steel hat had flown off in his panicky retreat and something hit him on the head and he was on the ground. When he roused from the stupor his own men were around him and they were firing and their grenades were exploding and because it was automatic and there was nothing else to do, big Eddie Scarsi picked up his carbine and started firing, too. Suddenly there was no enemy.

Later he knew that the Polack punk who didn't even have a stripe had taken over. He had knocked his sergeant out and bellied over to the others and got them together and made a small strong point with a great show of fire power and the enemy had assumed in the darkness that it was up against the main body of troops and had beaten a retreat back through the forest. It had been one of those absurd accidents that can determine the course of a war. If Rundstedt's advance party hadn't encountered the patrol they might have probed on and on until they found how pitifully weak the defenses really were and they might have taken Bastogne and moved on to the Channel ports before Patton could gas his tanks and race north to rescue them. Anyway, it was treated as a real big deal and it got mentioned in dispatches.

Sergeant Eddie Scarsi got a medal, the kind they give you for gallantry above and beyond the call of duty. They promoted him from staff to master sergeant so he had three rockers with the stripes. All because the little Polack had told the others it was the sergeant's orders to belly up and show fire power. When they'd found their sergeant on his knees, shaking his addled head, they'd assumed

he'd been holding a position alone and had been hit by a ricochet. All the Polack got was a hole in his shoulder and the Purple Heart, the piece of tin they give you when you forget to duck. The Polack never even got the one stripe of a PFC which stood for Poor Fouled-Up Cluck. But he never talked, never said a goddam word. Eddie couldn't figure it. It didn't add. Even now, after a dozen years had passed, it didn't add. It made the percentage wrong.

I've got to find Pete Wladek, Eddie told himself desperately. *I've got to find him and pay him off. . . .*

The blonde spoke and interrupted his dark reverie. Eddie frowned. One of the things that kept the blonde from being as perfect as he'd thought she was was her voice. It was nasal and grating. Nothing was perfect. The color TV was the most expensive made, but it kept getting out of order. Even the percentage had its one small flaw in the person of the Polack.

"You call the same TV people that come to fix the set last time?" the blonde asked.

Eddie grinned at her unpleasantly. He let her stew a minute. He could read her like a form chart and he knew exactly what she was thinking. She was wondering if they'd send the same big Swede they'd sent the last time, the one with wavy hair and muscles. He'd seen the way the blonde had looked at the Swede and he'd enjoyed it. He'd enjoyed it because he owned her and all she could do was look. He was enjoying himself now because he knew how disappointed she would be.

"That outfit's got no night shift," he said. "I had to call Apex. They're the only ones around here with twenty-four-hour service."

He watched the blonde's face. She tried to keep her disappointment out of it, but she couldn't quite control her expression. Eddie's grin was almost good-natured. "Don't take it so hard, baby. Maybe Apex has got a big Swede, too."

The blonde's eyes darted toward him. She said quickly, "I don't know what you're talking about." Eddie chuckled. "It's okay, baby," he said. "Maybe I'll buy you a big Swede for Christmas sometime."

The blonde bit her lips, trying to cover her anger and confusion. "What's the matter with you?" she asked. "You on the junk or did you flip your wig?"

She rose from the chair and turned her back on Eddie, who continued to chuckle. She walked hastily from the room and slammed a door behind her.

As soon as she had gone, Eddie began to think about the percentage again and his face grew sober. He had everything a man could want. It was all around him here. Class. Luxury. A doll that made men drool. Power. He'd have even more when Fassio died. There was only one thing he wanted. He wanted the percentage to be right. He wanted Pete Wladek. Every day it was bothering him more and more.

I've got to pay him off, he told himself. I've got to find Pete Wladek.

Thirty seconds later he found him.

The apartment buzzer sounded and a servant ushered Pete Wladek into the room.

Eddie had had the picture of Pete Wladek in his mind when the little television repair man carrying the big satchel walked through the door and he thought for a minute that he was mistaken, that his mind had just transferred the silly, boyish face of the little Polack to the body of the TV man. But that couldn't have been it because the repair man said, "Hello, Sarge."

Eddie had to regain control of himself. You couldn't ever let anybody know what you were thinking or what was bugging you. You always had to play it deadpan.

Eddie said, "I wasn't exactly expecting you, Pete. You don't seem surprised to see me, though."

"Why should I be?" Pete said. "You're a pretty famous guy now. I've been reading a lot about you in the paper for years. I even saw you on television during that anti-crime committee thing. You didn't tell 'em anything. I had to laugh. So when I got this call tonight I knew it had to be your apartment. How you been, Eddie?" Pete looked around him, his eyes wide. "Man, you really got it made."

The blonde came in and Eddie almost burst out laughing at the expression on her face when she saw the scrawny little repairman. "Meet Pete," said Eddie. "I'm sorry he ain't a Swede. He's Polish. He's an old buddy from the war. Pete, meet Fay."

Pete said, "Mighty pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Now get back to the other room, baby, or I don't give you a Swede for Christmas. Pete and I got things to talk about."

The blonde left the room, looking confused.

Pete said, "Is that your wife? She's mighty pretty, Eddie. I'm married now, too."

Eddie guffawed. "I need a wife like I need a tax rap," he said. "She's just part of the furnishings. Put that damned tool kit down and park it on a chair and have a drink. We got a lot to talk about."

"Later, Eddie," Pete answered, crossing to the big, red TV set and removing his jacket. "I got to fix this thing first. We can talk a little while I'm working on it."

"To hell with the TV!" Eddie flared. "I said I want to talk to you. Throw that set in the river and I'll buy another one. I been looking for you, Pete. I been looking for you for years. Where the hell you been?"

Pete paid no attention whatever to Eddie's command. He was on his knees now, removing the dust cover from the back of the set, probing for weak tubes. He said, his words punctuated with little grunts as he put pressure on a tiny screwdriver, "I been around, Sarge. Right around New York. I went to TV school under the GI bill and I been with Apex five years now. Six years ago I got mar-

ried. We got one of those little ranch house things out in Queens. Place called Sylvan Village. I don't think it's a damned thing but a tube, Eddie."

"Haven't you got a goddam telephone?" Eddie asked accusingly. "You know what the hell I did? I hired a guy who reads good to go down to the public library and look up your name in every damned telephone book for every damned town in the U. S. A. Oh, he found some Wladeks, all right; but none of them was the right one."

"Gee, why'd you ever do a thing like that, Eddie?" Pete asked, removing a tube from the set. "You couldn't have found me in the book. You see, my wife, she didn't like my Polish name. She said her friends couldn't even pronounce it, much less spell it, so we changed the name legally. Walters, that's the name I go by now. Peter Walters. Why'd you want to find me, Eddie?"

"Don't you know, you goddam goof? Listen, Pete, I owe you something. And I don't like owing anybody. Like you say, I got it made. You got it made, too, now I've finally found you. All you got to do is name it."

Pete was concentrating on replacing the tube he had just removed, still grunting at the job. "That one was gone completely, Eddie. I'm putting another one in, too. The old one might last a week or so, but the filament is opening and shutting and it'll blow any minute. This visit is going to cost you five bucks so you might as well replace it now. It's only a buck ninety-five tube, anyway."

"Five bucks! A buck ninety-five!" roared Eddie. "I said I owe you something. Leave that goddam piece of junk alone and sit down and get yourself drunk and tell me what you want."

"It's finished," Pete said. "I'll just screw this back on." He switched the dial from channel to channel, said, "I wish there was a color program on so we could test the blend."

"Leave it alone!" Eddie was thoroughly angry. "Sit down here and get drunk and let me pay you off."

Pete switched off the set, put tools in the leather bag. He sat down tentatively on the edge of the chair the blonde had vacated. He said, "I don't know what you mean, Eddie. You don't owe me anything. I don't even remember you bumming a smoke off me all the time we were in the 990th together."

Eddie's face grew hard and when he spoke his voice was flat. "Don't play me for a chump, Pete," he said. "You know a lot about me. Tell me I went chicken if you want to. Tell me I was a phoney sergeant. That I'll take. But don't call me a chump, Pete. I ain't no chump."

Pete remained silent for a moment, an embarrassed expression on his face. Finally he said, "I wasn't playing you for a chump, Sarge. I guess it must be that patrol that's bugging you. Forget it. I forgot, a long time ago. Figure it this way. We

were in combat and you were in command. You lost your head for a minute. So what? It happened to every GI who ever got up in the lines. All of us were going to get killed real quick if somebody didn't do something. I was closest to you, so I did something. It worked out all right and you got the credit because you were in command. If it hadn't worked out you'd have got the blame, for the same reason. Figure it that way, Eddie."

"Don't tell me how to figure," Eddie said. "I ain't got much education but I know how to figure. I owe you."

"Owe me?" Pete shook his head. "What you going to pay me off with, Eddie? Money? I don't need any money. It's nice of you, but I don't want it. I got a real good job. It averages about a hundred and ten a week now and in a few more months I won't be going out on calls. I'll be doing bench work. A good bench man can make up to a hundred and a half. I got a house and I got a Ford and insurance and I put a little money in the savings bank every week. Why should I take money from you?"

Eddie's swarthy face had a speculative look. "Look, Pete, how much would it have cost me if you'd had to take this gimmick out and put it on the bench instead of fixing it here?"

Pete shrugged. "That's hard to say. It would depend on what was wrong with it. I'd guess a minimum of twenty or twenty-five."

"And how much is the work you did going to cost me?"

Pete took a pencil from his pocket and began to scribble on a bill pad. "Nine seventy-five."

Eddie grinned happily. "That's just what I thought. It's less than half of what it would have been if you'd moved the damn thing out and kept it a few days. Here's the angle, Pete. I'm no chump, but I don't know a damn thing about that TV. Neither does anybody else who owns one. All you had to do was test the wrong tubes and tell me you couldn't do a thing without putting it on the bench. You'd have taken it to the shop and charged me twenty or thirty bucks instead of nine seventy-five and I wouldn't have squawked any more than the other suckers. You do that with all the customers and you double or triple the profits, get it? Oh, maybe you fix one in the house now and then just to make it look good, especially if the sucker is one of those do-it-yourself bugs who looks like he might know a little something about how the damn thing works. . . ."

Pete was shaking his head and he opened his mouth to speak, but Eddie silenced him angrily.

"Don't interrupt me, Pete. I'm thinking out a proposition and when I'm thinking out a proposition I don't like interruptions."

Pete closed his mouth and Eddie continued.

"So you and I open up a TV repair shop, Pete. A big one. I'm a silent partner. I put up all the

dough. You buy all the equipment you need and rent all the space you need and hire anybody you want. I'm just the money man. You're the front. We put your name on the sign, the Wladek—I mean Walters—TV Repair Service. I'll pay you, say, two hundred a week to start plus a cut of the take. In no time you'll be good for twenty-five grand a year. Hell, with our kind of operation, we can't lose. And I got other angles. There's an accountant works for the organization that knows all the tax dodges. We take him in, too."

Pete was shaking his head again. This time when he opened his mouth words came out.

"It won't work, Eddie," he said. "They tried that when TV first come in. More than half the repair shops were gyps like the one you're planning. The papers all ran pieces about it. The cops stepped in and closed up the shops and put some guys in jail. So everybody reformed. They got a kind of code now. It ain't the code that keeps 'em honest, though. It's something kind of funny. The shops found out they made more money being legitimate."

Big Eddie Scarsi was furious. His voice rose to a menacing shout. "You trying to tell me I can't figure the angles? Listen, Pete. Don't make me mad. I owe you big and I want to pay it off. But don't make me mad. There's guys around will tell you it don't pay to make Scarsi mad."

"I don't want to make you mad," Pete answered mildly. "There's something else, too. I don't want to manage anything. I couldn't ever be a boss because I ain't built that way. What I like is working with a screwdriver and a wrench, doing things with my hands. At that I'm good."

"Goddam it, I'll buy you a gold-plated screwdriver and wrench!"

Pete grinned. "They wouldn't be any good, Eddie. The tools you use on TV sets have got to be insulated."

"Are you turning me down cold, Pete? Listen, you got a wife. Don't she want minks and diamonds and big cars? You think she's satisfied to spend the rest of her life cooking and washing your socks? I want to make you a big shot, Pete. I want to make you rich, so your wife can have anything she wants."

"I guess she'd like those things, all right," Pete answered. "I guess all girls would. But she can't have 'em, so that's that. And I got to go now, Eddie. I got another call to make, to an old lady up on Ninety-sixth." Pete was strapping up the bag, donning his jacket.

Eddie said urgently, "Just a minute, Pete. You got a mortgage on that house?"

"Sure. It's one of those GI loans. Costs me less per month than the rent of a two-by-four railroad flat."

"I'll pay it up, Pete. The house belongs to you and no more payments. And if you've got the car on time, I'll pay that up, too."

Pete said, "That's real nice of you, Eddie, but I couldn't let you do it. It's not like I'm broke or starving or anything like that. I'm doing fine and I'll do better. I couldn't take it. I been paying my way since I was fourteen. I got to keep on doing it."

"You damn dumb bastard!" Scarsi bellowed. "Isn't there anything you want?"

Pete smiled at Eddie. "Sure," he said. "I want just what I got."

The Polack was starting for the door. Big Eddie sprang from his chair and blocked the way. He grabbed Pete by the shoulder. His thick fingers bit in so hard that the little man winced.

"You stupid cornball!" Eddie said. "Don't you understand? Don't you know I got to pay you off? Don't you see I got to set things right?"

"You're talking crazy, Eddie," Pete answered. "All I know is you owe me nothing and I don't want anything."

Pete saw the desperation in the other's face. He thought a minute and then he said, "Listen, Eddie. Maybe there *is* something. My wife Louise is always saying she wishes we could have dinner at some swell joint like the Starlight Roof, then go to a ritzy club like the Seventh Veil. Hell, they wouldn't let us past the velvet rope in joints like that even if I could afford it. If you want to take us out on the town some night, I'd take that much from you on account of Louise. She wants to meet you, too. She knows about you and she's got a weakness for big shots and she's asked me why I didn't get in touch with you sometime."

"When?" asked Eddie eagerly. "Any night you say."

Louise was the angle, maybe. He could use her somehow in making the percentage right.

"Thursdays and Sundays are my nights off," said Pete.

"There ain't no floor shows on Sunday," Eddie told him. "We'll make it Thursday." Thursday was closer, anyway.

On Thursday he took Fay, the blonde, along to make a foursome. She wouldn't be in the way. All she'd do was sip at the drinks they put in front of her and smile and show her nice teeth and dance if somebody asked her to. The Starlight Roof was formal. Pete Wladec arrived dressed up in a dinner jacket that looked as if it were rented, which of course it was. Louise, Eddie's wife, had on one of those evening dresses they sell on Fourteenth Street with the guarantee that they're exact copies of the gown Marilyn Monroe wore in her latest picture. It was American-beauty color and it looked as if it were painted on her with a brush. It showed off everything she had and Big Eddie had to admit that what she had was quite a lot. Louise was a lot of woman, for a skinny little squirt like Pete to handle. In her spike-heeled evening slippers she stood a couple of inches higher than her husband. She'd

had the works at the beauty shop that afternoon, too, Eddie guessed. But she didn't send him. He'd known dozens of broads like her in the neighborhood where he had grown up. When they got an uptown date they'd fix themselves up and try to look glamorous, but they were still exactly what they were. Eddie made a big play for her all evening, though, turning on the charm. He needed Louise on his side.

When they danced, she thrust herself against him and moved sinuously. Eddie wished she wouldn't, because he was trying to get her to persuade her husband to accept a business proposition. At the Seventh Veil, when the lights went down for the floor show and everybody was feeling the liquor a little, Louise pressed her leg hard against Eddie's leg and kept it there. So poor Pete's married to a dog, Big Eddie thought. A tramp. Maybe she is too much woman for him to handle. But Eddie didn't want her. Usually Eddie would have taken another man's woman as casually as he'd take a glass of fourteen-year-old scotch. But taking Louise would only louse up the percentage worse than it was already.

He got one thing out of the evening. Louise promised she would talk to her husband about letting Eddie back him in his own business. A few days later Louise called up. She told Eddie her husband was a stubborn chowderhead and wouldn't let anybody help him. She put on a husky voice and she suggested to Eddie if they could meet somewhere real private and have a nice long talk they might be able to think up some way of convincing Pete of the error of his ways. But Eddie stalled her on that one. He didn't want to complicate this thing any more by a private chat with Pete's wife. You couldn't pay off a man and make the percentage right by fooling around with his wife. Instead of meeting her alone, Eddie asked Louise and Pete to a party at his apartment.

He didn't want muggs and mobsters at the party. He wanted to impress Pete how legitimate he was. He ordered some show girls from Syndicate clubs to be present, because the party was on Sunday and they wouldn't be working. He ordered his lawyer to be present. He rang in a respectable accountant who helped him cheat on his income tax and a few fighters and fight managers he controlled who were semi-legitimate, anyway.

The party wasn't a success. Louise was ga-ga about the duplex and its furnishings, of course. The lawyer made a big deal of trying to persuade Pete he should come in on a business proposition with Eddie. After she'd got a few drinks inside her, Louise kept trying to edge Big Eddie toward the bedroom. That was about all. Pete remained the same thick-headed Polack he'd been before.

Eddie took Louise and Pete out on the town just once more. This time he provided the best seats for a musical that was a sellout nine months ahead.

Pete enjoyed himself and Louise was embarrassingly amorous, but nothing came of it. And Pete wouldn't accept another invitation, even. He said Eddie was doing too much and he didn't want to collect obligations he couldn't repay. He said next time Eddie would have to come out to the house for a home-cooked dinner.

After that Eddie really got bugged. The percentage kept getting worse and worse and half a dozen slugs of Scotch didn't help him to sleep. There were big liver-colored circles under his eyes. For the first time in his career he was neglecting things. One of the numbers banks in his territory got overloaded on some damn-fool hunch number and Eddie didn't catch it and stop the bets or put in the rig. One of Fassio's enforcers discovered that a book under Eddie's control had been knocking down on him. The madam of a cathouse in the East Sixties who had been recommended for Syndicate protection by Eddie himself got slopped-up on martinis and talked too much and there was a raid.

Lenny Fassio, the Big Boss himself, called Eddie on the carpet. Word got around the mob that Big Eddie Scarsi was slipping. Eddie knew that people were talking behind his back. The blonde named Fay suffered. Hardly a day passed that Eddie didn't belt her around for something or other or just because he felt like it.

Before long, Eddie began to suspect he was going psycho. For one thing, he had a sudden hatred for the Number 9. It was figures that made up the percentage, and that number kept cropping up like a jinx. It was the 996th Combat Team in which he and Pete had fought in the war. The number 979 was the one the bank had let itself get overloaded on. It was Thursday, the 9th, when he first took Pete and Louise out on the town. Eddie continued to be haunted by nines. He saw them on billboards and house numbers and on the commercials on television screens. Once, when he was searching his pocket for jingling money to tip a doorman he found he had just a nickel and four cents in change and he was so furious he hurled the coins into the street and drove off in the cab without tipping the startled doorman at all. Little things like that were eating at him. In his business you couldn't have anything eating at you, not so others could notice. The Syndicate was a confederation of wolves just waiting to devour each other. And the others were noticing Eddie now. He was no longer being treated as the heir-apparent to Fassio's empire.

It was all Pete Wladek's fault. Sometimes Eddie wanted to kill Pete. But that wouldn't change the percentage except to make it worse.

Finally, he accepted Pete's invitation to eat a home-cooked dinner. Pete lived in a housing development that looked like all the other housing developments. His house was a flimsy box that re-

minded Eddie of a dog kennel with fringed lampshades. It was a thoroughly unpleasant evening. Pete had splurged himself on big prime steaks, but Louise wasn't much of a cook and the steaks were gray and the juice was out of them by the time they got to the table. Pete was a cornball who had decorated his home with a lot of military souvenirs. Eddie sat in the living-room looking square at an emblem of the 996th's shoulder patch that was on the mantelpiece. Once, when Pete was out in the kitchen mixing drinks, Louise threw her arms around Eddie and squeezed her body up against him and kissed him on the mouth. "Come out sometime when Pete's not here," she whispered. Eddie barely managed to shake off the stranglehold before Pete came back and even then he suspected he hadn't wiped off all traces of the lipstick.

After that, Eddie started going to Pete's office at night in order to see him. Sometimes Pete was out on a call. Sometimes Eddie managed to talk to him, but he couldn't move Pete an inch. Finally, Pete even asked him not to come around so much. The boss was complaining, he said.

Louise kept calling up, too. She wanted Eddie to come out to see her. She said she got lonesome the nights that Pete worked. When Eddie refused, she suggested they meet some place, any place. Any place with a bed, Big Eddie thought.

In business, things got worse and worse. Fassio took three books and two numbers banks away from Eddie and put them under supervision of a punk who wasn't fit to shine Big Eddie Scarsi's shoes. The punk's name was Mariletto. Nine letters, Eddie thought darkly.

Finally, Eddie got the courage to go to Fassio and complain. Fassio just smiled his mean, crooked little smile and told Eddie he was overworked and they were therefore relieving him of certain tiresome details.

Louise had quit calling, at least. He hadn't heard from her for more than a week. Then one night she called up and started putting on a new act. She pretended she was scared to death.

"You must have read about that sex maniac out here in Sylvan Village," she said hysterically. "It's been in all the papers. He was here tonight, Eddie. I swear it! I heard someone at the back door and when I went out to the kitchen, he'd gone, but he had been here. I called the police, but they couldn't find him and they've gone away. I tried to call Pete, but he was out on a call and he's got a lot more calls tonight. For God's sake, Eddie, come out here! I'm scared to death!"

Eddie thought about it. There was some kind of sex fiend around the housing development, all right. He'd read about him in the papers. He'd assaulted two women and injured one of them. Maybe, just maybe, this was the way to even up the percentage. If he could save the life of Pete's wife, that would square the score between him and the

little Polack. If she's kidding I'll take her, he told himself bitterly. I'll do what she wants. To hell with Pete and to hell with the percentage. I'm finished anyway if I can't make the percentage right.

He drove the Jag out and he drove fast. He parked it on a dark street, a couple of blocks from Pete's house.

Louise was waiting for him. If she was expecting a sex fiend she was dressed for the part. She wore a sleazy negligee that concealed even less of her than the evening gown had. She didn't seem very frightened, either, but Eddie went through the motions. He searched the house, even the extension attic. Then he went out the back door and used a flashlight to search the shadows of the back yard. Nothing. He was so contemptuous of Louise's excuse for luring him out there, that he even neglected to lock the door when he came back into the house.

Louise had mixed them drinks. They went into the living room and drank them. Eddie's drink was very strong; it was cheap blended whisky. Louise said, "You don't know what I've been through, honestly. Oh, God, it's good to have a big, strong man like you here, Eddie. Pete won't be home until tomorrow morning. You'll stay all night, won't you, Eddie?"

Eddie just looked at her and grinned.

When he had the drink inside him, Louise rose and walked toward him.

She pressed herself to Eddie. She kissed his mouth. She reached up and rumbled his thick hair with her fingers. "Put your hands on me, Eddie," she whispered. "I want you to put your hands on me."

Eddie suddenly knew how he could make the percentage right.

He put his hands on her.

He put them on her throat.

When he quit squeezing, Louise's eyes bulged out gruesomely and she was dead.

