

MANHUNT

DETECTIVE STORY MONTHLY

EVERYBODY'S WATCHING ME
A New Mystery Thriller By
Mickey Spillane



FEBRUARY
35 CENTS

EVERY STORY NEW!

PLUS STORIES BY **ELEAZAR LIPSKY** **RICHARD DEMING**
JOHN ROSS MACDONALD **JOHN EVANS** AND OTHERS

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MAY 28 1953

The Imaginary Blonde

FEB 9 1954 JAN 3 REC'D

BY JOHN ROSS MACDONALD

APR 9 1954 AUG 29 1954

*How do you pin a murder on
a woman who doesn't exist?*

JUL 5 1955



IT WAS a Friday night. I was tooling home from the Mexican border in a light blue convertible and a dark blue mood. I had followed a man from Fresno to San Diego and lost him in the maze of streets in Old Town. When I picked up his trail again, it was cold. He had crossed the border, and my instructions went no further than the United States.

Halfway home, just above Emerald Bay, I overtook the worst driver in the world. He was driving a black fishtail Cadillac as if he was tacking a sailboat. The heavy car wove back and forth across the freeway, using two of its four lanes, and sometimes three. It was late, and I was in a hurry to get some sleep. I started to pass it on the right, at a time when it was riding the double line. The cadillac drifted

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towards me like an unguided missile, and forced me off the road in a screeching skid.

I speeded up to pass on the left. Simultaneously, the driver of the Cadillac accelerated. My acceleration couldn't match his. We raced neck and neck down the middle of the road. I wondered if he was drunk or crazy or afraid of me. Then the freeway ended. I was doing eighty on the wrong side of a two-lane highway, and a truck came over a rise ahead like a blazing double comet. I floorboarded the gas pedal and cut over sharply to the right, threatening the Cadillac's fenders and its driver's life. In the approaching headlights, his face was as blank and white as a piece of paper, with charred black holes for eyes. His shoulders were naked.

At the last possible second he slowed enough to let me get by. The truck went off onto the shoulder, honking angrily. I braked gradually, hoping to force the Cadillac to stop. It looped past me in an insane arc, tires skittering, and was sucked away into darkness.

When I finally came to a full stop, I had to pry my fingers off the wheel. My knees were remote and watery. After smoking part of a cigarette, I U-turned and drove very cautiously back to Emerald Bay. I was long past the hot-rod age, and I needed rest.

The first motel I came to, the Siesta, was decorated with a vacancy sign and a neon Mexican sleeping

luminously under a sombrero. Envy-ing him, I parked on the gravel apron in front of the motel office. There was a light inside. The glass-paned door was standing open, and I went in. The little room was pleasantly furnished with rattan and chintz. I jangled the bell on the desk a few times. No one appeared, so I sat down to wait and lit a cigarette. An electric clock on the wall said a quarter to one.

I must have dozed for a few minutes. A dream rushed by the threshold of my consciousness, making a gentle noise. Death was in the dream. He drove a black Cadillac loaded with flowers. When I woke up, the cigarette was starting to burn my fingers. A thin man in a gray flannel shirt was standing over me with a doubtful look on his face.

He was big-nosed and small-chinned, and he wasn't as young as he gave the impression of being. His teeth were bad, the sandy hair was thinning and receding. He was the typical old youth who scrounged and wheedled his living around motor courts and restaurants and hotels, and hung on desperately to the frayed edge of other people's lives.

"What do you want?" he said. "Who are you? What do you want?" His voice was reedy and changeable like an adolescent's.

"A room."

"Is that all you want?"

From where I sat, it sounded like an accusation. I let it pass. "What else is there? Circassian dancing

girls? Free popcorn?"

He tried to smile without showing his bad teeth. The smile was a dismal failure, like my joke. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "You woke me up. I never make much sense right after I just wake up."

"Have a nightmare?"

His vague eyes expanded like blue bubblegum bubbles. "Why did you ask me that?"

"Because I just had one. But skip it. Do you have a vacancy or don't you?"

"Yessir. Sorry, sir." He swallowed whatever bitter taste he had in his mouth, and assumed an impersonal, obsequious manner. "You got any luggage, sir?"

"No luggage."

Moving silently in tennis sneakers like a frail ghost of the boy he once had been, he went behind the counter, and took my name, address, license number, and five dollars. In return, he gave me a key numbered fourteen and told me where to use it. Apparently he despaired of a tip.

Room fourteen was like any other middle-class motel room touched with the California-Spanish mania. Artificially roughened plaster painted adobe color, poinsettia-red curtains, imitation parchment lampshade on a twisted black iron stand. A Rivera reproduction of a sleeping Mexican hung on the wall over the bed. I succumbed to its suggestion right away, and dreamed about Circassian dancing girls.

Along towards morning one of them got frightened, through no fault of mine, and began to scream her little Circassian lungs out. I sat up in bed, making soothing noises, and woke up. It was nearly nine by my wristwatch. The screaming ceased and began again, spoiling the morning like a fire siren outside the window. I pulled on my trousers over the underwear I'd been sleeping in, and went outside.

A young woman was standing on the walk outside the next room. She had a key in one hand and a handful of blood in the other. She wore a wide multi-colored skirt and a low-cut gypsy sort of blouse. The blouse was distended and her mouth was open, and she was yelling her head off. It was a fine dark head, but I hated her for spoiling my morning sleep.

I took her by the shoulders and said, "Stop it."

The screaming stopped. She looked down sleepily at the blood on her hand. It was as thick as axle grease, and almost as dark in color.

"Where did you get that?"

"I slipped and fell in it. I didn't see it."

Dropping the key on the walk, she pulled her skirt to one side with her clean hand. Her legs were bare and brown. Her skirt was stained at the back with the same thick fluid.

"Where? In this room?"

She faltered, "Yes."

Doors were opening up and down the drive. Half-a-dozen people be-

gan to converge on us. A dark-faced man about four-and-a-half feet high came scampering from the direction of the office, his little pointed shoes dancing in the gravel.

"Come inside and show me," I said to the girl.

"I can't. I won't." Her eyes were very heavy, and surrounded by the bluish pallor of shock.

The little man slid to a stop between us, reached up and gripped the upper part of her arm. "What is the matter, Ella? Are you crazy, disturbing the guests?"

She said, "Blood," and leaned against me with her eyes closed.

His sharp black glance probed the situation. He turned to the other guests, who had formed a murmurous semicircle around us.

"It is perfectly hokay. Do not be concerned, ladies and gentlemen. My daughter cut herself a little bit. It is perfectly all right."

Circling her waist with one long hairy arm, he hustled her through the open door and slammed it behind him. I caught it on my foot and followed them in.

The room was a duplicate of mine, including the reproduction over the unmade bed, but everything was reversed as in a mirror image. The girl took a few weak steps by herself and sat on the edge of the bed. Then she noticed the blood spots on the sheets. She stood up quickly. Her mouth opened, rimmed with white teeth.

"Don't do it," I said. "We know

you have a very fine pair of lungs."

The little man turned on me. "Who do you think you are?"

"The name is Archer. I have the next room."

"Get out of this one, please."

"I don't think I will."

He lowered his greased black head as if he was going to butt me. Under his sharkskin jacket, a hunch protruded from his back like a displaced elbow. He seemed to reconsider the butting gambit, and decided in favor of diplomacy:

"You are jumping to conclusions, mister. It is not so serious as it looks. We had a little accident here last night."

"Sure, your daughter cut herself. She heals remarkably fast."

"Nothing like that." He fluttered one long hand. "I said to the people outside the first thing that came to my mind. Actually, it was a little scuffle. One of the guests suffered a nosebleed."

The girl moved like a sleepwalker to the bathroom door and switched on the light. There was a pool of blood coagulating on the black and white checkerboard linoleum, streaked where she had slipped and fallen in it.

"Some nosebleed," I said to the little man. "Do you run this joint?"

"I am the proprietor of the Siesta motor hotel, yes. My name is Sallanda. The gentleman is susceptible to nosebleed. He told me so himself."

"Where is he now?"

"He checked out early this morning."

"In good health?"

"Certainly in good health."

I looked around the room. Apart from the unmade bed with the brown spots on the sheets, it contained no signs of occupancy. Someone had spilled a pint of blood and vanished.

The little man opened the door wide and invited me with a sweep of his arm to leave. "If you will excuse me, sir, I wish to have this cleaned up as quickly as possible. Ella, will you tell Lorraine to get to work on it right away pronto? Then maybe you better lie down for a little while, eh?"

"I'm all right now, father. Don't worry about me."

When I checked out a few minutes later, she was sitting behind the desk in the front office, looking pale but composed. I dropped my key on the desk in front of her.

"Feeling better, Ella?"

"Oh. I didn't recognize you with all your clothes on."

"That's a good line. May I use it?"

She lowered her eyes and blushed. "You're making fun of me. I know I acted foolishly this morning."

"I'm not so sure. What do *you* think happened in thirteen last night?"

"My father told you, didn't he?"

"He gave me a version, two of them in fact. I doubt that they're the final shooting script."

Her hand went to the central hol-

low in the gypsy blouse. Her arms and shoulders were slender and brown, the tips of her fingers carmine. "Shooting?"

"A cinema term," I said. "But there might have been a real shooting at that. Don't you think so?"

Her front teeth pinched her lower lip. She looked like somebody's pet rabbit. I restrained an impulse to pat her sleek brown head.

"That's ridiculous. This is a respectable motel. Anyway, father asked me not to discuss it with anybody."

"Why would he do that?"

"He loves this place, that's why. He doesn't want any scandal made out of nothing. If we lost our good reputation here, it would break my father's heart."

"He doesn't strike me as the sentimental type."

She stood up, smoothing her skirt. I saw that she'd changed it. "You leave him alone. He's a dear little man. I don't know what you think you're doing, trying to stir up trouble where there isn't any."

I backed away from her righteous indignation: female indignation is always righteous; and went out to my car. The early spring sun was dazzling. Beyond the freeway and the drifted sugary dunes, the bay was Prussian blue. The road cut inland across the base of the peninsula and returned to the sea a few miles north of the town. Here a wide blacktop parking space shelved off to the left of the highway, overlook-

ing the white beach and whiter breakers. Signs at each end of the turnout stated that this was a County Park, No Beach Fires.

The beach and the blacktop expanse above it were deserted except for a single car, which looked very lonely. It was a long black Cadillac nosed into the cable fence at the edge of the beach. I braked and turned off the highway and got out. The man in the driver's seat of the Cadillac didn't turn his head as I approached him. His chin was propped on the steering wheel, and he was gazing out across the endless blue sea.

I opened the door and looked into his face. It was paper white. The dark brown eyes were sightless. The body was unclothed except for the thick fur matted on the chest, and a clumsy bandage tied around the waist. The bandage was composed of several blood-stained towels, held in place by a knotted piece of nylon fabric whose nature I didn't recognize immediately. Examining it more closely, I saw that it was a woman's slip. The left breast of the garment was embroidered in purple with a heart, containing the name, "Fern," in slanting script. I wondered who Fern was.

The man who was wearing her purple heart had dark curly hair, heavy black eyebrows, a heavy chin sprouting black beard. He was rough looking in spite of his anemia and the lipstick smudged on his mouth.

There was no registration on the

steeringpost, and nothing in the glove-compartment but a half-empty box of shells for a .38 automatic. The ignition was still turned on. So were the dash and headlights, but they were dim. The gas gauge registered empty. Curlyhead must have pulled off the highway soon after he passed me, and driven all the rest of the night in one place.

I untied the slip, which didn't look as if it would take fingerprints, and went over it for a label. It had one: Gretchen, Palm Springs. It occurred to me that it was Saturday morning and that I'd gone all winter without a weekend in the desert. I retied the slip the way I'd found it, and drove back to the Siesta Motel.

Ella's welcome was a few degrees colder than absolute zero. "Well!" She glared down her pretty rabbit nose at me. "I thought we were rid of you."

"So did I. But I just couldn't tear myself away."

She gave me a peculiar look, neither hard nor soft, but mixed. Her hand went to her hair, then reached for a registration card. "I suppose if you want to rent a room, I can't stop you. Only please don't imagine you're making an impression on me. You're not. You leave me cold, mister."

"Archer," I said. "Lew Archer. Don't bother with the card. I came back to use your phone."

"Aren't there any other phones?" She pushed the telephone across the desk. "I guess it's all right, long as it

isn't a toll call."

"I'm calling the Highway Patrol. Do you know their local number?"

"I don't remember." She handed me the telephone directory.

"There's been an accident," I said as I dialed.

"A highway accident? Where did it happen?"

"Right here, sister. Right here in room thirteen."

But I didn't tell that to the Highway Patrol. I told them I had found a dead man in a car on the parking lot above the county beach. The girl listened with widening eyes and nostrils. Before I finished she rose in a flurry and left the office by the rear door.

She came back with the proprietor. His eyes were black and bright like nailheads in leather, and the scampering dance of his feet was almost frenzied. "What is this?"

"I came across a dead man up the road a piece."

"So why do you come back here to telephone?" His head was in butting position, his hands outspread and gripping the corners of the desk. "Has it got anything to do with us?"

"He's wearing a couple of your towels."

"What?"

"And he was bleeding heavily before he died. I think somebody shot him in the stomach. Maybe you did."

"You're loco," he said, but not very emphatically. "Crazy accusa-

tions like that, they will get you into trouble. What is your business?"

"I'm a private detective."

"You followed him here, is that it? You were going to arrest him, so he shot himself?"

"Wrong on both counts," I said. "I came here to sleep. And they don't shoot themselves in the stomach. It's too uncertain, and slow. No suicide wants to die of peritonitis."

"So what are you doing now, trying to make scandal for my business?"

"If your business includes trying to cover for murder."

"He shot himself," the little man insisted.

"How do you know?"

"Donny. I spoke to him just now."

"And how does Donny know?"

"The man told him."

"Is Donny your night keyboy?"

"He was. I think I will fire him, for stupidity. He didn't even tell me about this mess. I had to find it out for myself. The hard way."

"Donny means well," the girl said at his shoulder. "I'm sure he didn't realize what happened."

"Who does?" I said. "I want to talk to Donny. But first let's have a look at the register."

He took a pile of cards from a drawer and riffled through them. His large hands, hairy-backed, were calm and expert, like animals that lived a serene life of their own, independent of their emotional owner.

They dealt me one of the cards across the desk. It was inscribed in block capitals: Richard Rowe, Detroit, Mich.

I said: "There was a woman with him."

"Impossible."

"Or he was a transvestite."

He surveyed me blankly, thinking of something else. "The HP, did you tell them to come here? They know it happened here?"

"Not yet. But they'll find your towels. He used them for bandage."

"I see. Yes. Of course." He struck himself with a clenched fist on the temple. It made a noise like someone maltreating a pumpkin. "You are a private detective, you say. Now if you informed the police that you were on the trail of a fugitive, a fugitive from justice. He shot himself rather than face arrest. For five hundred dollars?"

"I'm not that private," I said. "I have some public responsibility. Besides, the cops would do a little checking and catch me out."

"Not necessarily. He *was* a fugitive from justice, you know."

"I hear you telling me."

"Give me a little time, and I can even present you with his record."

The girl was leaning back away from her father, her eyes starred with broken illusions. "Daddy," she said weakly.

He didn't hear her. All of his bright black attention was fixed on me. "Seven hundred dollars?"

"No sale. The higher you raise it,

the guiltier you look. Were you here last night?"

"You are being absurd," he said. "I spent the entire evening with my wife. We drove up to Los Angeles to attend the ballet." By way of supporting evidence, he hummed a couple of bars from Tchaikovsky. "We didn't arrive back here in Emerald Bay until nearly two o'clock."

"Alibis can be fixed."

"By criminals, yes," he said. "I am not a criminal."

The girl put a hand on his shoulder. He cringed away, his face creased by monkey fury, but his face was hidden from her.

"Daddy," she said. "Was he murdered, do you think?"

"How do I know?" His voice was wild and high, as if she had touched the spring of his emotion. "I wasn't here. I only know what Donny told me."

The girl was examining me with narrowed eyes, as if I was a new kind of animal she had discovered and was trying to think of a use for.

"This gentleman is a detective," she said, "or claims to be."

I pulled out my photostat and slapped it down on the desk. The little man picked it up and looked from it to my face. "Will you go to work for me?"

"Doing what, telling little white lies?"

The girl answered for him: "See what you can find out about this — this death. On my word of honor,

father had nothing to do with it.”

I made a snap decision, the kind you live to regret. “All right. I’ll take a fifty-dollar advance. Which is a good deal less than five hundred. My first advice to you is to tell the police everything you know. Provided that you’re innocent.”

“You insult me,” he said.

But he flicked a fifty-dollar bill from the cash drawer and pressed it into my hand fervently, like a love token. I had a queasy feeling that I had been conned into taking his money, not much of it but enough. The feeling deepened when he still refused to talk. I had to use all the arts of persuasion even to get Donny’s address out of him.

The keyboy lived in a shack on the edge of a desolate stretch of dunes. I guessed that it had once been somebody’s beach house, before sand had drifted like unthawing snow in the angles of the walls and winter storms had broken the tiles and cracked the concrete foundations. Huge chunks of concrete were piled haphazardly on what had been a terrace overlooking the sea.

On one of the tilted slabs, Donny was stretched like a long albino lizard in the sun. The onshore wind carried the sound of my motor to his ears. He sat up blinking, recognized me when I stopped the car, and ran into the house.

I descended flagstone steps and knocked on the warped door. “Open up, Donny.”

“Go away,” he answered huskily.

His eye gleamed like a snail through a crack in the wood.

“I’m working for Mr. Salanda. He wants us to have a talk.”

“You can go and take a running jump at yourself, you and Mr. Salanda both.”

“Open it or I’ll break it down.”

I waited for a while. He shot back the bolt. The door creaked reluctantly open. He leaned against the doorpost, searching my face with his eyes, his hairless body shivering from an internal chill. I pushed past him, through a kitchenette that was indescribably filthy, littered with the remnants of old meals, and gaseous with their odors. He followed me silently on bare soles into a larger room whose sprung floorboards undulated under my feet. The picture window had been broken and patched with cardboard. The stone fireplace was choked with garbage. The only furniture was an army cot in one corner where Donny apparently slept.

“Nice homey place you have here. It has that lived-in quality.”

He seemed to take it as a compliment, and I wondered if I was dealing with a moron. “It suits me. I never was much of a one for fancy quarters. I like it here, where I can hear the ocean at night.”

“What else do you hear at night, Donny?”

He missed the point of the question, or pretended to. “All different things. Big trucks going past on the highway. I like to hear those night

sounds. Now I guess I can't go on living here. Mr. Salanda owns it, he lets me live here for nothing. Now he'll be kicking me out of here, I guess."

"On account of what happened last night?"

"Uh-huh." He subsided onto the cot, his doleful head supported by his hands.

I stood over him. "Just what did happen last night, Donny?"

"A bad thing," he said. "This fella checked in about ten o'clock —"

"The man with the dark curly hair?"

"That's the one. He checked in about ten, and I gave him room thirteen. Around about midnight I thought I heard a gun go off from there. It took me a little while to get my nerve up, then I went back to see what was going on. This fella came out of the room, without no clothes on. Just some kind of a bandage around his waist. He looked like some kind of a crazy Indian or something. He had a gun in his hand, and he was staggering, and I could see that he was bleeding some. He come right up to me and pushed the gun in my gut and told me to keep my trap shut. He said I wasn't to tell anybody I saw him, now or later. He said if I opened my mouth about it to anybody, that he would come back and kill me. But now he's dead, isn't he?"

"He's dead."

I could smell the fear on Donny; there's an unexplained trace of

canine in my chromosomes. The hairs were prickling on the back of my neck, and I wondered if Donny's fear was of the past or for the future. The pimples stood out in bas-relief against his pale lugubrious face.

"I think he was murdered, Donny. You're lying, aren't you?"

"Me lying?" But his reaction was slow and feeble.

"The dead man didn't check in alone. He had a woman with him."

"What woman?" he said in elaborate surprise.

"You tell me. Her name was Fern. I think she did the shooting, and you caught her red-handed. The wounded man got out of the room and into his car and away. The woman stayed behind to talk to you. She probably paid you to dispose of his clothes and fake a new registration card for the room. But you both overlooked the blood on the floor of the bathroom. Am I right?"

"You couldn't be wronger, mister. Are you a cop?"

"A private detective. You're in deep trouble, Donny. You'd better talk yourself out of it if you can, before the cops start on you."

"I didn't do anything." His voice broke like a boy's. It went strangely with the glints of grey in his hair.

"Faking the register is a serious rap, even if they don't hang accessory to murder on you."

He began to expostulate in formless sentences that ran together. At the same time his hand was moving across the dirty grey blanket. It bur-

rowed under the pillow and came out holding a crumpled card. He tried to stuff it into his mouth and chew it. I tore it away from between his discolored teeth.