Eddie lowered her body to the sofa and left it there.

His head was clear now. He felt a tremendous

sense of actual physical relief, for the percentage was right again.

He had done the very best thing he could have done to repay Pete. Pete would never have the guts to kill his wife even if he found out she was a tramp. Big Eddie had done the job for Pete, just as Private Wladek had done a job for Sergeant Scarsi years before.

Eddie caught a glimpse of the picture on the mantelpiece, the photograph of Pete in uniform. He gave it a mock-salute.

"Okay, Pete, you and I are even now," he said aloud.

He felt happy as he walked toward the hallway, for his coat and hat. They'd never suspect him. They'd think the sex maniac had done it. Pete would never know he'd done it, but that didn't change it any, because Eddie knew and he wouldn't have to bother about the percentage again. Pete himself couldn't be accused. He'd have witnesses to prove he was fixing television sets.

The percentage was right. He'd figured all the angles.

All but one.

The angle was the intruder.

He'd slipped in the back door that Eddie had left unlocked.

The intruder was waiting for Eddie in the hall.

He had a gun in his hand.

Eddie had talked his way out of tough spots before. He started to say something now as he raised his hands. Then he knew it wasn't any use. He saw the look in the man's eyes. When they had that look in their eyes, they weren't all there. When they had that look in their eyes, they always pulled the trigger.

Big Eddie stared at the gun. It reminded him of something. The butt was rounded, kind of like a loop, and the barrel was a straight line.

Just before the gun exploded Eddie realized why it seemed so familiar; it was the shape of the hated thing he had been seeing everywhere.

The gun looked just like the figure 9.



MARKELL turned from the highway and stopped his car at the base of the tower. The guard on duty below nodded and pressed the gate button. When the gate closed behind Markell, he drove slowly across the tarmac, between the flood lights to the side door of Building C.

Foster was waiting for Markell in the controls room. He led him out on the balcony overlooking the thousand bent heads of the girls. This was the assembly section, the heart of Foster's plant. Foster

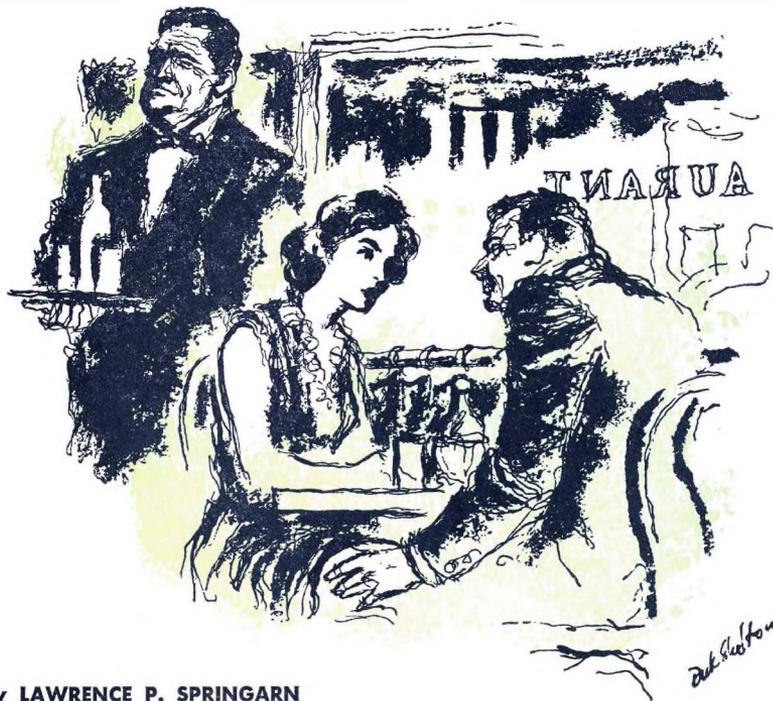
gripped the railing of the balcony, his neck stiff.

"Go on, Markell. Spill it! What've you heard?"

Markell also gripped the railing, his bullet head and squat, flabby body bent toward the girls below.

"Could be that the girls are getting sick. Could be that they conk out at work. Uncle Sam wouldn't like that. He wouldn't like that some have died, either."

"Could be," Foster said wearily. "Let's talk private, Markell."



by LAWRENCE P. SPRINGARN

was it worth it, MR. MARKELL?

The beauty of her legs tripped him. The invitation of her arms held him, until . . .

Markell welcomed the invitation. He followed Foster down spiral iron steps and through cement passages to the bomb-proof main offices. When they arrived in Foster's office, he sat and put his feet on the desk.

"Another thing, Foster. I've got the medical reports. . . ."

This was a lie, but Foster reddened and sat up straighter. He drummed on the desk.

"I see. And if the news leaks, the plant is closed. I couldn't afford that, Ed."

Markell sat back chewing his unlit cigar.

"What can you afford?" he asked.

Foster blinked and lowered his eyes. "Five hundred bucks."

"A thousand," Markell said, dropping his feet from the desk. Foster scowled, but swivelled around, opened the wall safe, and took out money. He stood up to count the money into Markell's hand. Markell received the money, put it in his wallet, and lit his cigar.

"Foster," he said. "What makes the girls sick?"

"We don't know yet. Maybe some chemical in the tubes. They feel faint and stay home a few days. Most of them come back."

"Most of them, Foster?"

Foster sat down abruptly, twisting his fingers.

"I suppose you'll leave us alone for awhile, Markell. . . ."

Markell laughed and put out his hand.

"Sure, Foster. And I've got to scam. No hard feelings, I hope?"

They shook hands, but Foster would not smile. Markell was still smiling as he reached his car.

It was dusk when he drove through the gates. He was about to resume normal driving speed when he noticed the girl waiting in the open shed for the intercity bus. He stopped the car and leaned toward the girl. She had nice legs.

"Going my way?" he asked pleasantly.

Her eyes were bright and nervous, but her face was young and pretty. She wore a cheap cloth coat; no hat. When he opened the front door, she nodded and hurried forward.

"I'm going to Graysboro, mister."

"I'll take you there," Markell said.

Reaching around the girl to lock the door, Markell touched her shoulder. She jumped at his touch, but smiled when she looked at him.

"Going off shift?" Markell inquired, as they rode along through a rain that brushed across the darkening road.

"I'm going home early. The nurse sent me home. Got a headache."

Markell pressed his fat lips together thoughtfully. He drove half a mile without speaking.

"A headache, Miss? They got air-conditioning there. Air-conditioning gives some folks headaches."

"Maybe. I just know I feel funny."

Markell started humming. Graysboro, he knew,

was only another five miles. Helen lived ten miles beyond Graysboro. Although he had phoned from the city to say he was delayed, Helen would be expecting him between now and midnight. Good old Helen! His gift for her bulged the pocket next to the girl.

"I'll bet you could eat something," Markell said. "A nice thick juicy steak, for instance. How's that sound?"

Markell studied the girl furtively. She might be the hungry type. Perhaps she had already cased his car, the wrist watch that Helen had bought him. Helen, however, wasn't the hungry type. Helen wasn't even the jealous type. If he got to Helen by midnight, that would be early enough.

"How about it?" Markell said. "I'm ready for dinner now. And two's company."

The girl was smiling. When Markell faced her, she bit her lip but nodded eagerly.

"Okay. My name's Ed. We'll find a good place pretty soon."

Rain dulled the lights in Arrigoni's parking lot as Markell pulled in. The attendant ran over with an umbrella. Markell hurried after the attendant and the girl. He stamped his feet in the lobby and helped the girl take off her coat as Arrigoni came up rubbing his hands. The girl wore an I.D. badge on her shoulder. Noticing the badge, Arrigoni winked at Markell as he led them to a table. A fire burned in the hearth nearby, but the girl was shivering.

"A drink," Markell said. "You need a drink."

When she smiled, she looked real cute. Her hair was black and fine, pulled away from her face and piled on her neck. The blue sweater suggested as much as it hid. Her hands and face were whiter than the tablecloth. Markell ordered two martinis.

The drinks came promptly. Markell smiled when the girl sipped hers. He gulped his down. "Feel better?" he asked.

The girl nodded, glanced into the main part of the dining room. More people had arrived. A music system began to operate.

"Let's dance, huh? Sa-ay, young lady, you haven't told me your name!"

"Connie," she answered as they got up. "Connie Bettard."

She looked as French as her name, with her dark eyes and pale skin. Markell held her stiffly at first. By the second dance, the martini he'd had began to work and he was pressing Connie against him. She kept her head on his shoulder. She was breathing hard.

"Tired?" he asked when she raised her face.

"Please—let's not dance anymore."

As they sat down, Markell noticed sweat on her skin. He drank three more martinis. By the time their steaks came, he was primed for enjoyment.

"Rare!" he said as he cut into the meat. "Blood rare, the way I like it."

Connie ate slowly. Unlike Markell, she left her potatoes and half her salad. Rain beat against the window beside them.

"Some night!" Markell observed. "Where'd you say you lived?"

Arrigoni interrupted them by bringing over a bottle of burgundy and glasses.

"On the house," he explained as he poured.

"Hey, that's pretty swell. Business is slow, ain't it?"

"Rain," Arrigoni told Markell sourly.

Arrigoni went to the fire and put on more wood. Arrigoni had a few rooms upstairs and a cottage in back, but there was no hurry. Arrigoni winked at Markell in passing the table again.

"How about some dessert?" Markell asked the girl. "Spumoni. Tortoni. Rum-cake. . . ."

Connie shook her head. "No thanks. Just coffee. Don't you think we should be shoving off?"

"It's raining mighty hard," Markell said. "Waiter!"

He ordered whiskey for himself when Arrigoni brought the coffee. The liquor was threading an eager excitement through him. The girl excused herself. As she went toward the ladies' room, Markell looked her over. Stunning legs! A ripe kid, if a bit pasty-looking, and not more than twenty-two.

Arrigoni sighed as he put down Markell's second whiskey. "The usual problem, Ed?"

"Give me time," Markell replied, a bit drunkenly. "I just met her. She's not exactly a tramp."

"You could have a flat, or engine trouble. . . ."

"Leave her to me," Markell boasted. "I don't quit so soon."

He appraised the promise of Connie's body as she came toward him. His face had reddened. A fine sweat bedewed his upper lip. Connie did not sit down, but looked at him uneasily.

"I'm getting there," Markell said. "One more drink. Wish you'd join me."

Helen would have joined him. Helen never refused drinks, but there were certain offers that Helen refused.

Markell's face creased in a smile. He covered Arrigoni's check with a twenty dollar bill, pursed his lips, and pushed away the table.

"Okay. We'll get going."

The attendant fetched Markell's car to the canopy, but the rain was letting up. Markell did not feel his drinks, yet when he turned into the highway he nearly ran into a ditch. That sobered him. His eyes were cold and small as he drove along.

"Graysboro," he said. "Now, where the hell is the turn-off?"

Markell knew the turn-off but he guessed that by riding busses to work Connie would not recognize it. He grinned confidently when she faced him.

"Here we are!" he told her, choosing the side road and driving in as far as possible.

"Listen, mister," Connie said, her voice rising. "If you think you're pulling a fast one—"

"I don't *think*," Markell switched off his motor, but kept his lights on. "I know. There's plenty of room in the back seat."

Connie became even paler. Her arms were raised apprehensively. She was trembling.

"Just for one measly dinner. I won't stand for that!"

And then Connie struck Markell with her purse. When he grabbed her, her strength surprised him. He got his face close, but could not pinion her right arm. He was struggling to get his lips on hers when the girl suddenly went limp. She lay against the door, her neck bent and her mouth open. She had fainted. When she came to, Markell figured, she might be reasonable. He put on the overhead light.

"Jesus! Holy Jesus!"

Connie's face was pinched. Her eyelids were swollen and dark. She did not respond to light taps on her cheeks. Frightened, Markell switched off the light and started his car. By the time he reached Arrigoni's, the attendant was gone and the lot dark. Only the lights in Arrigoni's apartment at the rear of the road house were burning. Arrigoni answered Markell's knock at once.

"I'm back," Markell said. "We're back. But she passed out."

"Too many drinks?" Arrigoni asked.

"Not enough. Look, I'll want your cabin for a couple hours. And I need a drink."

Markell had several drinks. When he returned to the car with whiskey and water, the rain had stopped. Connie sat up as he approached the door. Her hair was tousled. Her eyes were big, but she seemed stupefied as he gave her the water. She drank greedily. He poured whiskey into the glass.

"And this too. It'll do you good."

Watching her sip whiskey, Markell nodded benignly. He thought of her legs.

"You can stay here, girlie. It's perfectly safe."

Connie started to shake her head. She looked at him, then beyond him to Arrigoni's lighted window.

"You can't go home," Markell argued. "Not the way you look. Your folks might ask questions. You live with your folks, don't you?"

Connie admitted that she did. Her eyes were duller now. When she seized his arm and tried to pull up, Markell knew she would be reasonable.

"That's right. Lean on me. And walk slow, see?"

Markell thrust open the cabin door. The bathroom light was burning, as if Arrigoni had made preparations for their coming. Connie stumbled, but walked more steadily after that. Markell steered her toward the bed.

"Rest," Markell said, easing her down onto the bed. "I'll drive you home soon as you feel better."

The bathroom light showed her stretched flat and

breathing more evenly. Was Connie already asleep? Watching her, Markell found his scruples in the way. He subdued his excitement, then slipped off Connie's shoes. Her coat was no problem, but her dress gave Markell some difficulty. She was naked before she roused. She smiled, lazily. And as lazily, she raised her hand and drew him down to her. . . .

Markell thought of Helen. Let her wait, he decided. He wasn't leaving this woman and a warm bed for her.

"Where you going?" Connie asked.

Markell continued on to the bathroom, without answering, and turned off the bathroom light. "Got to get some sleep," he said as he came back to the bed.

It suddenly occurred to Markell that moonlight had penetrated the drawn shade. But there had been no moon. Markell stopped where he was, staring hard. As the glowing light intensified, Markell's eyes widened.

Connie lay on the bed. She had kicked off the covers. Her face and body were shining in the darkness with a brilliant phosphorescence. The glow

shimmered over her, rising and falling with her irregular breathing.

"Connie . . ." Markell quavered.

He recalled the plant, the thousand girls in the enormous room assembling the new top-secret tube, the tube that had made Foster rich on government contracts. Connie must be an assembler. The tube's chemicals had invaded Connie. Her bones had become phials of poison! Markell gagged on his own saliva. Watching the glow, feeling weak and dizzy, Markell gripped the bed-rail. He looked down at himself, half expecting to see the first signs of the poison's effects on him.

"Darling," Connie's voice was saying, "why are you taking so long?"

Markell blamed the whiskey for the nausea that pounded his stomach. Sweat lined his clothes, dripped from his cheeks. Staring at the glowing arc of Connie's smile, he backed from the bed. When a chair stopped him, he panicked completely. Turning to seek the door, he tripped and nearly fell. He found his balance. He tore open the door and ran outside as Connie began to laugh. Her laughter pursued him to his car.



Pay-Off

Carl Morris, 30, entered a cafe in Louisville, Ky., and pumped eight bullets from a .22 caliber pistol into a pinball machine. He told officers that he had lost about \$100 in four weeks while playing the machine, but it wouldn't pay off.

"It's not supposed to pay off," the cafe operator said. "It's for amusement only."

Skull and Crossbones

There are river pirates on the Detroit river at Detroit. Ronald Hafey told police he was sitting on a bench in Owen Park along the river when two men pulled up in an outboard. The men seized him, took his wallet containing \$30, jumped back into the boat and sped away.

Dream Discovery

Deputy Sheriff Zeb Nicholson, of Statesville, N. C., had a dream. It wasn't quite accurate, but he doesn't mind. In his dream, the officer found some stolen cars hidden in a rural hollow about 20 miles from town. Several days later he checked the location and found an 800-gallon moonshine still.

Visiting Day

A prisoner in the New Castle, Pa., jail tried to dig his way out, but he apparently had a poor sense of direction. Warden Ben E. Heartland said the prisoner simply burrowed through a brick wall into an adjoining cell.

OBJECT OF DESIRE

by
**PAUL
G.
SWOPE**



A chippy, a tramp; but she had what he wanted.

HE LEANED against the bar, toying with his drink and letting his eyes move over the room, so it wouldn't be obvious he was studying her.

She sat in the booth close to the door, sipping a sloe gin fizz and peering through the window at the fog that rolled gloomily through the street. One slim leg swung back and forth, keeping time with the music of the juke box.

His gaze flickered casually over her, taking in each detail with interest. Brown loafers with turned-down, dirty white socks. Good legs. Tight black skirt that hugged the curve of her thighs. A faded pink sweater molded her breast into a thrusting invitation. Short, brown hair peeked out from a white, silk scarf that was worn peasant style and framed a face that had seen too much. A tired face.

A tramp, he decided. Just another hooker. But she had what he wanted. The need rose in him

suddenly, nearly overpowering in intensity. He fought it down and took a long, gulping drink. His hands trembled. The room suddenly seemed too hot—too bright and noisy.

He let his eyes wander to the window, then back to the girl. With a start, he realized that she was looking directly at him. He licked his lips and finished the drink. The beat of the juke box kept time with the throbbing in his head.

"Refill," he ordered tersely. He turned from the bartender back to the girl. She was still watching him—with an amused smile, now. One eyebrow quirked quizzically. He felt a momentary revulsion. Chippy, he thought. A cheap little chippy.

He paid for the new drink, picked it up and walked over to her.

"May I join you?" His voice sounded loud in his ears and a little unnatural.

"Sure, handsome." The smile widened. "Sit down."

He sat down. "Warm in here," he said. "Or is it just me?"

Her eyes encouraged him. "Well," she drawled, "it *could* be the weather."

He didn't have much time. The need was rising in him again, building up pressure.

"Another drink?" he asked.

"Skip it," she said, her voice hardening. "I come higher than that."

He felt a sense of relief. It was going to be easy. "How much higher?" he asked. His voice sounded shaky.

"Twenty bucks," she said flatly. "One time." And waited for his refusal.

"A bargain," he said.

She picked up her purse, snapped it shut. "Then let's go," she said. All business now.

They rose and went to the door. She tightened the scarf around her head, and they stepped out into the night.

They walked a block and turned. The street was quiet and the fog folded around their footsteps as they moved.

He stopped suddenly and turned, facing her.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "It's not far."

Her face was indistinct in the mist.

The need knotted up in him and he took a step forward. "We're not going any farther," he said hoarsely.

Her eyes widened in sudden fright. She turned to run, but his fingers caught the scarf and pulled her back. His hands tightened on her throat.

"Don't!" she gasped, fighting him. "You don't have to do this! Please!"

He forced her back, closing his hands slowly, feeling their strength.

"Oh, yes!" he breathed. "I do. It's no good unless I do."

He squeezed harder.

The fog swirled around him as he half-walked, half-stumbled down the street.

He held the scarf in his hands, crooning softly to it. It was beautiful, so soft and white. He stroked it. He would put it with the others, to be enjoyed again and again.

He turned the corner and walked on in the fog . . .



Disoriented

Camille Saucier, 35, Hartford, Conn., was arrested for setting fires in the back seats of nine parked automobiles. He was sentenced to six months in jail after the state's attorney described the accused man as "legally sane, but imperfectly oriented."

Tipoff

In San Francisco a 26-year-old man tipped a taxi driver \$4 for a \$1 fare to the Golden Gate Bridge. The driver called police who arrived in time to prevent the man from leaping to his death. "I'm always suspicious of big tipsters," the driver told officers.

Practical Illustration

A juvenile court judge and a deputy sheriff appeared on an Indianapolis radio panel discussing juvenile delinquents. After the program, the two men discovered that some of the subjects under discussion had broken the windshield wipers, bent the aerials, and flattened the tires on their autos.

Tar Want of a Gun

Clarence O'Connel, 47, of Springfield, Ill., approached two men on a downtown street and offered them part of the loot from a proposed holdup, if they would get him a gun. Fifteen minutes later he was in jail. One of the men was a detective and the other a former policeman.

JOY RIDE

by

C. B.

GILFORD

Harv picked up an iron pipe, hefted it. "We can get a car," he said.



THEY FELT A NEED for shining chrome and the feeling of mastery it gives to unleash roaring horse power on an inviting concrete stretch. The need was as deep as the yearning for a woman. It ate at their insides like a primitive hunger. And so they walked the dark streets looking for a way to satisfy this desire of theirs.

"Harv, maybe your old man's home by now and he'd let us have his car," Leech said. Leech wasn't his real name, but he was called that because of the way he stuck to his buddy.

"He ain't home, and he wouldn't let us have it anyway."

They walked on. Whenever they found a car parked in a shadowy place they tried its doors. But they weren't lucky. Car owners in that neighborhood had grown cautious. And they weren't professionals, so they had no skill with locks.

"Let's get a beer and forget it," Leech said after awhile.

"Who'd serve us beer around here?" Harv wanted to know. "But if we had a car we could go out to Andy's. He don't go for draft cards."

In front of Anarchios' Shoe Parlor they found a dusty 1939 Plymouth. Its windows were rolled down. They stood on the sidewalk and looked at it. Leech waited for Harv.

"I heard '39 Plymouths are easy to get started," Leech said.

"Junk," Harv answered disdainfully. "And the guys that drive 'em leave about a spoonful of gas in the tank. We can do better'n this."

They wandered. They drifted into an area where the street lights were dirty and the neon signs fewer, but their luck didn't improve.

"We should have taken that Plymouth," Leech said sadly.

"Shut up," Harv answered, his frustration bursting out as anger. Leech fell silent.

When they came to the Sperry Avenue junk yard, they were suddenly back in familiar territory. They had sold hub caps here. The place had a high wire fence all around it, but there was nothing inside for them anyway. Leech ran his finger along the fence as they walked, playing one of the oldest games known to boys. But the gesture produced little noise, and so Leech picked up a piece of iron pipe that lay outside the fence. Dragged along the fence, the pipe made an adequate noise, like a slow and tired machine gun.

"What the hell are you doing?" Harv exploded, finally waking to the noise. "Why the hell all the racket?"

Leech stopped the noise, but he didn't get rid of the pipe. He stared at it instead.

"Where'd you get that?" Harv asked.

"Back there."

They both got the idea at the same time.

They retraced their steps till they came to the place. There were half a dozen short lengths of pipe strewn over the ground. Harv picked up one, hefted it for weight and balance.

"We can get a car," he said finally, his voice soft, even trembling a bit.

"It's been done," Leech agreed, with the same trembling.

But they hesitated. They stood there, each with two feet of lethal metal in his right hand. A minute ago they'd been boys, wandering in search of luck. Now they were armed men.

"What do you say?" Harv asked after awhile.

Leech was nervous. He even giggled. "It's okay with me," he said. "How do we do it, Harv?"

"Don't you read the papers?"

"Sure."

"If it's two guys working together, each guy gets in on opposite sides of the car when it's stopped for a stop sign or a red light. When it's the only car around, of course."

"What if the doors are locked?"

"Then you run like hell and try some place else."

Leech giggled again. He couldn't control himself. "What if they ain't locked?"

"You get in and convince the guy he ought to give us the car." Harv made small, but significant motions with the pipe.

"I don't want to hurt nobody," Leech said.

"Me neither. We just want a car."

They started walking. A clock in a store window said eleven-thirty. They headed back toward a slightly busier section, where there would be more stop signs, more traffic lights, and more cars.

They went unnoticed. They were big boys, and they passed for men. They wore identical dark blue jackets over white tee shirts. Leech wore faded

levis, but Harv's trousers were a natty gray. There was little about them to attract special attention. They carried the iron pipes vertically next to their legs, always on the side away from the street.

There were no other pedestrians. Even the cars were thinning out. And the cops, if any existed, were somewhere else. The boys picked the first corner they came to that had a traffic light. Harv crossed the street. They both had a shadow to wait in.

The wait wasn't too long. The first two cars came as a pair. They stopped, but were allowed to speed on, when the light changed, unhindered. The third car had the light in its favor and didn't slow down. The two boys waved encouragement to each other. The fourth car came a moment later, and it was the only moving car on the street. It was an ivory and green hardtop, and it looked like it might have been bought yesterday.

There are people who say traffic lights ought to be turned off at a certain time at night, because late at night they no longer serve a useful purpose. Perhaps those people are right. But perhaps too they're not completely right. A red light might serve a purpose, though maybe not a useful one.

There was a man driving this hardtop, all alone. He didn't look like a very big man. And he was obviously a law-abiding citizen, because he stopped at the intersection even though there wasn't another car in sight. He stopped and he sat there dreamily, like a pigeon on a fence post. Harv whistled.

It was the signal, not pre-arranged, merely an inspiration. Harv came sprinting from across the street. Leech darted out of his shadowy spot. They arrived on opposite sides of the car at the same time. And neither door was locked.

The man was a fool. The doors shouldn't have been unlocked. And he shouldn't have shouted "Hey!" and started flailing around with his arms. He should have known that two strangers leaping into his car like that must have come on serious business. They could have had a gun or two. He could have been shot. But he shouted and flailed anyway.

The two boys both hit him. They had to, to shut him up. They weren't free-swinging, skull-crushing blows. The quarters were too cramped for that. Harv used a wrist motion, tapping the man over the ear. Leech's pipe scraped along the roof of the car and hit the man mostly on the shoulder. Leech pulled back to swing again.

On Harv's side there was a little blood on the man's head. Harv could see it because the opened door of the car kept the overhead light burning. The sight of the blood made him hurry, scared him a little. He pushed the man toward the middle of the seat and took the driver's place himself. Leech barely had time to throw himself inside before the car began to move. They ran through the red light, and they didn't get the doors closed till they were

halfway down the next block. The car shot forward.

"Man, this baby has pick-up," Harv exulted, his hands clenched tensely on the steering wheel.

"Yeah!" Leech said.

The little man sandwiched in between them made no comment. Even if he were dazed or unconscious or had fainted, he couldn't have fallen over. He was wedged too tightly between the two blue jackets.

They paid little attention to him. Harv's pipe was forgotten on the floor. Leech still had his, but he wasn't using it to threaten the man. He was too fascinated by the speed of buildings and street lights whizzing by.

But it was Leech who came to his senses first. "Slow down," he said, "or we'll have the cops on us."

Harv's foot let up a little on the gas pedal. The whine of tires over cement grew softer. The outside world went by in a slower parade, its glare softened by the tinted glass all around them. The leather seats, the dials and gadgets, the green to match the exterior, everything new and gleaming—it even smelled new—were all sheer luxury. They squirmed sensually on the seats to express their pleasure. Leech flicked on the radio, and the music that came on was as soft and soothing as the leather of the seats. Paradise . . .

"Where'll we go?" Harv was asking. "Man, this thing is just screaming to go places."

"What about the Ferry Road?" Leech said.

And now a third voice talked. The little man who owned the car hadn't said anything. Maybe he had been dazed, in a state of shock. But maybe now the conversation woke him up. Maybe he had visions of his green hardtop hurtling along the Ferry Road at the incredible speed it was capable of, a speed he himself would never push it to. A drag race maybe . . .

"Let me out," he said. "Please let me out."

The sound of his voice surprised them. Suddenly Harv laughed. "Hey, Leech, I forgot about the guy."

Leech laughed too. It was funny.

"Please let me out," the little man said again.

"Let's get rid of him," Leech said.

Harv slowed and pulled toward the curb. They were in a residential area now, and there were plenty of shadowy places to dump an unwelcome guest. Harv chose one of them, turned off the lights as he slid smoothly into it. Leech opened the door on his side.

"Wait a minute," Harv said.

"What's the matter?"

"I just thought of something."

"Like what?"

"We put this guy out, and the first thing he does is call the cops and tell 'em his car's been stolen. Gives 'em a description and the license number, so every cop in town is looking for this car."

"That ain't good, is it?" Leech said.

"There's enough gas in this baby to ride all night. We don't want to waste it, do we?"

The little man chimed in again, and his voice was shaking. "I won't report it," he said. "I won't report it till morning."

"Like hell . . ." Harv sneered.

"But I promise."

"Shut up," Leech still had the pipe in his right hand. He showed it to the little man, and the little man didn't say anything more.

"Harv," Leech said. "Let's put him in the back seat. We can do that."

"Sure."

Leech got out. The little man, sensing what was expected of him without being told, climbed around the seat into the back.

Leech showed him the pipe again. "You give us any trouble," he said simply, "and you get this."

The little man, who by this time was probably feeling the pain of the earlier blows, wasn't in a fighting mood. Leech got back in, and the green hardtop rolled.

Nobody said anything now. The two boys up front surrendered to the luxury of the machine, and the man in the rear had his own thoughts. But it was a different kind of silence somehow. It could almost be heard above the soft croon of the radio. They had just about reached the Ferry Road, where there would be no speed restrictions, when Leech spoke up.

"I just thought of something," he said.

"You think?" Harv said. "What've you got to think with?"

Leech ignored the mild insult. "You know," he said, "the cops could be looking for this car anyway."

"How do you mean?"

"This guy could have a wife who's expecting him home by a certain time. When he don't show up, she could call the cops and tell 'em about it. She could tell 'em what kind of a car he was driving too."

Harv pondered. He hadn't thought of that possibility.

"Hey, mister," Leech said to the little man, "you got a wife or somebody at home waiting for you?"

There was just the slightest hesitation before the reply came. It was a noticeable hesitation, as if the little man were trying to think of the wisest thing to answer. "Yes," he said finally.

"He's lying," Harv said.

"Is she the kind to worry about you?" Leech asked the little man.

"I don't know . . ." There was a strange ring of truth in the statement which the boys could have missed. "I don't know . . ."

"He's lying," Harv said again. "Hell with him!"

But the joy ride was spoiled.

"I got an idea," Leech said a few minutes later. "We could park on some dark street and let the air

out of the tires and put this guy out for awhile with a little knock on the head and you and I could hitch home and we could get rid of this whole thing . . ."

But they were on the Ferry Road, a four-lane divided strip, miles of smooth, uninterrupted concrete gleaming white in the headlights. It seemed that Harv's foot didn't even have to press harder on the gas pedal. The hardtop seemed to know that this was the reason for all its horsepower having been put under the hood. It became a thing with a life all its own, and it was as seductive as a strip-tease, each higher number on the speedometer another veil flung off, another mystery revealed.

"Take it easy, Harv," Leech said, as if afraid of his own ecstasy.

"I just want to see what it will do," Harv told him. "I just want to see . . ."

They passed everything on the road.

"Nice, huh?" Harv said.

"Yeah, but slow down, will you?"

"Why should I?"

"We can't have cops chasing us now, Harv. This is a stolen car, and there's the guy in the back seat."

Sure . . . the guy in the back seat. Always the guy in the back seat. The millstone getting heavier with every mile. They'd made a mistake somewhere. But how could they have gotten the car without taking its driver too?

Harv slowed down. The hardtop seemed reluctant. It wasn't easy to keep it under sixty. It was such a waste of a good car. And it wasn't much fun.

"Harv," Leech said.

"What? You thought of something else?"

"No . . . I just don't like this any more."

"Well, that's great. That's real great."

"What do they call this, Harv?"

"What do they call what?"

"The cops. If they catch us, I mean. What do they call it? Besides stealing a car. The guy in back, I mean."

"How do I know?"

"What'll they do to us if they catch us?"

"They ain't going to."

Leech grinned, a sickly grin. "Sure, sure . . . but just in case. I know lots of guys who've taken cars, Harv. They just get talked to most of the time. Those judges are real soft. So we took a car . . . that's all right. But what about the guy? We took him too. And we hit him a couple of times . . ."

"They call it assault, I guess."

"That ain't too bad, is it?"

Harv shook his head. But he wasn't sure. It made him relax just a little more on the gas pedal, and the hardtop dropped to fifty.

And a minute or so later it was Harv who said, "Do you think they'd call it kidnapping?"

Leech didn't answer. He stared straight ahead. The hardtop's powerful engine seemed to make no

noise at all at a mere fifty, and the only sound was the rush of wind going past.

"What do you think, Leech?" Harv asked again. His voice was the merest whisper, scarcely audible above the wind.

"I don't know. Maybe so. How do I know? That'd be something for the Feds, wouldn't it?"

The side road leaped into view almost without warning, but Harv took it anyway. He swung the steering wheel hard to the right, and the hardtop, low-slung road-hugger though it was, protested with a screech of tires. Harv had the wheel to hold onto, but Leech was thrown against him so violently that he almost lost the iron pipe. The back tires skidded, raising clouds of gravel dust. For a few seconds then they were plowing through soft dirt, till the car finally righted itself and dug gravel once again. Harv accelerated till they were out of sight of the lights on the main highway. Then he braked hard, and the car came to a jolting halt that almost unseated the passengers a second time.

Harv doused the headlights, and they were left sitting in the middle of a dark silence.

"Suppose they do call this kidnapping?" he said.

"That's what it is, kidnapping!" the little man in the back squeaked suddenly. Maybe it was wise and maybe it wasn't, his butting in like that. He just sounded scared.

"Shut up!" Harv yelled.

They sat for a minute and listened to one another's breathing.

"What do we do now, Harv?" Leech was fully surrendering leadership.

"I'm trying to think."

"We could do like I said. Put the guy out for awhile, and hitch back to town."

Harv thought for a moment. "Yeah, but what happens after that?" he wondered aloud.

"We forget about the whole thing."

"Sure, we forget. But does this guy forget, and do the cops forget?"

"They don't know who we are though."

"But this guy can describe us, can't he?"

"I guess so . . . but they got to find us first."

Harv considered again. All of a sudden he was feeling a healthy respect for cops. "That can happen," he said.

"But how?"

"How do I know? I seen it happen though. I seen 'em pick up guys six months after they do something. They got ways, Leech. I don't know how they do it, but they do it."

"I know what you mean," Leech said.

They sat for awhile again. In the back seat, the little man was perfectly still. If his knees were shaking, or if he was puking in his fear, he was doing it silently.

"There's a way," Harv said after a long time.

"What?"

"It ain't a good way, but it's the only way."

Harv spoke jerkily. "Everything depends on this guy telling the cops what we look like, okay? The rest don't matter. We can wipe off the places we touched in the car, so there won't be no fingerprints. And we can tell anybody who asks that we were watching a movie or just walking around, and nobody can say we weren't. Nothing can happen to us if this guy can't identify us to the cops. You know what I mean?"

Maybe Leech knew. Or maybe he didn't want to know. Because he didn't ask. He just waited.

And Harv had to say it. "We got to take care of this guy."

For maybe half a minute all three of them contemplated it. The naked truth, finally. The facts of life that any criminal, big or little, has to look at. You can get away with anything if they don't know you did it. Evidence is the thing that tells them you did it. And the best evidence is a witness. No witness . . . no evidence . . . no cops . . . no jail . . . nothing . . . you're clean.

But it was a big step, a step you can't back up from. They hadn't taken it yet. They hadn't even decided to take it.

All the little man in the rear seat knew, however, was that they were talking about killing him. He was in a spot where a lot of people have made a mistake.

"I won't tell the police what you look like," he started babbling. "I won't even tell 'em you took the car or hit me or anything . . ."

And because he promised them that he wouldn't, they knew beyond any doubt that he would.

It was Leech who made the first move. He wrenched the door open, slid out, and then reached in again for the little man. The little man screamed when the groping hand first touched him in the dark. He fought the hand. Leech had to drop the iron pipe. With both hands then he dragged at the little man, and the little man held onto the seat and wouldn't let go. It was an even fight for a moment, until Harv lunged over into the rear seat and pounded at the little man so that he had to let go. They dragged him, kicking and sobbing, out of the car.

They didn't know exactly how to kill a man. For a few seconds they just swung wildly at him in the darkness. Sometimes they hit each other. And finally it dawned on them that they couldn't kill him with their fists alone.

"Hit him with the pipe, Leech!" Harv yelled desperately.

"I haven't got it. It's in the car."

"Get it. I'll hold him. Get it, Leech!" Harv said.

Leech stumbled toward the hardtop. Somewhere on the car's floor, he'd dropped his iron pipe. He searched for it in absolute blackness. It seemed an eternity before the pipe came to his hand, cold metal, hard, hard enough to split a skull . . .

But he wasn't going to do this thing alone. Harv had to join in. Harv wasn't going to say later that Leech had done it all by himself. So he went looking for the other pipe, Harv's pipe. It was on the floor in front of the driver's seat. He took it with him, too.

When he staggered back with the weapons, Harv was yelling again. "Hit him with the pipe, Leech. Go on and hit him."

"You got to hit him, too," he yelled back.

"Hit him with the pipe, Leech."

"I brought both of 'em. Here, take yours. You got to hit him first."

"Hell with it, Leech . . . hit him . . ."

"Take the pipe . . . take it . . ."

And suddenly the little man wasn't there any more. He had wrenched out of Harv's grip, and had melted into the deep black of the night. They heard him go crashing into the roadside brush and took out after him at once. But the racket they made drowned out or confused the sounds that they might have followed.

They made their way back to the car, deciding they would leave it just where it was. They hoped that the guy would come back and drive home in the car, that maybe because they'd left the car, he wouldn't call the police and would just forget the whole thing. And they told one another, by way of further comfort, that they were glad he had gotten away, because if he hadn't they might have killed him and hell that would have been murder . . .

When they reached the car, they got rid of the iron pipes, throwing them off into the darkness as far as they could. Harv throwing his in one direction; Leech in another.

And then they were walking along the Ferry Road in the direction of town. Their clothes were torn and there were cuts even on their faces where they'd run into sharp branches in the darkness. Every now and then Leech made a noise in his throat that sounded like he was crying.

"Will you cut that out?" Harv complained wearily. He'd been thinking of cops, the mysterious ways they had of picking up people. That no matter what, no matter where they went—how far—it was too late to get out of it now.



you should live so long

by JACK RITCHIE

THE PHONE CALL got me out of bed. I had a couple of cups of coffee first and then got to Emma's place before eight.

Emma was there to open one of the big double doors herself. Her face was still flaky with last night's powder and her eyes were small in the bloat of her face.

She put a hand in front of her face and bit at her yawn. "Maylee Doyle," she said. "I got her locked up in room 23."

I draped my topcoat over a hanger and put it in the hall closet. "You're getting old, Emma, when you got to call the boss for help."

She shrugged. "Maybe tired. It just don't interest me to use the heavy hand myself any more. Besides, this isn't just the normal sassy tongue type of thing. I caught Maylee coming down the stairs with a suitcase in her hand this morning."

Emma fumbled in the pocket of her dressing gown and brought out a pack of cigarettes. "I been watching her for the last week, Freddy boy. When a girl has that look in her eyes, she wants to quit."

Emma took a drag on the cigarette. "Maybe she saved up her money. Maybe she wants to go back to Prairie Junction or wherever the hell she came



A young girl in the oldest profession. No wonder she didn't know all the rules.

from. Sometimes the girls start thinking about all-electric kitchens, a garden, and somebody to water the lawn on summer evenings."

In the big room downstairs one of the maids in uniform was cleaning up. She glanced at me disinterestedly and continued emptying and stacking the ash trays.

Emma pulled out a ring of keys and selected one. She scowled in the direction of the stairs leading to the second floor. "No blood, Freddy. We just got that room re-decorated. And don't make too much noise. Most of the girls are still sleeping."

The wide stairway was thick-carpeted and soft under my feet. The windows at the ends of the hall were opened for the morning ventilation, but there still lingered the scent of musky perfume.

I turned the key in the lock of room 23.

Maylee Doyle sat on the edge of the crimson bedspread with a small glass ash tray on her knees. She was in her early twenties and her gray eyes watched me almost impassively.

I closed the door behind me and locked it.

Maylee stubbed out her cigarette. Her hand moved into her purse and came out with a sharp nail file.

"Now, Maylee," I asked softly, "what seems to be the trouble?"

Her eyes narrowed with wariness. "There's no trouble if you unlock the door."

I moved closer. "You just want to leave, isn't that it?"

Her face was expressionless. "That's all I want."

I shook my head slowly. "It's not that easy, Maylee. You girls just don't quit when you work for me."

She had a half-smile on her lips. "Now tell me the story of the syndicate. Tell me I can't escape. Tell me that it reaches out into every nook and cranny of the nation and a couple of foreign countries besides."

I smiled at her. "That's the second step, Maylee. I use it when the first one doesn't work."

Her small hand held the nail file tightly. "There's no going to be a first step."

I grinned and drifted closer.

She tried for my eyes the way I thought she would, but I caught her wrist and twisted. She made no noise, but her face whitened at the pressure.

I picked up the nail file and tossed it into the waste basket.

Maylee sat still on the bed, her body stiff.

I slapped her hard across the face. Her head jerked with the blow, but she faced me again. There was only cold hate in her eyes.

I slapped her again and then stepped back to study her. Some of them cave in with just a little pressure. They whimper and they cry. And others you can beat to death and get nowhere.

I picked Maylee's purse off the bed and opened it. I examined the entries in the small green bank book. Maylee had less than two hundred dollars in the bank. According to the figures, she never had much more than that at any time.

I tossed the bank book on the dresser. "I'm curious, Maylee. I've seen the girls try to get out of the racket because they saved their money. What's your reason?"

She was silent.

My slap drew a little blood from her lower lip. I put my hands behind my back and looked down at her. "Somebody offer to set you up in an apartment, Maylee?"

She glared at me and said nothing.

I shook my head. "I guess that's not it then, Maylee. In the old days the boys with money weren't so particular. But now they like the amateur type. The innocent kind without mileage."

I smiled as I watched her. "I'll keep guessing, Maylee. I'll keep guessing and I'll hit it."

I walked around the room moving things absently. Then I glanced at Maylee. "But we got one thing straight, haven't we? You're thinking of leaving because of a man?"

There was just the slightest flicker in Maylee's eyes, but it was enough for me.

I grinned and folded my arms over my chest. "I think I can see it, Maylee. He's a clean-cut type you met while you were taking a walk in the park or something. You know what I mean, Maylee? And I'll bet he's sincere. A sort of boy-man. They always seem to appeal to you girls. I imagine he thinks of you as a goddess. Is that right, Maylee?"

Her cheekbones reddened. "You dirty bastard," she said tightly.

I rubbed my jaw. "I'm just wondering if you really deserve something like that. Think of how you've been earning your room, board, and perfume the last three years."

I teetered on my toes. "Suppose someone was to tell him, Maylee?"

There was something like a smile in her eyes and for a moment it stopped me. And then I got it.

I waited half a minute while I thought it out. "So he knows all about you and he loves you just the same? That must be it, Maylee."

She didn't have to say anything. It was there in her eyes.

I shook my head. "I just hate to lose, Maylee. I hate it like hell."

And after a few seconds I smiled again. "I'll bet you promised him that there would never be another man again."

I took a step forward. "But there's going to be one more, Maylee. At least one more."

Maylee tried to slip away, but my hand caught her and swung her to the bed. She fought and scratched, but my hand went to the neckline of her dress.

When I came downstairs, Emma was in an arm chair drinking a cup of coffee.

She looked up. "Well?"

I shrugged. "I don't think we can hold her."

Emma was moody. "Hell, she was one of the best we had."

I was slipping into my topcoat when the doorbell chimed. Emma groaned her way out of her chair and went past me to answer it.

A tall, thin man with shell-rimmed glasses stood in the doorway. He was extremely nervous, but at the same time there was determination in his chin. "I've come to get Maylee," he said defiantly. "She was supposed to meet me at seven-thirty at the railroad station, but she didn't show up."

Emma and I exchanged glances. She shrugged her shoulders. "I never seen him before."

"Come in," I said. "We've been expecting you."

He hesitated for a moment and then crossed the sill. He swallowed uneasily.

I lit a cigarette and looked him over. His clothes were obviously inexpensive and ready-made. "I suppose you were prepared to batter down the door or something like that?"

"If necessary," he said stiffly.

I grinned. "That would hardly have been necessary. All the girls are free to go whenever they want. I'm afraid you've been reading some of those old-fashioned novels."

I sighed. "We'll hate to lose Maylee. She's been with us for three years, you know."

I guess he didn't. That must have been a lot longer than Maylee had told him.

I shook my head. "I hope we don't lose any of our regular customers because of this. Maylee was quite a favorite. She had certain specialties."

He lost a little color, but his face remained stiff. "Maylee's told me everything I need to know."

"Ah, yes," I said thoughtfully. "These are all fine girls and happy. They like this type of work."

I turned to Emma. "Why don't you go up and see what's keeping Maylee?"

Emma looked at me questioningly for a moment and then moved on. She palmed the keys on the cocktail table as she passed it.

The thin man surveyed me with narrowed eyes. "I want to warn you that it will do you no good to blackmail us. In the first place we'll never have a lot of money. I'm just a bookkeeper."

I thought that was somewhat regrettable. Certainly from my point of view.

"And besides," he continued with a trace of smugness, "we're going a long way from here. And we'll make certain that we're not followed. I'll change my name, if necessary."

"It's really quite refreshing," I said. "To see a man of your caliber willing to marry a . . ." I held up my hand. "I'm sorry. I won't use the word. But still, it is refreshing. I imagine you must also have terrific confidence in yourself."

His eyes were puzzled and suspicious. "Confidence?"

"Why, yes," I said. "After all, in the three years Maylee's been here she's known . . . I believe that's the expression. Biblical, isn't it? . . . Well, she's known . . ." I looked at the ceiling and my lips moved with silent mathematics.

I laughed self-consciously. "I'm not too good with figures, but you get the general idea of why I admire your confidence. After all, you'll be competing with probably a couple of thousand men." I thought it over. "Possibly the number of individuals is somewhat less. A lot of them were repeaters."

His face was dead white.

"I wonder," I said thoughtfully, "if she'll ever think of any of them." I smiled. "After you're asleep, of course."

From the way he threw his right, I'd say that he never had a fight in his life. I blocked the hook easily. My right to his jaw snapped the consciousness from his eyes and he dropped to the floor.

I bent over him and took the wallet from his pocket. His driver's license showed that his name was James Wells and I guess he was right about being just a bookkeeper. His last pay check was for less than sixty-eight dollars.

Emma came back alone. "Maylee will be down in a minute or two."

I put the wallet back in Wells' pocket. "I guess it must be true love, Emma," I said. "He's a nobody."

I propped Wells up and slapped him a couple of times to bring him to. After awhile he groaned and opened his eyes. He glared at me with hate and helplessness.

I lit a cigarette and took a puff. "I wonder if Maylee's going to miss this life. Once the girls get started on this type of thing, it's hard for them to quit."