It was a registration card from the motel, signed in a boyish scrawl: Mr. and Mrs. Richard Rowe, Detroit, Mich.

Donny was trembling violently. Below his cheap cotton shorts, his bony knees vibrated like tuning forks. "It wasn't my fault," he cried. "She held a gun on me."

"What did you do with the man's clothes?"

"Nothing. She didn't even let me into the room. She bundled them up and took them away herself."

"Where did she go?"

"Down the highway towards town. She walked away on the shoulder of the road and that was the last I saw of her."

"How much did she pay you, Donny?"

"Nothing, not a cent. I already told you, she held a gun on me."

"And you were so scared you kept quiet until this morning?"

"That's right. I was scared. Who wouldn't be scared?"

"She's gone now," I said. "You can give me a description of her."

"Yeah." He made a visible effort to pull his vague thoughts together. One of his eyes was a little off center, lending his face a stunned, amorphous appearance. "She was a big tall dame with blondey hair."

"Dyed?"

"I guess so, I dunno. She wore it in a braid like, on top of her head. She was kind of fat, built like a lady wrestler, great big watermelons on her. Big legs."

"How was she dressed?"

"I didn't hardly notice, I was so scared. I think she had some kind of a purple coat on, with black fur around the neck. Plenty of rings on her fingers and stuff."

"How old?"

"Pretty old, I'd say. Older than me, and I'm going on thirty-nine."

"And she did the shooting?"

"I guess so. She told me to say if anybody asked me, I was to say that Mr. Rowe shot himself."

"You're very suggestible, aren't you, Donny? It's a dangerous way to be, with people pushing each other around the way they do."

"I didn't get that, mister. Come again." He batted his pale blue eyes at me, smiling expectantly.

"Skip it," I said and left him.

A few hundred yards up the highway I passed an HP car with two uniformed men in the front seat looking grim. Donny was in for it now. I pushed him out of my mind and drove across country to Palm Springs.

Palm Springs is still a one-horse town, but the horse is a Palomino with silver trappings. Most of the girls were Palomino, too. The main street was a cross-section of Hollywood and Vine transported across the desert by some unnatural force and disguised in western costumes

which fooled nobody. Not even me.

I found Gretchen's lingerie shop in an expensive-looking arcade built around an imitation flagstone patio. In the patio's centre a little fountain gurgled pleasantly, flinging small lariats of spray against the heat. It was late in March, and the season was ending. Most of the shops, including the one I entered, were deserted except for the hired help.

It was a small cool shop, faintly perfumed by a legion of vanished dolls. Stockings and robes and other garments were coiled on the glass counters or hung like brilliant tree-snakes on display stands along the narrow walls. A henna-headed woman emerged from rustling recesses at the rear and came tripping towards me on her toes.

"You are looking for a gift, sir?" she cried with a wilted kind of gaiety. Behind her painted mask, she was tired and aging and it was Saturday afternoon and the lucky ones were dunking themselves in kidney-shaped swimming pools behind walls she couldn't climb.

"Not exactly. In fact, not at all. A peculiar thing happened to me last night. I'd like to tell you about it, but it's kind of a complicated story."

She looked me over quizzically and decided that I worked for a living, too. The phony smile faded away. Another smile took its place, which I liked better. "You look as if you had a fairly rough night. And you could do with a shave."

"I met a girl," I said. "Actually she was a mature woman, a statuesque blonde to be exact. I picked her up on the beach at Laguna, if you want me to be brutally frank."

"I couldn't bear it if you weren't. What kind of a pitch is this, brother?"

"Wait. You're spoiling my story. Something clicked when we met, in that sunset light, on the edge of the warm summer sea."

"It's always bloody cold when I go in."

"It wasn't last night. We swam in the moonlight and had a gay time and all. Then she went away. I didn't realize until she was gone that I didn't know her telephone number, or even her last name."

"Married woman, eh? What do you think I am, a lonely hearts club?" Still, she was interested, though she probably didn't believe me. "She mentioned me, is that it? What was her first name?"

"Fern."

"Unusual name. You say she was a big blonde?"

"Magnificently proportioned," I said. "If I had a classical education I'd call her Junoesque."

"You're kidding me, aren't you?"

"A little."

"I thought so. Personally I don't mind a little kidding. What did she say about me?"

"Nothing but good. As a matter of fact, I was complimenting her on her — er — garments."

"I see." She was long past blush-

ing. "We had a customer last fall some time, by the name of Fern. Fern Dee. She had some kind of a job at the Joshua Club, I think. But she doesn't fit the description at all. This one was a brunette, a middle-sized brunette, quite young. I remember the name Fern because she wanted it embroidered on all the things she bought. A corny idea if you ask me, but that was her girlish desire and who am I to argue with girlish desires."

"Is she still in town?"

"I haven't seen her lately, not for months. But it couldn't be the woman you're looking for. Or could it?"

"How long ago was she in here?"

She pondered. "Early last fall, around the start of the season. She only came in that once, and made a big purchase, stockings and night-wear and underthings. The works. I remember thinking at the time, here was a girlie who suddenly hit the chips but heavily."

"She might have put on weight since then, and dyed her hair. Strange things can happen to the female form."

"You're telling me," she said. "How old was — your friend?"

"About forty, I'd say, give or take a little."

"It couldn't be the same one then. The girl I'm talking about was twenty-five at the outside, and I don't make mistakes about women's ages. I've seen too many of them in all stages, from Quentin quail to

hags, and I certainly do mean hags."

"I bet you have."

She studied me with eyes shadowed by mascara and experience. "You a policeman?"

"I have been."

"You want to tell mother what it's all about?"

"Another time. Where's the Joshua Club?"

"It won't be open yet."

"I'll try it anyway."

She shrugged her thin shoulders and gave me directions. I thanked her.

It occupied a plain-faced one-story building half a block off the main street. The padded leather door swung inward when I pushed it. I passed through a lobby with a retractable roof, which contained a jungle growth of banana trees. The big main room was decorated with tinted desert photomurals. Behind a rattan bar with a fishnet canopy, a white-coated Caribbean type was drying shot-glasses with a dirty towel. His face looked uncommunicative.

On the orchestra dais beyond the piled chairs in the dining area, a young man in shirt-sleeves was playing bop piano. His fingers shadowed the tune, ran circles around it, played leap-frog with it, and managed never to hit it on the nose. I stood beside him for a while and listened to him work. He looked up finally, still strumming with his left hand in the bass. He had soft-centered eyes and frozen-looking nos-

trils and a whistling mouth.

"Nice piano," I said.

"I think so."

"Fifty-second Street?"

"It's the street with the beat and I'm not effete." His left hand struck the same chord three times and dropped away from the keys. "Looking for somebody, friend?"

"Fern Dee. She asked me to drop by some time."

"Too bad. Another wasted trip. She left here end of last year, the dear. She wasn't a bad little nightingale but she was no pro, Joe, you know? She had it but she couldn't project it. When she warbled the evening died, no matter how hard she tried, I don't wanna be snide."

"Where did she lam, Sam, or don't you give a damn?"

He smiled like a corpse in a deft mortician's hands. "I heard the boss retired her to private life. Took her home to live with him. That is what I heard. But I don't mix with the big boy socially, so I couldn't say for sure that she's impure. Is it anything to you?"

"Something, but she's over twenty-one."

"Not more than a couple of years over twenty-one." His eyes darkened, and his thin mouth twisted sideways angrily. "I hate to see it happen to a pretty little twist like Fern. Not that I yearn —"

I broke in on his nonsense rhymes: "Who's the big boss you mentioned, the one Fern went to live with?"

"Angel. Who else?"

"What heaven does he inhabit?"

"You must be new in these parts —" His eyes swivelled and focused on something over my shoulder. His mouth opened and closed.

A grating tenor said behind me: "Got a question you want answered, bud?"

The pianist went back to the piano as if the ugly tenor had wiped me out, annulled my very existence. I turned to its source. He was standing in a narrow doorway behind the drums, a man in his thirties with thick black curly hair and a heavy jaw blue-shadowed by closely shaven beard. He was almost the living image of the dead man in the Cadillac. The likeness gave me a jolt. The heavy black gun in his hand gave me another.

He came around the drums and approached me, bull-shouldered in a fuzzy tweed jacket, holding the gun in front of him like a dangerous gift. The pianist was doing wry things in quickened tempo with the dead march from *Saul*. A wit.

The dead man's almost-double waved his cruel chin and the crueller gun in unison. "Come inside, unless you're a government man. If you are, I'll have a look at your credentials."

"I'm a freelance."

"Inside then."

The muzzle of the automatic came into my solar plexus like a pointing iron finger. Obeying its injunction, I made my way between empty music stands and through

the narrow door behind the drums. The iron finger, probing my back, directed me down a lightless corridor to a small square office containing a metal desk, a safe, a filing cabinet. It was windowless, lit by fluorescent tubes in the ceiling. Under their pitiless glare, the face above the gun looked more than ever like the dead man's face. I wondered if I had been mistaken about his deadness, or if the desert heat had addled my brain.

"I'm the manager here," he said, standing so close that I could smell the piney stuff he used on his crisp dark hair. "You got anything to ask about the members of the staff, you ask me."

"Will I get an answer?"

"Try me, bud."

"The name is Archer," I said. "I'm a private detective."

"Working for who?"

"You wouldn't be interested."

"I am, though, very much interested." The gun hopped forward like a toad into my stomach again, with the weight of his shoulder behind it. "Working for who did you say?"

I swallowed anger and nausea, estimating my chances of knocking the gun to one side and taking him bare-handed. The chances seemed pretty slim. He was heavier than I was, and he held the automatic as if it had grown out of the end of his arm. You've seen too many movies, I told myself. I told him: "A motel owner on the coast. A man was shot

in one of his rooms last night. I happened to check in there a few minutes later. The old boy hired me to look into the shooting."

"Who was it got himself ventilated?"

"He could be your brother," I said. "Do you have a brother?"

He lost his color. The center of his attention shifted from the gun to my face. The gun nodded. I knocked it up and sideways with a hard left uppercut. Its discharge burned the side of my face and drilled a hole in the wall. My right sank into his neck. The gun thumped the cork floor.

He went down but not out, his spread hand scrabbling for the gun, then closing on it. I stamped his wrist. He grunted but wouldn't let go of it. I threw a rabbit punch at the short hairs on the back of his neck. He took it and came up under it with the gun, shaking his head from side to side like a bull.

"Up with the hands now," he murmured. He was one of those men whose voices went soft and mild when they were in killing mood. He had the glassy impervious eyes of a killer. "Is Bart dead?"

"Very dead. He was shot in the belly."

"Who shot him?"

"That's the question."

"Who shot him?" he said in a quiet white-faced rage. The single eye of the gun stared emptily at my midriff. "It could happen to you, bud, here and now."

"A woman was with him. She took a quick powder after it happened."

"I heard you say a name to Alfie piano-player. Was it Fern?"

"It could have been."

"What do you mean, it could have been?"

"She was there in the room, apparently. If you can give me a description of her?"

His hard brown eyes looked past me. "I can do better than that. There's a picture of her on the wall behind you. Take a look at it. Keep those hands up high."

I shifted my feet and turned uneasily. The wall was blank. I heard him draw a breath and move, and tried to evade his blow. No use. It caught the back of my head. I pitched forward against the blank wall and slid down it into three dimensions of blankness.

The blankness coagulated into colored shapes. The shapes were half human and half beast and they dissolved and re-formed, dancing through the caves of my mind to dream a mixture of both jive and nightmare music. A dead man with a furred breast climbed out of a hole and doubled and quadrupled. I ran away from them through a twisting tunnel which led to an echo chamber. Under the roaring surge of the nightmare music, a rasping tenor was saying:

"I figure it like this. Vario's tip was good. Bart found her in Aca-pulco, and he was bringing her

back from there. She conned him into stopping off at this motel for the night. Bart always went for her."

"I didn't know that," a dry old voice put in. "This is very interesting news about Bart and Fern. You should have told me before about this. Then I would not have sent him for her and this would not have happened. Would it, Gino?"

My mind was still partly absent, wandering underground in the echoing caves. I couldn't recall the voices, or who they were talking about. I had barely sense enough to keep my eyes closed and go on listening. I was lying on my back on a hard surface. The voices were above me.

The tenor said: "You can't blame Bartolomeo. She's the one, the dirty treacherous lying little bitch."

"Calm yourself, Gino. I blame nobody. But more than ever now, we want her back, isn't that right?"

"I'll kill her," he said softly, almost wistfully.

"Perhaps. It may not be necessary now. I dislike promiscuous killing —"

"Since when, Angel?"

"Don't interrupt, it's not polite. I learned to put first things first. Now what is the most important thing? Why did we want her back in the first place? I will tell you: to shut her mouth. The government heard she left me, they wanted her to testify about my income. We wanted to find her first and shut her mouth, isn't that right?"

"I know how to shut her mouth,"

the younger man said very quietly.

"First we try a better way, my way. You learn when you're as old as I am there is a use for everything, and not to be wasteful. Not even wasteful with somebody else's blood. She shot your brother, right? So now we have something on her, strong enough to keep her mouth shut for good. She'd get off with second degree, with what she's got, but even that is five to ten in Tehachapi. I think all I need to do is tell her that. First we have to find her, eh?"

"I'll find her. Bart didn't have any trouble finding her."

"With Vario's tip to help him, no. But I think I'll keep you here with me, Gino. You're too hot-blooded, you and your brother both. I want her alive. Then I can talk to her, and then we'll see."

"You're going soft in your old age, Angel."

"Am I?" There was a light slapping sound, of a blow on flesh. "I have killed many men, for good reasons. So I think you will take that back."

"I take it back."

"And call me Mr. Funk. If I am so old, you will treat my grey hairs with respect. Call me Mr. Funk."

"Mr. Funk."

"All right, your friend here, does he know where Fern is?"

"I don't think so."

"Mr. Funk."

"Mr. Funk." Gino's voice was a whining snarl.

"I think he is coming to. His eyelids fluttered."

The toe of a shoe prodded my side. Somebody slapped my face a number of times. I opened my eyes and sat up. The back of my head was throbbing like an engine fuelled by pain. Gino rose from a squatting position and stood over me.

"Stand up."

I rose shakily to my feet. I was in a stone-walled room with a high beamed ceiling, sparsely furnished with stiff old black oak chairs and tables. The room and the furniture seemed to have been built for a race of giants.

The man behind Gino was small and old and weary. He might have been an unsuccessful grocer or a superannuated barkeep who had come to California for his health. Clearly his health was poor. Even in the stifling heat he looked pale and chilly, as if he had caught chronic death from one of his victims. He moved closer to me, his legs shuffling feebly in wrinkled blue trousers that bagged at the knees. His shrunken torso was swathed in a heavy blue turtleneck sweater. He had two days' beard on his chin, like moth-eaten grey plush.

"Gino informs me that you are investigating a shooting." His accent was Middle-European and very faint, as if he had forgotten his origins. "Where did this happen, exactly?"

"I don't think I'll tell you that. You can read it in the papers to-

morrow night if you are interested."

"I am not prepared to wait. I am impatient. Do you know where Fern is?"

"I wouldn't be here if I did."

"But you know where she was last night."

"I couldn't be sure."

"Tell me anyway to the best of your knowledge."

"I don't think I will."

"He doesn't think he will," the old man said to Gino.

"I think you better let me out of here. Kidnaping is a tough rap. You don't want to die in the pen."

He smiled at me, with a tolerance more terrible than anger. His eyes were like thin stab-wounds filled with watery blood. Shuffling unhurriedly to the head of the mahogany table behind him, he pressed a spot in the rug with the toe of one felt slipper. Two men in blue serge suits entered the room and stepped towards me briskly. They belonged to the race of giants it had been built for.

Gino moved behind me and reached to pin my arms. I pivoted, landed one short punch, and took a very hard counter below the belt. Something behind me slammed my kidneys with the heft of a trailer truck bumper. I turned on weakening legs and caught a chin with my elbow. Gino's fist, or one of the beams from the ceiling, landed on my neck. My head rang like a gong. Under its clangor, Angel was saying pleasantly:

"Where was Fern last night?"

I didn't say.

The men in blue serge held me upright by the arms while Gino used my head as a punching bag. I rolled with his lefts and rights as well as I could but his timing improved and mine deteriorated. His face wavered and receded. At intervals Angel inquired politely if I was willing to assist him now. I asked myself confusedly in the hail of fists what I was holding out for or who I was protecting. Probably I was holding out for myself. It seemed important to me not to give in to violence. But my identity was dissolving and receding like the face in front of me.

I concentrated on hating Gino's face. That kept it clear and steady for a while: a stupid square-jawed face barred by a single black brow, two close-set brown eyes staring glassily. His fists continued to rock me like an air-hammer.

Finally Angel placed a clawed hand on his shoulder, and nodded to my handlers. They deposited me in a chair. It swung on an invisible wire from the ceiling in great circles. It swung out wide over the desert, across a bleak horizon, into darkness.

I came to cursing. Gino was standing over me again. There was an empty water-glass in his hand, and my face was dripping. Angel spoke up beside him, with a trace of irritation in his voice:

"You stand up good under punishment. Why go to all the trouble,

though? I want a little information, that is all. My friend, my little girlfriend, ran away. I'm impatient to get her back."

"You're going about it the wrong way."

Gino leaned close, and laughed harshly. He shattered the glass on the arm of my chair, held the jagged base up to my eyes. Fear ran through me, cold and light in my veins. My eyes were my connection with everything. Blindness would be the end of me. I closed my eyes, shutting out the cruel edges of the broken thing in his hand.

"Nix, Gino," the old man said. "I have a better idea as usual. There is heat on, remember."

They retreated to the far side of the table and conferred there in low voices. The young man left the room. The old man came back to me. His storm troopers stood one on each side of me, looking down at him in ignorant awe.

"What is your name, young fellow?"

I told him. My mouth was puffed and lipping, tongue tangled in ropes of blood.

"I like a young fellow who can take it, Mr. Archer. You say that you're a detective. You find people for a living, is that right?"

"I have a client," I said.

"Now you have another. Whoever he is, I can buy and sell him, believe me. Fifty times over." His thin blue hands scoured each other. They made a sound like two dry sticks

rubbing together on a dead tree.

"Narcotics?" I said. "Are you the wheel in the heroin racket? I've heard of you."

His watery eyes veiled themselves like a bird's. "Now don't ask foolish questions, or I will lose my respect for you entirely."

"That would break my heart."

"Then comfort yourself with this." He brought an old-fashioned purse out of his hip pocket, abstracted a crumpled bill and smoothed it out on my knee. It was a five-hundred-dollar bill.

"This girl of mine you are going to find for me, she is young and foolish. I am old and foolish, to have trusted her. No matter. Find her for me and bring her back and I will give you another bill like this one. Take it."

"Take it," one of my guards repeated. "Mr. Funk said for you to take it."

I took it. "You're wasting your money. I don't even know what she looks like. I don't know anything about her."

"Gino is bringing a picture. He came across her last fall at a recording studio in Hollywood where Alfie had a date. He gave her an audition and took her on at the club, more for her looks than for the talent she had. As a singer she flopped. But she is a pretty little thing, about five foot four, nice figure, dark brown hair, big hazel eyes. I found a use for her." Lechery flickered briefly in his eyes and went out.

"You find a use for everything."

"That is good economics. I often think if I wasn't what I am, I would make a good economist. Nothing would go to waste." He paused, and dragged his dying old mind back to the subject: "She was here for a couple of months, then she ran out on me, silly girl. I heard last week that she was in Acapulco, and the federal Grand Jury was going to subpoena her. I have tax troubles, Mr. Archer, all my life I have tax troubles. Unfortunately I let Fern help with my books a little bit. She could do me great harm. So I sent Bart to Mexico to bring her back. But I meant no harm to her. I still intend her no harm, even now. A little talk, a little realistic discussion with Fern, that is all that will be necessary. So even the shooting of my good friend Bart serves its purpose. Where did it happen, by the way?"

The question flicked out like a hook on the end of a long line.

"In San Diego," I said, "at a place near the airport: the Mission Motel."

He smiled paternally. "Now you are showing good sense."

Gino came back with a silver-framed photograph in his hand. He handed it to Angel, who passed it on to me. It was a studio portrait, of the kind intended for publicity cheesecake. On a black velvet divan, against an artificial night sky, a young woman reclined in a gossamer robe that was split to show one bent

leg. Shadows accentuated the lines of her body and the fine bones in her face. Under the heavy makeup which widened the mouth and darkened the half-closed eyes, I recognized Ella Salanda. The picture was signed in white, in the lower right-handed corner: "To my Angel, with all my love, Fern."

A sickness assailed me, worse than the sickness induced by Gino's fists. Angel breathed into my face: "Fern Dee is a stage name. Her real name I never learned. She told me one time that if her family knew where she was they would die of shame." He chuckled drily. "She will not want them to know that she killed a man."

I drew away from his charnel-house breath. My guards escorted me out. Gino started to follow, but Angel called him back.