Maylee appeared at the head of the stairs carrying her suitcase. The side of her face was swollen and she walked down slowly, her hand on the rail.

Wells stood up almost reluctantly. He seemed to look at her as though he had never seen her before.

I let Maylee get to the foot of the stairs. Then I took out my wallet and pulled out two tens. "Never let it be said that the boss doesn't pay when he samples the stock. I'm sorry about the face, Maylee, but you know that's the way I like to have mine. I guess you do too. At least you've never complained."

Maylee went past me without so much as a glance. There was a timid smile on her face as she looked at Wells.

He flinched slightly when she touched his arm.

It was an electric shock to Maylee and her eyes widened. "Jimmy, what's the matter?"

He couldn't meet her eyes. "Nothing," he said guiltily. "Let's go."

Maylee whirled on me and her voice was a hiss. "What have you done? What have you told him?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Why nothing, Maylee. I didn't have to lie."

I turned to Wells who was edging for the door. "I gather that you missed your train. Wouldn't it be more economical if you just left Maylee here until tomorrow morning? It would save you hotel bills for tonight."

Maylee's voice was high with panic. "No, Jimmy. I want you to take me away right now."

"Come now, Maylee," I said soothingly, "let's be sensible. What difference can twenty-four hours mean when you've been here three years already?"

Wells licked his lips.

Maylee met his eyes and knew by his indecision that I had killed something. Her face was white as she clutched his arm. "Take me with you now, Jimmy!"

He shook his head stubbornly and forced open her grip. I took a tight hold on Maylee's arm and kept her away from him.

Wells moved quickly to the door and opened it. There was the color of guilt in his face. "I'll call for you tomorrow morning, Maylee."

Like hell you will, I thought.

And Maylee knew it too. She screamed and tried to follow him, but I tightened my grip on her arm.

She struggled for half a minute more after Wells left and then burst into hysterical tears.

I let her cry until she was exhausted and then I gave her an order. "Get back upstairs, Maylee."

She picked up the suitcase and moved without spirit.

When I left Emma's place, I walked two blocks to where I'd parked my car.

A uniformed cop had one foot on the bumper of my sedan and he was writing out a ticket.

I came up behind him. "Hundreds of people get robbed every day, but you cops got nothing better to do than write out tickets for honest taxpayers."

He didn't look back. "You're parked practically on top of a fire plug, mister. As soon as I fill this out, I'll go chase a couple of rapists for you."

He tore out the ticket and turned around. Then he grinned and crumpled it up. "Hell, it's you."

He put his book back in his pocket and studied my car. "That's a pretty beat-up mess you got there, Fred. A detective sergeant ought to be able to show something a little better for his salary."

I opened the door and slid inside. "I'm saving my money, Al. One of these days I'm taking off for Cuba and buy myself a couple of estates. I'll have a dozen Jaguars."

He laughed. "You should live so long."

I grinned. "You're damn right I will."



Thoughtful Thief

At Nogales, Mexico, Hugo W. Miller told police that a thief stole his wallet during a festival in the border town. "But the pickpocket was considerate," Miller said, "and in a good mood, I guess. He buttoned my pocket again after lifting my billfold."

Trial and Error

Members of the Pershing School PTA at Repert, Ida., are looking for other means of raising money after their "circulating basket" project failed. They placed three baskets into circulation with instructions that they be passed around from person to person, collecting food and money for the school. But all three baskets disappeared.

Writ of Error

In Lumberton, N. C., Judge Raymond Mallard arrived to preside over a term of superior court. One of the first documents he picked up was an order committing him to prison for two years for bootlegging.

An investigation disclosed that the assistant clerk of court was typing the commitment order for another man when the telephone rang. The caller asked who was conducting court. And the clerk typed Judge Mallard's name as she replied. The Judge lost no time in beating the rap.

A LITTLE song was building in his head. I'm down, I'm out, it went. I'm down, I'm out, I'm in a strange town and I'm hungry. I haven't eaten for a day and a half, I'm down, I'm out, and I don't know a soul in this town.

He kept on walking, because he had a vaguely guilty feeling about stopping; as though honest citizens could see he was down-and-out-and-hungry, and would call a policeman to have him punished for being in that state.

He walked, and the pain in his legs, the pain in his empty belly, constrained him to smile—a humorless contraction of his lips away from each other. A girl smiled back once, but then, somehow, she seemed to sense what he was, and hurried on.

It was getting dark, the street lights were coming on. The store fronts around him lit up, and the storekeepers locked their doors, and the sidewalks began to get empty. He had a brief impression of

traffic doubling up in the street and then slackening off, and it began to be quiet.

He stopped, swaying slightly, facing a red light, though no cars passed between him and the opposite curb. From somewhere off to the right a good deal of noise came.

He turned that way, because his poverty, his loneliness and his despair could not stand being alone.

The streets became shabbier as the noise became louder. Then he came out on another avenue, and even in his shocked, painful state, a phrase came into his mind. Skid Row. I'm on Skid Row.

The noise came from loudspeakers over the entrances of shabby movie houses, barely able to accommodate their large and gaudy signs; it came from



Locker 911

A Novelette

by **RICHARD WORMSER**

36

This particular money interested too damn many people. It also happened to be illicit.

MANHUNT

shops selling off-label records; it came from the open doors of bars that didn't bother to have signs at all.

He pulled up again, considering. In one way, he'd done right; here the night-club swinging policeman would never pick out a man who was down-and-out-and-hungry-and-tired.

But here, too, there would be no chance of stopping a passing stranger, or begging a coin, or—face the right word—panhandling.

The speed of his descent in the world suddenly struck him, almost knocking his breath out.

Yesterday—only yesterday—his wife's bright eyes, her trick of never quite shutting her lips across her teeth, her constantly dangling earrings had become too much for him.

So he'd gone to the bank, drawn half their savings account—four hundred and twelve dollars, he remembered—and taken a Greyhound out of town.

Only yesterday. But last night there had been a bar, and a remarkably sympathetic girl, a room someplace, and deft hands that had unbuttoned his clothes for him.

And this morning there had been nothing, but the room and his clothes.

At least she'd paid for the room, or maybe the clerk had made him pay in advance.

But why had she taken his papers—his driver's license, his social security card? He had no means of identification left.

He shrugged, and shuffled across another street, past a chili parlor, a hock shop, a bar. There was no one back in the world he had left that he could turn to for aid. All his so-called friends had really been friends of his wife's; he'd never run in any popularity contests.

His foot kicked something that tinkled. He walked on, then turned and came back. A dime would buy coffee, a quarter would put chili or a hamburger in his belly.

Lights on the pavement were green and red and lavender from the neon signs of the chili parlor and the bar. When he bent over, his head swam from fatigue and hunger and hangover; his eyes blurred.

But then something glittered and his dirty, shaky fingers snatched it.

Even as he straightened, fighting his nausea, he knew it wasn't a coin; it wasn't even round. He started to throw it away, but a fit of tremors came on him, and he leaned against the hockshop window, shaking, retching without being able to bring anything up; there was nothing left in him.

His eyes cleared, and the thing in his hand was a key. An extraordinarily large key.

Maybe a key to a room someplace, someplace where he could hide out, sleep, get his thoughts together. Oh, give me a break, he thought; let it be a room, with a bed, warm water. Yeah, a hard voice jeered inside his ear. And a bottle of milk on

the windowsill. Sure. All the breaks in the world. And the First National Bank wide open behind the bathroom . . .

He wiped his eyes on his gritty sleeve, and held the key close to his eyes. Union System Lock. It had been a mistake to think about that warm bed waiting for him. He stopped and wiped his eyes again; he was crying.

He took a deep breath, used all his energy to concentrate. Union System Locker No. 911.

It meant nothing.

It had to mean something. He didn't even have a coin to reach an operator, put in a reverse call for his wife, ask to be allowed to creep home. Home! An endless future stretched ahead, a future of being told of the time he had drunk up half their savings, while the earrings tinkled, and the uncovered teeth gleamed and the senselessly bright eyes glittered.

He stumbled on, dropping the key into his pocket automatically, moving his feet automatically, going no place as fast as his battered legs would take him.

Food smells poured into his nose, a hand was on his shoulder, words were pouring into his ear. He had a vague impression that the mouth that sputtered the words was spraying saliva on his cheek at the same time, but he was past disgust.

He let the hand turn him, and then was aware that the smells around him were indoor smells instead of street smells. Then a bowl of soup was burning his hand and his other hand was soiling a chunk of bread sawed carelessly off some loaf, and he had stumbled to sit down on a bench. He heard, or thought he heard, an organ playing.

Mission. Midnight Mission. He'd contributed to the one in his home town each year. He'd never really thought about it, at the time.

Remnants of the man he had been warned him not to gulp the shoddy manna. He ate slowly, chewing the bread carefully, sipping the soup out of a spoon that had once been nickel-plated.

The world swung around for awhile in larger and more pleasant circles than he had been experiencing, and then came to rest, and he leaned his head against the back of the pew and let the organ music play over him. He opened his mouth and shut it again, as though singing the hymn that was payment for the food, and his belly stopped pitching.

Blood came back to his head and he remembered the key. He took it out of his pocket and looked at it. Now he realized that the key was a twenty-four hour check for a locker in some bus station or railroad depot. It was as simple as that to a man who had just eaten a bowl of soup and a piece of bread. When the hymn was over, he rose, and went, not stumbling now, to the door. Someone dropped a hand on his shoulder, said: "Bless you." He said: "Thanks," and went back out on Skid Row.

Out in the street a bus lumbered, looking crippled and harassed as it made its way through city traffic

for the last little stretch of the long cross-country run. He followed the big thing along, saw it turn into the terminal.

The terminal had Union System Lockers, but the numbers ran from four hundred to six hundred only. But there was a bank of public phones with books, and he looked up two more bus terminals, a railroad station. There were two airports, too, but a man with no money would have trouble getting as far as an airport . . .

He stood there, leaning against the rack of phone books. Then he flipped the unclassified open, looked up his own name. There were people in this city with his last name, one with his initials, but none with his own name.

And he realized that he'd lost his name; hadn't even thought about it since he woke up this morning. How can a man lose the name he's had since he had anything?

Then, right then and there, he became Henry Reynolds. The name had no relation to what he'd been, but it was as good a name as any . . .

2.

Another bus terminal, the railroad station, and then, finally, the third bus terminal and success. The numbers here started at eight hundred. He went down the line, looking for #911.

There it was, looking like any other locker in the bank.

But Henry Reynolds had to do something before he opened it. Something for a luck symbol. The way his luck had been running, the locker called 911 would have a pair of dirty socks and a leaky umbrella in it.

There was a slight film of dust on the door. He drew a triangle in a circle in the dust; he'd heard someplace that that was a good symbol.

Then he fished out his key, and opened the door.

There was nothing inside the locker, but a paper bag. A small one. It was a quarter locker, and the bag would have gone easily into a dime one. Funny. He took the bag out, and started to leave. Then, on second thought, his hand still on the door, he took out the key, dropped it into his pocket again, let the door click shut.

Whatever was in the bag wasn't going to grow from waiting. He leaned against #911, and opened the crackling paper a little.

Then he shut the bag again and instinctively twisted the top, held it in his clenched hand. He looked around furtively, but nobody in the bus terminal seemed at all interested in him.

The bag was full of money. Nice, green money. Folding stuff. He had seen tens in there, twenties; he thought he had seen a hundred dollar bill.

He shielded the bag with his body, and fished out a small bundle marked "tens." He took a twenty,

too, used the key, put the bag back in the locker.

Then Henry Reynolds stood there, reading the metal sign. Ten cents a day, three days for a quarter . . . He went over to the cigar stand, bought two packages of cigarettes, and fished a quarter from the change to buy three days of locker #811, a smaller locker, but big enough for the bag.

There was an all-night clothing store in the railroad station. He bought a fresh shirt and underwear and socks, a new tie; he had his shoes shined and sat in a curtained booth while his suit was sponged and pressed.

He counted the money he'd taken out of the bag. A little over a hundred of it left.

Henry Reynolds took a cab from the railroad terminal to the only hotel in town he'd ever heard of. A nice place, suitable for prosperous salesmen, and people like that. Across the plaza, there was a better place, for movie stars and millionaires, but he didn't want to be conspicuous.

The clerk took his registration card, assigned him room 3305, and charged him seven-fifty in advance.

Henry Reynolds went up and ordered dinner from room service.

Then, suddenly, he was lying on the bed, laughing. Roller coaster Reynolds! Up and down, then up again, all in twenty-four hours!

He was still laughing when there was a rap on his door. He yelled "Come in" at what he thought was a room service waiter, and swung to his feet, chuckling. He'd ordered a good dinner, and he'd enjoy it.

The man who came in was no waiter. Too much muscle. Too much jaw. Too little eyes and too little lip. He was a man who had spent quite a bit of his life gritting his teeth at an unreasonable world.

He said: "My name's Birkett," and flashed a hand that held a leather case and a badge.

"Mine's Henry Reynolds. And this is my room."

Birkett shut the door, dropped into the easy chair. "I read the register downstairs. I read good. All right. Start talking."

"Any particular subject?"

Birkett didn't smile, certainly, but a gleam came across his heavy face and was gone at once. "This business has gotten to be a lot more fun since guys like you took up reading these whodunits. We get some real fine conversations going once in a while. G'wan. Kid me. I'm a public servant."

"Are you?" Henry Reynolds asked. "That badge came and went in a hurry."

Birkett shook his head. He took the badge out again, and threw it across. "Examine it at your leisure," he said. "Take ten days, and if at the end of that time you aren't completely satisfied, your money will be refunded cheerfully."

The badge seemed all right. Sergeant of City Detectives. Henry said: "I suppose I should phone headquarters and certify your identification."

"Why bother?" Birkett said. He took the badge back, put it in his pocket. "You are going to be there quick enough. Why waste your money? These hotels charge you a dime for service on a phone call, too."

There was a rap at the door. Henry Reynolds watched Birkett; the detective did nothing but swivel around a little, so he could cover Henry Reynolds and the door at the same time. Henry Reynolds told whoever it was to come in, and a waiter pushed a serving wagon into the room.

"Hm," Birkett said. "Steak, baked potato, creamed spinach, salad, a napoleon, coffee. Good dinner. Me, I don't like eating in hotel rooms."

"It takes all kinds," Henry Reynolds said. "I'd ask you to join me, but I'm hungry."

"Yeah," Birkett said. "Eat away. The chow in the county jail's awful."

Henry Reynolds sat down at the table. The waiter stood there. Henry Reynolds reached in his pocket and got out a bill, a twenty, and laid it on the little silver tray. The waiter reached for it.

Sergeant Birkett said: "Hold everything," and scooped up the bill. He read the serial number, took a list out of his pocket, and then nodded. He consulted his wrist watch, took the waiter's pencil, and wrote something—maybe the time—on the bill.

Henry Reynolds had taken a mouthful of steak. He kept chewing and chewing it, unable to swallow.

Sergeant Birkett had finished what he was doing, apparently; he took two tens out of his own wallet, put them on the tray, and the wide-eyed waiter made change out of them.

"Tip the man," Birkett said. "Tip him good. Where you're going, the dough won't help at all."

The steak was sticking in Henry Reynolds' throat. But he got it down, left the tip, pocketed the rest of the money.

"Okay," Birkett said to the waiter. "Depart. The gent'll put the table in the hall when he's through with it."

The waiter was a scurrying flash getting out of there.

Henry Reynolds got his throat clear. "I suppose it would be silly to ask you what this is all about?" He made his knife cut another bit of meat.

"Silly," Birkett said. "You know." He got up, went into the bathroom, got a water tumbler and helped himself to coffee. "I'm a very polite cop," he said, adding sugar and cream. "A lot of officers would make you use the glass, take the cup for themselves. Got anything you want to tell me, Reynolds?"

"Just good night, is all." The second piece of steak went no easier than the first.

"Very funny. Let's see your identification."

Henry Reynolds shook his head. "I have none."

The tumbler full of coffee came down on the table with a thump. "What?"

"I got rolled by a dame. She took the wallet, and—" he stopped. Careful now. "—and what dough I had in it. Luckily my big money was in my sock. She never thought to look for it, I guess."

Birkett said: "It's where they usually look first." But his voice was, for the first time, a little gentle. "Go on," he said. "I could be wrong about you, but I don't think so."

"All right. I came to in a dump, here in town. I went to a barbershop, and heard about a poker game. It seemed a good idea at the time. I lost fifty bucks."

"I see. And this dough in your pocket?"

"From the poker game. Change when I cashed in." He swallowed without difficulty now. It was a good story. The touch about losing the fifty was just perfect. If he'd said he'd won, it wouldn't have sounded—

Birkett had him by the lapels, was hauling him out of his chair. "It's a change, all right. Usually it's a crap game, and they win, not lose. You're coming in with me."

"What have I done?"

"Extortion," Birkett said. He shook Henry Reynolds without apparent effort on his part. "Let's turn out your pockets, wise guy."

Henry Reynolds said: "Just a minute," but the big hand shook the words out of him. Birkett's other hand plunged into pocket after pocket. It came up with loose money, a handkerchief, and then, the key to the locker.

Birkett shoved him across the room, and he landed sprawled in the semi-easy chair. The detective got out his list, looked through Henry Reynolds' bills, checked them off on the list.

"Yeah. It's the money, all right . . . at least part of it. Want to tell another story before we go walking?"

"There isn't any other story. I told you the truth."

Birkett let out his breath in a long sigh. "You aren't gonna like this," he said. "How about it? Your real name and where'd you come from?"

Henry Reynolds said: "I left my wife. That's no crime."

"Desertion. Well, it ain't anything we push much. Go on."

But Henry Reynolds had had a thought. Not so much of a thought as a picture in the back of his mind. A picture of the paper bag in the locker. Full of money. Maybe ten thousand, even more. A new chance, a new start, and alone. He said: "Nothing more to say."

Birkett said: "I say again, you ain't gonna like this. But I got to do it."

He went to the phone, gave a number, asked for Detective Wellman. "Sam? I got him. Meet me in back of the hotel." He hung up, turned on Henry Reynolds. "You want to walk out quiet, or go down the back elevator like a hunk of meat?"

"Where's your warrant? Where's your—"

Sergeant Birkett hit him, then. Even as the first blow landed, square in Henry Reynolds' belly, he knew he was being hit with scientific detachment. There was no anger behind the blow. There might even be sorrow.

Then the second punch landed, on the back of his neck, and he was saved from thinking for awhile.

3.

He was in an alley, sitting against rough brick. From a distance he heard sounds, someone talking, and then Birkett's voice coming through, "No, we can use him, Sam."

Henry shook his head, hard. He saw a car waiting at the mouth of the alley. A taxicab, not a car. The man named Sam helped him to his feet. Sergeant Birkett got up off a garbage can, and said: "Let's go."

Henry Reynolds' hands were fastened together with cuffs. It didn't surprise him. But he was startled at how hard it is to walk with your hands fastened in front of you. He waddled down the alley like an old lady. Birkett and Sam followed, talking softly. Henry couldn't hear what they were saying, and Sam left them at the cab.

Birkett said to the hack driver: "You got the address," and gave Henry Reynolds a hand on his elbow to help him into the cab. "You aren't used to the bracelets," he said. "I've picked up guys that felt naked without them." He shut the cab and leaned back, sighing. "A fine way to make a living."

"Aren't you supposed to put one cuff on me and one on you?"

Birkett snorted. "Matter of judgment. You're an easy guy to handle. Why wear the skin off my own wrist? . . . You know our town? There's the new police building. Cost a mint."

"Aren't we going there?"

Birkett was watching the huge white building pass by. "Later, maybe. Never be in a hurry to get locked up. Under the best circumstances it takes a lot of money and time to get unlocked again. That is, if you're going in for this sort of thing as a regular habit."

"What sort of thing?"

"Ah, save it. Nothing you could say would stop me now."

"Aren't you supposed to tell me what I've done, book me, take me to court?"

Birkett laughed heavily. He seemed very unhappy. "That's in the books . . . Here we are. Yeah, that's in the books, some of the whodunits, too. It isn't much in real life, like you might say." He opened the cab door and stepped out, motioned for Henry to follow. Light came from a street lamp through an evergreen tree—a cedar, or something like it—and danced on his face. He shoved some

money at the hackie. "Thanks, Max. Come on, Mr. Reynolds. We go in here."

"Here" was an old-fashioned-looking house, too big for its lot. It looked like a very old house, but the neighborhood looked new; maybe it was the first house there, maybe it had been moved there; Henry Reynolds had heard of houses this big being moved.

Birkett reached down and unlocked the cuffs. "Guy sees you for the first time with those on, it's one strike against you," he said, and pushed the bell.

Henry Reynolds said: "Whose side are you on?"

"I dunno," Birkett said. "It's a thing I mighta done myself, given a chance. I got one more year to put in for my pension . . . It's a good thing, too. I'm beginning to feel sorry for you guys."

"Crime doesn't pay," Henry Reynolds said.

"Wise-cracking makes me less sorry. Keep it up."

The door opened, then. The man who opened it could have been a large Filipino, or a small Mexican; his accent as he said: "Come in, Sergeant. Mr. Leazer's waiting for you," was plain American. He had on a white shirt, but his suit and tie were dull black; a servant of some kind.

Birkett pushed Henry Reynolds ahead of him, and they followed the flunky up curving stairs and into a big room without doors.

A man smaller than the servant was behind a desk. Smaller than the servant, and uglier than anybody Henry Reynolds could remember seeing. Sergeant Birkett said: "This is the man, Mr. Leazer. Calls himself Henry Reynolds. Ever see him before?"

Mr. Leazer squinted across the big desk. This did not, because it could not, make him any more homely. He said: "No. And yes. It's a common enough type. Several hundred of them work for me."

"I don't make him," a voice said from the side. It was the voice Henry had heard in the alley—the one Birkett had called Sam. He must have come directly here, Henry thought, just before us. Henry Reynolds looked over, and saw a tall, thin guy, only a little younger than Birkett, and he didn't look any richer. His light tan suit needed cleaning. He walked up to Henry Reynolds, grabbed his chin, and twisted his face up to the light. "Never saw him before, Birk. The files don't make any Henry Reynolds that adds up to anything, either. A safe-cracker, two pickpockets . . . I saw their pictures, they ain't him."

Mr. Leazer was used to bossing; his voice told it. "Sergeant Wellman! You were not to go through official channels!"

Birkett said quietly: "Nobody in Records notices a detective checking files. We got the tip from a friend of ours, houseman at a hotel downtown. This guy paid for his room with one of the bills. He has around another hundred of them with him. I spent twenty of yours buying one from a room waiter."

Mr. Leazer said, sharply: "There is to be no publicity."

Wellman was not as quiet with the rich man as Birkett. He said: "Yeah, yeah, the Commissioner explained all that to us. What's this mope say about the dough?"

"The poker game routine," Birkett said.

Wellman chuckled. He walked over and stood looking Henry Reynolds up and down. "How's he do with a one-two?"

"Folds," Birkett said.

Wellman repeated the punches that Birkett had used; the hard jab to the belly, the hand across the back of the neck. Either he wasn't as good as Birkett, or he didn't want to do as complete a job; Henry Reynolds did not black out this time. He just sat down on the floor, feeling sick.

Wellman reached down and grabbed his hair. "Who was in the poker game with you?"

"I don't know."

The hair tightened and Henry Reynolds heard himself screeching. He tried to get his weight on his hands, to ease his scalp, but Wellman kicked the hands aside.

"I never saw them before—"

Then he was sprawling on the floor, unsupported. The tears insisted on running down his face. He was ashamed of himself, but worse than that, he couldn't remember what kind of an answer he'd given to make Wellman let him go. It was an important thing to know.

Voices got through to him. "I'd rather you didn't do that here," Leazer said.

"Whatayawant, Mr. Leazer?" That was Wellman. "Fried eggs without any broken shells? Make up your mind."

"I'll not fail to remind the commissioner that Mr. Birkett's manners are a good deal better than yours. No, I don't mind this man being hurt. But—I believe in keeping fit. There is a gymnasium in my cellar. It does not have imported rugs for people to bleed on."

Wellman again: "I could get to like you, Mr. Leazer. Okay, the gym, then. Come on, Reynolds."

"I'll bring him." This was Birkett. "I got another idea, Mr. Leazer . . . This girl, young lady, your dame—whatever you call her—oughtn't she to have a look at my jerk-baby here?"

Henry Reynolds had gotten to his feet. He ran the sleeve of his coat over his slimy face. The tears had stopped for awhile, he hoped.

Leazer was saying that he didn't want the young lady brought into the matter.

"She's already in," Birkett said. "Somebody blackmailed you. Either it's someone who knows you or someone who knows her . . . We oughta find out which. And—no, wait a minute—don't think a couple of old officers like Wellman and me couldn't find out who she is. Any policeman could. The thing is, we got more sense than to put the squeeze

on a rich man in a rich man's town, Mr. Leazer."
"I see."

"I don't know if you do," Birkett said. He moved over and took Henry Reynolds arm. "If this isn't the guy who knew what to put in that letter to you, we got to keep digging till we find him. If this is just a messenger I picked up, the number one guy'll keep after you. It'll all happen again."

"I see."

"So show us this gymnasium, and phone your little lady. You told us your wife was away . . . Okay, Mr. Leazer."

Henry Reynolds' vision was coming clear now. He saw the frown on the ugly face deepen. Mr. Leazer said: "There is a place for everything. I don't believe in bringing—certain elements in my life—into my home."

Wellman snorted. "You said your wife was away. Hell, man, speed's the whole thing. Once that money gets out of town, we gotta put the list out, on an all points broadcast. Once we do *that*, your cozy little secret's out. And don't tell me you don't like the way I talk. You didn't hire me for my pretty voice. You want a nice guy, get one. You want a case broken quick, get a guy who breaks things."

"All right, all right," Mr. Leazer said. "Take him down to the gym . . . I'll make a phone call."

Birkett said: "Come on, Henry," and tugged at Henry's arm.

4.

The unexpected use of his first name—even if it was not his own—touched Henry Reynolds. He looked at Birkett, hope twisting his mouth.

Birkett took a firm hold of his arm and wrenched it around behind him, frog-marched him to the door, his feet half touching the ground.

Outside, the servant who had let them in hovered. Birkett said: "Gymnasium." The servant nodded, bowed, and stepped across the wide hall to press a button. Somewhere a motor whirred; then it stopped and a door opened, and Birkett shoved Henry Reynolds into an elevator.

The servant stepped in after them and pressed another button that closed the door and started them down. Birkett said: "What's your name, son?"

Nobody answered him, and the sergeant used his free hand to shove the black-coated back. The flunky said: "Joe, sir. My name is Joe."

"Okay, Joe. Glad to know you. You take care of Mr. Leazer, huh?"

"That's my job, sir."

"You don't have to call me sir. You probably make more than I do, and steal more than that."

The tan face turned over the black shoulder, split itself into a white-toothed grin.

Birkett said. "They leave it around, you pick it up. That's what the rich are for, Joe."

Joe laughed noiselessly. The elevator stopped, and he led them across a cement corridor, opened a heavy door, snapped on a light. "The gym, sir. I'll go get the other gentleman."

"Yeah, get my partner, too. You call him a gentleman, he won't know who you're talking to. Just get him."

The flunky went away. Birkett pulled a cigar out of his inner pocket, looked at it, then shrugged and put it away again, got out a package of cigarettes. He held them out to Henry Reynolds. "G'wan, take one." He lit up for both of them, threw the match on the floor. "The butler done it," he said. "Like they say. That dark guy. Whataya make him, Spanish, Mexican, Filipino?"

"Could be Puerto Rican."

"Yeah, Henry, could be. Sure, he was the one shaking the old boy down. Well, seeing a couple of roughnecks like Wellman an' me come in here, he won't do it again." Birkett chuckled, the noise of a man accustomed to have the world go his way. "We'll horse around here awhile . . . Henry, where'd you get the money?"

Henry Reynolds cleared his throat and stammered something that didn't make sense even to him.

"The dough, Henry, the dough. Where'd you get it?"

"I'd better not mention the poker game again."

"No. You'd better not. I'm not Wellman, but I can get rough."

"I found a locker key. On Skid Row. A key to a locker in a bus station."

"Who are you, Henry?" That face could never get kindly, but it did its best.

Henry Reynolds hesitated again. Then he said: "I told you the truth before. I left my wife. Took half our savings, and just left. She's got the house, four hundred dollars, there's no children; she can go back to work and—"

Birkett said: "All right. And a whore rolled you for your wallet. That's level?"

"Level," Henry Reynolds said. "I can tell you the place where I woke up, the bar I picked her up in."

Birkett dropped his cigarette and ground it out on the floor. "Yeah, Henry. Well, the dough would be gone, but we can get you new identification papers, Wellman an' me. This isn't an official case; we're doing it as a favor to the big brass. Leazer's got money runnin' out of his navel . . . You want to cooperate, Henry? With Wellman an' me?"

Henry said: "Do I get to make a choice?"

Birkett gave his contented chuckle again. "Sure, Henry, sure. This ain't an official case. No prison, no jail. You don't cooperate, Wellman an' I beat you up, put you on a bus, tell you never to show in this town again. But—" He stopped, a little. His small eyes were as shrewd as a hog's.

"It's a nice town," Henry said.

Birkett looked steadily at him. Satisfied, he said: "As good as the next."

"I'll cooperate."

Birkett nodded. He reached for another cigarette just as Henry Reynolds finished his; Birkett was one of those smokers who takes deep, quick draws.

Then they heard the elevator whine again, and Birkett reached out, patted Henry Reynolds on the shoulder quickly, reached up, mussed Henry Reynolds' hair, grabbed his coat collar, pulled it down to his elbows, and was holding him that way when Wellman came in.

Mr. Leazer was with Wellman, and a woman. A girl, really; a beauty—blue-black hair, very pale skin, very red lips, and one hell of a figure.

"Mop him up a little, Birk," Wellman said. "Miss Davis wants a look at him."

Birkett was breathing hard, though Henry Reynolds knew he'd been under no exertion at all. The detective pulled a handkerchief out of Henry Reynolds' pocket. "Clean your face up. There's water over there . . . Mr. Leazer, I don't think we got the right guy. He ain't cracked, an' when I work on 'em, they usually squeal a lot earlier than this."

"Over there," was a drinking fountain in one corner of the gym, near some pull-springs and a vaulting horse. The fountain ran ice cold, and Henry Reynolds used the dirty handkerchief to scrub his face. Then he dried it as best he could with his hands, and came back. The pressing he'd bought for his suit before was wasted money; well, it hadn't been his dough, anyway.

The girl looked at him without any interest at all. "I never saw him before."

Birkett said: "Make sure. Your milkman, mailman, the guy who fixes your plumbing? A guy who pumps gas into your car? Men look different in work clothes, uniforms."

The girl shrugged, and walked closer to Henry Reynolds. Her hand came up, showing long fingernails painted pearl-silver. She took hold of Henry Reynolds' chin, and tilted his face up to the light, her fingers cold and impersonal as a dentist's.

He had never hated anyone so much in his life; he had never known he was capable of hating anything as beautiful as this girl.

"I never saw him before," she said again.

"All right," Birkett said. "We got the wrong guy."

"Then where did he get the money?" Mr. Leazer asked.

Birkett said: "He mighta told the truth about the poker game, crap game, whatever it was. Me, I'm more likely to think he dipped it outa somebody's pocket."

Wellman had been looking at Birkett. He took over now. "Either way," he said, "you won't be bothered again. We're gonna beat the—" he looked at the girl, hesitated—"the stuffing out of this guy, an' turn him loose. He's the kinda guy gets around with other crooks. Before tomorrow night,

there won't be a bum in town doesn't know it ain't safe to play around with you, Mr. Leazer."

"How about the money I paid?"

Birkett took that one. "So maybe it's gone. But it'll be the last."

The girl, Miss Davis, moved inside her dress. All four men looked at her at once; it was that kind of movement. She said: "Do you really beat them with rubber hoses, Sergeant?"

"Sure. If we have them. Or you can wrap towels around your fists. The trick is to let 'em have it in the belly and chest, so it don't show on a witness stand."

"I'll bet you're good at it. You and your partner."

"Sure. We been officers a long time."

The girl took her breath in and held it till her breasts were tight against her black velvet dress. Then she let it out again, slowly, and put all her attention on Mr. Leazer. "I'd like to see that," she said. "I'd like to see them beat him."

Mr. Leazer hesitated. Then he said: "After all, officers, it was my money he took. Go ahead."

5.

Surprisingly, it was Wellman, not Birkett who said: "Wait a minute, Mr. Leazer."

"I could call the Commissioner," Mr. Leazer said in his soft voice. "I could even call the Mayor."

Birkett said: "He'd do it, too. Okay, Mr. Leazer," he turned to Henry Reynolds. "Coat off, pal."

Henry Reynolds looked around. The eight eyes that looked back at him were a wall around him, a wall with no door. He took his coat off, slipped his tie loose.

There were towels hung here and there around the room, ready for any rich hands that got a little sweaty exercising. First Wellman and then Birkett went over and got two towels each, each man knotting one around his left hand, then holding out the right one to be wrapped, too. Mr. Leazer had to wrap Birkett's right hand.

The girl stood as though immobilized, eagerly alert.

"Shirt," Birkett said. There was no tone in his voice.

Henry Reynolds took his shirt off like an automaton, went over and laid it on top of his coat, on the vaulting horse. Then he slowly walked back.

As he came within range of Wellman, the officer hauled off and hit him hard in the belly.

Henry Reynolds started to double up. But as he did so another fist connected with his kidneys; Birkett, from behind. He straightened again, and took a right to his heart.

Then the punches came fast; they came hard; they came often. Reynolds made no effort to fight back, but once or twice he tried to raise his arms to protect himself, to get his elbows over his solar

plexus. Easy side blows of the towel-wrapped fists knocked his arms apart again, left him wide open.

A voice came through the roaring of blood in his ears. "Lower," it said. "Lower." It was the girl's voice.

The blows stopped for a moment, but the pain went on. The voice that answered was Birkett's. "Can't take a chance of a hernia," he said. "Permanent mark."

"Get it over with." That was Mr. Leazer.

Henry Reynolds could hardly feel anything any more. He was in a world that spun and rocked; he was in a high-powered washing machine filled with blood instead of water.

Then it stopped. The automatic washing machine reversed itself, the blood was pumped out, cold rinse water came in, and his head stopped spinning.

He lay still—he didn't know how he'd gotten to the floor—gasping. Hands reached down and got him, and he was stretched out. Rubbing table. The reek in his nose was smelling salts.

"Some guys," Birkett said, "know when to take a dive. Other guys, now, don't."

"We'll get out of here in a minute," Wellman said. "Old man Leazer took his dame off some place to cash in on the kicks we gave her."

Henry Reynolds tentatively ran his hands over his chest.

"I don't think we broke any ribs," Birkett said. "Me, I wouldn't do it with that girl, not on a platinum bed."

"With gold leaf sheets. Lemme feel Reynolds. . . . Naw, nothing broken. Let's get out of here."

Not the least of all the puzzling things that had happened to him in the last day or so was the solicitude with which the two officers helped him back into his clothes. Birkett even lent him a pocket comb.

"You can sure take the punishment, Reynolds," Wellman said, as they filed up cement stairs to the front hall of the house. The dark houseman was lounging on a stiff chair in the front hall, half asleep. He jumped up, buttoning his black jacket.

"Scram, punk," Wellman said. His hand was flat on the flunky's chest, pushing him aside. They went out into the night, through a glass and wrought-iron door, and Wellman led the way to a dusty sedan at the curb.

Only it wasn't night. It was turning light, blotting out the street lights. They went through the streets, passing newspaper trucks and garbage men and street-sprinkling outfits.

"Remember when we was rookies?" Birkett asked. "And you knew your tour was about over when you heard the milk wagon horses start coming through the streets?"

"Yeah. Wonder what they did with all those horses? Shoot 'em?"

"Like old cops," Birkett said. "Turn 'em out to eat grass."

This struck Wellman as funny. He chuckled, deep down, without the good humor of Birkett laughing. "Me, I don't like grass. I ain't got the digestion for it. Where we going?"

"The bus terminal, on Sixth," Birkett said.

Henry Reynolds gasped. The key! Birkett had seemed to pay no attention to it, had been concentrating on the money. But now, as Reynolds watched, he saw the big hand come up from a pocket, and the locker key shone in the early morning light.

Wellman switched off the driving lights. "Another day, another dollar. How much did you snitch out of the locker, Henry?"

Henry Reynolds gulped and muttered something. He was on the front seat, next to Wellman, and Birkett was in back, leaning between them. Birkett's hand came down on Henry Reynolds' bruised shoulder and Henry Reynolds said: "Somewhere between a hundred and two hundred."

"Plenty for all of us," Birkett said. "I'm glad you aren't a hog. Some guys might have stolen a lot. It's our dough. Mine and Wellman's."

Henry was stunned. What did Birkett mean "Mine and Wellman's?"

They were on Sixth now. Wellman stopped in front of the bus station, in a No Parking zone.

Birkett said: "Move it, Wellman. You want to cut a bunch more cops in?"

Wellman started the car up, drove it around the corner. The bus station parking lot was three-quarters empty. The attendant in the front booth hardly looked up as he slid a ticket out to them.

"I don't understand," Henry Reynolds said.

They were in the little alley that led to the waiting room. Wellman looked around, and saw nobody was near them. "Tell him, Birkett."

"We were going to bump off the guy that picked up the key," Birkett said. "Resisting arrest, or trying to escape—there's a lot of ways. Then we woulda given Mr. Leazer back some of the dough, and he'da called us good boys. We give him the blackmail, we give him some dough—we're great fellows."

Wellman said: "But you—a guy with no past, no future, nothing—you're made to order for our business. You we can use."

Birkett went on: "We'll all get rich. You, we'll give you a quarter of what we made off Leazer."

"You mean you guys sent him the blackmail note?"

Birkett smiled. "Extortion letter. Let's talk nice."

"But how could you be sure you'd be assigned to the case?"

Wellman laughed his hard laugh. "It was the second note, we sent. The first was for only five hundred. He paid that. We figure that slick-haired butler of his sent it. Okay. After he paid it, he ran to the Commissioner. Told him about it, gentleman to gent. So the Commish tells us to handle it, on

our spare time. He was sure Leazer would pay us. Sure. Fifty bucks each. But we gotta keep Leazer happy. Next time there's gotta be a fall guy. Mebbe you can pick us up a bum, Henry."

"That's the best way to handle it," Birkett said. "Sure. Pick us up a bum, Henry, take care of that detail for us. He'll resist arrest, an' we'll have to let him have it. Killed resisting an officer . . . There'll be some of Leazer's money in his pocket."

"You'll be in a spot to help us." This was Wellman. His voice was a little eager; he was selling now. "You can set up a lot of deals for us, besides finding a fall guy for Leazer. This is a chance for you to make some real dough, Henry."

Henry Reynolds stood there, looking from officer to officer. It was a fresh start. He could see their thinking. They retired next year, and they wanted to get rich first. Like Birkett had said to the houseman, they leave it around, you ought to pick it up; that's what the rich are for.

It would be big money, a fresh life. If his wife ever caught up with him, these policemen were the finest kind of protection.

He looked at their hard, frozen faces. Not enough milk of human kindness there to cream coffee for a louse. But they'd be on his side, because he made money for them. Yeah, they'd be on his side until something went wrong, and then he'd be the fall guy.

Suddenly he lurched, started to go down to his knees. He saw Birkett give Wellman a sudden, startled look and come forward. He felt Birkett grab at him, to hold him up.

Henry's face was pressed hard against the gun in Birkett's shoulder holster. Groping, trying to hold himself up, he brought his hands up, and then he had the gun. He pulled the trigger almost before the barrel was clear of the leather.

It blew Birkett away from him, reeling into the wall.

Henry was clear, and all he had to do was turn and shoot Wellman. The gun barked again, quickly.

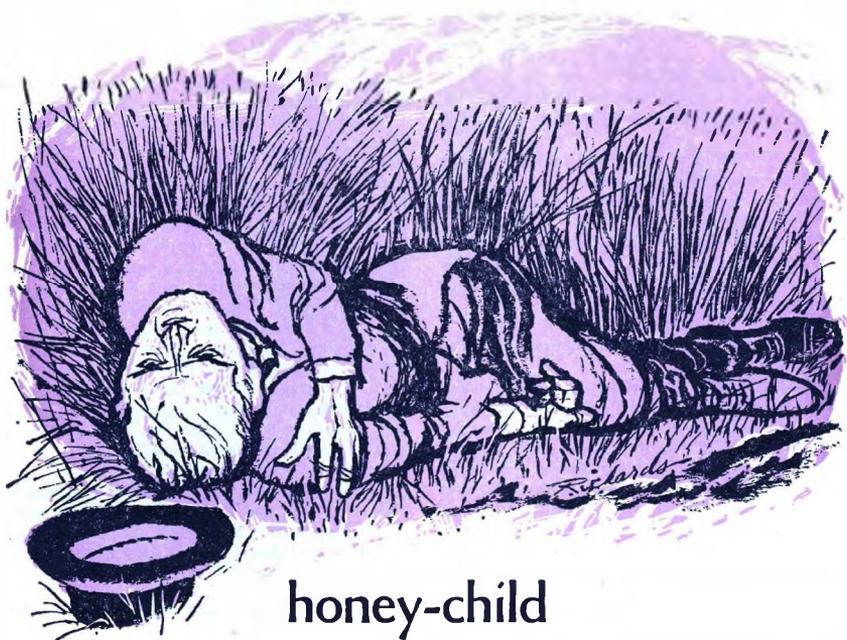
Then he was out of there in a hurry, moving along until he was down on Skid Row again. He'd never be able to get the rest of that money from the locker; the key was in Birkett's pocket. But he still had a hundred or so. He'd get out of this town for awhile, put more distance between him and that good wife of his.

Yeah, take it on the fly till this case cooled off, till anyone who'd seen him had forgotten his face. Leazer wouldn't talk; the girl wouldn't talk.

He had money for a bus ticket, and money to buy a gun in a hockshop when he got off the bus in a new town. And someday he'd be back.

The men who had beaten him were dead. But there was still Leazer. And the girl.

He knew about life now, as it had been dealt to him. He knew what to do to get along. He'd have no further trouble.



honey-child

She had the gun out of his pocket before he could stop her. "Don't!" George shouted. "Steve's an okay guy!" A freight train rattled by . . .

by

LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

GEORGE found himself chain-smoking as he drove back to join Claire at the motel. He was entitled to feel a bit shaky. It was hard now to believe he'd done what he'd done. Claire would be pleased. If it hadn't been for her he'd never have done it.

Ahead he could see the motel. He waited for the stream of traffic to dwindle, turned in and parked the car down by the farthest cabin. Claire came out looking cool and easy-to-look-at in her sun suit.

She pulled off her dark glasses and smiled at him.

"Well," she said, "did you do it?"

"Sure, I did it," George said. He lit a cigarette and Claire said, "Like a drink?" because she couldn't help seeing his hand was shaking, and he said, "I could do with one."

He sat down in one of the lazy-back chairs in the shadow of the cabin, and Claire made him a drink. "Go ahead, Honey-child," she said, "tell me."

It was in that night club place she'd first called him that, the night they met. She'd come up to him and said, "Hello, Honey-child, introduce me to you." Later, when he reproached her for calling every man she met by that name, she said, "Why should you mind? You're my boy. We're going places." Later still she said thoughtfully, "Honey-child, you've got pretty well everything it takes only you don't always think. There's your trouble. You've got to think and act fast if you mean to get anywhere in this town."

When he'd told Claire about Lecky, Brandon and old Steve and how they'd agreed to stash the loot until Lecky got out and then make the split, she'd said, "How crazy can you get? Why wait till he gets out?" George had told her, "Lecky's the kind you wouldn't want to tangle with," and Claire had said, "Aren't there ways you can think of to get around that?"

She'd had her ideas when word came that Lecky had done his stretch and was out.

And now she sat there saying, "Honey-child, tell me all about it."

George said, "All right. Give me a chance."

"I never did like the idea," Claire said, "that only Brandon knows where the stuff is hidden. I hope you got it out of him."

"In a way," George said.

He lit another cigarette; the flame from his lighter wobbled.

He remembered how he'd gone in to see Brandon. Brandon had already heard from Lecky, by phone, and what he'd heard he hadn't liked. "George," Brandon had said, "we sure should have split the loot and made ourselves scarce before this. Lecky insists now on a sixty-forty split, because he says he took the rap for us all. I argued with him, but it was no go. I had to agree to let him know where the money is hidden and let him go hunt it up himself."

All this George told Claire.

Claire blew a quick smoke ring. "How crazy can you get?" she demanded.

"I told Brandon that," George said, "and he simply said, 'George, I had to. I promised that Steve or I would meet him any place named and tell him where the stuff is. So I sent Steve. I don't want to fool around closer than I have to with a guy like Lecky. But I'll say this for Lecky, he'll play straight with our forty percent. At least he'll see we get that, so we'll have to be content to split that three ways between you and me and Steve.'"

George stopped, and Claire made a funny little sound in her throat.

"Honey-child," she said, "I hope you thought fast. Did you remember what I told you?"

George nodded. He took a long drink.

"Go on," Claire said. "Tell me."

He felt a little sick, remembering. Finally, he said, "After—after I'd shot Brandon I called the cops on the phone. I said I could tip them off about a murder by a guy just out from doing a stretch—name of Lecky. I gave him the description, but they didn't need it; they knew he was out. I said if they wanted to pick him up to watch for him as he came towards the drugstore at the corner of Main and Fourth."

"Go on," Claire said and she was smiling.

So he continued, remembering how he'd parked a block away from Main and Fourth and walked.

"You couldn't ask for better luck," George ad-

mitted. "Just as I got there the cops spotted Lecky and moved in on him, and his finger got itchy like it always does and he started shooting—and that was that."

"So now," Claire summed it up softly. "Brandon and Lecky are both out of the way. Go on."

"I watched the drugstore for Steve to come out," George told her, "but he didn't come out. If he heard the shooting, he probably thought it was a car backfiring. Steve isn't overbright. Not many brains, but dependable, loyal. He's the patient kind, too. He wouldn't budge from where he was told to wait. Trust Steve. I found a telephone booth a block away and called the drugstore. I said, 'Is there a man with a brown hat and light coat standing near the telephone booth?' They said to hang on a minute and they'd look. They came back and said, okay, he was there. So I asked them to put him on, 'Steve,' I said, 'it's George. There's been a change of plans. The cops have got Lecky and somebody's shot Brandon so that leaves only you and me, Steve; and we sure ought to move fast.' So I told Steve to go get his jalopy and meet me."