"Don't wait to hear from me," the old man said after me. "I expect to hear from you."

The building stood on a rise in the open desert. It was huge and turreted, like somebody's idea of a castle in Spain. The last rays of the sun washed its walls in purple light and cast long shadows across its barren acreage. It was surrounded by a ten-foot hurricane fence topped with three strands of barbed wire.

Palm Springs was a clutter of white stones in the distance, di-amed by an occasional light. The dull red sun was balanced like a glowing cigar-butt on the rim of the hills above the town. A man with a

bulky shoulder harness under his brown suede windbreaker drove me towards it. The sun fell out of sight, and darkness gathered like an impalpable ash on the desert, like a column of blue-grey smoke towering into the sky.

The sky was blue-black and swarming with stars when I got back to Emerald Bay. A black Cadillac followed me out of Palm Springs. I lost it in the winding streets of Pasadena. So far as I could see, I had lost it for good.

The neon Mexican lay peaceful under the stars. A smaller sign at his feet asserted that there was No Vacancy. The lights in the long low stucco buildings behind him shone brightly. The office door was open behind a screen, throwing a barred rectangle of light on the gravel. I stepped into it, and froze.

Behind the registration desk in the office, a woman was avidly reading a magazine. Her shoulders and bosom were massive. Her hair was blonde, piled on her head in corneted braids. There were rings on her fingers, a triple strand of cultured pearls around her thick white throat. She was the woman Donny had described to me.

I pulled the screen door open and said rudely: "Who are you?"

She glanced up, twisting her mouth in a sour grimace. "Well! I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Sorry. I thought I'd seen you before somewhere."

"Well, you haven't." She looked me over coldly. "What happened to your face, anyway?"

"I had a little plastic surgery done. By an amateur surgeon."

She clucked disapprovingly. "If you're looking for a room, we're full up for the night. I don't believe I'd rent you a room even if we weren't. Look at your clothes."

"Uh-huh. Where's Mr. Salanda?"

"Is it any business of yours?"

"He wants to see me. I'm doing a job for him."

"What kind of a job?"

I mimicked her: "Is it any business of yours?" I was irritated. Under her mounds of flesh she had a personality as thin and hard and abrasive as a rasp.

"Watch who you're getting flip with, sonny boy." She rose, and her shadow loomed immense across the back door of the room. The magazine fell closed on the desk: it was *Teen-age Confessions*. "I am Mrs. Salanda. Are you a handyman?"

"A sort of one," I said. "I'm a garbage collector in the moral field. You look as if you could use me."

The crack went over her head. "Well, you're wrong. And I don't think my husband hired you, either. This is a respectable motel."

"Uh-huh. Are you Ella's mother?"

"I should say not. That little snip is no daughter of mine."

"Her stepmother?"

"Mind your own business. You better get out of here. The police are keeping a close watch on this

place tonight, if you're planning any tricks."

"Where's Ella now?"

"I don't know and I don't care. She's probably gallivanting off around the countryside. It's all she's good for. One day at home in the last six months, that's a fine record for a young unmarried girl." Her face was thick and bloated with anger against her stepdaughter. She went on talking blindly, as if she had forgotten me entirely: "I told her father he was an old fool to take her back. How does he know what she's been up to? I say let the ungrateful filly go and fend for herself."

"Is that what you say, Mabel?" Salanda had softly opened the door behind her. He came forward into the room, doubly dwarfed by her blonde magnitude. "I say if it wasn't for you, my dear, Ella wouldn't have been driven away from home in the first place."

She turned on him in a blubbering rage. He drew himself up tall and reached to snap his fingers under her nose. "Go back into the house. You are a disgrace to women, a disgrace to motherhood."

"I'm not *her* mother, thank God."

"Thank God," he echoed, shaking his fist at her. She retreated like a schooner under full sail, menaced by a gunboat. The door closed on her. Salanda turned to me:

"I'm sorry, Mr. Archer. I have difficulties with my wife, I am ashamed to say it. I was an imbecile to marry again. I gained a senseless

hulk of flesh, and lost my daughter. Old imbecile!" he denounced himself, wagging his great head sadly. "I married in hot blood. Sexual passion has always been my downfall. It runs in my family, this insane hunger for bloneness and stupidity and size." He spread his arms in a wide and futile embrace on emptiness.

"Forget it."

"If I could." He came closer to examine my face. "You are injured, Mr. Archer. Your mouth is damaged. There is blood on your chin."

"I was in a slight brawl."

"On my account?"

"On my own. But I think it's time you levelled with me."

"Levelled with you?"

"Told me the truth. You knew who was shot last night, and who shot him, and why."

He touched my arm, with a quick, tentative grace. "I have only one daughter, Mr. Archer, only the one child. It was my duty to defend her, as best as I could."

"Defend her from what?"

"From shame, from the police, from prison." He flung one arm out, indicating the whole range of human disaster. "I am a man of honor, Mr. Archer. But private honor stands higher with me than public honor. The man was abducting my daughter. She brought him here in the hope of being rescued. Her last hope."

"I think that's true. You should have told me this before."

"I was alarmed, upset. I feared your intentions. Any minute the police were due to arrive."

"But you had a right to shoot him. It wasn't even a crime. The crime was his."

"I didn't know that then. The truth came out to me gradually. I feared that Ella was involved with him." His flat black gaze sought my face and rested on it. "However, I did not shoot him, Mr. Archer. I was not even here at the time. I told you that this morning, and you may take my word for it."

"Was Mrs. Salanda here?"

"No sir, she was not. Why should you ask me that?"

"Donny described the woman who checked in with the dead man. The description fits your wife."

"Donny was lying. I told him to give a false description of the woman. Apparently he was unequal to the task of inventing one."

"Can you prove that she was with you?"

"Certainly I can. We had reserved seats at the theatre. Those who sat around us can testify that the seats were not empty. Mrs. Salanda and I, we are not an inconspicuous couple." He smiled wryly.

"Ella killed him then."

He neither assented, nor denied it. "I was hoping that you were on my side, my side and Ella's. Am I wrong?"

"I'll have to talk to her, before I know myself. Where is she?"

"I do not know, Mr. Archer, sin-

cerely I do not know. She went away this afternoon, after the policemen questioned her. They were suspicious, but we managed to soothe their suspicions. They did not know that she had just come home, from another life, and I did not tell them. Mabel wanted to tell them. I silenced her." His white teeth clicked together.

"What about Donny?"

"They took him down to the station for questioning. He told them nothing damaging. Donny can appear very stupid when he wishes. He has the reputation of an idiot, but he is not so dumb. Donny has been with me for many years. He has a deep devotion for my daughter. I got him released tonight."

"You should have taken my advice," I said, "taken the police into your confidence. Nothing would have happened to you. The dead man was a mobster, and what he was doing amounts to kidnaping. Your daughter was a witness against his boss."

"She told me that. I am glad that it is true. Ella has not always told me the truth. She has been a hard girl to bring up, without a good mother to set her an example. Where has she been these last six months, Mr. Archer?"

"Singing in a night club in Palm Springs. Her boss was a racketeer."

"A racketeer?" His mouth and nose screwed up, as if he sniffed the odor of corruption.

"Where she was isn't important,

compared with where she is now. The boss is still after her. He hired me to look for her."

Salanda regarded me with fear and dislike, as if the odor originated in me. "You let him hire you?"

"It was my best chance of getting out of his place alive. I'm not his boy, if that's what you mean."

"You ask me to believe you?"

"I'm telling you. Ella is in danger. As a matter of fact, we all are." I didn't tell him about the second black Cadillac. Gino would be driving it, wandering the night roads with a ready gun in his armpit and revenge corroding his heart.

"My daughter is aware of the danger," he said. "She warned me of it."

"She must have told you where she was going."

"No. But she may be at the beach house. The house where Donny lives. I will come with you."

"You stay here. Keep your doors locked. If any strangers show and start prowling the place, call the police."

He bolted the door behind me as I went out. Yellow traffic lights cast wan reflections on the asphalt. Streams of cars went by to the north, to the south. To the west, where the sea lay, a great black emptiness opened under the stars. The beach house sat on its white margin, a little over a mile from the motel.

For the second time that day, I knocked on the warped kitchen door. There was light behind it, shining

through the cracks. A shadow obscured the light.

"Who is it?" Donny said. Fear or some other emotion had filled his mouth with pebbles.

"You know me, Donny."

The door groaned on its hinges. He gestured dumbly to me to come in, his face a white blur. When he turned his head, and the light from the living room caught his face, I saw that grief was the emotion that marked it. His eyes were swollen as if he had been crying. More than ever he resembled a dilapidated boy whose growing pains had never paid off in manhood.

"Anybody with you?"

Sounds of movement in the living room answered my question. I brushed him aside and went in. Ella Salanda was bent over an open suitcase on the camp cot. She straightened, her mouth thin, eyes wide and dark. The .38 automatic in her hand gleamed dully under the naked bulb suspended from the ceiling.

"I'm getting out of here," she said, "and you're not going to stop me."

"I'm not sure I want to try. Where are you going, Fern?"

Donny spoke behind me, in his grief-thickened voice: "She's going away from me. She promised to stay here if I did what she told me. She promised to be my girl —"

"Shut up, stupid." Her voice cut like a lash, and Donny gasped as if the lash had been laid across his back.

"What did she tell you to do,

Donny? Tell me just what you did."

"When she checked in last night with the fella from Detroit. She made a sign I wasn't to let on I knew her. Later on she left me a note. She wrote it with a lipstick on a piece of paper towel. I still got it hidden, in the kitchen."

"What did she write in the note?"

He lingered behind me, fearful of the gun in the girl's hand, more fearful of her anger.

She said: "Don't be crazy, Donny. He doesn't know a thing, not a thing. He can't do anything to either of us."

"I don't care what happens, to me or anybody else," the anguished voice said behind me. "You're running out on me, breaking your promise to me. I always knew it was too good to be true. Now I just don't care any more."

"I care," she said. "I care what happens to me." Her hazel eyes shifted to me, above the unwavering gun. "I won't stay here. I'll shoot you if I have to."

"It shouldn't be necessary. Put it down, Fern. It's Bartolomeo's gun, isn't it? I found the shells to fit it in his glove compartment."

"How do you know so much?"

"I talked to Angel."

"Is he here?" Panic whined in her voice.

"No. I came alone."

"You better leave the same way then, while you can go under your own power."

"I'm staying. You need protec-

tion, whether you know it or not. And I need information. Donny, go in the kitchen and bring me that note."

"Don't do it, Donny. I'm warning you."

His sneakered feet made soft indecisive sounds. I advanced on the girl, talking quietly and steadily: "You conspired to kill a man, but you don't have to be afraid. He had it coming. Tell the whole story to the cops, and my guess is they won't even book you. Hell, you can even become famous. The government wants you as a witness in a tax case."

"What kind of a case?"

"A tax case against Angel. It's probably the only kind of rap they can pin on him. You can send him up for the rest of his life like Capone. You'll be a heroine, Fern."

"Don't call me Fern. I hate that name." There were sudden tears in her eyes. "I hate everything connected with that name. I hate myself."

"You'll hate yourself more if you don't put down that gun. Shoot me and it all starts over again. The cops will be on your trail, Angel's troopers will be gunning for you."

Now only the cot was between us, the cot and the unsteady gun facing me above it.

"This is the turning-point," I said. "You've made a lot of bum decisions and almost ruined yourself, playing footsie with the evillest men there are. You can go on the way you have been, getting in deeper

until you end up in a refrigerated drawer, or you can come back out of it now, into a decent life."

"A decent life? Here? With my father married to Mabel?"

"I don't think Mabel will last much longer. Anyway, I'm not Mabel. I'm on your side."

Ella made a decision. I could tell a mile away what she was going to do. She dropped the gun on the blanket. I scooped it up and turned to Donny:

"Let me see that note."

He disappeared through the kitchen door, head and shoulders drooping on the long stalk of his body.

"What could I do?" the girl said. "I was caught. It was Bart or me. All the way up from Acapulco I planned how I could get away. He held a gun in my side when we crossed the border, the same way when we stopped for gas or to eat at the drive-ins. I realized he had to be killed. My father's motel looked like my only chance. So I talked Bart into staying there with me overnight. He had no idea who the place belonged to. I didn't know what I was going to do. I only knew it had to be something drastic. Once I was back with Angel in the desert, that was the end of me. Even if he didn't kill me, it meant I'd have to go on living with him. Anything was better than that. So I wrote a note to Donny in the bathroom, and dropped it out the window. He was always crazy about me."

Her mouth had grown softer. She looked remarkably young and virginal. The faint blue hollows under her eyes were dewy. "Donny shot Bart with Bart's own gun. He had more nerve than I had. I lost my nerve when I went back into the room this morning. I didn't know about the blood in the bathroom. It was the last straw."

She was wrong. Something crashed in the kitchen. A cool draft swept the living room. A gun spoke twice, out of sight. Donny fell backwards through the doorway, a piece of brownish paper clutched in his hand. Blood gleamed on his shoulder like a red badge.

I stepped behind the cot and pulled the girl down to the floor with me. Gino came through the door, his two-colored sports shoe stepping on Donny's laboring chest. I shot the gun out of his hand. He floundered back against the wall, clutching at his wrist.

I sighted carefully for my second shot, until the black bar of his eyebrows was steady in the sights of the .38. The hole it made was invisible. Gino fell loosely forward, prone on the floor beside the man he had killed.

Ella Salanda ran across the room. She knelt, and cradled Donny's head in her lap. Incredibly, he spoke, in a loud sighing voice:

"You won't go away again, Ella? I did what you told me. You promised."

"Sure I promised. I won't leave

you, Donny. Crazy man. Crazy fool.”

“You like me better than you used to? Now?”

“I like you, Donny. You’re the most man there is.”

She held the poor insignificant head in her hands. He sighed, and his life came out bright-colored at the mouth. It was Donny who went away.

His hand relaxed, and I read the lipstick note she had written him on a piece of porous tissue:

“Donny: This man will kill me

unless you kill him first. His gun will be in his clothes on the chair beside the bed. Come in and get it at midnight and shoot to kill. Good luck. I’ll stay and be your girl if you do this, just like you always wished. Love. Ella.”

I looked at the pair on the floor. She was rocking his lifeless head against her breast. Beside them, Gino looked very small and lonely, a dummy leaking darkness from his brow.

Donny had his wish and I had mine. I wondered what Ella’s was.



The romance was a strange one, and the marriage was even stranger. Doc Marston wasn't surprised when the result was a

Sex Murder in Cameron

BY MICHAEL FESSIER

OLD Doc Marston is a stubborn cuss. When they found the body of Cass Buford with his head sliced in the middle by an axe and started looking for Linda, old Doc Marston said that what had hap-

pened to Cass didn't surprise him one bit. When they caught Linda hiding in Jim Carver's cabin trying to wash the blood out of her dress, Doc Marston seemed almost disappointed that she hadn't got away. When they remembered that Jim had been hanging around the Buford farm long after his work as handyman was done and that Cass had complained about it, Doc Marston made a lot of enemies by saying that folks were taking too much for granted.

What made the people really disgusted with Doc, though, was Doc's attitude when Linda calmly confessed that she'd killed Cass.

"Maybe she did," Doc said, "but there's more back of it than anybody knows about. There's something mighty



strange about this whole business.”

“You bet there is,” the sheriff told him. “There’s something damned strange about a woman who kills a man who gave her such a good home as Cass gave Linda.”

“How do you know she had a good home?” Doc asked. “You haven’t ever lived with Cass.”

“And neither have you,” the sheriff said.

That stumped Doc. He didn’t have anything to say for a while. Which was a good thing for Doc, because most folks thought he’d said too much already.

Everyone admitted, of course, that there was something strange about Cass’ marrying Linda. Cass was one of the most important men in Cameron County. He was the last of the Bufords and he owned everything that was left of the family fortune. It wasn’t as much as it used to be, but still there was a well-paying farm and a half interest in the Cameron First National Bank and some first and second mortgages that paid good interest.

Besides all that, Cass was young and good-looking. He had black hair and he was tall and slender and he dressed well. There was something funny about his eyes, though. They weren’t exactly crossed, but they were slanted in an odd way. This didn’t spoil his good looks, however. The ladies seemed to think it made him more handsome.

Whether it was because he was

handsome or because he was rich, the ladies liked Cass. He could pick and choose even when he was a kid. Before he was fifteen there was almost a shooting between the Carrolls and the Bufords over Emily-Sue, the Carroll girl. She was thirteen and she came home one night with her dress torn and her face scratched and said Cass did it. Old man Carroll got a gun and went over to the Buford’s and went around and around the house to get a shot at Cass who was hiding underneath.

Finally old man Buford came out and there were some hot words and old man Carroll threatened to shoot him, too. Then they calmed down and got to talking and everything was settled. Mr. Buford loaned Mr. Carroll his prize Hereford bull which old man Carroll had been trying to borrow ever since it won the blue ribbon at the state fair.

After that, Cass didn’t get into much trouble. Anyway, he was pretty careful.

It wasn’t until he was nineteen that old Doc Marston started hating Cass. It wasn’t over very much, either. It was over a dog that wasn’t worth a cent. The dog’s name was Nero. When people asked Cass what breed Nero was he’d always grin and say it was a cross between a boll weevil and a hook-worm. That always got a laugh.

One day Cass came into the village store laughing. He’d just killed Nero. Something had been

killing chickens around the Buford place and Cass decided that it was his dog. So he took him out and killed him.

"I took my twenty-two along," Cass said, "and I drove out near Willow Branch. I got Nero out of the car and let him have it, right between the eyes."

He sat on the counter and reached for a bottle of pop.

"Damnedest thing you ever heard of," he said. "The bullet hit him right between the eyes and he went down like his head'd been chopped off. I started for the car and damned if Nero didn't get up. I aimed again and then the fun started. Around and around the car he went — him with a bullet in his head — and me after him a-hooting and a-hollering so's hell wouldn't have it."

He laughed, thinking of his chasing a dog that was supposed to be dead.

"Finally," Cass said, "he jumped into the car — into the front seat where he always rode — and tried to sit up like nothing had happened and he didn't have a bullet in him."

Then Cass went on to tell how he dragged Nero out of the car and beat him to death with a rock.

"Damnedest thing you ever heard of," he said.

Old Doc Marston walked closer and looked at Cass. He looked a long while, as if he'd never seen Cass before. Then he spat as if he were aiming at Cass' feet.

"Tchew!" he went. "Yes. It *is*

the damnedest thing I ever heard of!" Then he turned and walked off.

After that, Doc Marston would hardly ever speak to Cass, even when he treated Cass for measles or flu or a cut hand.

It was about ten years later that word got around that Cass was seeing Linda Wells once in a while. At first, nobody'd believe it. Linda had never had a fellow, not even when she was in grammar school. The plain truth is that she was just about the sorriest looking girl in the whole county. She was tall for a girl, and big-boned, and her body didn't have much more shape to it than a hoe handle. Her mouth was too wide and her eyes were too small and even in the summertime her skin was always a dead white, a sort of fish-belly white. And that wasn't all that was wrong with her. Her teeth weren't in straight and she had straggly hair that no amount of combing or braiding or silk-ribboning would make look like a girl's hair should.

Linda's father was poor and she worked on his farm just the same as a hired hand. She never went to dances and it wasn't very often that she came to church socials. When she did, she stuck in a corner and nobody paid any attention to her except the preacher and his wife.

So when Cass started going around with her, people couldn't figure it out.

"Maybe he's after something," one of the fellows said.

Another fellow laughed.

"He ain't that hard up," he said. "Not that Linda wouldn't be broad-minded about it."

"How do you know about that?" he was asked.

"One night after a church social I was gassed up," the fellow said. "I met Linda going home and I started walking along with her. I fooled around a little bit and you shoulda seen how that gal took to it. I bet I was the first guy ever tried anything."

"What happened?" he was asked.

"Well," he said, "it was dark and I figured what the hell!"

He made a face.

"Ugh!" he said. "Even in the dark, and gassed up like I was, I couldn't go it."

He laughed. "Too bad she isn't pretty," he said.

"Well, she ain't and if what I hear's true, Cass Buford's gone off his nut," another guy said.

Off his nut or not, Cass kept on going with Linda and pretty soon it wasn't just a rumor. It was a fact. He took her everywhere, to dances and church socials and skating parties and everything. At first the fellows took it as a joke, but they quit laughing to Cass' face. He beat up a couple of humorists and that ended that. Cass was a powerful man and he had a funny streak in him. When he started fighting it was for keeps, and when he got another man down he'd tear into him and see just how bad he could cut him up with his

fists before somebody hauled him off. Sometimes he'd keep hitting another man long after he should have stopped . . . almost as if he was sort of enjoying it. Guys who'd been in a fight with Cass Buford remembered it a long time.

Nobody believed Cass'd actually marry Linda, though. He was too good-looking and too rich. Every single girl in Cameron County had her cap set for him. He hadn't gone with any of them steady, but everybody thought that that was because he was choosy.

At first they figured maybe Cass wanted some other Cameron girl and she was holding out and that Cass was lugging Linda around to make her jealous.

The preacher's wife thought Cass was just trying to be a good Christian.

"The poor girl's been neglected," she said, "and Cass is just being charitable."

Old Doc Marston spat.

"Tchew!" he went. "Whatever that young whelp's got on his mind, it isn't charity and you can be sure of that!"

And then Cass ups and marries Linda. It was hard to believe, but all of a sudden there was Cass and Linda standing before the preacher and promising to love, honor and obey. Cass was as solemn as a barnful of owls, but Linda couldn't hide her excitement. She had on a pretty dress and, for the first time in her life, she had put paint and powder

on her face. Her eyes sparkled and she smiled and squeezed Cass' hand. She was so excited and happy and all that she even looked kind of pretty.

During the ceremony some of the women cried. It was sad and beautiful and wonderful, they said, that such a plain, ordinary, ugly girl as Linda should be made so happy by Cass.

The couple left on a honeymoon and the whole county kept right on talking about the wedding. It was hard to believe, but there it had happened and everything was settled. Nobody in the county ever mentioned that Cass might of got a good wife. It was all Linda and how lucky she was. Everybody figured Cass'd done something noble and fine and generous and everybody liked him a lot more for it.

Everybody but old Doc Marston. He chewed and spat.

"Tchew," he went. "It'll come to no good end. Just you wait and see."

When Linda got off the train from the honeymoon she still had on paint and powder and a pretty dress, but you wouldn't have thought for a minute that she was pretty. She didn't seem any too happy either, but she smiled at everyone and said she'd had a wonderful time.

Everybody noticed how kind and considerate Cass was when he helped Linda into the car. You'd of thought he was a prince or something helping the most beautiful lady in the world into a carriage all lined with silk.

And Cass kept on being kind and considerate. People invited to dinner couldn't believe their eyes when they saw how gentle Cass was with Linda. He kissed her and loved her right before everybody and sometimes he went a little too far with it and shocked some of the ladies.

What puzzled people was the way Linda acted. She didn't bother to use powder or paint any more. She didn't wear pretty dresses, either. When Cass kissed her and loved her in front of people she tried to pull away at first. Then something'd happen to her and her lips'd part and she'd grab Cass' arm and look at him kind of wild until she remembered where she was. Then she'd turn and run out of sight and everybody'd be embarrassed.

That went on for a long time: Cass being kind and considerate and loving Linda a little too much before people and Linda acting funny about it.

And then Cass hired Jim Carver as handy-man. Jim was from another county and he wasn't much good as a farm worker. He was a scrawny, ferrety-looking guy, always grimy and ragged, and most of the time he was either half drunk on sweet wine or sick to his stomach from what he had drunk the night before. He was as shiftless as they come, and nobody liked him. He was just plain no-account, folks said, and the only kind of work he ever got was the hateful odd jobs nobody else would do.

Everybody said it made them feel uncomfortable just to be around him.

Jim didn't live on the Buford farm. He came out from the village about three times a week and did what there was to do. At first he went back to his shack in the village soon's work was over and got drunk. But then he started staying around the farm a little while longer in the evening before he went home, weeding Linda's flower garden and bringing her shoots and things from other gardens.

At first people thought it was just because Linda was kind-hearted. Jim was different from most folks and so was Linda and it was natural they'd have something in common. People didn't pay much attention to the thing at all.

Then a sort of rumor started going around. At first nobody paid any attention to it. Linda was smart enough to know what side her bread was buttered on, they said. She had enough sense not to take any chances ruining the best thing that'd ever happened to her. Besides it was silly. Jim was such a miserable fellow, what with being drunk or sick half the time and all, that he wouldn't appeal even to Linda.

For a while Cass went along just as usual. Then he spoke to just a few of his closest friends and made them promise never to breathe a word of it around. If they did, he said, he'd beat their heads off for them. That's the reason the thing

didn't spread as fast as such things usually do. When Cass said he'd beat someone's head off he meant just that.

It wasn't until Cass went to the preacher that things started to happen. He was in the parsonage a long time and when he came out those who saw him didn't suspect that he'd had anything serious on his mind. Remembering it later, they said he'd had a kind of funny smile on his face.

The preacher told about his part later. He said he went to Linda and tried to get her to pray. She wanted to know why and the preacher told her. She acted like the preacher must be crazy. Then he told about the talk he'd had with Cass. Linda didn't seem to believe him at first. He went on talking and scolding her and urging her to pray her sins away and promise to try and live down the ugly, black, slimy sin she'd committed. She just sat there like a hunk of stone and didn't say anything. The preacher went on talking and suddenly Linda got up and ran out of the room crying. The preacher couldn't find her, so he went home and talked to his wife about it.

It was the next morning they found Cass lying in the kitchen with his head split open by an axe. The axe was laying right beside him and the blood on it was beginning to dry. At first they thought it must have been a robbing tramp who did it and then Cass' friends

came out and told about what Cass had confided to them. The preacher told his story, too.

That put a different face on things. They started looking for Linda. They found her in Jim's cabin washing a bloody dress. Jim tried to help her out, but the sheriff smashed his face in with one blow and called him all the filthy names he could think of while he lay on the floor with blood spouting between his fingers.

Linda was awfully ugly then. Her hair hadn't been combed and she had on an old faded dress. She looked worse than before Cass married her. She wouldn't talk. She wouldn't cry or she wouldn't look afraid. She was just sullen.

Linda wouldn't talk until they got her to the county jail.

Then she said: "I did it. I hit him with the axe."

They asked her why and she wouldn't answer. She just didn't pay any attention to questions. It didn't matter.

It was the most exciting thing that'd ever happened in Cameron County. Nobody talked about anything else. The more people talked the more excited they got. Everybody remembered what a fine, upstanding, kind and generous man Cass Buford was and all he'd done for Linda. And then she'd killed him out of lust for a no-good bum like Jim. She ought to be lynched, they said.

Somebody suggested that Jim

ought to be lynched first and they went for him. But Jim had packed up and gone away. Nobody ever saw him again.

The crowd sort of cooled down while looking for Jim and they didn't make any serious attempt to lynch Linda after that. It was decided that law and order would take its course and there'd be a county hanging in back of the jail just as soon as Linda was found guilty.

The trial attracted a lot of attention in the county and even the big city papers took it up. They said Linda was the Cinderella Girl who'd murdered her fairy prince.

Cameron people didn't call her anything like Cinderella. They called her every low name they could think of. They hated her. When Doc Marston still insisted there was something behind the case other than a depraved woman's lust, people just walked away from him. He was too old a man to beat up. They just put him down as cracked and let it go at that.

The trial was over in a hurry. The defense attorney couldn't do much. Linda wouldn't help him. She just sat there in the courtroom stony-faced and looking straight ahead. She wouldn't even testify.

The county attorney made a longer speech than was necessary, seeing as Linda was practically convicted already. He told of what a loving husband Cass had been, how he'd demonstrated his love before all sorts of people. He spoke of the

fine home Cass'd given Linda and how she'd had everything a woman can desire. And then she'd thrown it all away for the lustful love of a man decent people wouldn't even speak to.

"And then," he said, "when her husband found her out she deliberately murdered him so that she could carry on her affair with the other man."

It took the jury five minutes to bring in a verdict of guilty of murder in the first degree and when they led Linda out of the courtroom, the other women spat at her.

The gallows was rigged up in back of the county jail. The crowd began gathering before dawn and by sunrise every man, woman and child in Cameron County was packed into the square. The prisoners in the jail lined the windows to watch.

Just as the sun came up and the roosters started crowing and the early freight began whistling far off on the river bend, they led Linda out of the jail and up the stairs to the gallows. A rustle and a murmur ran through the crowd and then a woman started screaming. Not in fear or horror. She was screaming insults at Linda. Some of the others took it up, but the men looked at one another and at the women and then kept their eyes on Linda and didn't say anything.

Linda's arms were strapped close to her sides and she walked with short, dragging steps and looked

straight ahead and didn't seem to see anything, not even the noose dangling before her eyes.

The sheriff asked her did she have anything to say and she shook her head without looking at him. The sheriff gave the signal and the jailers who'd been practicing on a dummy went to work. It was one-two-three — just like a well-executed football play. One man knelt and strapped her legs together. Another put a black bag over her head and another slipped the noose over that. The sheriff waved his arm and the strings were cut and there was a clang like a heavy door slamming and Linda was below the trap and two men were holding her feet, pulling down so's she wouldn't kick.

Old Doc Marston walked up with a stethoscope and opened Linda's blouse and stood there for ten, twelve minutes and during that long wait while you could hear the roosters crowing louder and the train coming closer, five men and a woman fainted. It was the waiting and silence that got them.

Finally Doc Marston put the stethoscope in his pocket and turned to the sheriff and solemnly shook his head.

"Congratulations," he said. "She's dead."

Later the sheriff was in his office with several of the fellows having a little drink on account of the whole thing'd been such a strain on his nerves.

"I don't like to hang people, especially women," said the sheriff, "but this here Linda sure did have it coming to her. To think of a woman with a strong, virile, handsome man like Cass going around and —"

He didn't finish because old Doc Marston came in.

"I just finished examining Linda," he said to nobody in particular.

One of the fellows giggled nervously.

"Was the operation a success, Doc?" he asked.

The others giggled inside their lips. They didn't want to make fun of a dead woman, but the joke was

too good to let pass.

"Oh, yes," said Doc. "It was quite a success. Her neck was cleanly broken."

He walked toward the door and turned and looked at the people in the room. He chewed a while and then he spat right on the sheriff's new office carpet.

"Tchew!" he went. "It might interest you to know you've just hanged a virgin."

He turned and closed the door softly and you could hear his footsteps going down the hall.

You could hear his footsteps even after he reached the end of the hall and started downstairs.



Pleasant finding a naked girl in your car?

Not when she isn't breathing

Dirge for a Nude

BY JONATHAN CRAIG

IT WASN'T exactly a new sound I was getting out of the little spinet, but it was a *good* sound — and the few customers left in this brand-new Village kick joint at three o'clock in the morning were at least hipped enough to know barrelhouse from outhouse. They sat around the stucco walls in twos and threes, and every time I'd hit a

real gone figure they'd nod approvingly. Every now and then, when I got tired of this dead-pan approval, I'd sour a note or slide out of chord a little, just to watch them look pained and sympathetic.

I felt pretty good. I was knocking down good dough for this solo spot here in the Cavern Club, and while we wouldn't be giving Nick's and



Eddie Condon's any real competition for a while, it looked like we were going to do all right. The club was a natural for the tourists all tricked up to look like a cave, with weird lighting and recesses in the stucco walls for tables and even a few stalactites scattered around here and there on the ceiling.

A real corny, jazzy place, where you could spend a buck and a half on a four-bit drink. It wasn't a bad spot, outside of the echoes. The echoes were terrific. Even that frothy, delicate stuff in the treble sometimes came out like bricks rattling in a wash tub.

But the hat-check girl was beautiful, and I had a date with her at four o'clock. So everything was lovely.

I got a good ride rhythm going in the left hand and settled down to show off for the cognoscenti. If they liked their piano pure, then that's what they were going to get.

That's when Gloria Gayle came in — and from then on I was no longer the center of attraction. I watched her coming toward the piano and cussed a little and missed a couple of notes and had to cover up quick, like a cat. I needn't have bothered. Nobody noticed sour notes when Gloria was around.

She draped her equipment over the top of the spinet and smiled at me and jiggled a little to show she was properly sent.

"Baby!" she said.

"Baby, hell," I said. "Shove off."

She had blue-black hair that shouldn't be real, but was, and long sooty lashes and skin as smooth and white as a new piano key. She gave me a long slow sweep of the lashes and the smile got even brighter. Smiles like that they measure in kilowatts.

"Be nice to me, Marty," she purred. "Or I'll twist off your head."

I riffed a little up high on the keyboard and grinned at her. A couple of months ago Gloria Gayle had made the world go round for me. That was before she gave me the heave-o for Al Prince, the guy the sports scribes called the Uncrowned Light-heavyweight Champ.

"The last name's Bishop," I said.

"Quit clowning," she said. "I want to talk to you. Now."

"I've still got this set and another one to go."

She put both hands down flat on the piano and rocked it. It was that little. All at once I was playing in another key.

"Take a break," she said.

I got up and walked around the spinet and took her arm and led her over to a table against the wall, next to the service bar. I held up two fingers to a waitress and sat down on the chair next to Gloria's and said, "I hope this is going to be fast."

She worked her chair over so that her thigh was pressed against mine and the side of her breast just accidentally brushed my arm every time either of us so much as moved.

"It is, darling," she said in that

sultry voice of hers. "We're going to Mexico City. Just you and me. Tomorrow. Isn't that exciting?"

I nodded. "It sure is. And what about Al Prince? And what will we use for money? And why don't you see a psychiatrist?"

"I've ditched Al," she said. "After you, darling, Al was like a sip of wine after a jolt of whiskey." She brought up her hand to touch the taut bodice of her silk jersey dress. "And the money's in here. There's twelve thousand dollars in my bra, Marty."

The drink-mixer on the service bar was making a terrific racket, almost in my ear. I was sure I'd misunderstood her. I'd thought she said twelve thousand dollars.

"How much?" I said.

She smiled at me and said it again. "Twelve thousand dollars."

"Whose twelve thousand dollars?" I asked. I was looking past Gloria toward the check room. My four o'clock date, Julie Cole, was having an easy time of it, what with the hot weather. She was leaning on the counter, looking very hard away from me. A really luscious kid . . . I hoped this little session with Gloria wasn't going to give cause for a post mortem. But Julie wouldn't stay miffed long, I knew. Not when I gave her the bracelet I'd bought for her that afternoon and for which I'd plunked down four hundred bucks. She was a little girl who liked presents, was Julie, and she liked them small and bright and expensive.

Gloria increased the pressure of her thigh against mine a little. "It's my twelve G's," she said. "Al was very generous, if nothing else. When I ditched him, I turned all the things he'd given me into cash."

I shook my head wonderingly.

"Don't fret about it, darling," she said. "The point is, I've got it. And I've got it where it's all nice and soft and warm."

Our drinks came. Gloria raised her glass and clicked it against mine. "To us, Marty," she said. "To our finding each other again."

I took a drag on my drink and put it down.

"I've got hot news for you," I said. "We *didn't* find each other again. It took me a while to get over you, maybe two or three days, but I did it. I want to keep it that way. Sorry, Gloria, but no Mexico City. No more dates. No nothing."

She looked at me, half smiling, ready to turn on the full voltage if she saw I was kidding.

But I wasn't kidding.

Color spread up into her face and the dark eyes looked as if they were going to shoot sparks.

"Why, you big, egotistical six-foot-two of — of *nothing!*"

"Please," I said. "This is a hallowed place." I was a little sorry for her. This was probably the first time in her life that anything like this had ever happened to her. But this was the way it had to be.

She rose half way from her chair, then sank back down again.

"But why not?" she asked. "Just give me one good reason!"

"You, for one," I told her. "And Al Prince for another. You gave me the brush for him — which was all right, this being a free country and all. But once was enough. More than enough."

Her lips drew away from her teeth, and now she wasn't quite so beautiful. "Damn you, Marty!" she said, her voice suddenly loud and shrill. "Who do you think you are?"

People were giving us the hard eye now. Especially Julie Cole. I saw the boss duck his head out of his cubbyhole. He glared at me, shuttled his eyes meaningfully between me and the piano, and pulled his head back in again.

"Got to go to work, Gloria," I said. "First night in a new place. You know how it is."

She shook her head. "We're going to talk this out!"

"No," I said.

She surprised me. She slapped me. And she slapped me hard. It made quite a noise.

I got up and turned toward the piano. But she was up beside me in an instant, her hands clutching my arm. "Damn you, Marty! I said we were going to talk this out!"

I thought of my date with Julie at four. I got off at three-thirty. I pushed Gloria's hands off my arm and fished the keys to my Caddy out of my pocket and gave them to her.

"You know what my car looks like," I said. It's parked in the

mouth of that alley on Christopher Street, where I used to park it when I worked at the Gopher Hole. You remember?"

She nodded, her eyes blazing.

"Wait for me there," I said.

"How long?"

"I'm off in fifteen minutes."

She said something beneath her breath, gave me a go-to-hell look and started for the door. Every eye in the place followed that lithe, swivel-hipped walk of hers, even my own.

I went back to the spinet and started playing again. I glanced around at the cash customers, to see how they'd taken the free floor show — and that's when I saw Al Prince. He was standing by the steps that led up to the street, and he was staring at me with the most open look of hatred I'd ever seen on a man's face. He was blonde and handsome and big, almost as big as me, and I could almost swear he was so mad that he was trembling.

I hadn't seen him come in, but that didn't mean he hadn't been there all the time that Gloria was. It didn't mean anything.

The boss came by and stopped and gave me a hard eye.

"Watch yourself, Bishop," he said.

"Shove it, Dad," I said. "Keep moving."

He got a little red, but he kept moving.

A bunch of young kids, mostly girls, came down the steps into the

club. Artists, if the fact that they were all barefooted meant anything. A new fad, brought back from the Left Bank in Paris. When the kids had cleared out of the way, Al Prince was gone. Maybe back outside. I couldn't tell. I wondered if he'd be punk enough to lay for me out there. Could be.

Al was a flashy light-heavyweight who had been knocking on the throne room a lot of years now without ever getting a crack at the title. Money he had, and a lot of rugged good looks. But no savvy about women. He liked to get physical about things. Yeah . . . he'd probably be waiting.

I played straight through until three-thirty, modulating from one number to another without a break in rhythm and without fluffing a single figure. When I got up, the crowd gave me a hand, which surprised me. Up till now, they'd been pretty cold-fish.

At the check room I waited a moment for Julie Cole to finish talking to somebody on the wall telephone at one side of her tiny alcove.

She hung the phone back on its hook and came over to me and leaned on the counter and winked one big blue eye. She had shoulder length auburn hair and dimples, and there were those who thought she might be stretching it a little when she claimed she was nineteen. Just looking at her gave me a real charge, and there was a rich, ripe female

smell to her that took over where the looks left off.

"You can sure pick them," she said, laughing. "I'm fuming."

"I've got to go out for a couple minutes, Julie," I told her. "I'll be back at four, right on the button. Okay?"

She tilted her head; the blue eyes measured me. "Maybe there won't be much left of you by then."

"Forget it," I said. "This is strictly business."

"Of course," she said. "Business. Well, have fun — just the same."

I shrugged and went up the steps to the street and walked along toward the alley where I'd parked the Caddy. There weren't many people cruising the Village tonight, and what few there were seemed pretty well lushed. Tourists, mostly. But one of the drunks who passed me was no tourist. He shambled by without looking at me, and I almost didn't recognize him. His name was Ed Farr. He'd been a top-drawer song-writer once, a handsome guy with a lot of friends. But not now. Now the hooch had got him.

The hooch and Gloria Gayle.

She'd been singing with Tony Schuyler's band when Ed met her. Just another beautiful body with a so-so voice. But she had a phenomenal memory for words and music, and when Ed had played and sung a new song for her, she'd lost no time in swiping it for her own. Those things happen, and they happen easy. She simply peddled it to a

notorious Tin Pan Alley pirate who beat Ed Farr to the copyright. Just like that. Ed had been on the thin edge of alcoholism anyhow, and when the stolen song made the Hit Parade, he'd slipped all the way under.

I tried not to think of Ed. Liquor was my trouble too; it's a sort of occupational disease in the music business.

I kept an eye out for Al Prince, a little surprised that he hadn't been waiting for me outside the club. Surprised, and glad. I'm big, and reasonably healthy, but I'm no pro fighter.

Gloria Gayle wasn't sitting in the Caddy, and she was nowhere near it. I stood there in the mouth of the alley and leaned up against the car and lit a cigarette. I felt relieved. The cool morning air was good to breath after the smoke and perfume and liquor fumes in the club.

I wondered if Al Prince had caught up with Gloria outside and talked her into going off with him. Or maybe she had talked him into going off with *her*, to keep him from bouncing me up and down on the sidewalk.

Either way, it was fine with me. And then I remembered that she had the keys to the Caddy.

I reached down to try the door handle, figuring that she might have passed the car and had had enough consideration to leave them in the dash.

My hand stayed on the door handle a long time. I couldn't have moved it if I'd wanted to.

Because, lying sprawled there on the front seat in the dim reflected light of a street lamp, was the naked body of Gloria Gayle.

I don't know how long I stood there. A full thirty seconds, maybe. At last I got back enough presence of mind to yank the door open and say her name. There was no answer. Not that I'd expected any. She was dead, and I'd known that the first instant I saw her. No living person looked like that. Dead bodies are always different, somehow.

I reached out and put my hand flat against the flesh just beneath the left breast long enough to confirm what I already knew. There was no heartbeat. The skin against my palm was still warm and a little moist. So far as I could see, there wasn't a mark on her any place.