"Not here, I hope," Claire said.

"On the highway," George said. "I told him to park on the side and watch for us. Then we could go along somewhere and get the stuff and split it."

"Split it how, Honey-child?" Claire asked.

"I guess Steve would be happy with a sixty-forty deal."

"Honey-child," Claire said, "what ideas you think up!"

"Well, let's go," George said. He wanted to be off. Every time he remembered Brandon he felt sicker, but he couldn't let Claire see that. "We don't want to keep old Steve waiting," he told her.

"No," Claire said, smiling.

They settled the account with the motel and said a pleasant good-bye to the proprietor—so he'd think they were nice people—and Claire smiled at him in a way that always brought a glazed sort of look into men's eyes; but George had got over feeling jealous. He was her boy, and they were going places. He tried to remember just that and, driving along the highway, he said, "It'll be nice to be in the money, after the thin time we've been having."

Claire lit a cigarette and asked thoughtfully, "How much did you say it should come to?"

"Upwards of thirty grand," George said. "You take off Steve's forty percent and that should net us nearly twenty grand."

Claire asked, "Why should Steve ring up that much?"

"Well," George said, "he might settle for a bit less. Steve's funny that way. Not too many brains, but as Brandon always said you could be sure of old Steve."

They drove along a bit. George glanced at Claire. He saw the twist of a smile on her mouth.

"Don't get thinking," George said, uneasily.

"There's your trouble," Claire reminded him. "You should think more, George. You don't always think."

Suddenly, he braked the car a bit. There was Steve's jalopy parked just off the highway on the soft shoulder. George drove by slowly, honking, and Claire flashed Steve her best smile. Steve began to tail them with his car.

"Keep going," Claire said. "I'll say when." It was nearly dusk by the time she said, "Turn off here," and George signalled the turn, taking a little used road.

Finally, there was a honking behind them, and Claire said sharply, "You'd better stop. That fool's making too much noise. What's eating him?" So George signalled he was going to stop, and Steve stopped and came walking up to them. "How far do we have to go?" he wanted to know, but his voice, as always, was patient. "Looks to me as if we were ten miles from nowhere now." He gestured towards the dark countryside, the only lights in a distant farmhouse and at the railway crossing just below them.

"Honey-child," Claire smiled, "we certainly are in the sticks. George says you have an envelope from Brandon that you were to give to Lecky, so's he'd know where the money was hidden. I hope you still have it?"

Steve said, surprised, "Why, sure. Sure, I have it." He said it slowly, drawing the envelope out of an inner pocket. "Here it is, see—just like he give it to me."

"That's a nice boy," Claire said. "Let me have it." Steve glanced doubtfully at George, who said, "Let her have it, Steve."

Steve handed the envelope to Claire.

"Now," Claire said, "you have something for Steve, too, haven't you, Honey-child?" Her white fingers tapped George's pocket.

George said, "Now, look, Claire—"

"Okay," Claire said, "I'll manage." She had the gun out of his pocket before he could stop her.

"Claire," George shouted, "don't! Don't! Steve's an okay guy."

A freight train rattled by at the crossing; by the time the caboose went winking by, it was over.

"George," Claire said, "the track's clear now. Why not drive on."

George drove on. He felt sick.

Claire put a hand on his sleeve, "Honey-child," she said, "you've got to learn."

"I'm learning," George said.

"You're my boy," Claire said softly. "You're my boy worth thirty grand. The things we can do together. All we needed was a bit of capital. I've made reservations by plane."

"You think of everything," George told her.

"I hope," Claire said, "this money is somewhere near at hand."

"It will be," George said. "Brandon assured me of that. He knew his stuff. All you have to do is open that envelope."

Claire said, "There's a drive-in ahead. I'm going to be hungry after I open this. We'll want to celebrate, won't we, Honey-child? Aren't you hungry, George?"

"No," George said.

He parked the car at the drive-in, and honked, and a waitress came out and took the order. Claire flicked on the light in the car. "Now," she said. She took the envelope with Brandon's instructions about the money and kissed it with joyous exaggeration. She slit the envelope open with scarlet-tipped fingers. "And all of it's ours now," she said, unfolding the paper bearing Brandon's hasty scrawl. She handed it over. "You read it, George."

George read it silently. After a long moment, he handed it back. He began to laugh, somewhat hysterically. He thought of Steve's body back there in the bushes beyond the railroad crossing. He thought of the plane trip they were to buy for the getaway, and the funds for going places together. All the money to come out of the thirty grand that Claire was bound should be all theirs.

"What's so funny?" Claire asked, her voice a bit tight with apprehension.

"Honey-child," George said, "you think of everything, don't you? Maybe you better read it for yourself."

He sat there watching her read the note that Brandon had scrawled for Lecky's information. Brandon's note that said he didn't figure it was a smart idea to put anything on paper, about where the money was hidden. He'd just told Steve, who was a loyal guy and could be trusted with the knowledge. "So just ask Steve," Brandon wrote, "and he'll tell you where the dough is."

"Honey-child," George said grimly, "you got any other bright ideas?"



Red moved the knife's blade slowly back and forth, his hips swaying gently, in rhythm with his hand and the train . . .

express

STOP



by

JASON

JANUARY

THE TWO TRAINS pulled into the station at the same time, the local on the outside track and the express on the inside. One of the group of black-jacketed boys on the platform started toward the local train.

"Hey, man, where you going? We're riding express tonight."

"It don't go to our street, though."

"So we walk back a few blocks. Them locals get me jittery."

The good-looking boy with the reddish-blond hair stepped into the express train, and the others followed him. The stocky, dark-haired boy who had wanted to take the local shrugged his shoulders as a grimace twisted across his face; then he

got on the train just as the doors were closing.

There were five of them, all about seventeen or eighteen years old—Red and Twitch and three others, Muff, Slob and Tiger. They all wore the same kind of clothes, tight dungarees, black leather jackets and mean-looking black boots, and they swaggered and talked loudly as teen-age boys do when they're together in groups. Even though there were only about a dozen people in the car and plenty of seats, they stood near the door, leaning against the white, upright pipes and hanging from the straps.

Red held onto the pipe with one hand and swung part way around it in an arc, looking at the people riding the subway. Most of them were men,

some with ties and some without. They were all pretty nondescript looking—the usual sort of New York “guy” who rides the subway and buys copies of the early edition of the News and the Mirror to read about the divorces and sex-crimes. Two or three of them were riding with women, as gray and uninteresting-looking as themselves.

When Red swung all the way around, he saw that there was a girl sitting right in front of him, by the door. He put his foot on the seat beside her and, resting on his knee, leaned down over her. “Oh, man!” he said, pursing his lips.

The girl pretended she didn't even notice Red. She was a fairly good-looking girl in her late teens, but there was something soft and bovine about her that made her less exciting than she might have been. What had caught Red's attention was the size of her breasts, and the low-cut of her dress that revealed the upper swell of her bosom.

By this time the other boys had also noticed her. “Man, dig that set!” Slob said, his little blue eyes leering out through the strands of stringy yellow hair that were always flopping down over his forehead. Tiger was swinging round and round on the pole, wearing his habitual grin.

“Man,” he said, “I weesh all girl have pair like that.”

Twitch swung back and forth from a strap. “Guess you don't have to go looking no more today, huh?” he said to Red.

Red stood up straight and looked at them, “For Christ's sake! There's people on this train.”

“This crew of squares?” Slob said, spitting on the floor.

Twitch was looking at Red stupidly. “Whassa matter, you chicken or something?” The grimace ran across his face again.

“You know damn well I ain't,” Red said. “I just happen to have a few brains, unlike you.”

“Well, it looks pretty chicken to me, if you ain't going to do nothing about that nice—”

Red grabbed Twitch by the collar so that his swinging motion was stopped. “You want to keep breathing, punk?”

Muff was hunched over so that he could see enough of his faint reflection in the window to comb his hair. He was tall and skinny with greasy, black hair at least six inches long and which he combed back very carefully and neatly. “Looks to me like he's right, man,” he said softly. “You always talking about how much stuff you get—most guys, more they talk about it, less they get.”

Tiger was still going around the pole. Each time he swung by Red he prodded him in the back and said, “Hey, man, make out huh?”

The girl sat there looking down at her hands which were folded in her lap, trying to pretend that nothing was happening. Red turned back so that he was leaning over her again. “What do you think of these characters, huh? They'd raise all

sorts of hell if I wasn't around to straighten 'em out.” The girl just kept looking at her hands, ignoring him. “You know, baby,” he went on, “you're sort of cute. You and me should get to know each other.” He ran a finger down a strand of her hair. “My name's Red. What's yours?”

Slob and Twitch were getting bored and had started looking at the advertisement signs around the top of the car. They paid particular attention to one with a picture of a girl with her legs up in the air. It was supposed to advertise stockings.

“I wonder if this guy is really the man he keeps telling us he is,” Slob said.

Red looked at them for a minute, disgustedly. Tiger was still flopping around the pole, nudging him in the back and saying, “Make out, hey!”

“You're pretty shy, ain't you?” Red said. He lifted the girl's chin, but she refused to look at him, twisting her head away. “I know all about you shy chicks, though; you're the ones that really go wild when you get started.” He was stroking her hair and the side of her neck. “I bet you and me could really go to town, how about it?”

There was a man about four seats down from the girl, a short, flabby man of middle age, wearing a tie and a hat and wild-colored socks that didn't match. He kept burying his nose farther and farther into the movie section of the News, trying to make out that he wasn't noticing what was going on. Most of the other people in the car were acting the same way, although a few would peek slyly out of the corners of their eyes every now and then. Muff looked slowly around the car at one time, and the peekers all stuck their faces back in their papers.

Red ran his hand down onto one of the girl's breasts. “I really got to give it to you,” he said. “You're stacked nice.”

For the first time, the girl looked up at him, her soft mouth hanging open in disbelief, her pale eyes staring at him in a helpless pleading. “No,” she said. “No.”

Red didn't pay any attention to what she was saying. By this time his hand was moving back and forth, back and forth. “Now, you sure wouldn't mind a fine stud like me hittin' it off with you, would you? It ain't like just any old cat came along.” He put his face down so near the girl's that she could feel his breath on her forehead. She seemed to have drawn up within herself, sat there pale and trembling, breathing in short, dry little gasps.

Outside, another local station flicked past; it was possible to see the people standing on the platform, glimpsing them between the upright girders that separated the express and local tracks. There were two more local stations, before the train would come to the express stop where the boys were getting off. Red ran his hand down the girl's body; then put it on her leg, and his four pals stood in

an arc in front of them, shielding them from the people in the car.

The man with the mis-mated socks put down his copy of the News and started leafing nervously through the Mirror. He had been sliding away from the door seat by seat, so that he was now eight seats away. Red was sitting beside the girl now, his hands busier, bolder. She stared straight ahead, her quiet sobbing drowned out by the roar of the careening train.

Suddenly, every muscle in the girl's body stiffened, her chin thrusting up and her legs kicking out in front of her. "Oh, don't!" she wailed. "Please, please!"

Red spoke softly and reassuringly in her ear. "That's okay, baby," he said. "Just take it easy."

The four boys continued to stand in front of them, watching, quiet and menacing. Around the car an embarrassed, inaudible stirring started, as it became more and more difficult for the passengers to pretend nothing was happening. One woman was plucking at her husband's arm, trying to call his attention to what was going on, but he ignored her, reading the paper. By this time, the girl was sobbing and groaning so loudly it was impossible not to hear her.

Just as the train was coming abreast of the last local platform before the express stop, a man in the far corner of the car, wearing overalls and a work-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, put down his paper and stood up. There was a strange expression on his face, an expression that seemed to come from deep in his past, a look at once of wonder and purpose. He took one slow step forward, and all the other passengers began standing up, each one looking toward the five boys and the girl.

Muff was the first one to notice them. "Hey Red!" he shouted. "Look . . . look at them!"

None of the passengers moved, just stood staring, ominously, silently, like a herd of cattle. Then they came closer, slowly, forming a gradually constricting half-circle. One man was on crutches and several carried umbrellas, wet with rain. The crutches and umbrellas now assumed the character of potential, vicious weapons.

Red jumped to his feet, standing in front of his buddies as they crowded into the doorway. In a minute the train would be in the station and they could make a run for it.

But the passengers pressed closer and closer. Suddenly, Red's hand flashed down to his belt in a quick, precise motion, and he held a knife in front of him, a long, slender blade snapping out automatically. He was crouched over slightly, his athletic body tensed, and he moved the blade slowly back and forth, his hips swaying gently, in rhythm with his hand.

Then, for the first time since Red had left her, the girl took her hands from in front of her face. Now she stared around her, mouth open in anti-

ipation and fear, and slowly drew her fingers down the sides of her face, scraping the nails into her cheeks.

This seemed to act as a cue to the passengers. They started pressing in tighter. But Red's arm lashed around in three threatening arc-like swaths and the ring of passengers moved back slowly and quietly, all of them still keeping their eyes fastened unblinkingly on the boys.

Red had snapped back into his crouch, poised to strike again, when a tremendous, agonizing pain struck him in the groin and burst up into his stomach, tying his guts in knots. For a minute the pain blinded him, and he heard his knife clatter to the floor, a strange, faraway sound, as if it had fallen down a deep hole.

The girl lowered her foot slowly, almost regretfully, from where it had struck between Red's legs in what had been a reflex action. The expression on her face remained unchanged, her fingers still pressed into her pale cheeks. Now the passengers were again able to move in, and they came forward like a rolling wave, catching the boys' flailing arms and slowly bending them back by the weight of their numbers. There were a few seconds of this grim, silent wrestling, the only sounds slight animal-like, straining gasps, until Slob began whining frantically as he gestured toward Red, "Hey, I didn't do nothing! He done it, get him!" He was struggling against two hands that had grabbed him by the neck, and his tough face had become soft and blurry.

The silent determination of the passengers gave them an almost supernatural character and that overawed the youths. And all of them except for Red, who was practically bent double by the agony in his gut—soon stopped struggling. Twitch was saying, "Hey, don't!" stupidly, with a succession of grimaces twisting over his face, while Muff was waving back and forth on his knees, his long hair fallen wildly over his ears and the sides of his face, waiting for mercy in a high-pitched, womanly voice. Tiger seemed hardly to comprehend what was happening, staring around him wildly as he whispered something over and over again in Spanish.

One of the women reached out and clawed her nails down the side of Slob's face. After that the blows came—blows from umbrellas, crutches, fists and rolled newspapers—until Twitch, Slob, Muff and Tiger all lay on the floor, their faces bruised and bloody. But Red was still on his feet, straining against the arms that held him pinned against the door. His face was running with sweat and he was making small, yipping cries like an animal being overpowered by an enemy. Finally, the crush of bodies stretched his arms out straight from his sides.

Suddenly Red's eyes dilated wildly. There was a bony, snaggle-toothed old woman standing in front

of him. A demonic, revengeful gleam glinted in her colorless eyes, and she held an umbrella so that its long, spiked tip was pointed at his throat.

The train was slowing down, coming into the station. In a few seconds, its doors would slide open. With a chuckle, the witch-like woman thrust, and the metal pierced Red's neck. With a final lurch the train stopped, throwing Red's body forward on top of the others. The umbrella stuck straight up like a flag, with the blood oozing out around it in a pulsing flow. The doors opened and the

passengers pushed their way out, stepping gingerly over the pile of black-jacketed bodies on the floor. Two men had helped the girl from her seat and were gently steering her out onto the platform. She was quiet, now, her eyes blank, her breathing soft and steady.

Suddenly, she tore free of her escort and spun back into the car, just as the doors closed. She pulled the umbrella from Red's throat and threw herself down on top of his body, sobbing soundlessly as the blood soaked into her light hair.



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IT HAD BEEN a hot and trying day and I'd come in for a quiet drink. I'd had the first and was contemplating the advisability of another, when the man took the stool next to mine.

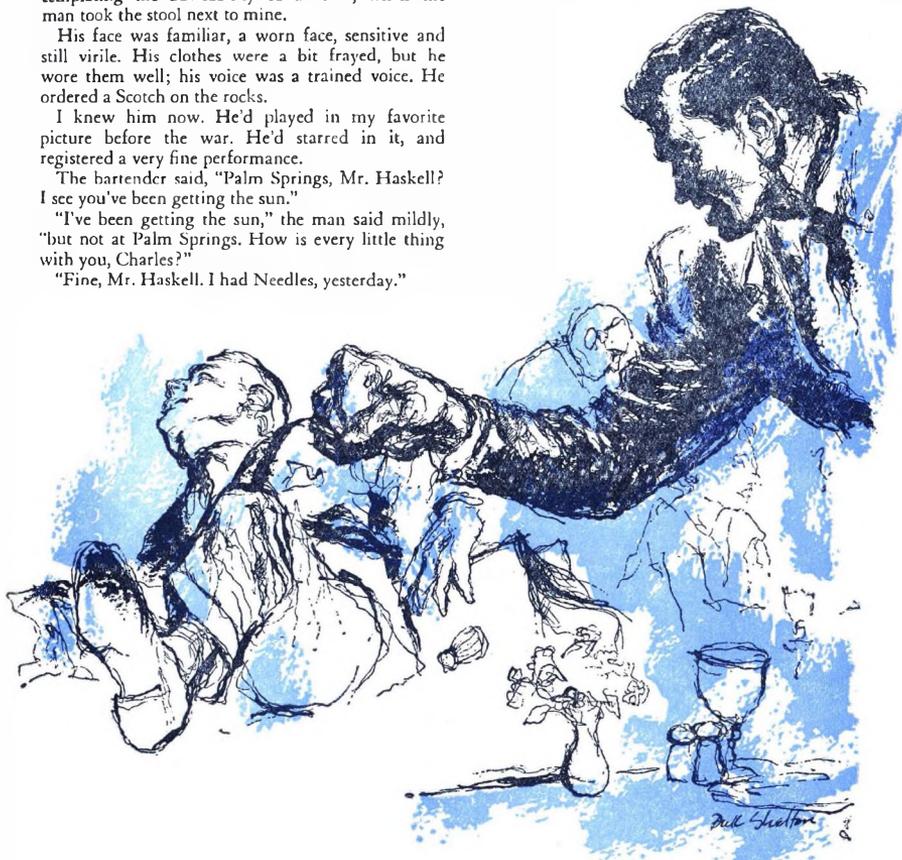
His face was familiar, a worn face, sensitive and still virile. His clothes were a bit frayed, but he wore them well; his voice was a trained voice. He ordered a Scotch on the rocks.

I knew him now. He'd played in my favorite picture before the war. He'd starred in it, and registered a very fine performance.

The bartender said, "Palm Springs, Mr. Haskell? I see you've been getting the sun."

"I've been getting the sun," the man said mildly, "but not at Palm Springs. How is every little thing with you, Charles?"

"Fine, Mr. Haskell. I had Needles, yesterday."



death of a BIG WHEEL

A Novelette

by WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

There were those who said Haskell wasn't fit to live. From such a forthright declaration, murder may quite easily develop.

John Haskell smiled. "I didn't even know you were on the stuff, Charles."

The bartender grinned and shook his head. "The horse, I mean, Mr. Haskell. Ain't you betting any more?"

John Haskell shook his head and sipped his drink. "Not betting the horses or taking blondes to Palm Springs. It's a monastic life I lead."

"I'll bet," the bartender said genially. He looked at me, "Another of the same, Mr. Puma?"

I nodded.

John Haskell turned. "Joseph Puma, the private detective?"

I nodded again. "The same, Mr. Haskell. Where have you heard of me?"

"In the *Examiner*, on the Engle murder. I'm addicted to murder stories, true murder stories. You did a beautiful job on that case."

"Thank you," I said. "And you did a beautiful job in *Man In The Street*. I think that's my all-time favorite picture and yours was my all-time favorite performance."

He looked at me without expression. "That was a long time ago. That was before the war."

I said nothing.

He said quietly, "I was very big before the war. I was so big I thought it would be smart to be independent. I turned down four duration contracts before I went into the service."

Here it comes, I thought. The detailed and lengthy story of John Haskell's fall. And all I meant to have was one drink.

I shook my head sympathetically, but said nothing.

John Haskell said, "The studios put all the boys to work who had signed pre-service duration contracts. They had to pay the lads anyway, so they put them to work. What keeps an actor alive is work."

I nodded and sipped my drink.

John Haskell chuckled. "Don't look so bored. I only told you all that to forestall the tedious question too many people ask me. They continually ask me, 'What happened to you?' Well, that's what happened to me."

"I wasn't going to ask you," I said with a smile. "I'm not a tourist, Mr. Haskell."

"Of course you're not," he said. "I should have realized. Now, tell me about the Engle case. What put you on the trail of the Pastore woman?"

The man was drunk, I realized now. He spoke carefully and held himself primly erect, but he was almost blind drunk and only a supreme effort of will was keeping him off the floor.

I said, "Why don't I buy you a dinner while I tell you about the Engle case? I'd like to tell my grandchildren, some day, that I bought a dinner for John Haskell."

His voice was very steady. "I don't need your charity, Mr. Puma."

"One dinner is hardly charity, Mr. Haskell."

Silence, while he stared at me. "Italian, are you?"

"That's right."

"My first wife was Italian. Very compassionate people, Italians. You were undoubtedly thinking that if I had some food in me, the alcohol would have something to work on besides the walls of my stomach."

"You're discerning," I said.

"And so are you. But of course, that's your business, isn't it?"

"Part of it," I admitted. "My size and my hunger help, too."

He looked at the bartender and talked to me. "Now, Charles, here, serves drinkers day and night. But he didn't know I was drunk. Charles is not discerning."

Charles smiled and said nothing, as good bartenders do.

"A steak," I said, "and some coffee, Mr. Haskell, and the story of Gina Pastore. There's a quiet booth over there in the corner."

He turned slowly to look at the booth and then swung back slowly to look at me. Finally, he said, "Fair enough. And you may call me John."

The bartender looked at me and shrugged. I ignored him.

Haskell swung around on his stool, his drink held steadily in his hand. I stood close to him, waiting for him to fall. He didn't. I walked alongside him all the way to the booth and he never wavered.

The waiter came, and I ordered a pair of steaks. Then I told Haskell the story of Gina Pastore who had asked Alan Engle to go on a picnic with her and had, during the course of the picnic, bashed in Engle's head with a rock.

It was a story even uglier than my resume, but it didn't affect the appetite of John Haskell. He ate the steak and all the rolls they brought and all the butter—everything, in fact, but the dishes.

Then he leaned back and looked at me contentedly. "A fascinating story. I knew Alan Engle in high school. He was always in trouble."

There had been some satisfaction in his voice. I said, "You sound as though you've had an opinion vindicated."

"A pattern," he said. "We're all victims of a pattern, don't you think?"

"No," I said. "That's defeatism."

He smiled. "A big muscular Italian like you would no doubt be a hedonist."

"Partially. I guess almost everybody is, partially. If I'd had a talent, though, nothing would have stopped me. And certainly not booze."

He looked at me curiously. "You're speaking of me, now, I suppose? You think I have a talent?"

I nodded. "And so did all the critics. How many actors can please *all* the critics? Name me five."