I heard footsteps coming along the street and I closed the door and walked around behind the car until they passed the mouth of the alley.

It was coming to me — in pieces. But the pieces were coming fast. And every one of them was like a kick in the belly.

It had to be Al Prince. I would have bet my life on it. Here in Greenwich Village, anything can happen, sure — she might even have been murdered by a passerby. Somebody who saw a pretty girl sitting in a car alone in the mouth of an alley and decided to take advantage of it.

Maybe rape, maybe robbery. Maybe both. But I didn't think so. The odds on Al Prince were far too heavy.

I went around to the driver's side and opened the door and lifted Gloria's head and got beneath the wheel. The keys were in the dash, where she had put them. Then, with her head on my lap, I backed the Caddy up the alley to the darkest shadows I could find. I got the small flashlight out of the glove compartment and flicked it over her body.

I turned her completely over twice. She was a small girl, but it was cramped in the seat, and she was a little slippery. Her clothes, except for stockings and spike-heels, were nothing but a pile of shredded cloth on the floorboard. There was no money.

I felt the wound before I saw it — a tiny crescent-shaped cut on her left temple where it had been hidden by her hair. There was a bad bruise beneath it, and when I put my hand down on the upholstery it came away sticky with what I knew had to be blood.

It looked to me as if Gloria had been killed with a hammer.

Then another thought came to me, and I started the motor again and gunned the Caddy out of there. I didn't stop until I was a dozen blocks away, down another dark alley. I was a patsy, I knew, and whoever had made me one would sure as hell tip the cops the moment he knew the frame-up was exactly right. And I knew who "whoever"

was — Al Prince.

He'd done a beautiful job of it. New York cops were the best in the world, sure, but what good was that going to do me in *this* situation? A man and a girl have a stormy affair and break up — and then the girl slaps the guy in a cellar jive joint, and fifteen minutes later the girl's dead and naked in the guy's car. Beautiful. A certain number of patsies are fried and hanged and gassed every year — a statistical fact.

I don't know why, but I didn't think of Ed Farr, the song writer, just then. There's no good reason; I just didn't.

I got out of the car and lugged Gloria's body to the back seat and put it down on the floorboard. I didn't *like* to do it, you understand. I just didn't have any choice. I put her shredded dress over her and covered her as best I could with the small lap robe I keep in the back seat, and that was all I could do.

For the first time since I'd bought it, I was glad the Caddy wasn't a convertible. At least no onlookers would know I had a dead girl in there, unless they opened the back door. And if they got that far, I was cooked anyhow.

I had a date with Al Prince. Only he didn't know it. He'd need no alibi himself, of course, and the best place he could be when the police came calling — if they even bothered — was at home.

I had about as much chance as an ice cube in a blast furnace. I didn't

have a gun, and didn't know where I could get one. But I had a knife. And I knew how to use it. You remember those things, after four years in the Marines.

Al Prince's apartment house was a converted brownstone front in the west seventies, scabby on the outside but plush on the inside. I'd been there a couple of times just after he hit the big time. I rang the buzzer beside his mailbox, and after a while the lock on the door clicked and I climbed the stairs to the second floor and knocked on the door of his apartment.

I let half a minute go by, and then I knocked again. Loud. I knew he was in there because he'd tripped the lock on the downstairs door. I knocked a third time.

Behind me a voice said, "You want something, Marty?"

I whirled around. Al was grinning at me with those pale yellow eyes of his. I didn't see his fist. I only felt it. It wasn't calculated to knock me out. It stunned me, the way he'd meant for it to, and for a moment the lights in the corridor swung around in lazy circles and the floor tilted and swayed beneath my feet. I felt one of my arms jerked behind me in a hammerlock, and in another few seconds Al had got the door open and walked me three-fourths of the way across the room.

"I saw you coming from the window," Smuggy said pleasantly. I knew you weren't up to any good —

not at this time of the morning. I waited for you on the back stairs." He yanked my arm up another couple of inches. "Now what the hell do you want?"

The room had stopped spinning. It was a big room, sound proof, I remembered, with full-length French windows. There were several large photographs on the walls — all of them of Al Prince, and most of them in fight poses. I thought of the knife in my pocket: a hell of a lot of good *that* was going to do me.

He jerked my arm up again. It was like having someone ram a red-hot ice pick into your shoulder.

"I asked you what the hell you wanted," he said, still pleasantly. "You come over here about Gloria?"

Was he kidding? "You're damn right," I choked out over the pain in my shoulder. "What'd you think?"

He pushed me ahead of him to a sofa. I barked my shins on a heavy bronze cocktail table. He liked that. He laughed softly and forced me down on the sofa, my face twisted around toward the back of it.

"You came over to tell me she belongs to you again, eh, Marty? You got the decision, eh?"

Another couple of inches and he was going to twist my arm right out of its socket. "Ease up, you punk," I said. "There's a bone in that arm."

I might as well have talked to a wall.

"I saw her come out of that crummy dive you play in," Al said.

"A big bruiser like you, playing a little piano like that. That's real funny. And her going for a guy like you — a damn piano player! That's even funnier." He put some more pressure on my arm. I yelled. I had to.

"Holler all you want," he laughed. "Nobody's going to hear you. Not with these walls. Go on! *Holler*, you bastard!" And then he laughed. It was the kind of laugh you hear only in a nut-house. Damn it, the guy was crazy! He'd taken too many punches, or Gloria had knocked him off his rocker, or something. But he was nuts. Plain simple nuts.

"You know something?" he said. "I can't see why she'd think you were so hot in bed. She used to keep harping on that, all the time — about what a hell of a good lover you were. Sometimes, right in the middle of it even, she'd tell me she wished I was you."

"For God's sake, Al," I said. "Let go my —"

"Shut up! Do you know how it is. Can you *imagine* how it is? She's up here, see? Right on this damn couch. And she's moaning and sweating and crying sort of, and all at once she starts biting you on the face and digging her fingernails in your shoulders and saying, 'Marty, Marty — Marty!' It's me, see, but all the time she's pretending it's you, and wishing it was you. You think that made me feel good? You think that didn't make me feel like killing you, you son of a bitch?"

I couldn't even breathe. My lungs were all up in my throat. I tried to jab at him with my free elbow, and he jerked my other arm up so hard the pain almost took the top of my head off.

"You know what I'm going to do?" he said. "I'm going to fix you so you can't ever put your hands on her again. I'm going to give you the same treatment that small-town cops give pickpockets. You ever hear about that? They break the pickpocket's fingers, so he can't ever get his hooks on somebody else's property again. They mash his hands real good so that when they heal up they aren't anything but stiff claws."

He got down behind me on the sofa, and now I felt his hand clench around mine like a vise. I struggled, I struggled like hell, but I couldn't break his hold.

"You loved to get your hands on her, didn't you, you bastard?" he said. He was excited now, almost giggling. "She was warm and soft, and she liked it too, didn't she? But no more. I'm going to crush your hands one at a time. You'll never put them on Gloria again.

"And nobody will ever laugh at you because you're such a big man to be playing a piano, either. You won't be able to use your filthy hands for *anything*."

The pain in my shoulder had been bad, but it was nothing compared with the pain in my hand as Al tightened his grip. He *could* crush it,

and that was for sure.

My eyes were blurring again, but I saw the glare of a passing auto's headlights against the French windows — and I got the only good flash I'd ever had when I really needed it.

I bent my leg and carefully put my foot against the edge of the heavy cocktail table and sent it streaking for the French windows. It hit with an unholy crash, like an explosion in a fruit jar factory.

They could hear me outside *now*, I knew, and I let out a yell to wake the dead. Prince shoved me so hard that I went headlong to the floor, and then he was on his feet and diving toward an open door that I knew led to his bedroom.

I started to scabble up and started after him. And then it struck me that my shoulder and arm were damn near paralyzed, and in the same instant I realized that he was going for a gun.

I didn't wait to find out. In ten seconds flat I was out of the apartment and down the stairs and sprinting along the street to where I'd left the Caddy. My shoulder might be numb but there was nothing wrong with my legs which they proved by some fancy running.

Al had flipped, and that was for sure. But he hadn't known about Gloria's murder. No matter how wacky he was now, he couldn't have reacted the way he had if he'd known she was dead. His acting wasn't that good.

Which made things worse, because I was still the patsy, there was still a murdered girl in my back seat — and time was running out. Whoever *had* made me a patsy had almost certainly tipped the cops by this time.

And there would be a few cops at Al's apartment, to see what the fracas was about. Al was bitter, and vindictive — he'd cook up *something* to put them on my tail, and the cops would believe him because he was a contender, everybody's hero.

It was hard to figure Ed Farr for a murderer — but the choice had narrowed down. I still couldn't buy the idea of Gloria's killer being some passing thug who'd taken advantage of an easy mark.

By the time I reached the Caddy, I was drenched with sweat and breathing heavily. But my arm and shoulder were better now, and I knew I'd be able to drive in spite of the aches.

But drive where? I didn't know where Ed Farr lived. From what I'd heard, he didn't live anywhere in particular. A couple of times he'd even been picked up as a vag and brought to the station.

So Ed Farr was out — unless I wanted to cruise the Village streets looking for him. Which I didn't. Not in a place where I knew so many people, and not with a naked corpse in the back seat. It might look a little peculiar.

I eased the car out onto the street

and cut over to Broadway and headed back downtown. I felt the urge to keep moving, even if I didn't have any place to go.

For some reason I started thinking about Julie Cole and the date I was supposed to have had with her. I glanced at my wristwatch. It didn't seem possible, but it still lacked a few minutes of being five o'clock.

I tried to think in a straight line, but it was no good. My mind was spinning, and it wouldn't stop. I was a cooked goose, and I knew it — but I couldn't help trying to figure out a way to save my skin.

There *wasn't* any way I could hide Gloria's body, but there was still the blood on the seat, and I couldn't get rid of it. The cops would have me cold. Sooner or later, no matter what I did, no matter how far I ran, they were going to get me. They would find out, follow me, and get me.

I became possessed with an almost frantic need to know if the cops were after me *yet*. Sooner or later, sure — but were they *right now*? If they were, they would have been to the Cavern Club. It was supposed to close at four o'clock — almost an hour ago — but this was opening night, and it was customary for other night spot owners to drop by a new place after they'd closed their own doors and wish the new guy luck. The chances were better than good that there'd still be someone there. Someone would answer.

I stopped at the next all-night

drug store and dialed the number. The phone rang twice.

When Julie Cole's voice answered, I was so surprised I almost dropped the receiver. I started to hang up — until I realized I didn't have anything to lose.

If the cops had already been there, she'd probably say so. And if she didn't, I could probably tell what I wanted to know from the sound of her voice. A musician develops an incredible ear for tone and inflection.

"Marty, Julie," I said, and waited anxiously.

There was a long pause. Then, "I *thought* we had a date."

"I'm sorry," I said, as levelly as I could. "I couldn't help it, believe me."

"Where are you? Why didn't you come back?" A little of the ice was melting from her voice now.

She sounded distant, but I was sure now that the cops hadn't been there. She was miffed because I'd stood her up, but there was nothing about her young girl's voice that sounded suspicious, only jealous.

"Anybody ask for me, Julie?"

"No. The boss said he was going to can you, but that's all." Her voice was in its natural pitch.

"Have we still got a date?" It popped out; I hadn't meant to say that at all. But maybe it wasn't a bad idea. I needed dough, and I needed it *right* away. No matter what I did from here on in, it was going to be expensive. If Julie had a

few bucks to loan me — fine. I wasn't in any mood to weigh ethics or morals.

"Well . . ." she said. She was talking rather softly, so that I could scarcely understand her over the babble of voices and the whirring sound of the drink-mixer. And somebody was hammering away at the piano, which didn't make it any easier. The piano was making noise but no music.

"Talk louder," I said.

"All right, Marty — it's still a date. I really shouldn't, though . . ." I was relieved. I'd heard *that* cool script before. She just had a few seconds to go on her mad, and then she'd get around to being sweet again.

"About ten minutes," I said. "Okay?"

"All right. I'll wait for you in front. Then you won't have to find a place to park."

"Fine," I said, and hung up.

I walked out to the Caddy and started for Greenwich Village.

Twenty minutes later I was sitting beside Julie on the sofa in her one-room apartment. I still hadn't worked around to asking her for a loan, and I couldn't think of any way to lead up to it. But I needed money.

Julie had her slim legs drawn up beneath her. I'll never forget her shoes: tiny suede shoes with four-inch heels. I was staring at them, wondering what it was that seemed

somehow wrong with them.

It was the heels. The spike heel of one of Julie's shoes was a dull satiny suede — the way it should be. But the heel of the other shoe had a sort of slick look, as if it had recently been scrubbed very hard with soap and water.

There was something else. Julie wore round garters, I knew very well, always rolled very high on her thighs. Just where the top of her stocking would be, there was a small oblong bulge.

And suddenly I knew who had murdered Gloria Gayle. And I knew, too, that I no longer need worry about finding Ed Farr.

I didn't like what I was going to do, but it had to be done.

I put my arm around Julie and drew her close to me. She murmured something and snuggled up, and then I slipped my hand around beneath her arm and fumbled with the buttons at the top of her dress. They held tightly.

"Wait a minute, baby," she whispered. She reached up and undid the first two buttons and settled back again. Her body against me was tense, expectant.

I brought my forearm across her, just beneath her breasts and pinned her against me. Quickly, then, I put my free hand under the hem of her skirt and whipped it up and twisted out the thing that had been making the tiny bulge in her garter.

A tight roll of bills.

I pushed Julie away from me and

fanned the money out with my fingers.

There was a lot of it, and all the bills were big.

Julie didn't make a sound. She sat staring at me as if she had been stunned. Her wide blue eyes were sick with fear.

I didn't have to count the money to know that there was at least twelve thousand dollars in that roll.

"How?" Julie breathed finally. "How did you . . . ?"

She wasn't the only one who was stunned, and she wasn't the only one who was sick.

"You killed Gloria Gayle, Julie," I said. "There are weird acoustics in the Cavern Club. When I called you a while ago I could hear the drink-mixer just as clearly as I heard your voice. If I could hear it over the phone in your check room, that means that *you* could have overheard Gloria and me talking. You heard her tell me that she had twelve thousand dollars, and you heard me tell her to wait for me in my car, and where it was parked."

Her lips moved, but there was no sound. The tip of a pink tongue came out to wet her lips, and stayed there. I could see the pupils of her eyes contract.

"It was easy," I said. "You followed her to the car and hit her a hell of a blow on the temple with your spike heel. You tore her clothes off to make it look like the murderer had been a man. The heel of your shoe left a crescent-shaped cut, and

got blood on your heel. You had to get it off, and then you couldn't remove the signs of having scrubbed the suede." I stared at her.

"Jesus, I knew from the way you were always plugging for gifts that you're money-hungry, but I never figured you for anything like this. . . ."

My mouth was dry from talking, and still she hadn't said another word. She had scarcely even moved. The dress was still hiked up around her hips. She shut her eyes and pressed her lips tightly together, and I could see the cords begin to stand out on her neck.

She sat like that for almost a full minute.

And then suddenly she screamed and sprang off the sofa and darted past me to the open window. I lunged after her, but I was half a second too late. I stabbed for her ankle, felt it graze my palm, and she was gone.

I took a deep breath and let it out very slowly, and then I looked down into the street.

She was there. A white blob on the pavement six stories straight down.

Cars were stopping in the street. Two of them. Men got out of them and ran toward her. A man's voice floated up to me.

"My God!" I heard him say. "She's still alive!"

I leaned up against the bathroom wall and was very sick. And then I threw cold water on my face and

went out into the living room to wait for the police.

There was nothing I could do for Julie Cole now, absolutely nothing.

Julie lived for almost forty-eight hours. She knew she had no chance, and she told the homicide cops exactly how it was. I'd been beside her hospital bed when she did it. She'd wanted to see me, the cops had said, and after they'd taken her

declaration they left me alone with her.

She looked at me and smiled and tried to say something. But she didn't make it. She was dead before the words passed her lips.

And since then I've always wished there weren't so many thousands of tiny spike-heel shoes in New York. Every single pair of them reminds me of Julie Cole.

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There was one funny thing about the stabbing: neither side had wanted trouble.

Stabbing IN THE Streets

BY ELEAZER LIPSKY

THE ringing telephone came almost as a relief. Wiley was lying in bed unable to sleep. The sheets were wrinkled and uncomfortable and his mind was going over his preparation for a murder trial still a month off. The telephone continued to ring. He threw aside the covers, fished for his slippers, and flapped into the living room where he picked up the instrument.

"This is Wiley," he said, yawning.

"There's a call from the Tenth," the man down in Communications said. "Some kid got stabbed in a street brawl. He's a merchant seaman, I understand. English. One of those things. They say they've got witnesses."

"Who's on the case?"

"Ricca and Corbin."

"Well, that's good," Wiley said, "Now, what about a car?"

"Just a minute." There was a moment's silence in which Wiley could hear familiar sounds in the



background, then the man returned. "It's on the way, Mr. Wiley."

"Say, Sergeant —"

"Yes, Mr. Wiley?"

"Do you know what all this is about?"

"Sorry, I just didn't ask. The victim is at the hospital, but the rest of them are all at the Tenth."

There was a click and David Wiley was left holding the telephone receiver. He returned to the bedroom to dress in working clothes, a sweater, jacket and an old Army trenchcoat.

Dorothy murmured and turned.

He sat down on the bed beside her and slid his arm under her shoulder. "It's just some stabbing, I've got to cover. I'm sorry."

"Oh, dear." She brushed aside a hair. "What time is it?"

Wiley looked at his luminous wrist watch.

"About five. It's near dawn."

"Just don't get tied up, darling," she murmured, and turned over in her warm bed. "We've got company tonight."

Wiley kissed his wife and went to the kitchen. He found some milk and bread and he was drinking a pair of raw eggs when he heard the hooting of an auto horn out in the street.

He left the dark apartment and went down to the street and got into the waiting sedan. They started off. It had been raining and they swept through the wet streets with the sound of drumming tires.

"I hear an English kid got it," the

driver remarked, "a merchant seaman. Now why don't they watch out for themselves?"

"I don't know." Wiley closed his eyes. "They just get into trouble." He sank into a weary silence while the driver talked about the previous day's baseball.

"We're here," the driver said.

Wiley looked up. The green lights of the station house were shining in the darkness. Wiley dismissed the driver and turned into the building. As he passed the desk, the officer, a sergeant, nodded. Wiley went upstairs into the Homicide Squad offices.

A detective named Vincent Ricca came forward holding a meat sandwich and a mug of coffee in either hand. "You won't like me for this, Dave," he said. "There ain't much to this case, what I mean."

Wiley looked about with an expert eye and remarked, "I can see that." The few witnesses were lolling without spirit on the benches in the large chamber. In an inner room, a barracks, two men were sleeping on cots wrapped in woolen blankets. The naked light bulbs were garish. Wiley returned to the detective and said crisply, "Let's get through this fast, Vince. Suppose you sum it up for me."

Ricca took a large bite of his sandwich. "These four merchant seamen got into a brawl with a customer in this bar, they're all English. After it was over, the customer came up and stabbed one of them outside in the

street, a kid named Eddie Porter. They're operating on him now at St. Vincent's. We don't know about his chances to pull through."

"What was the reason for the stabbing?" Wiley shook his head as he declined a share of the sandwich.

The detective licked away a trace of mustard. "This customer can't tell us that. Doesn't talk English, what I mean. We know what he did, we just don't know why or what he had in mind. The way we got the story right now, this thing came out of a clear sky. He was drunk or vicious or both."

"I'll settle for 'what'," Wiley said grimly. "Let's get on with this."

"Come on." The detective took Wiley's arm and described the crime. Ricca was a lean man with a dark face, dressed in good taste, with amusement in his eyes. He carried himself with a jaunty air. He was friendly and willing to help Wiley do a good job. He drew Wiley over to a prisoner seated on a bench and said, "Here's Juan Figueroa. He did the cutting. When we get a translator, he'll give us his story."

Wiley stared down at a picture of misery.

The prisoner was a stout man of forty, dressed in a foreign cut business suit. He looked up and pointed with an imploring gesture to abrasions on his temples. He portrayed the picture of innocence. His reddish eyes were inflamed and tears were rolling down his cheeks.

The detective said forcefully,

"Figueroa, this is the district attorney! You want to tell him your side of the story? The district attorney — see?"

The prisoner broke into a torrent of choppy dialect, showing his wounds and protesting until Wiley cut him short. "I don't talk Spanish, Figueroa! Now stop trying to kid me. You talk English and I'll listen!"

The prisoner stared a hopeless moment, then threw his head back and applied a bloody handkerchief to his nose.

Wiley turned back to the detective and thrust his hands into his pockets. "What's he crying about? Did he get a beating somewhere along the line?"

"Not from any of us," Ricca grinned. "He got those marks in the brawl. He's bawling because he knows he's in trouble. That girl there told him the kid might die."

"What girl?" Wiley looked across the room to a thin girl hunched forward on a bench near an inner office and smoking a cigarette with a thoughtful manner. Her long dark hair was tumbled down her neck in disorder. As he watched, she pulled a man's raincoat close about her, concealing a loose glittering black evening dress.

"That's the one." Ricca finished his coffee and put the mug away. "She could make sense out of all this, but she won't."

Wiley frowned. "Who was fool enough to let her know that the kid might be dying?"

Ricca shrugged. "She was here when the news came in."

"Well, let's see." Wiley crossed the room and said in a severe tone, "What's your name, Miss?"

The girl looked up with calm. "I'm Jenny Ortega," she said, in a husky voice. "Now this time, who are you?"

Wiley returned her stare. "I'm an assistant district attorney for this county. I want to know about this stabbing. Did you see it?"

The girl made a gesture toward the weeping prisoner. "It wasn't Figueroa's fault. I saw the whole thing."

"Tell me what happened." The girl shrugged and Wiley repeated sharply, "Why did Figueroa stab this young seaman?"

The girl considered him thoughtfully and a sneer gathered. "Why don't you ask those men there? They'll give you a pack of lies. Isn't that what you're after?"

"I want your side of the story," Wiley said sharply. "I'm looking for the truth."

She shook her head with contempt. "No, mister, you're not after the truth. Whatever I tell you, you wouldn't believe me. You just want a story against poor Figueroa. Well, get that from the others."

"The others?" Across the room three men were anxiously conferring in low tones with a second detective named Tom Corbin, Ricca's partner. "All right, let's do that."

Ricca and Wiley went over. Cor-

bin got up with a pleasant smile. He was a freckled blue-eyed man, taller than his partner and dressed with equal neatness. He shook hands and introduced his three witnesses to Wiley. They were short muscular men whose hands showed large callouses. They nodded politely. Their faces were all sunburnt but the tans were old and faded. Under their stoic manner, Wiley saw that they were deeply upset. Their names meant nothing to him.

One of the men asked in a cockney accent, "How's the kid, mister? These here 'tecs don't seem to know."

Ricca said to Wiley in a low voice, "Start off with this witness. He can give you the picture."

"Let's go inside." Wiley nodded the witness into the inner office. He took out a yellow form and placed it on the desk and put questions. The witness was Alexander Goudy, aged 28, unmarried, a British subject, a resident of Cowper's Lane, London, England. Ricca and Corbin entered these facts in their notebooks.

"All right, Goudy." Wiley sat back and shaded his eyes. "Tell me what happened."

"Eddie did nothing. It was really the rest of us who had this trouble with the man." Goudy spoke with a stammer. "This man had no reason to knife the kid at all."

"When you say 'this man' do you mean Figueroa?"

"Yes, sir, the man outside, the

prisoner." Goudy fumbled to light a cigarette with a shaking hand. "Eddie, that's Edward Porter, sir, he's just eighteen. His mother manages a little sweets shop back home. We're neighbors and I promised to look after him. The fact is I expect to marry his sister, Kitty, when I get home. Here, you can see what they look like."

He showed a photograph of a group seated around a picnic basket under a tree. Goudy was in the picture with his arm around a girl with yellow hair. A tired older woman gazed pleasantly at the couple while a youth in shirtsleeves stood behind them grinning in a boyish pose. Wiley studied the group as Goudy pointed each one out. "That's Kitty, Mrs. Porter, Eddie and me last summer."

Wiley put down the print.

"Eddie's a nice boy," Goudy said solemnly. "He's wanted to go to sea since he's been a kid. That's because of me. Not having an older brother, that made me one, in a way of speaking. I've been to sea all these years. I'm an oiler and Eddie liked the idea —"

"Get to the point, Alex," Ricca said impatiently.

Wiley said, "Let him take his time."

Goudy went on in a slow serious way. "Mrs. Porter let Eddie go to sea when I promised to take care of him. This was his first time. We shipped to Boston and then started the run back to Oslo. One day out

we hit an old mine square in the shipping run. There was a big blow-up. The whole bloody sky crashed down on us. There was just four alive when this Norskie freighter picked us up New York-bound. Eddie couldn't swim and he's just alive because we kept him afloat — me and Hughie Cartright and Johnny Barrow, taking turns —"

"Cartright? Barrow?" Wiley asked. "The two men sitting outside, sir."

Wiley made a note and Goudy added, "I almost went under myself, but I kept thinking how it would be to face up to Mrs. Porter and Kitty if anything happened to the boy and I stuck it."

"Were you in the War?"

"I made three runs to Murmansk, sir." Goudy rubbed his hands and lapsed into staring.

Wiley could see the pictures in Goudy's mind — the flaming tower of spume, the crash of the deluge, the shock of icy seas, the screams of men, the rumble of the sinking vessel with its spine cracked, death in the gray North Atlantic. He opened the door to the waiting room. "Which is which?"

Goudy turned. "That's Cartright, the other's Johnny Barrow."

The two dozing men looked up expectantly. They were without overcoats and they shivered. Cartright's spectacles gave a mild cast to his eyes. Barrow's hairy face with its lantern jaw made a picture of respectability. Wiley closed the

door. "You were lucky the War was over," he said drily.

Goudy stammered, "I thought of that. With any Nazi subs around, the Norskies would have passed us by. I saw that happen once. As it was, they found us praying and crying and balmy. The next thing, we were in a rest home here in New York. The company was quite good to us. I asked them not to notify Mrs. Porter that the ship had sunk."

Wiley brought him back. "What about last night?"

"Well, we were out for a bit of fun. That's not easy for merchant seamen, sir, since we draw our pay in pounds mostly. But we were to ship out today for home and we did our best. We got wind of a little Hallowe'en party and we went there, but it was just for kids, and we left. Then we saw a film and walked around Times Square. We passed up a few prosties who tried to talk to us. We didn't want that sort of thing. The kid was red in the face, blushing you know, and besides Barrow and Cartright are married men, and me engaged. We walked all over town and when it began to rain, we were outside this nightclub. We were hungry, and we went in."

"What time was this?"

"About two." Goudy started another cigarette. "It was a nice quiet place. We went down and there were tables. A man was playing the piano, something bouncy, and a girl was singing *Enjoy Yourself*. She looked full of fun. There were

only two couples about —"

"What about Figueroa?"

"He was at a table near the door drinking heavily."

"Was there trouble then?"

"The girl was singing and that was all. We took a booth and then this man Blasco —"

"Blasco?"

Ricca gave the answer. "He's the owner. James Blasco, 847 Arlington Street, Long Island City. We're out looking for him now."

Goudy waited while Wiley made a note. "The owner, Blasco, came over smiling, a friendly looking man, nicely dressed. He was wearing a dinner jacket. I said, 'We'd like a pint of ale each and some sandwiches.' He laughed and said, 'You sound English! I like the English — a great race of people! My sister married an Englishman. They keep a flowershop in London.' We talked a bit about London, and then he had the kitchen do up some lamb chops for us. They came in sizzling and rare, proper good stuff, with little paper flowers for holding. We offered to pay, but it was his treat, he knew we were short dollars. And then suddenly he looked up and said something in Spanish and went off. He seemed disturbed suddenly."

Goudy's mind was on the cafe with its few customers, garish and cheap, but looking first class to his eyes. He shivered and clasped his hands between his thighs. "The girl had stopped singing and was at Figueroa's table. I said, 'Beauty and

the Beast' and we laughed."

"He means the girl outside," Ricca said. "Jenny, the good looker."

"Suppose we come down to the trouble," Wiley suggested.

"That came a little later, sir. We heard loud voices and we all turned. Figueroa was talking fast to the girl in Spanish. I thought he was drunk. Then he was standing up screaming at the owner."

"Where were all these people located?"

"Blasco, the owner, was behind the bar. Figueroa had thrown his table aside. His face was red as blood. He was sweating and dancing about, quite excited. The veins were sticking out in his neck. The girl was scolding him. He threw a chair across the bar and smashed the big mirror."

"What made him do that?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Go on."

"I said, 'I expect Mr. Blasco needs help!' Figueroa was tearing his hair and shaking his fist, a big one, the biggest I ever saw. I went to him and said, 'Now then, now then, we can't have this!' The others were behind me. I remember thinking I sounded like a silly London bobby in an American film. The girl tried to get in the way. She kept saying, 'Keep out of this, you. Let them alone.' And a lot of other things, not all of them nice."

The witness paused, then went on. "We knew what to do, of course. Cartright and Barrow took him from

the sides, an arm each, and I hit him twice. I'm a fair boxer, but his face was slippery with sweat and I couldn't connect. Then the owner came up with a heavy stick. It was a hell of a row. We broke a chair and some glasses, Barrow sprained a thumb, and I got this." Goudy solemnly showed the mark of large teeth matrixed in the flesh of his hand. "The girl kept pulling at us, shrieking in Spanish. We were fair winded when the owner got in a clear whack. Figueroa started to moan and roll his eyes. We got out into the street and the girl ran after. Then the owner bolted the door and we stood about to catch our wind."

"Tell me one thing, Alex." Ricca scratched his face dubiously. "What possible reason made you men all get into the fray?"

"What else could we do, sir?" Corbin said drily.

"Mr. Blasco, the owner of the pub, needed help. This fellow Figueroa was quite out of hand." Goudy was puzzled.

"Ah!" Ricca said. "That explains it."

"Did the owner of the pub explain all this?" Wiley asked.

"No," Goudy said thoughtfully. "Blasco just looked sick at the mess and began to get the place cleaned up. He offered us drinks for having helped out but we had enough. Then suddenly we heard Figueroa shouting outside, and all at once his fist smashed through the glass door — smashed right through and hung

there, bleeding. I pulled the door open and shouted, 'Hoy, you there! Clear off!' Then he ran off and I lost him in the drizzle. I thought to call the police but Blasco said, 'No, I know that man. A bad customer but he won't come back. I'll put up the shutters now.'"

Goudy bit a heavy underlip and concluded. "Meanwhile, the kid gave the girl his jacket against the rain and he walked her down the street, talking. I didn't like it but he came back in ten minutes. He told me he had taken the girl to her flat down a bit. His shirt was wet."

Wiley put a number of questions to establish the details and Goudy went on. "We left and we split up to scout out a taxi. Barrow and Cartright crossed the street and walked the north side. The kid and me walked the south side. I scolded the kid about the girl but he told me he'd had a nice talk with her and he didn't mind the wet. It was dark and we almost fell over him again."

"Who was that?"

"Figuroa, sir. He'd come back for more. The girl was with him, carrying a heavy stick. We stood still and I said as quiet as I could, 'Eddie, don't move — the man has a knife.'

"The kid said, 'Don't worry, Alex. It's all right.'

"The man said something in Spanish and held up his hand. I looked for Barrow and Cartright. They were off a distance looking for a taxi. The girl shook the stick and

said, 'Keep away from us, keep away.'"

Goudy stared at Wiley and tears welled up. "I shall never forget that the kid was smiling at the girl. He just opened his hands and said to her, 'It's all right, Miss. It's just us. We want to pass by.' He took a step forward when this man made a quick motion to the kid's belly and Eddie screamed and fell down to the pavement. I couldn't believe it. Then I looked up and smashed him as hard as I could. I hit him three times, I think, then he and the woman ran off. I shouted ahead, 'Cartright! Barrow! Stop that man! He's hurt the kid!' They cut him off and just at that moment the police came.

"I came back to the kid and I got sick. He was holding in his guts and asking like a baby, 'What made him do it, Alex? What happened?' Then the ambulance came and took him away and that was all. Except that I don't know what I shall tell Mrs. Porter if he dies, sir. Indeed I don't."

The little group was silent while Wiley studied the family picture. He knew England and he fancied he could see the little shop Mrs. Porter kept. The mother seemed tired and her children carefree and thoughtless. Wiley rubbed his eyes and said, "Your girl's pretty."

Goudy's body was shaking violently. "Thank you, sir."

Wiley frowned. "For a man with a clear conscience, you seem nervous."

The witness considered this seriously. "I caught that off Murmansk, sir, shellshock. I was torpedoed twice and strafed after. Couldn't sleep mainly. Kept hearing those awful bombs. This thing's brought it back." He was silent and the bitter tears returned. "I almost wish I'd had it then. What did I fight for? What good did the whole bloody mess bring me?"

Wiley handed back the photograph. "All right, Goudy, wait outside. It won't be long."

Goudy went out, sniffing and blowing his nose.

Wiley drummed the table dubiously. "Well?"

Ricca raised his shoulders. "The others tell the same identical story. I guess we got the facts."

Corbin said, "Three witnesses is pretty good."

"What about getting some sort of confession?" Wiley said.

Ricca scratched his jaw. "Well, you know, we got nothing yet, not from the girl, not from Figueroa. We're trying to get a Spanish cop down to translate, but we may not need him. This Blasco, the owner, he'll tell us when he comes in."

Wiley noticed the light of dawn. He stretched and stalked into the waiting room. The witnesses were dozing. He stood above the prisoner. "All right, Figueroa, do you want to tell your side now while you have a chance?"

The prisoner pointed to abrasions in his scalp. He unwrapped a hand-

kerchief to show his gashed fingers.

"I know all about that," Wiley said impatiently. "You talk English!"

"He's scared, mister!" Jenny Ortega got up angrily. "Let him alone! Why not be fair about this?"

"Well!" Wiley looked her over. "Since you talk English, suppose you come inside." She looked Wiley over with her self-contained manner still intact and said coolly, "If that's what you want, mister."

Wiley held the door aside as she entered the inner office and took a seat. Wiley placed the yellow form before him and considered the girl. She was small-boned but her carriage was proud. He invited her to begin. "Cigarette?"

The girl threw back the raincoat calmly. "I smoke my own."

"All right." Wiley lit up and began. "What made this man stab the English kid?"

"Who says he did?"

"I've got three witnesses."

"Then why ask me?"

Ricca said, "This is no way, Jenny. Here's your chance to tell your side. This is the district attorney. If you help him, he helps you. If you make trouble, he makes trouble." He waited, then said strongly, "For God's sake, Jenny, he can throw you in jail for a material witness! Fifty thousand dollars bail! You want that?"

"Jail?" She tossed her hair and said harshly, "What about my baby? You going to put him in jail too?"

Ricca said strongly, "This is Mr. Wiley, Jenny, a square shooter."

Wiley said, "That's up to you. I need the truth. If you have a side to tell, now is the time."

"You'll listen?" she asked cynically. "You'll take our side? You'll believe us?"

"You've been saying that all night. Why shouldn't I believe you?"

"Why should you? We're just dirt to you, me and my kind."

"You don't know what I think at all, Jenny," Wiley said quietly. "But I'll tell you this, if you hold out on me, I'll have to hold you and the baby goes to the Foundling Home. But if you tell the truth, I'll believe you. Now suppose you drop this act and think of that baby a minute."

There was a long moment of silence.

The girl put out her hand. "I'll take that cigarette." She smoked thoughtfully while the white plumes curled from her nostrils, and Wiley saw that she was quite beautiful. Finally she looked up. "I've been telling these cops they got the wrong party. But no! They arrest poor Figueroa. The funny thing is he's a citizen and they believe those foreigners against him."

"Tell me something about Figueroa?"

"He's a good man," she said simply. "He runs a little business in the neighborhood, a grocery store. He keeps to himself, just a hard-working man trying to get along.

He's no criminal."

"What was he doing in this bar?"

"He's been coming these couple of months. He wants me to stop singing there and to marry him."

"What did you say?"

"I wouldn't do it. I said I'd just live with him. He didn't want it that way on account of his mother. She's very religious and he respects her. He's like a baby, that way."

"Why not marry him?"

She said in a low voice, "It wouldn't be right."

"Why not?" She said nothing, and Wiley went on. "What happened tonight?"

"Figueroa came in while I was singing. He had good news and he smiled to me. When he wants to, he's got a nice smile. I saw him ask for whiskey, though normally he drinks beer. I smiled back. He's the one man never treated me like an animal. Meanwhile these four walked in like they thought to take over, loud voices and everything, trouble-makers."

"What kind of trouble?"

"The regular thing. They give me the eye but I paid it no mind. I was just interested in Figueroa's news."

"What was that?"

"Figueroa had fixed it to send his mother to San Juan with his relatives. That meant I could move in. Then when we finally got to arguing and talking about it, Blasco horned in. He knew the deal. That's because Figueroa's got a loose tongue in the

neighborhood. Can't keep a thing to himself. He never could. He's too excitable."

"Were you going to take that deal?"

She shrugged. "Why not? That way I could get my kid to live with me. He's only four and he's staying with my grandmother now." She added bitterly, "My mother don't talk to me, my own mother."

"Are you married?"

"No," she said.

Ricca said, "Tell Mr. Wiley about Blasco."

She said, "Blasco didn't want me to go. When he came over, he was looking mean. He knows my line isn't singing but I draw a certain steady trade and how many singers can claim that? He told Figueroa to forget about me and he said, 'You take this girl away, and I ruin you! Now you got your warning!' He made the sign for death and walked away."

"What's the sign?"

She paused to draw a finger across her throat. "Now, Figueroa's got a few drinks in him at this time and he kept getting excited. Then Blasco said in a mean way, 'Figueroa, I hear all about you and Esteban!'

"Figueroa said, 'What about Esteban?'

"Blasco said, 'The cops pulled a raid on him last night. Some pigeon tipped 'em off!'

"Figueroa got nervous and grabbed a chair. 'What are you telling me?' he yelled.

"Blasco came right back at him. 'I say we got a pigeon in the house! I got my idea who it is!'

"Then Figueroa screamed, 'You mean me? You calling me a pigeon?'

"Blasco bites his thumb and yells back, 'Don't make me stick a finger in your eye! You been pigeoning! I'm passing the word! We don't want your kind around! You ask Jenny herself, she knows the whole story!' Then Blasco talked some more against me and Figueroa began to turn purple. He could hardly breathe and I was afraid for his bad heart. Then he yelled like a wild man and threw a chair and the four sailors ganged him. I begged them to let the men fight fair, but no, they jumped him — four against one. They held his arms while Blasco busted his head open with a club. Then they threw him into a gutter like an animal. I found him there crying in the rain."

"He went back for trouble," Wiley suggested.

"No!" She shook her head. "He didn't know what he was doing, he was so mixed up. He just wanted to go back to get his hat. But by then he was so wild he put his fist through the glass and cut himself. Then these four men came out to help Blasco gang him again and he ran home. When I got there, he was bleeding bad. He had to get to the hospital but he was afraid to go on the street. He thought they might be after him, so I promised to go with him. He finally took his small

knife for protection and I carried his stick. It was dark, but before we took two steps, he whispered, 'Watch out, Jenny, they're back!' I looked around. I got the picture right there. We were cut off on both sides. Two of them were right on top of us. Two others were circling us. They closed in and poor Figueroa had to defend himself. Then the big one gave Figueroa a beating before we could get away. The cops took us and they never once blamed the other side."

Wiley drummed the table, then said pointedly, "The one he cut was the kid, the same one who lent you his jacket. That kid meant no harm."

"How did we know that?" the girl said with a hard look. "We were just looking for the hospital. I warned them both to stay away. They just kept closing in. We wanted no trouble."

"Did you give this warning in English?" Wiley asked pointedly.

The girl sat back and there was a moment of silence.

"When I'm excited, I use Spanish," she said slowly. She knitted her brows and thought back. "I guess I made a mistake. I didn't think of that. Now that you tell me, I'm sorry about that kid."

Ricca coughed and moved his chair.

Wiley shaded his eyes. "Who is Esteban? Why should his name get Figueroa excited?"

"Esteban?" She laughed harshly.

"He's Blasco's partner in this house the cops raided. That's who Esteban is. Why isn't he under arrest? How can he be operating? Esteban and Blasco!"

Wiley put the next question with care. "What did Blasco say against you just before the fight?"

The girl sat mute.

Ricca threw away a cigarette. "It's obvious what Blasco said. He told Figueroa that Jenny works in that warehouse for him. That's why he was objecting to her going away. Am I right, Jenny?"

She said in a low voice, "Figueroa couldn't stand to hear that said about me," and turned to finish the cigarette.

Wiley asked, "Didn't Figueroa know all this?"

"Sure he knew, but he couldn't stand to hear it said." She stared. "You're a decent man. How would you feel?"

"If Figueroa feels that way about you," Ricca said, "why wouldn't you marry him? What's the point?"

She said cynically, "Since I was twelve, I know too much about men. I won't get tied to the best men alive. If he don't treat me right, I want to walk out. I knew a girl got killed once just because a man thought he owned her."

After a moment, Wiley said, "Stick around, Jenny. I'm sorry, but you're a witness if there's a trial."

"What's going to happen to Figueroa?" she asked huskily.

"I can't tell until I know whether the kid dies. But I'll do my best for him. You can tell him that much in Spanish."