He smiled sadly and patronizingly. "Critics—They won't even pay to get in; that's what they

think of the theatre. Joe, I hit my peak at the age of twenty-seven. Then I had four years in the service, three years of it overseas, two of them in combat."

"You enlisted, if I remember right," I pointed out. "Where was the pattern there? That was an act of your will."

He shook his head. "It was an act of my youth. Of emotional thinking, my enlisting." He gestured to the waiter and ordered a pair of drinks.

At a table on the other side of the room, we were getting a lot of attention. A blonde in a pale green cashmere sweater was pointing us out to her escort.

The escort was sitting, so I couldn't judge his height, but his shoulders were impressively broad.

Our drinks came, and Haskell lifted his. "To luck."

"You don't believe in it," I told him, "but I'll drink to it."

We drank, and I said, "Don't look now, but do you know that blonde across the room who's giving us the eye?"

Haskell swung his gaze that way and said, "I know her. Her name is Lira McCrea and she hates my guts."

"Who's the muscle with her?" I asked.

Haskell shrugged. "Never saw him before. He looks—malignant, doesn't he?" He sipped his drink. "I met her at a party. I was drunk and she was ready. I was too drunk to take advantage of that. At any rate, that's my memory of the thing. About a week later, at *Ciro's* she walked over to my table and really told me off. It was very vulgar."

I said, "I think you're due for an encore. She's on the way over right now. And the muscle is trailing her."

Haskell smiled. "I'll take her. You can have the big guy." He didn't look their way.

The blonde seemed younger than I had first imagined her. And the big man was not tall, only broad. He had the kind of a face that looks naked without a number under it. I was sure I had seen it before, if only on a poster in the post office.

The blonde said nastily, "Well, well, if it isn't drunken John Haskell. Have I told you what I think of you lately, John?"

He smiled and shook his head. Behind Lira McCrea, the muscle looked at us impassively.

I said, "Lady, we were having a serious conversation. Would you mind running along?"

Her gaze swung to me. "Don't get flip, big boy. I've got all the man I need behind me."

"Not quite," I said. "And I'll tell you something else. If I have to get up to pop him, I may also hand you one for luck. Beat it."

John Haskell's eyes were bright with interest. The muscle growled something I didn't catch and the blonde reached forward to slap at Haskell's face.

I put a hand out that pushed her off balance, and she stumbled against the edge of the booth.

Her escort came charging in, then, to join the fray. I came up out of the booth and brought the good left hand along.

It was a lucky punch. My body was in it and it caught him just exactly where it was supposed to. He went stumbling backward until a table got in his way. Luckily, it was an empty table. He took it over with him.

The blonde screamed and a waiter and the bartender started our way and John Haskell said, "Now might be the intelligent time to leave."

We stood up and I put some money on the table and we were out of the place before the resistance could get properly organized.

On the parking lot, John Haskell said, "Well, Puma, it's been a pleasure. We must do this again."

"You're not driving, are you?" I asked. "You're not in condition to drive."

"I'm not driving," he said. "I sold my car. I'll get a cab down at the corner."

"All right," I said. "Take care of yourself. If you ever crawl out of the bottle, you might make a comeback, you know."

He smiled. "Don't worry about me, Puma. I'm not that important. Nobody is."

I watched him as he made his way steadily and leisurely toward the corner. He certainly didn't look drunk from the back.

I went to a movie that night and the next day I put in on a hotel skip. I couldn't get Haskell out of my mind. He was faintly arrogant and soft on mysticism, but I'd liked him and I'd always thought of him as one of this town's really good actors.

Friday morning, his picture was on the front page of the *Times*. He had been bludgeoned to death. By a person or persons unknown.

2.

What was Haskell's death to me? Nothing. I'd enjoyed him as an actor and talked to him for an hour and now he was dead. There were ten thousand police officers in this town. So what was it to me?

According to the *Times*, there was very little that the police had to go on. John Haskell had no known enemies. Most of his old friends had lost track of him; he was living in a cheap motel in Santa Monica. The most logical theory seemed to be that he had been the victim of a prowler. That, of course, could have been the reporter's theory, not the Department's.

It was a bright and sunny morning and I had nothing to do. I could have run over to the Department and told them about the blonde, Lira McCrea, and her pugnacious boy friend. But that might be unfair to the blonde.

I phoned an agent I knew and asked him if Miss McCrea was an actress, and if he knew where she

lived. He'd heard the name, he told me, but very little more. He would check and call back.

He phoned back in ten minutes and told me Lira McCrea was a starlet under contract to *Verital Films* and he gave me her address.

Verital was a small outfit, specializing in low budget pictures, and there was a strong rumor around town that Arnie Roman had a big piece of the firm. Arnie had come up through pandering, dope and gambling to Las Vegas and the big time. He was a highly respected citizen of that Nevada rat's nest now, and active in Los Angeles real estate speculation.

If a man can afford it, buying a small studio is a fine way to keep supplied with dames. The blonde could be one of those.

Not that any of it was my business, but I had liked John Haskell. And I wasn't busy at the moment.

I climbed into the flivver and drove over to Beverly Hills.

The apartment house was on the edge of that gilded village, a rambling, two-story stucco building filled with small units. The directory in the lobby informed me Lira McCrea had a second floor apartment.

She was without make-up this morning, wearing a lounging robe of brocaded red satin, and the natural brown of her hair was showing at the roots. "What the hell do you want?" she asked.

I studied her. Her toughness was not inherent and it seemed recently acquired; she obviously wasn't thoroughly at home in the gutter yet. I said, "Information. I'm looking for enemies of John Haskell."

"Look somewhere else," she said. "You're not the law; you're a private man."

"How did you know that?"

"My friends know you."

"How well do you know them?" I asked. "Well enough to expect them to rush to your rescue if I tell the police about you?"

Her face was momentarily vulnerable and she looked at me doubtfully. I said quietly, "How long ago did you decide *Verital* was the studio for you? How long ago did you learn there were short-cuts in this acting game?"

Her young face showed scorn. "What are you, a minister? Crummy, angle-shooting private eye—"

"You've been watching television too much," I said. "I'm a respectable member of a dignified profession. You could probably use an ally like me."

"I've got friends," she said, "who could buy you with their cigar money."

"The man was never born who can buy me," I told her. "But it's your decision. I'll let you argue with the boys from the Department."

I turned, took two steps, and she said, "Wait."

I waited, looking at her quietly.

"I don't want any trouble," she said. "I don't

know anything about John's enemies. My friends aren't his enemies."

"You looked like an enemy two evenings ago."

"That was—personal." She hesitated. "Come on in."

I went into a one bedroom apartment furnished in just-under-first-class modern. She said, "I'm making some coffee. Want a cup?"

"Yes, thank you."

I followed her to a small dinette.

"Maybe some toast, too?" she asked. "I've got some really special marmalade from England."

I chuckled. "Why the Dale Carnegie touch for a crummy, angle-shooting private eye?"

She looked at me bleakly. "Maybe you're not one. Maybe you're what you claim to be."

"Maybe. All is not lost, anyway, if you can still think like that. Why did you hate John Haskell?"

"Didn't he tell you? Weren't you a friend of his?"

"I met him only that evening in that bar. He told me you had made a play for him at a party and he hadn't been interested. He seemed to think your vanity was inflamed."

She stared at me blankly. "The lying son-of-a-bitch—"

"Easy, now. Let's hear your story."

She said quietly, "My best friend committed suicide because of John Haskell."

A pause, and I asked, "Unrequited love?"

"Yeah. If that means unreturned love." She went to the small stove to get the percolator. "After an abortion."

"John Haskell's child?"

"He claimed it wasn't. She claimed it was and I believed her. I knew her since we were seven and she *never* lied to me."

"Why didn't she get a lawyer?"

"Because she loved him and he could talk fast. He was a great talker, that bastard."

I asked softly, "Why do you use those ugly words? It's not really natural for you."

She put some toast into the toaster and sat down across from me. "It's an ugly world, isn't it? If anybody should know that, you should."

"I should. But you shouldn't. Not yet." I sipped my coffee. "Did Haskell know you were a friend of this girl's?"

"Of course he knew it. We used to double-date."

"Was she an actress, too?"

Lira nodded. "Only she had more talent than I have. And she was prettier."

"Did she consider Haskell a step in the right direction?"

Lira McCrea looked at me steadily and angrily.

I said, "I don't want an emotional answer. *Think*, now, and be honest."

She took a deep breath. "She loved him very much. She knew knowing him would help her career, but I honestly think she would have given up her career for him."

"I'll buy all of that," I said, "but now let's think of it from his viewpoint. He had probably met dozens of girls as pretty and talented as your friend. And many of them were undoubtedly—available. A gent in—oh, say Cedar Rapids might consider himself very lucky to marry a girl like your friend. To John Haskell, there were too many of them; she was only one of many. We're all victims of our environment to a degree, you know. He simply had more chances to be immoral than his less fortunate brothers."

"Man thinking," she said. "You're all alike."

"That could be. But some of us are worse. How long have you been hanging around with the hoodlum element in this town?"

"Is there another element in this town?"

I didn't answer. I spread some toast with marmalade and took a bite. "It is good marmalade," I said.

She didn't look at me. "If you only met him two evenings ago, why are you here now? Did some-body hire you?"

"Nobody. I liked him. I hate murder and I wasn't busy."

Doubt was on her face.

"Nobody is paying me," I repeated, "and nobody is required to tell me anything. What was your girl friend's name?"

"Jean Morley. I've a picture of her, if you'd like to see it."

I said I would and she went into the bedroom to get some snapshots. Some of them were of the girl alone, a thin and attractive dark-haired girl. Two of the snaps showed her with John Haskell's arm around her. In one of these, she was wearing a bathing suit, and she wasn't thin any place it would hurt her.

I said, "Are her parents living?"

"No. The only living relative she has is a brother."

"Does he live out here?"

"He—" She paused. "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm looking for a killer, Miss McCrae."

"Well, it wasn't Jean's brother. He lives in New Jersey."

She looked at me candidly as she said this, but I knew she was lying. Lying, like her toughness, was too new for her to handle skillfully. I'd believed what she'd said about Jean Morley, but perhaps Jean Morley had lied to her.

And then I remembered Haskell's preoccupation with a pattern in lives and wondered if that was the way he was trying to absolve his conscience from the guilt of Miss Morley's death.

"Why so quiet?" Lira asked.

"I've been thinking about Haskell. It's hard to get a picture of a man from the newspapers, isn't it?"

"It is, if he has a good press agent. And John

could be very charming when he wanted to make the effort."

"So can you," I said. I stood up. "Move warily among your new playmates, won't you? Keep your guard up."

"I'll get by," she said. "Are you still going to look for the man who killed John?"

I nodded.

"He wasn't fit to live."

"We can't decide that. Good luck, Miss McCrea."

The sun was still shining and there was a slight breeze from the east. I drove over to my office and phoned the agent again.

I asked him, "Do you remember a Jean Morley?"

"Sure do. She committed suicide. Great young talent."

"Do you know anything about her brother?"

"Didn't even know she had one."

"Could you find out about him?"

"For how much?"

"For nothing," I said. "It's a charity case; I'm working for the public. Don't you ever do public service work?"

"Not unless there's a promotion angle."

"All right," I said. "Good day. To hell with you."

"Wait," he said. "Don't let your wop temper get the best of you. Some day I may need a little free investigating. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll ask around among a few of Jean's friends. Okay?"

"Fair enough," I agreed. "Is Arnie Roman really the big man at *Verital*?"

"Right. I hope you don't plan to tangle with him. He's got too many strings to too many places, Joe."

"I'm shivering," I told him. "You let me know about Jean's brother. I'll be here at the office."

I was going over some statements when the phone rang. I thought it was my friend calling back, but it wasn't.

A feminine voice said, "This is Arnold Roman's secretary, Mr. Puma. Would it be possible for him to talk with you this afternoon?"

"I'm sure I can squeeze him in," I said. "Where does he want to talk to me and about what?"

"Here, at his office, at two o'clock?"

"I can make it. Is it business?"

"I—I imagine so, Mr. Puma. He only instructed me to arrange an appointment for this afternoon." She gave me the address.

"I'll be there," I assured her. "Thank you for calling."

I went back to the statements, and had addressed and sealed the hopelessly past due ones when my agent friend called back.

Jean Morley's brother, he informed me, worked at an auto body repair shop on Lincoln Boulevard and lived in Venice, in an apartment over a four car garage. He had both addresses for me.

"You're a noble man," I told him. "I hope I can repay you in kind, some day."

"We both do," he said. "What are you hounding this kid for?"

"I'm not. How do you know he's a kid?"

"One of my—informants told me he was on the sunny side of thirty. That's a kid to me. He also told me he served with John Haskell in the army. And with Haskell murdered and all, I thought you might have something I can sell to *Confidential*."

"Who served with John Haskell, Morley or your informant?"

"Morley. My informant served under Teddy Roosevelt. Is there a column item in this business, Joe?"

"Not yet," I said. "If there turns out to be, you'll be the first to know, of course."

"Good boy. Got to feed the dirt, you understand, if I expect to get plugs."

"I understand," I said. "Carry on."

On the sunny side of thirty? How could he be and still have fought in a war that had ended eleven years ago? If he had been only nineteen when that war had ended, he would be thirty now. Of course, there had been some young ones who had lied about their ages. And for combat, the powers that decide had preferred the young ones. John Haskell had had two years of combat.

One of John Haskell's patterns was forming.

3.

The fat bald man in the office said, "He's out on a call right now. He's due back soon, though, if you want to wait."

I said I'd wait. I sat on a bench in the bare office, listening to the pounding of the lead mallets on body steel from the shop and studying the three identical Monroe calendars that hung on the wall. Cigar smoke from the office mixed with the smell of acetylene from the shop and I thought about the war.

So you're a kid from nowhere and you meet a wheel from Hollywood in the service and get to be buddies and when the killing is over, you move out here and look up your old friend and even introduce him to your sister. And your sister falls for the big wheel and he is no longer the nice guy you knew. And your sister commits suicide, so you take one of those leaden hammers and look up your old, big wheel service buddy.

On the phone, the fat man was saying, "Sure, that's wholesale. What the hell did you think it was?"

So, go to Acme. I'm crying for your business? Yeh? Well, I didn't get fat off you. I got fat off my wife's cooking, and she can stretch a buck from here to Topanga." He banged the receiver down, looked at me and shook his head.

"Another lost account," I said.

"Him? Hell, I've been talking worse than that to him for eighteen years. He'd think I was sick

if I talked any other way."

I lighted a cigarette to combat his cigar. I said easily, "Has Arthur Morley been working for you long?"

"Five years. Good man. Real good man. He's not in any trouble, is he?"

"Not to my knowledge. How old is he?"

"Around thirty. He looks a lot younger, though. Before his sister died, he looked about eighteen. You a cop?"

"Private investigator," I answered. "I—do a lot of insurance work."

"Oh? The suicide clause, eh?"

"Not exactly," I said. "Arthur's sister was a lot younger than he was?"

"Five, six years, I'd guess. Pretty girl, if you like 'em skinny." He looked out toward the shop. "Morley just came in. You want to talk to him in here?"

"No need. I'll see him in the shop."

Arthur Morley was thin, like his sister had been. But he was taller and had light hair in a crew cut. I told him who I was and that I was investigating the death of John Haskell.

"For who?" he asked. "Who'd pay to find that out? He didn't have any friends."

"Weren't you a friend of his?"

"Not since my sister died. I didn't kill him, if that's why you're here. I thought of it, but what would it prove? I had all the killing I wanted in New Guinea."

"You served with Haskell there?"

"Under him. He was a first looie, a platoon leader. He was one hell of a fine soldier, too, I've got to admit. He lost some men, but never foolishly."

"That's the first nice thing I've heard about him today," I said. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Four months ago, in a bar on Wilshire."

"I see. Where were you last night?"

"Bowling and then out for beers. I got a raft of guys that'll swear to that."

"Better get them alerted," I said. "There's a line the police can follow from a bartender to John Haskell to me to Miss McCrea and then to you. She told me you were in New Jersey, but I didn't believe her and I'm sure the police will check it."

"I'm not worried," he said.

"Miss McCrea has some strange new playmates, hasn't she? You ought to give her a serious talking to."

Arthur Morley shrugged. "She's old enough to know what she's doing. And nobody would call me a first-rate judge of character, not any more."

I could have asked him who his alibi friends were, but I wasn't too sure I was going to continue the search for Haskell's killer. When I did charity work, I had to have my heart in it. Haskell's death seemed less important than it had that morning.

It was past noon now and I was hungry. I drove

over to the Santa Monica Pier for some sea food.

Actually, if that bartender had read the morning paper, the police should be almost on the same trail I had followed, but it would have started with me. Unless the bartender knew Lira McCrea. In which case, they would have started where I had started, with her.

I ate sea bass and thought back on my morning and ahead to my appointment with Arnie Roman. In the yacht basin, sails bellied and the fishing boats went out loaded. On the pier, the old men sat in the sun only half watching the bobbing floats on their lines.

The imitation red-head in the reception room told me that Mr. Roman would be free in a few minutes. I sat on a plastic upholstered chair and leafed through a copy of *Nugget*. There were some fine pictures in there; some were up to the trio on that body shop office wall.

In a few minutes a fat and expensively dressed man left Roman's office and the red head smiled and told me I could go in now.

I went into a gray-carpeted office with dull gray walls and brightly colored drapes and upholstered furniture. It was more like a living room than an office. Above the desk, there was an expensively framed reproduction of Shahn's "Miners' Wives." Beneath the picture, Arnold Roman was rising to greet me.

He was a big man with blue-black jowls and gray-streaked black hair, beautifully tailored and well barbered. He had come a long way from the two dollar girls.

His brown eyes looked at me warmly. "Mr. Puma. I know you by reputation."

"And I you," I said.

His grip was firm and strong. Black hair curled on his wrists below the French cuffs.

He indicated a chair and I sat in it. He sat down and said, "You've been busy this morning, haven't you?"

"I try to keep busy. I suppose Miss McCrea phoned you?"

He nodded. "And that's why you're here."

I looked past him to the picture above his head. I asked, "Did you ever work in the mines, Mr. Roman?"

"For seven years," he said. "I started when I was thirteen. How did you know that?"

"I just couldn't figure any other way you'd be a Shahn collector. A picture like that can keep a man driving, can't it?"

He looked at me quizzically. "I didn't make the appointment to discuss art, Mr. Puma."

I said nothing more, meeting his gaze and waiting.

He leaned back in his chair and gave me the executive look. "A few evenings ago, you had some trouble with an employee of mine. This trouble centered around a man who was murdered

this morning. I don't like my employees to get into trouble."

I said nothing.

"Certain officials in this town are looking for an excuse to persecute me."

"Persecute or prosecute?"

His face stiffened. "Are you trying to be funny, Mr. Puma?"

I nodded. "I guess I missed, huh? Mr. Arnold, there's a bartender who knows me and knew Haskell who will undoubtedly tell the police about your employee with the glass jaw. The police will eventually come to me and I'll have to send them to Miss McCrea and she will lead them to my opponent, if she has any sense left. So why am I here?"

Roman carefully straightened an ebony ink well on his desk. He said casually, "The bartender won't tell the police anything. And I would like to hire you to investigate Haskell's death."

"Why?"

"To clear my employee, if that's the way the chips fall. To pin the murder on him, if that happens to be the way it is. I don't like my men to—engage in outside—activities."

"I see. And why should he want to kill Haskell?"

"I've no idea. I doubt if he did. But he is in love with Miss McCrea and there is a remote possibility he may have gone over to work Haskell over a little and—" Roman shrugged.

I asked, "Did you know Haskell?"

"Not really. Miss McCrea told me she brought him to a party at my house one time, but I don't remember meeting him."

"A famous man like that—you'd remember, wouldn't you?"

Roman smiled. "The last movie I saw starred Tom Mix. I was twelve years old."

I sat and he sat. Neither of us said a word for seconds.

Then he said, "Business must be good, Mr. Puma. Don't you want my account?"

"Yes. Two things bother me. First of all, the police don't like private men investigating murder cases. I've done it before and got away with it, but I've never done it for a man the police don't like. That's the second thing that bothers me."

"Five hundred dollars minimum," he said, "And your regular rate."

"You're talking my language. And if I learn something, I take it to the police?"

"If you learn who killed John Haskell you take it to the police. If you learn anything that might damage me, you had better not."

"There's the bind," I said.

He said nothing, sitting quietly in his chair, staring at me without expression.

Finally, I said, "All right."

He must have known how I would answer. Because the check was all made out. He smiled,

and slid it across the desk toward me. "Miss McCrea assured me you couldn't be bought."

"But I can be rented," I said. "I'll get right to work on it."

The name of Roman's employee was Krup. This information plus Krup's address and three separate small photographs of him and his fingerprint card were in the sealed envelope the red-head handed me when I stopped at her desk. Krup, Eddie Krup, age thirty-four, weight a hundred and ninety-six, height five feet nine, complexion ruddy. Kenmore Apartments, Hollywood.

What an efficient man was Arnie Roman. And what did he have against Eddie Krup? There was still time to make the bank with the check, but I decided against cashing it. If things started to smell, I might be glad I still had the chance to return that check.

Was I being conned? Was I being paid off? If I spent a couple of days on a wild goose chase, it would be kind of late for me to run to the police with my story of the saloon fight.

I knew a couple of detectives in the Santa Monica Department; one of them might throw me a bone. I caught one off duty and at home, out in the front yard seeding his lawn with dichondra. He wasn't on the case, but he knew about it. The police had very little, so far. It was the work of a man they were certain and he had used a hammer, but there had been no motive established. Two fingerprints, one of them bloody, were still unidentified.

I thought of telling him about Arthur Morley, but decided that would wait.

He said, "What's your interest in this, Joe?"

"I knew Haskell. I admired him very much before the war."

His smile was skeptical.

"How about the fingerprints?" I asked, "the unidentified ones? You couldn't have checked with Washington yet."

"Not yet. That bloody one should be the clincher if Washington has a record of it."

And if the bloody one was Arthur Morley's, I thought, Washington would have a record of it. All the boys in the service had been fingerprinted.

4.

The *Kenmore Plaza Apartments* in Hollywood was an old building in good repair, located half a block north of Sunset. I was nosing along, looking for a parking space, when I saw Lira McCrea stepping from a Chev Bel Air parked on the other side of the street. She was heading for the apartment building.

I slowed and let her get by before driving on to find a space half a block past the building. From here, I could watch the entrance in my rear vision

mirror. It was possible that she was going up to see her monster for an afternoon tryst.

But it was also possible that she was coming here to tell him about me. I waited.

I didn't wait long. The girl came out again less than ten minutes later, and Krup was with her. They climbed into her car.

In my mirror, I saw the Chev swing into a driveway for a U-turn, which would bring them past me. I ducked low in the seat. They turned west at the corner and I followed in the flivver.

They were taking the trip I had taken this morning, to Lincoln Boulevard in Venice. Had Arthur Morley phoned her after my visit to him? I doubted it. She could be coming to warn him about me, or, more likely, she and Krup could be visiting him in order to determine the possibility of Arthur's guilt. Krup had his own neck to consider.

It was an easy car to follow; I gave them a constant three block lead. At the body shop, the Chev turned into the parking lot. I drove past and parked at the curb half a block down.

I walked back on the far side of the street. Through the show window of the shop office, I could see Lira talking to the fat proprietor. Krup still sat in the car.