The girl looked at Wiley as though she saw him for the first time. There were hard lines about the lawyer's mouth. Whether his eyes, cold and blue, had any sympathy, she could not tell. "Four against one!" she muttered. "The poor man!"

The interview was over and the girl left the inner office and gave the prisoner Wiley's message. The prisoner kissed her hand and pressed it to his cheeks. "*Pobrecito!*" she murmured and he responded in Spanish. The girl looked up at Wiley. "He wants me to say 'Thanks'."

An hour of formalities passed. Other witnesses were questioned, then Corbin took the weeping prisoner downstairs and booked him for assault as a temporary measure.

They all left the precinct house together. Outside on the steps of the station house, Wiley paused to ask, "How old are you, Jenny? Do you mind telling me?"

"Nineteen." She answered with a lurking hard smile as though she knew that he had expected her to say thirty.

The street was wet and steaming but the early sun was warm. The girl turned abruptly and walked off, her black evening dress attracting the gibes of urchins.

Wiley and the detectives got into the car and drove off.

At St. Vincent's Hospital they got permission to visit the emergency ward. They found the young seaman in a corner bed under a dim light, screened off from the other patients. His face, they saw, was nothing like his laughing photograph. His eyes and lips were blue outlines in a waxy mask. His breathing was stertorous and shallow.

While Ricca took notes, Wiley explained his mission. The nurse kept stroking the boy's damp hair with a soothing motion. His thin nose rose like a scimitar from the pillow.

"Do you want to talk, Porter?" Wiley asked.

The boy turned his eyes and his lips moved. "Will I die, sir?" he whispered.

Wiley did not answer directly. "Do you want to tell me how you got stabbed?"

The boy made an effort. His eyes were frightened. He managed a whisper.

"It hurts."

Wiley paused to rub his jaw. His eyes were bleak. He hated this but he had to make an attempt.

"How do you feel about your chances?" he asked softly.

The boy whispered, "I'm all right, sir. I'll be up soon. I've got to make my ship, you know."

"Just tell me what happened in your own way."

The boy said weakly, "A girl. I only meant to pass. I told her that. I was only —"

The whisper trailed off and the nurse intervened.

"He's in a coma," she said. "There's nothing he can say now."

The investigators trailed out, feeling relieved.

"That's that!" Ricca lit a cigarette. "You go ahead, Dave. I'll stick around, just in case."

Wiley left and went directly to court to dispose of a lengthy sentence calendar. The hospital ward was in his mind throughout the day.

Toward evening he received a call from St. Vincent's that the young seaman had died in coma. Wiley looked at his notes on the desk, then telephoned Goudy.

"I know about it, sir." Goudy's voice was remote and, it struck Wiley, all the more desolate for being quiet. "They called me first thing. Thank you for calling."

Wiley scrawled a change in his report to indicate that the assault had become homicide. "We'll charge Figueroa with manslaughter, perhaps murder, but I can't promise the result. A jury will probably acquit."

"How can that be, sir?" Goudy cried.

"He'll claim he was defending himself. He was afraid of you."

"But, sir!" Goudy protested. "The kid told him we just wanted to pass!"

"The kid told him in English. This man didn't understand." Wiley

paused. "It seems neither side spoke the same language. Too bad."

In a small voice, Goudy asked, "What shall I tell Mrs. Porter, sir? That it was too bad?"

"Tell her it was just a street accident."

"That wouldn't be true," Goudy objected. "How can I say that?"

"It's true enough, and she won't feel so badly."

"I don't understand!" Goudy said stubbornly.

Wiley waited with a sense of exasperation.

"Do you want her to know the boy was stabbed to death in a gutter?"

There was no answer.

After a time, Wiley concluded that Goudy had forgotten to hang up.

That evening, Wiley was grateful to get home. The children were frisky and demanding of attention until he read them their comics. They were not to be put off until dinner guests arrived.

Wiley did more than his usual drinking but he was a silent host. As the talk went on about him, he was conscious of the warmth of his home and the affection of his wife's eyes.

The evening ended early.

Even when the guests had gone and the dishes were done, his wife did not ask nor did he tell her about the stabbing in the streets.



Carrera's Woman

BY RICHARD MARSTEN



Carrera had the money, and he had a gun. But Mac-Cauley had his woman — his beautiful, easy woman.

WE WERE just about even. The Mexican sky hung over our heads like a pale blue circus tent. We crouched behind the rocks, and we each held .45's in our fists. We were high in the Sierra Madres, and the rocks were jagged and sharp; high outcroppings untouched by erosive waters. Between us was a stretch of pebble-strewn flatland and a solid wall of hatred that seemed alive in the heat of the sun.

We were just about even, but not quite.



The guy behind the other .45 had ten thousand dollars that belonged to me. I had something that belonged to him, his woman.

She lay beside me now, flat on her belly. She was slim and browned from the sun, a colorful print skirt curving over the smooth roundness of her body. Her legs were long and sleek where the skirt ended. I held her wrist tightly, her arm twisted into a V behind her back. She had stopped struggling now, and she lay peacefully, her head twisted away from me, her hair looking like black, untamed weeds against the ground.

"Carrera!" I shouted.

"I hear you, *señor*," he answered. His voice was fat, fat the way he was. I thought of his paunch, and I thought of the ten G's in the money belt, pressed tight against his sweaty flesh. My money. I'd worked hard for that money. I'd sweated in the Tampico oil fields for more than three years, socking it away a little at a time, letting it pile up for the day I could kiss Mexico goodbye.

"Look, Carrera," I said, "I'm giving you one last chance."

"Save your breath, *señor*," he called back.

"You'd better save yours, you bastard," I shouted. "You'd better save it because pretty soon you're not going to have any."

"Perhaps," he answered. I couldn't see him because his head was pulled down below the rocks. But I knew he was grinning, and I wanted to strangle him for it.

"I want that ten thousand," I shouted.

He laughed aloud this time, and my fingers tightened involuntarily around the girl's wrist. "Ah, but that is where the difficulty lies," he said. "I want it, too."

"Look, Carrera, I'm through playing around," I told him. "If you're not out of there in five minutes, I'm going to put a hole in your sweetie's head." I paused, wondering if he'd heard me. "You got that, Carrera? Five minutes."

He waited again before answering, and then his voice drifted across the flatland. "You had better shoot her now, *señor*. You are not getting this money."

The girl began laughing, a throaty laugh that started somewhere down in her chest and bubbled up onto her lips.

"Shut up!" I told her. I let her wrist go for a second and slapped her on the behind, hard, the palm of my hand smarting. I grabbed her wrist again, and bent her arm up

behind her.

She was still laughing.

"What's so damn funny?" I asked her.

"You will never outwait Carrera," she said. Her voice was as low and as deep as her laugh. "Carrera is a very patient man."

"I can be patient, too, sister," I said. "I patiently saved that ten thousand bucks for three years, and no tin horn crook is going to step in and swipe it."

"You underestimate Carrera," she said.

"No, baby, I've got Carrera pegged to a tee. He's a small-time punk. Back in the States, he'd be shaking pennies out of gum machines. He probably steals tortillas from blind old ladies down here."

"You underestimate him," she repeated.

I shook my head. "No, baby, this is Carrera's big killing — or so he thinks. That ten thousand is his key to the big time. Only it belongs to me, and it's coming back to me."

She rolled over suddenly, pinning my arm under her back. She wore a peasant blouse with a swooping neckline, and a shadowed cleft was deep between her breasts. Her lips were a little too full, almost swollen looking. And her mouth was a little too wide for the narrow oval face. She looked up at me through heavily fringed eyes, smoldering brown, intense with the reflection of the Mexican sky — *and with something else.*

"If you were smart," she said, "you would leave. You would pack up and go, my friend, and you wouldn't stop to look back."

"I'm not smart."

"I know. So you'll stay here, and Carrera will kill you. Or I will kill you. Either way, you will be dead, and your money will be gone, anyway." She paused and a faint smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "It is better that you lose only your money."

I glanced at my watch. "Carrera has about two minutes, honey."

"And after that?"

"It's up to Carrera," I said. As if to check, I shouted, "You like your girlfriends dead, Carrera?"

"Ten thousand dollars will buy a lot of girlfriends," he called back.

I looked down at her. She seemed to be comfortable resting against my arm. I could feel the warm flesh of her back where it pressed against my hand.

"Did you hear your boyfriend?" I asked.

"I heard."

"He doesn't seem to give a damn whether I shoot you or not."

She shrugged, and her sudden motion did things to the front of her blouse. "It is not that," she whispered. "He simply knows that you will not kill me."

"Don't be too surprised, baby."

She lifted one black brow against her forehead, held it bent there like the crooked wing of a raven in

flight. The smile flitted across her face again, was gone almost before it started. "You will not kill me," she said.

I didn't answer her. I kept staring at my watch until the five minutes were up. I was suddenly sweating all over. My shirt stuck to my back, and I could feel the perspiration trickling down my chest, oozing through the blond hairs that covered it. My brow was beaded with enormous drops of sweat that converged and slid down the side of my nose.

After a long while, she said, "See?"

That was all she said. I looked at her for a few seconds, and then I released her wrist, pulling my arm from under her. I held the .45 on her as I undid my belt. My dungarees were tight around my waist. I'd thrown them on the night I caught them both in my hotel room, Carrera and this wench. Carrera was fast for a fat man, but I'd grabbed his woman, and I'd kept her with me on the chase that led through the streets of Tampico, out past El Higo, Taniajas, Tancahuitz, Chicontepac — Mexican towns as old as the Aztecs, towns with rutted cart roads that had raised hell with the tires of my '46 Olds. Carrera had driven an old Ford. He drove it recklessly, ditching it when we reached the mountains, stumbling forward on foot then, with the girl and me close behind him.

"Roll over," I told her.

Her eyes opened in mock surprise, then narrowed lewdly.

"Why, *señor!*"

"Let's not get cute," I said. I grabbed her shoulder and shoved, and she rolled over, her skirt lifting with the movement, lifting over a soft, browned thigh. She pulled it down quickly, and I grabbed her hands and crossed them behind her back. I wrapped the belt around them tightly, looped it through, and took another turn. She sat up when I was finished, and studied my face carefully.

"My feet, *señor*. Are you not afraid I will *kick* you to death?"

She was mocking me, and I was ready to answer when I realized her last statement had been a carefully calculated one. She was trying to shame me into leaving her feet unbound.

I pulled my shirt tails out of the band of my dungarees, and started to unbutton the shirt. I was going to tear it into strips and use these to tie her feet together. I thought of the sun overhead, and I realized how pleasant it would be with a blistering sunburn and that fat pig across the dirt alley with a .45 pointed my way. I buttoned my shirt again and let it hang outside my trousers. Then I sat down across her knees quickly, pinning her legs to the ground. A surprised look crossed her face, and her eyes grew saucer-wide as I took the hem of her skirt in my hands and began tearing.

She tried to kick, so I shoved her back with the heel of my hand, and she sprawled onto her back and lay still while I tore a wide band from the bottom of her skirt. It made the skirt a good deal shorter. Her knees were round and smooth, and her calves were muscular, like a dancer's calves, rippling with a supple, sinuous grace. She looked at me with unmasked hatred in her eyes. She was Carrera's woman, all right, clear to the marrow.

I tore the band of material into narrower strips and reached for her ankles. She kicked out viciously, aiming for my face as I bent over her. I threw one arm across her legs, looped the material under her ankles. I straddled her then, my back to her face, and finished knotting the cloth around her ankles. I did a good job. Not so tight as to stop circulation, but tight enough to prevent any running around. I got up then and lit a cigarette, tucking the heavy Colt into my waistband.

"Now what?" she asked. She was leaning back against the rocks, a loose strand of hair falling over one eye.

"What's your name?"

She didn't answer.

I shrugged. "Suit yourself," I said.

"My name is Linda," she said at length.

"Make yourself comfortable, Linda," I told her. "We're going to be here for quite some time."

I meant that. I still hadn't figured out how I was going to get my money from Carrera, but I knew damn well I was staying here until I *did* get it. Crossing the open dirt patch would have been suicide. But at the same time, Carrera couldn't cross it either. Not unless he wanted a slug through his fat face. I thought of that, and I began to wish he *would* try to get across the clearing. Nothing would have pleased me more than to have his nose resting on the sight at the end of my gun muzzle.

Ten thousand bucks! Ten thousand, hard-earned American dollars. How had Carrera found out about it? Had I talked too much? Hell, it was general knowledge that I was putting away a nest egg to take back to the States. Carrera had probably been watching me for a long time, planning his larceny from a distance, waiting until I was ready to shove off for home.

"It's getting dark," Linda said suddenly.

I lifted my eyes to the sky. The sun was dipping low over the horizon, splashing the sky with brilliant reds and oranges. The peaks of the mountains glowed brilliantly as the dying rays lingered in the crevices and hollows. A crescent moon hung palely against the deepening wash of night, sharing the sky with the sinking sun.

And suddenly it was black. There was no transition, no dusk, no violets or purples. The sun was simply

swallowed up, and the stars devoured the sky with hungry white mouths. The moon grinned down like a bigger, lopsided mouth against the blackness, and a stiff breeze worked its way down from the caps of the mountains, spreading cold where there had once been intolerable heat.

Linda shivered, hunching her shoulders together, pressing her elbows against her sides, hugging herself against the cold.

"You'd better get some sleep," I said.

"And you?"

"With that pig across the way?" I asked. "I'll stay awake, thanks."

She grinned. "Carrera will sleep. You can bet on that."

"I wish I could bet on that. I'd go right over and make sure he never woke up."

"My, my," she mocked, "such a tough one."

"Hard as nails," I said, a faint smile starting on my lips.

"You know, I don't even know your name."

"Jeff," I told her. "Jeff Mac-Cauley."

She rolled over, trying to make herself comfortable. It wasn't easy with her hands and feet bound. She settled for her left side, her arms behind her, her legs together.

"Well," she said, "*buenos noches*, Jeff."

I didn't answer. I was watching the rocks across the clearing. Carrera may have planned on sleeping the

night, but I wasn't counting on it.

* * *

She woke at about two A.M. She pushed herself to a sitting position and stared into the darkness.

"Jeff," she whispered. There was the faintest trace of an accent in her voice, and she made my name sound like "Jaif."

I pulled the .45 from my waistband and walked over to her.

"What is it?"

"My hands. They're . . . I can't feel anything. I think the blood has stopped . . ."

I knelt down beside her and reached for her hands. The strap didn't seem too tight. "You'll be all right," I said.

"But . . . but they feel numb. It's like . . . like there is nothing below my wrists, Jeff."

Her voice broke, and I wondered if she were telling the truth. Hell, I didn't want the poor kid to suffer. I held the .45 in my right hand and tugged at the strap with my left. I loosened it, and she pulled her hands free and began massaging the wrists.

She breathed deeply, and the moon sent silver beams dancing across her breasts. "Ahhh," she said, "that's much better."

I kept the .45 pointed at where her navel should be. She looked at the open muzzle and sighed, as if she were being patient with a precocious little boy.

She leaned back on her arms then, tilting her head to the sky, her black

hair streaming down her back.

"Oh, it's a beautiful night," she said.

"Yeah."

"Just look at the moon, Jeff."

I glanced up at the moon, taking my eyes off her for a second. That was all the time she needed.

She sprang with the liteness of a mountain lion, pushing herself up with her bound feet, her fingernails raking down the length of my arm, clawing at my gun hand. I yanked the gun back and she dove at me again, the nails slashing across my face. She threw herself onto my chest, and her hands sought the wrist of my gun hand, tightening there, the nails digging deep into my flesh.

I rolled over, slapping the muzzle of the .45 against her shoulder. She curled up like a caterpillar for a second, nursing her shoulder, and then she exploded again, teeth flashing, nails bared.

I flipped the .45 into my left hand and brought my right back across my chest. I slapped out backhanded, catching her on the side of her face. She fell backwards and then lunged forward again. I slapped her twice more, and she went into the caterpillar routine again, curling up into a soft little ball, her head bent, her chest heaving.

She looked up at me suddenly, her eyes sparking. "You lousy bastard," she mumbled.

"Sure," I agreed.

"Hitting a woman!"

This struck me funny somehow, and I began laughing. I saw her eyes flare, and she bit her lip as I laughed louder. She pushed herself up from the ground, murder in her eyes. She hopped forward, and I backed away from her. She kept hopping, her feet close together, the material from her skirt keeping her in check. And then she toppled forward, and she would have kissed the ground if I hadn't caught her in my arms.

She kissed me instead.

Or I kissed her.

It was hard to tell which. She was falling, and I reached for her, and she was suddenly in my arms. I held the .45 in my right hand, and it felt like a cannon pointing out into the darkness. My left arm tightened around her waist and she lifted her head. There was a question in her eyes for a single instant, and then the question seemed to haze over. She closed her eyes and lifted her mouth to mine.

There was sweetness in her kiss, and an undercurrent of danger, a pulsing emotion that knifed through me like an electric shock. She pressed against me, and her body was soft and womanly, and I forgot the marks of her nails on my arms and face, forgot that she could be as deadly as a grizzly. She was a kitten now, soft and caressing, and her breath was in my ears, and the movement of her body was quick and urgent. I lifted her, the .45 still in my hand, and carried her to the deep shadows of the rocks.

The stars blinked down in wonder, and the wind sang a high, contented song in the jagged peaks around us.

* * *

Sunlight spilled over the twisted ground like molten gold, pushing at the shadows, chasing the night.

She was still in my arms when I woke up. I stared down at her, not wanting to move, afraid to wake her.

And then her eyes popped open suddenly, and a sleepy smile tilted the corners of her mouth.

"Good morning, darling," she said. Her voice was still lined with sleep, as fuzzy as a caterpillar.

"Hello."

She yawned, stretching her arms over her head in lazy contentment. She took a deep breath and then smiled archly, and I looked deep into her eyes, trying to read whatever emotion was hidden in their brown depths.

"Your boyfriend," I started.

"Carrera?"

"Yeah."

"He's not my boyfriend."

Her face was serious, so serious that it startled me.

"No?"

"No."

"Well, anyway," I said, "he's still got my ten thousand."

"I know."

"I want it back."

"I know."

"I want you to help me get it."

She was silent for a long while.

When she spoke, her voice was a whisper. "Why?"

"Why? Holy Jesus, that's ten thousand bucks! You know how much work I did to get that dough . . ."

"Why not forget it? Why not . . . forget it?"

"Sister, you're crazy. You're crazier'n hell."

"Carrera will kill you. I know him. Would you rather be dead without your money . . . or would you rather be alive without it? Alive and . . . with me?"

I hesitated before answering. "Ten G's is a lot of money, baby."

"I'm a lot of woman," she answered.

"Yeah."

"Well?"

I shook my head. "If you help me, I can have both. We can do a lot with that money."

She considered this for a moment and then asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"You'll help?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want to set a trap for Carrera."

"What kind of a trap?"

"Will you help?"

She moved closer to me and buried her head against my shoulder. Her voice tingled along my skin. "I'll do whatever you say."

* * *

We gave the sun time to get directly overhead, laying our plan as carefully as the foundation of a cathedral. The idea was to get

Carrera out into the clearing. Once he was there, I'd either get the money or put a big hole in his fat face. He could take his choice.

Linda and I crouched behind the rocks, our heads close together. The sun bore down ferociously, baking the earth, spreading heat over the surface of the land. The sky was as blue as a sapphire, streaked with spidery white clouds that trailed their delicacy across the wide wash. It was the Mexico of the picture books, bright and clear, warm, alive — and it should have been pulsating with the throb of laughter and music, wine and song, fiesta.

Instead, a funeral was being planned.

Carrera's.

And Mexico, the willing mistress, arched her crooked backbone, thrust up a solid barrier of jagged rock behind which we plotted while the sun watched with a bland, disinterested face. There was a sheer wall behind Carrera, rising like a giant tombstone for some hundred feet, terminating there in a jumble of twisted branches and fallen rock. A few feet from the wall, jutting up like an old man's browned, crooked teeth, was the outcropping behind which Carrera squatted with his .45 — and with my ten G's.

Once Carrera left the protection of that natural fortress, he was in my pocket.

We got to work. My watch read 12:45, and the sun was hot, probably

as hot as it would get all day. The sweat spread across the front of my shirt like a muddy ink blot, staining my armpits, rolling down my face in steady streams.

Linda screamed, just the way we'd planned it. The scream tore the heat waves into shreds and clung to the jagged rocks like a tattered piece of cloth.

"Shut up!" I shouted. "Shut your goddamn mouth."

"José!" she bellowed, her head turned to Carrera. There was no sound from across the clearing. I kept low behind the rocks, wondering if Carrera was listening, wondering if our little act was having any effect.

"I warned you," I shouted. "One more word . . ." I cut myself short and yelled, "Hey, what the hell . . . hey, cut it out! Let go that gun!"

"You lousy filthy scum," Linda shrieked.

"Don't! Don't! For God's sake . . ."