And now Arthur Morley came out with Lira and they walked over to the car. It seemed like a good time for me to make my entrance; I walked across the street.

I came at the right time. Their voices were rising when I reached the curb and Krup had stepped from the car by the time I got to the lot.

He looked menacing, but I couldn't be sure he was threatening Morley. Possibly, I might have irritated him.

In a few seconds, Morley and Lira turned to look at me, too. I smiled as I came closer.

Eddie Krup said something to Lira, then more loudly to me, "It's a private conference, peeper."

"I'll wait," I said. "I want to talk with Morley." I looked at Lira. "I thought he was in New Jersey."

Her eyes were scornful. "I don't have to tell you anything, Mr. Puma."

"It would have been better if you had," I said. "Because now you'll have to tell it to the police."

Krup said, "Beat it. I know who you're working for and you won't be going to the police."

"Don't make book on it," I said. "I'll wait until you've finished talking with Morley."

Arthur Morley said, "They're through right now, whether they know it or not. What did you want, Mr. Puma?"

"I want to know why they're here," I said. "And I want to know anything else you know about Haskell's death."

He looked at me defiantly. "I don't know anything about Haskell's death. I told you that before and I just finished telling them that. Now I'm

going back to work and I don't want to see any of you again."

Krup said, "Take it easy, Morley. We haven't finished."

Arthur Morley turned his back on them and started for the office. Krup took two steps and reached a heavy hand out to spin the kid around.

Here I was, fighting Krup for somebody else again. I moved in, reached my own hand out for his shoulder—and he turned very neatly while I was off balance.

He hooked a clean left into my gut and caught me high on the cheek with a right. I brought over the big right hand from hip level, but it never got home. He tagged me like a professional, smack on the button, and I went down.

Well, you can't win 'em all.

I was drowning. The wave had been too high and the surf board too narrow. I took a deep gulp of the salt water and discovered it wasn't salty.

There was parking lot gravel in my hair and a numbness from my temple to the point of my chin. The sun was out again and I was propped in a sitting position up against the front bumper of a car. The fat proprietor stood in front of me, an empty bucket of water in his hand.

"You could have waited," I said. "There wasn't any time-keeper. I'd have come out of it without the water."

He said apologetically, "In the movies, they always use a bucket of water. What the hell, I'm not the Red Cross."

My shirt, jacket and the upper part of my trousers were soaked. To the left of the fat man, Arthur Morley looked down at me without expression.

"Did they leave?" I asked him.

He nodded. "You've been out for almost three minutes."

I climbed shakily to my feet and rubbed the back of my neck. "Last time we met, he was easy. I guess I was overconfident."

Morley's voice was quiet. "You know who he works for? For Arnold Roman. Man, you're on borrowed time, right now."

The fat man said, "Well, *somebody* has to work around here. Make it as quick as you can, Art; we're way behind." He left.

I said, "You can't think of me as a friend, I suppose? But I could have thrown your name to the law. Really, I tried to play ball with you, boy."

He said evenly, "I can't tell you what I don't know. And I don't know who killed John Haskell. If you want the names of the guys I bowled with, I'll give 'em to you."

"Give 'em to me," I said.

In the office, he wrote down the names of three men and copied their addresses out of the phone book. As he handed me the slip, he asked, "Are

you going to tell the police about me?"

"Not yet. Maybe never." I didn't tell him that if his fingerprint was the bloody one, I wouldn't have to tell the police. They'd have him.

I went home and changed my clothes and then phoned Arnold Roman. I told him, "Your boy Krup just won a return engagement. And he seems to be investigating this murder himself. Are those your orders?"

"No."

"And he says he knows who hired me. How could he know that?"

"Did he say he knew it was me?"

"No, he just said he knew."

"He was lying. It was a tactical lie. Stay with it, Puma."

"Right." I hung up.

I wondered if Arnold Roman had lied to me. He, like all the hoodlums who owned Las Vegas, had an air of semi-respectability now. The so-called solid citizens had accepted the legality of Las Vegas and thus by implication accepted the hoodlums who were getting fat off the town. And this trash was coming into Los Angeles and buying into legitimate businesses, adding to their stature.

They were still hoodlums and Roman could right this minute be playing me for a patsy. He might have hired me for that reason. There was a strong possibility that I had made a bad decision.

So what was preventing me from giving him his money back and taking the whole sorry mess to the police?

Nothing was preventing me, really, nothing but my avarice.

I was hanging my wet jacket on a hanger in the kitchen, having decided to have dinner at home, when somebody rang my doorbell. A number of innocent people often ring my doorbell, but I took the 38 from the dresser drawer before going to the door. I kept it in a pocket, my hand on it.

A youth of about twenty stood there. He wore cotton gabardine trousers of a dirty tan and a checked gingham sport shirt.

"Mr. Joe Puma?" he asked.

I nodded.

"My name is Duane Putnam. Can I come in?"

Duane Putnam, indeed. He must have lifted it from an old theatre program. I held the door open wider and he came in, warily, like a cat in a new neighborhood, and stood not far from the doorway.

"What's on your mind, Duane?" I asked.

"Murder," he said.

They get that from TV, these cryptic, mono-syllabic answers.

"Whose murder?" I asked.

He took a breath and said, "John Haskell's."

I said nothing, waiting for him to go on.

He took another breath. "I couldn't go to the police. I've had a— a little trouble myself, so I couldn't go to them. But I saw this guy, see, and

I had to tell somebody—”

“What guy?”

“The guy that killed Haskell. I mean, I saw a guy leave there, last night, and he was carrying a thing that looked like a hammer, and he was sneaking along the empty lot next to the motel, and—”

“Hold it a second,” I said. “Who sent you to me?”

He stared, discomfited. He looked toward the door. Finally, he said, “I was walking along Lincoln Boulevard a little while ago and I saw the guy, the same guy that came out of the motel last night.”

“Where did you see him?”

“At that auto glass shop there, in the parking lot. He was with that blonde in the Chev Bel Air. I saw him hit you, so when you left, I followed. The way those guys in the shop talked to you, I figured you were a cop, so I asked them, and they told me who you were.”

“You asked them and still picked up my trail? Duane, do you want to start over and make it reasonable this time?”

“Phone ‘em,” he said. “Right now, go ahead, ask ‘em.” His face was grim. “Phone the glass shop, go ahead.”

“It wasn’t a glass shop; it was a body shop,” I corrected him. “Sit down. I’ll phone them.”

I phoned them and Arthur Morley answered. I asked him if Duane Putnam had talked to him about me.

“I don’t know what the guy’s name is,” Morley told me, “but some young fellow came over right after you left and asked if you were a cop. I told him you were a private detective.”

“Okay, Arthur, thank you,” I said.

I hung up and studied Duane Putnam. I said, “I guess that part of it wasn’t a lie. But the rest sure as hell was and you’re making a serious mistake, lying about anything as important as murder. Duane, what kind of trouble did you have with the law?”

“That’s not important.”

“Yes, it is. Are you running from the law now?”

He shook his head.

“All right, then,” I said, “I want you to tell the police what you told me.”

He shook his head again.

“Be reasonable,” I said patiently. “If we hope to convict the man, you’ll have to go into court and point a finger. Otherwise, why did you bring me this information? Don’t you want the man punished for his crime?”

He nodded. “I already pointed a finger. Aren’t you a good enough detective to get the rest?”

“No, and neither are the police. There isn’t any kind of police grilling that can break down a man like Eddie Krup. He’s undoubtedly been through it all before, time and again. Duane, I insist that you go to the police with me, right now.”

For the third time, he shook his head. And this time, he said, “no!”

“Yes,” I said, and took out the 38.

His eyes went from the gun to my eyes and he smiled. “You wouldn’t shoot me.”

“If you try to leave, I will.”

Again he looked warily at the door and then at me. His gaze dropped to the gun and he smiled once more. Maybe he wanted to get shot.

In any event, he broke for the door. He’d pegged me right; I didn’t even aim the gun. I tried to intercept him before he got through the door, but he was too fast for me. He was nearly out the front door when I got to the head of the steps.

By the time I got to the door, a chopped and channeled ’34 Ford coupe was gunning away from the curb in front. I didn’t have anything that would catch that, nor could I read the license number from where I stood.

5.

I went back to my apartment and got the dossier on Eddie Krup that Roman had given me. I took the fingerprint card out of the envelope and drove back to the house of my Santa Monica Department friend.

He was still planting dichondra.

There was no name on the card. I gave it to him and said, “Check that against the bloody fingerprint you found. If it matches, phone me, and I’ll give you the man’s name.”

“Why not give it to me, now?” he asked.

“I’m private, remember? P-r-i-v-a-t-e.”

“You’re also a citizen,” he said. “I hope.”

“A better citizen than you imagine.”

I left him glowering and drove back to the poor man’s edge of Beverly Hills. The Chev Bel Air was at the curb; I wondered if Eddie Krup was also there.

Eddie was there all right. Lira McCrea came to the door and beyond her I could see Eddie sitting on a studio couch.

“Now, what?” she asked.

“I came back for the rubber match with your fat boy friend,” I told her. “I don’t think he’s that good.”

“Get out of here,” she said, “before I call the police.”

“You’d better check with Eddie before you phone,” I said. “He doesn’t want any law here, I’ll bet you.”

From behind her, Krup said, “Let the slob come in. He doesn’t scare me.”

She opened the door wider and I came in, Krup didn’t move from the studio couch.

“Do either of you know a Duane Putnam?” I asked.

Lira shook her head.

Krup said, "I've seen him play with the Rams. What the hell has he got to do with this mess?"

That's where I'd heard the name. The kid had picked it up from the sport pages. I said, "I don't mean that Putnam. I guess the man who approached me used a pseudonym."

Krup laughed and shook his head. "Dick Tracy. Oh, man, you are a cute one."

"Easy, shorty," I said. "Don't let that lucky punch give you delusions of grandeur. This man claims he saw you leave John Haskell's motel after Haskell was murdered. You were carrying a hammer and sneaking through that empty lot next to the motel."

Lira looked at Krup meaningfully.

Krup was sitting erectly now, interest in his face. "A man or a kid?" he asked.

"Never mind that. Eddie, if you did kill Haskell, you won't get any protection from where you might expect it. And if you didn't, but know something, you'd be very wise to tell me."

"Drop dead," he said. "What'd this Putnam look like?"

I took a card from my pocket. I read off a telephone number and said, "Phone that number and ask if you should cooperate with me."

"That's Roman's number," he said quietly.

"You should know it."

Krup looked at Lira and then back at me. "It's not a private number," he said. "Anybody can look up a phone number. When I get orders to cooperate with you, I will. So long, peeper."

"It's your decision," I said. "You wouldn't want to come outside for a title fight, would you? My vanity is suffering."

"I've got more important things to do," he told me. "Look, if this kid saw me, why didn't he take it to the police? Chew on that and see what you come up with."

"I didn't say he was a kid."

"So long," he said. "Don't lead with your chin."

I didn't bother to answer. I went out quietly.

So, Krup knew he was a kid. So, Lira had taken Krup in her car over to see Arthur Morley. That would indicate the death of John Haskell came from the Morley side of her life, not the Roman side. They were worried, no doubt, and that could mean Eddie was guilty. It could also mean Eddie would get dumped by Roman if enough suspicion for Haskell's death should be centered on Eddie.

For a man in Eddie's line of work, being dumped by Arnold Roman certainly wouldn't enhance his employment chances with other employers in Roman's field. So it could be the loss of Eddie's job that was bothering him, not the loss of his neck.

Duane Putnam . . . In my mind, I heard Eddie's laugh again and I could feel myself blushing. Duane Putnam had seen Eddie Krup leave the motel with a hammer in his hand. With a hammer in his hand. . . . Had there been anything in the papers about a hammer? I couldn't remember.

An item like that might very well be kept from the papers, because it could be a valuable item to use in a lie detector test and its value would be lost if it was an item of common knowledge.

I phoned my Santa Monica detective friend. He asked me to phone back in ten minutes; he'd find out what I wanted to know.

I phoned back in ten minutes and he told me the hammer item hadn't been given to the papers and it had been withheld from them deliberately, just as I had guessed. And it was still a secret and had better remain so or I might wind up working on a parking lot.

"You might, too," I said. "None of us are really versatile, are we?"

"No, but some of us are bright," he said.

I hung up and went out to the sliver. What did I have? This much: the man who called himself Putnam knew a hammer had been used. He didn't want to go to the police. He did want to pin the crime on Eddie Krup.

Now why would he want to do that? Either he had seen someone leave with a hammer or he had left with the hammer himself. But if he was the killer, why had he come to me? His bright move would be to get out of town, as far from this town as possible—unless he had relatives here, or friends who might be suspicious of his leaving. Maybe he was still living at home. Why had I thought he wasn't?

Back now. Why would he want to pin the crime on Eddie Krup?

Two reasons came quickly to my mind, to divert suspicion from himself or from a friend.

And who could his friend be? Elementary, Watson. I only had two real suspects. I drove back to Venice, to an apartment over a four-car garage, the home address the agent had given me.

I went up the outside steps and knocked on the door. I could hear music inside, and it sounded like it was coming from some very expensive hi-fi equipment. It was George Shearing's music.

Arthur Morley came to the door and looked at me wearily. "God," he said. "You, again. Look, Mr. Puma, I've had a hell of a day at the shop and I came home to relax. Can't you give me a break?"

"A man's been killed," I said.

"A lot of men have been killed. I killed over nineteen myself. And got a medal for it. Over half of my platoon was killed and all of them were better men than John Haskell."

"Maybe," I said. "But not better soldiers, I'll bet."

"The war's over," he said. "It's been over for eleven years."

"I'll bet he was a disciplinarian," I said. "I'll bet a lot of you guys hated his guts."

"Whose guts?"

"John Haskell's. *Lieutenant* John Haskell's."

Arthur Morley looked at me doubtfully. "So?"

"Let's go inside," I suggested, "where we can talk."

He shrugged and stepped aside and I came in. It was a roomy and comfortable apartment and I could see the ocean from the western windows of the room I was in. Roomy and comfortable and cheap; that's the kind of place you can get in Venice if you're not class conscious.

Shearing changed to Wallen. This man must love the piano, I thought. I asked, "Got any Tatum?"

"I got all the Tatum there is. Sit down, I'll bring you a beer."

He brought me a frosted can of eastern beer and I sat down in a comfortable canvas and wrought iron chair. He stretched out on what looked like a home-made couch, wide and long and low. To a man who had killed nineteen, the death of John Haskell was probably not very important. Otherwise, I was sure he wasn't completely dispassionate.

"Some life," I said. "I'll bet you have fun, single and handsome and right next to the beach."

"I'm not kicking. What's on your mind, Mr. Puma?"

"A kid," I said. "A kid who calls himself Duane Putnam."

"Never heard of him."

"Not under that name, I'm sure. He probably just gave it to me on the spur of the moment. It's the name of a football player."

"Oh. Why did he give you a phony name?"

"To protect himself. He also told me he saw me in front of an auto glass shop. He meant the place you work."

"We're not a glass shop; we're a body shop."

"I know that, and so did the kid. But he figured, in his story book detective way, that if he made a mistake like that, I wouldn't be inclined to guess he knew you."

Silence, and then, "What makes you think it was a *deliberate* mistake?"

"Any kid that can chop and channel and soup a '34 flivver knows a body shop from a glass shop. This kid also knew what kind of weapon Haskell was killed with."

Arthur Morley stretched and his voice was tired. "What kind was it?"

"I'm not permitted to tell you that. Do you know the boy, Arthur?"

"No."

"Then why should he want to protect you?"

"I don't need protection. I don't know him."

"And I don't think he even saw me in front of the shop," I went on. "I think he found out from you what had happened. Did you phone him after I left? I could ask your boss if the kid was a witness to my knockout. I can do it now."

"You think I'm lying? Why should I lie?"

"To protect him. To protect him from a conviction of murder, just as he tried to protect you

from the suspicion of murder. He's a buddy of yours, isn't he?"

"I don't hang around with nineteen year old kids," he said. And then he was suddenly silent and I could hear him breathe.

"I didn't mention his age," I said. "Where is he, Arthur?"

"Finish your beer and beat it. Go to the police with your *crazy* story. I don't give a damn. I'm clean, *clean* . . ."

I sipped my beer. "The kid must have been eight years old when the war ended. So that couldn't be the reason. He sure as hell wasn't in the war."

Arthur Morley closed his eyes and said nothing. "The police have a fingerprint," I said. "A *bloody* fingerprint. It's just a question of time. What is the kid, psychopathic or something? Is he your brother?"

Morley's voice was soft. "Did Haskell ever get to you with that pattern kick of his, that pre-determined jag he was on?"

"A little."

Morley sat up. "I need a beer. Then I'll give you a silly pattern to chew on, an eleven year pattern."

He got himself a beer and came back to sit on the edge of the low, wide couch.

He told me the story of Patsy Lankowski, private in the platoon commanded by Lieutenant John Haskell. Patsy was a sorehead and a grumbler, but quite possibly the best combat scout in the 32nd Division and John Haskell knew it. Patsy got all the dirty assignments, but never a rating beyond Pfc.

And home in Waukesha, Wisconsin, Patsy's mother got his growling letters, complaining of the persecution his Lieutenant was inflicting on him, and swearing that if he ever came out of this thing alive, he would look up the good lieutenant and give him the pasting of his life.

And more than once, he had added that if he didn't come out of this thing alive, Lieutenant John Haskell would be to blame, and he wanted the world to know it.

"And Patsy didn't come out of it alive?" I asked. Arthur Morley smiled. "Sure he did. He's selling insurance in Iowa, right this minute. I just used that name, another member of our sad platoon. The guy who really hated Haskell and really wrote the letters home, his name wasn't Lankowski and he didn't live in Waukesha, Wisconsin. But he had a brother, and the brother reads the letters that had been written to his mother."

"And held a grudge for eleven years? He *must* be psychopathic." I finished the beer. "This man, of course, didn't come out of the war alive."

Morley said, "He died on a patrol. He hadn't volunteered for the patrol. The mother didn't show her other son the letters. But when she died, a month ago, the brother found them."

"And he came out here," I guessed, "looking up the men from his big brother's platoon. And from you, he got the story of the further adventures of Lieutenant John Haskell. And from comic books, he got some distorted ideas of justice and vengeance. Where is he now, Arthur?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"My God," I said, "John Haskell was *murdered*. What kind of man are you?"

"A 32nd Division kind," he said. "Murder is nothing new to us. Where were you when all that was going on?"

"In the 7th Division," I said. "Maybe you've heard of them?"

"I've heard of them," he admitted quietly, "and I apologise."

"And you're a citizen now," I reminded him. "You're not a soldier or a professional veteran or a judge or the swift arm of vengeance. You're a citizen, quite possibly the most important thing a man can ever be."

He shook his head. "*The most important thing a man can be is a friend.* I learned that the hard way. And there aren't enough cops in this world to ever make me anything less than that." He stood up. "I told you this to get you off the kid's neck. I figured you weren't the law and would listen to reason."

"I'm the law," I said. "Sit down; I want to check your closets."

"Why?"

"To see if the kid's clothes are here. He's been staying with you, hasn't he?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "If you want to look around, come back with a warrant."

"Don't mess with me, Arthur," I said. I started for the bedroom.

He came over to stand in front of the open bedroom doorway. "You're going to have to fight your way in here."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said.

"You've forgotten my sister," he said. "What about her?"

"I'm sorry about her. But a man's been killed. If that isn't important to you, you never learned anything, in New Guinea or any place else. Stand aside. This is the last warning."

"Start swinging," he said, and lifted his hands.

He'd killed nineteen men, but that had been with a rifle. I could have hit him five times while he drew back his right hand. I only hit him once, clean and neat and on the button and I caught him as he fell, lowered him gently to the floor.

I have a lot of respect for 32nd Division men.

And I saw the shadow in the bedroom and then the fury hit me as I came through the door. And this one bit and clawed and used his knees and grunted and used words no nineteen year old should know.

But I subdued him, finally, and dragged him with me to hold while I phoned the Santa Monica Police.

In the neat office of the Chief, Sergeant Koski glowered and chewed his lower lip and the Mayor frowned and the Chief looked at all of us blandly. He was the bland type, fat and smug.

Koski said, "The fingerprint matches. The kid's ready to confess, anyway."

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Lestere Burkholtz. German kid. He's from Eau Claire, Wisconsin."

"And what've you got against Arthur Morley, Chief?" I asked with a sneer.

The Mayor said, "Don't be insolent, Joe. Chief Roeder is simply trying to do his duty."

"That's all I want from him is his duty," I said. "I did mine. I came in with a killer, didn't I? I could have turned him over to the Los Angeles Police; I picked him up in Venice, and that would make him their baby. I brought him here because I thought maybe Arthur Morley would get a break. And I'm staying until he does."

Chief Roeder smiled his smug smile. "Mr. Puma, I run the police department here. And in Santa Monica, we don't toy with accessories to murder. In Santa Monica, we like everything tied up neat and clean."

I looked at him pityingly. I said, "And I'm going to sit in Santa Monica until you change your mind or your district attorney is going to look awful silly in court when I tell the jury Morley wasn't even home when I picked up Burkholtz."

The Mayor said, "You'd perjure yourself? Joe, I thought you were a citizen?"

"I am," I said. "But I'm something almost as important, too. I'm a friend. God forbid I should have to explain that word to a politician."

There was a lot of hemming and hawing and political double talk after that, but it was meaningless and we all knew it. At seven-thirty, Arthur and I stood on the front steps of that big, new municipal building, looking out toward the ocean.

The ocean made me think of eternity which, in turn, brought the late John Haskell to mind. In spite of all that I had recently learned about the man, my feeling at the moment wasn't harsher than pleasant reminiscence.

"Patterns," I said. "What do you think, Arthur? You think the individual can get away from a pattern?"

Arthur shrugged. "Don't know if I get what you mean."

"Skip it," I told him.

"After what you just did for me, I'll go along with anything you say."

I smiled and we went down the steps together, arm in arm.

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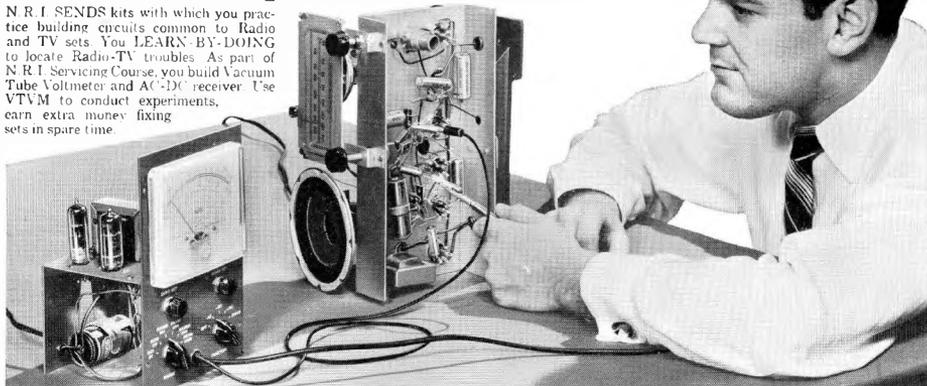
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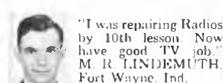
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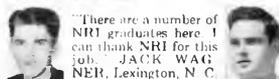
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