I pointed the .45 over my head and fired two quick shots, the thunder echoing among the rocks like the dying beat of a horse's hooves. I screamed as loud as I could, and then I dropped my voice into a trailing moan. I clamped my jaws shut then and allowed silence to cover the land.

It was quiet for a long time.

Linda and I crouched down behind the rocks, waiting, looking at each other, the sweat pouring from

our bodies. There was still no sound from the other side of the flatland, and I began to doubt the effectiveness of our plan.

And then, softly, in a whisper that reached across the pebble-strewn clearing and climbed the rock barrier, Carrera called, "Linda?"

I put my finger to my lips.

"Linda?" he called again.

I nodded this time, and she answered, "It's all right, José. It's all right."

Carrera was quiet again, and I could picture him behind his rock barrier, his ears strained, his fat face flushed.

"The American?" he called.

"He is dead," Linda answered.

"Tell him to come over," I prompted.

She hesitated for a moment and then said, "Come over, José. Come."

I waited, my chest heaving, the .45 heavy in my hand.

"Throw out the American's gun," Carrera said. His voice was cold and calculating. He wasn't buying it. He suspected a trick, and he wanted to make sure I wasn't forcing his woman to play along with me. I bit my lip and stared at the .45.

"Give me the gun," Linda whispered.

"What for? What good would that . . ."

"I'll stand up. When he sees me with the gun, he will no longer suspect. Give it to me."

"Throw out the gun, Linda,"

Carrera called again.

"Quick," she said, "give me the gun."

I hesitated for a moment, and then I passed the gun to her, holding it by the barrel, fitting the stock into her fingers.

She took the gun gently, and then pointed it at my belly. A small smile tilted the corners of her mouth as she stood up. My eyes popped wide in astonishment.

"It's all right now, José," she said. "I've got his gun."

"*Bueno*," Carrera said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. I'd been suckered, taken like a schoolboy, hook, line, and sinker.

I slammed my right fist into the palm of my left hand.

"So that's the way it is," I said.

"That's the way it is, *señor*," she answered. The gun didn't waver. It kept pointing at my belt buckle.

"And it's *señor* now," I added. "Last night, it was Jeff."

"Last night was last night," she said. "Now is now."

Across the clearing, I could hear Carrera scraping his feet against the rocks as he clambered to a standing position. Linda's eyes flicked briefly to the right as she heard the sound, too, and then snapped back.

I studied the gun in her hand, and I listened to the noises Carrera was making as he started across the clearing. I wondered whether I should pull the old "Get-her-Joe!" dodge, or the equally familiar "Who's-that-behind-you?" routine.

I decided against both. Linda was no dummy, and she could hear Carrera coming as well as I could. If anyone were behind her, Carrera would see him. And besides, she knew damn well there was no one but the three of us in those lonely hills. No, it had to be something else.

And it had to be soon.

Carrera was a fat man, but he was covering ground. I glanced over at him, watching him waddle slowly across the long, pebble-strewn flatland. He was bigger than I'd imagined he was, with a flat nose and beady black eyes that squatted like olives on either side of it. He kept coming, with still a hell of a lot of ground to cover, but plodding steadily away at it. Once he got to me, it was goodbye MacCauley, goodbye ten thousand bucks, goodbye world. And I never liked saying goodbye.

I started my play then. I began to sweat because I knew what it meant. Nothing had ever meant so much, and so it had to be good. It had to be damned good.

"I'm surprised, Linda," I told her. I kept my voice low, a bare whisper that only she could hear. From the corner of my eye, I watched Carrera's progress.

"You should learn to expect surprises, *señor*," she answered.

"I thought it meant a little more than . . ." I stopped short and shook my head.

She was interested. I could see the way her brows pulled together

slightly, a small V appearing between them.

"Never mind," I finished. "We'll just forget it."

"What is there to forget?" she asked. She wanted me to go on. She tried to keep her voice light, but there was something behind her question, an uncertain probing. Carrera was halfway across the clearing now. I saw the .45 in his pudgy fist and I began to sweat more heavily. I had to hurry.

"There's you to forget," I said. "You, Linda. You and last night. That's a lot of forgetting to do before I die."

"Stop it," she said softly.

"And the promise," I went on. "That'll be the hardest to forget. The promise, Linda, You and me . . . and ten thousand bucks. You and me, Linda . . ."

"Stop it!"

"You and me without Carrera. Don't you see, Linda?" I pleaded. "Can't you understand what I'm telling you. Isn't it all over my face? What do I have to do to make you . . ."

"Jeff, no," she said. "No, please." She shook her head as if trying to clear it.

I took a step closer to her. Carrera was no more than fifty feet away now. I could feel the sun on my shoulders and head, could hear the steady crunch of Carrera's feet against the pebbles.

"Look at him, Linda," I said, my voice a husky whisper. "Take a

look at the fat slobbering pig you're doing this for."

"Don't . . ." she said. She kept shaking her head and I could see her eyes beginning to glaze over.

"Take a look! Look at him, go ahead. There's your boyfriend! There's Carrera!"

"He's not my boyfriend," she said, anguish in her throat.

"Your boyfriend," I repeated. "Carrera, fat . . ."

"My husband," she said. "My husband, Jeff, my husband."

He was almost on us. I could see his features plainly, could see the sweat dripping off his forehead. I took another step towards Linda.

"Leave him," I whispered urgently. "Leave him, darling. Leave him, leave him."

She hesitated for a moment, and I saw her lower lip tremble. "Jeff, I . . . I . . ."

She lowered the .45 for an instant, and that was when I sprang. I didn't bother with preliminaries. I brought back my fist as I leaped and uncocked it as the .45 went off like a skyrocket. I smelled the acrid odor of cordite in my nostrils, and then I felt my fist slam against her jaw. She was screaming when it caught her, but she stopped instantly, crumpling against the ground like a dirty shirt.

Carrera was running now. I couldn't see him as I stooped to pick up the .45, but a man his size couldn't run on pebbles without all Mexico hearing it. I scrambled

to my feet, lifting my head over the outcropping.

He fired the minute my head showed, his bullets chipping off rock that scattered like shrapnel, ripping into my face. I covered my eyes with one hand and began firing blindly.

Carrera stopped shooting as soon as I cut loose. I uncovered my face, then, and got him in my sights. He wasn't hard to hit. Something that big never is. I fired two shots that sprouted into big red blossoms across the white cotton shirt he wore. He clutched at the blossoms as if he wanted to pick them for a bouquet, and then he changed his mind and fell flat on his face. The ground seemed to tremble a little — and then it was quiet.

I looked over my shoulder at Linda. She was still sprawled out on the ground, her hair spread out like spilled blackstrap under her head. I climbed over the rocks and walked to where Carrera was decorating the landscape. I rolled him over and unfastened the money belt. Carefully, slowly, I counted the money. It was all there, ten thousand bucks worth. Carrera's eyes stared up at it, still greedy, but they weren't seeing anything any more. I picked up his .45 and tucked it in my waistband. Overhead, like black thunderclouds, the vultures were already beginning their slow spiral. Carrera would be a feast, all right, a real fat feast.

I walked back to the rocks, my

.45 cocked in my right hand.

She was just sitting up when I got there. Her knees were raised, and the skirt was pulled back over them, showing the cool whiteness of her thighs. She brushed a black lock of hair away from her face, looking up at me with wide brown eyes.

Her voice caught in her throat. "Carrera?" she asked.

"He's dead," I said.

"Oh." The word died almost before it found voice. She stared at the ground for a moment, and then lifted her head again. "Then . . . then it's all right . . . you and me . . . we . . ."

I shook my head slowly.

A puzzled look crept into her eyes. She looked at me with confusion all over her face, and the lip began trembling again.

"No, baby," I said.

"But . . ."

"No," I repeated.

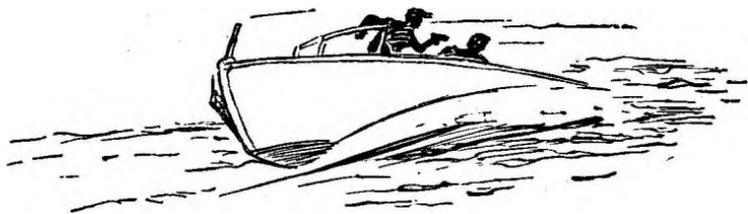
"But, you said . . ."

I turned my back on her and started walking down the twisting path, anxious to cover the long distance to the Olds.

"Jeff!" she cried.

I kept walking. Over my shoulder, I said, "You're Carrera's woman, baby. Remember? Go back to him."

I heard the sob that escaped her lips, but I didn't look back. I kept walking, the sun still high, the sky a bright blue except where the vultures hung against it like hungry black dots.



He was away only ten minutes, but it was long enough. Long enough for a madman to come in and beat Eileen to death. . . .

Attack

BY HUNT COLLINS

I stood in the open door of the cabaña, the sullen swish of the waves on the beach behind me. The moonlight filtered in through the louvred windows, throwing long, grasping bars on the floor and on the bed. I stared at the bed, and for a second I thought it was the moonlight playing tricks with my eyes.

She lay there like a crooked stick, her long blond hair fanned out on the pillow behind her. I recognized the hair, and that was all. The rest of her was a broken travesty of Eileen, not the Eileen I'd left ten minutes ago. Ten minutes. A short time. Barely time enough to pull the speedboat up onto the beach into the protection of the cove. Just time enough to do that and then hurry back to the cabaña.

Just time enough for a murder.
I didn't look at her again. I walked

straight past the bed, stopping beside the dresser. I moved quickly, like a man in a dream, my body performing actions while my mind raced far ahead. The .38 was in the top drawer where I'd left it. I took it out now and felt the strong feel of the walnut grip in my palm. Then I left the cabaña.

He'd left a clear track in the wet sand. His footprints were large, and they ploughed deep into the sand. I tried to picture him as I followed the prints. A big guy. Muscular, maybe. Wild-eyed. Crazy enough to have beaten Eileen's face into . . .

I felt my fingers tighten around the grip of the gun. A fresh breeze was blowing off the ocean, and it played with my hair, flirted with the back of my neck. My feet whispered in the sand as I followed the tracks. Far off, down near the shelter

of the rocks, I saw the red and white speedboat bobbing gently on the swells, her bow up on the sand, her stern squatting in the water.

I looked down at the footprints, suddenly realizing where they were heading. The sweat broke out on my forehead in a fine, gritty film. The speedboat!

I saw him then.

The moon suddenly popped from behind a cloud, spilling onto the beach like molten silver, spreading over the silent dunes, catching the man in a noose of glittering moonlight.

He was as big as I thought he'd be. He wore white flannels that flapped in the wind as he ran heavily up the beach. He almost looked comical, a big balloon of a man with his clothes flapping around him like a circus clown's. He looked funny except for the glint of gun-metal in his right hand.

Except for that, and the fact that it wasn't funny at all. None of it. Not one bit of it.

He turned abruptly, glanced nervously at the water, and then looked back at me. I stopped dead. The wind carried a fine spray over the sand, slapped it against my face. I tasted salt on my lips and squinted across the beach, waiting.

"Go back!" he shouted.

His voice was strange, or maybe it was just the wind that lifted it and carried it to me in a rush. It was thick and rasping, and somehow raw.

"I'm coming after you, you bastard!" I called. The wind lifted my voice, drowned it beneath the greater roar of the waves striking the long finger of sand.

"No!" he shouted. "Go away."

He turned and started running up the beach again, heading for the speedboat at the water's edge. I stood where I was, crossing my left arm in front of my chest, resting my gun hand on it and taking careful aim. I pressed the safety catch, and then I squeezed the trigger. An orange lance of flame licked out at the darkness. The explosion was loud in my ears, and I smelled the stench of cordite, heard the slug as it whistled across the beach. A little burst of sand ploughed up about two feet away from his heels. He dropped to the sand and whirled, the gun glinting in the light of the moon.

I saw a sudden streak of fire, and then I heard the loud bellow as the gun thundered in his fist. I dropped down, my cheek against the cold moistness. I thought fleetingly of Eileen, of the warmth of her, the way I had drowned myself in the softness of her mouth. The thought sent a hard knot to my stomach, and I got to my knees and began crawling forward.

I heard a faint scraping, and then the sound of an engine coughing into life. The man laughed shrilly as I jumped to my feet and started running toward the speedboat. I heard the motor catch and then hum

as he pulled the throttle wide. I had crossed the beach now, and I plunged into the icy water, the waves springing up around my knees in a numbing embrace. I leaped forward, the gun in the waistband of my trousers, both hands clawing for the stern of the boat. The boat seemed to fight me. It pulled away in a sudden spurt of energy, tearing skin from the palms of my hands. I reached out again, getting a good grip this time, pulling myself over the fantail as the boat headed out from the shore, moving at an oblique angle toward the breakwater.

I dropped down into the stern-sheets and reached for the .38 at my waist.

"No," his voice said.

I looked up. He was holding a .32 on me, a small gun in a fat fist. He held the fist steady, his fat forefinger barely squeezing into the trigger guard. The moon came out then, slipping from behind the cloud, lighting his face. He had practically no chin. His face seemed to end with flabby lips that were tilted now in a vacuous smile. Above his lips, his nose sat like a steel rivet, compact, hard.

I looked at his eyes, then, and they gleamed dully in the moonlight, the pupils wide and staring. A shudder ran down my spine like a drop of ice water. I looked down at the gun again, and then up to his eyes. He was hopped to his hairline. That crazy little light danced in his eyes, the dream-light, the

gleam that spelled drug addict. He was snow blind, and I could see the puncture marks on the layers of fat that hung from his arms now.

He kept smiling, his mind toying with a half-remembered idea, his eyes staring at me with a false look of concentration.

"What now?" I asked. He was half-turned away from me, one huge paw clutching the wheel of the boat.

"Don't talk," he said. He said it quickly, as if I'd stepped on a dream he was having.

"Why'd you kill her, you lousy bastard?"

"Her? Kill? Oh, yes . . . yes . . ."

He kept smiling, and I wanted to reach out and wrap my fingers around the folded fat on his throat.

"I saw her through the window," he said. "I was walking by and I saw her through the window." His eyebrows lifted slightly, and he grinned, as if he were sharing an obscene joke with me. "She was undressing. She took off her clothes and hung them on the chair, and I watched her and . . ."

"Shut up!" I said. In a minute, I was going to jump him and tear out his throat. One minute. One min . . .

"She was nice. A piece, you know? She was standing there without a stitch, and that's when I went in. Man, she was nice. I grabbed her, and I began feeling her and . . ."

"Shut up!" I screamed. "You lousy filthy bastard!" My fingers itched, and I wanted to pound my

fists into his face. I took a step forward, and the gun came up, leveling on my chest.

I looked at the gun, and then I looked out over the bow of the boat, saw the rocks ahead. I backed away, not saying anything. I shifted my eyes back to his face, and they didn't change position as he went on speaking.

"She fought me. You dig that? She fought me!" He acted surprised, and I thought of Eileen under his clutching fingers and the hate boiled up inside me. The bow sliced through the waves, heading toward the rocks on the breakwater. He didn't turn around. He kept looking at me and smiling, the gun pointed at my chest.

We hit the rocks with a splintering crash, and my gun was out of the waistband almost before we struck. He screamed and tried to turn the wheel, and then he remembered he had a passenger aboard. He whirled rapidly as the boat tossed to starboard, the .32 coming up automatically, the crazy light still in his eyes. The smile had vanished from his face now, and his lips were drawn tight across his teeth. I let him bring the .32 all the way up.

I fired then, and the gun flew out of his hand as the bullet struck it. I saw bone splinters pierce his skin, saw the blood suddenly appear in the palm of his hand like a squashed tomato.

I was breathing hard. I took a step closer to him, and he backed up

against the wheel, terror in his eyes.

"All right," I said. "All right."

I fired again, right at his face. He brought his hands up an instant after the bullet smashed the bridge of his nose. I kept saying, "All right, you bastard, all right," and I kept yanking on the trigger, the .38 bucking in my hand, the blood bursting out of his eyes, spilling from his mouth. I kept firing until the gun was empty, and his face was a wet sponge that splashed against the deck as he toppled forward.

He was lying in the bottom of the boat when I left him, his white flannels dripping with red. I walked back on top of the breakwater, finally reaching the beach, and padding across the wet sand to the cabaña.

She lay on the bed while I packed. She lay very still.

I put the .38 back into its holster, and then I took my police shield from the drawer and shoved it into the suitcase beside the gun. The boys would be surprised to see me back so soon. I was supposed to have two weeks. They'd be surprised.

I didn't bother taking any of my things out of the drawer. I just snapped the lid of the suitcase shut and looked at the writing scrawled across the top.

Just Married, it said.

I stared at it until it began to blur. I looked over at Eileen just once more, and then I left the cabaña.



Everybody's Watching Me

By MICKEY SPILLANE

Joe Boyle — with all eyes still on him, and with murder still dogging his footsteps. The reason? Vetter!

PART II

WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE :

JOE BOYLE, a young kid working for a junk dealer, delivers a note to MARK RENZO, local big-wig racketeer. The note reads, "COOLEY is dead. Now my fine fat louse, I'm going to spill your guts all over your own floor." It is signed, VETTER. Renzo's boys work Joe over, trying to find out more about the man who gave him the note. When he tells them all he knows, they throw him outside, beaten and bruised. HELEN TROY, feature attraction at Renzo's Hideaway Club, finds Joe, takes him to her apartment. She bandages him, tells him she had been in

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love with Cooley who'd figured a way to make money from Renzo's gambling tables. She thinks Vetter was a friend of Cooley's. Together, they go to CAPTAIN GEROT of the police. They learn from him that Vetter is a professional killer responsible for the death of many hoods, a mystery man about whom practically nothing else is known. Gerot also tells them that it's suspected Cooley crossed Renzo, and that he was somehow mixed up in narcotics. They leave headquarters, find BUCKY EDWARDS, Joe's reporter friend, who opines that Vetter will either kill Renzo, or Renzo will come out of it stronger than ever. When they get back to the apartment, JOHNNY, Renzo's gungel is waiting there, ready to work Joe over again. Helen gets the drop on Johnny, and Joe beats him unmercifully. They bundle him in a cab and send him back to Renzo's club. Joe is anxious to leave before Renzo sends more of his boys after him.

I WAITED until midnight before I left. I looked in her room and saw her bathed in moonlight, her features softly relaxed into the faintest trace of a smile, a soft, golden halo around her head.

They should take your picture like you are now, Helen, I thought. It wouldn't need a retoucher and there would never be a man who saw it who would forget it. You're beautiful, baby. You're lovely as a woman could ever be and you don't know it. You've had it so rough you can't think of anything else and thinking of it puts the lines in your face and that chiseled granite in your eyes. But you've been around and so have I. There have been dozens of dames I've thought things about but not things like I'm thinking now. You don't care what or who a guy is; you just give him part of yourself as a favor and ask for nothing back.

Sorry, Helen, you have to take something back. Or at least keep what you have. For you I'll let Renzo push me around. For you I'll let him make

me finger a guy. Maybe at the end I'll have a chance to make a break. Maybe not. At least it's for you and you'll know that much. If I stay around, Renzo'll squeeze you and do it so hard you'll never be the same. I'll leave, beautiful. I'm not much. You're not much either. It was a wonderful day.

I lay the note by the lamp on the night table where she couldn't miss it. I leaned over and blew a kiss into her hair, then turned and got out of there.

Nobody had to tell me to be careful. I made sure nobody saw me leave the building and double-checked on it when I got to the corner. The trip over the back fences wasn't easy, but it was quiet and dark and if anybody so much as breathed near me I would have heard it. Then when I stood in the shadows of the store at the intersection I was glad I had made the trip the hard way. Buried between the parked cars along the curb was a police cruiser. There were no markings. Just a trunk aerial and the

red glow of a cigarette behind the wheel.

Captain Gerot wasn't taking any chances. It made me feel a little better. Upstairs there Helen could go on sleeping and always be sure of waking up. I waited a few minutes longer then drifted back into the shadows toward the rooming house.

That's where they were waiting for me. I knew it a long time before I got there because I had seen them wait for other guys before. Things like that you don't miss when you live around the factories and near the waterfronts. Things like that you watch and remember so that when it happens to you, it's no surprise and you figure things out beforehand.

They saw me and as long as I kept on going in the right direction they didn't say anything. I knew they were where I couldn't see them and even if I made a break for it, it wouldn't do me any good at all.

You get a funny feeling after a while. Like a rabbit walking between rows of guns wondering which one is going to go off. Hoping that if it does you don't get to see it or feel it. Your stomach seems to get all loose inside you and your heart makes too much noise against your ribs. You try not to, but you sweat and the little muscles in your hands and thighs start to jump and twitch and all the while there's no sound at all, just a deep, startling silence with a voice that's there just the same. A statue, laughing with its mouth

open. No sound, but you can hear the voice. You keep walking, and the breathing keeps time with your footsteps, sometimes trying to get ahead of them. You find yourself chewing on your lips because you already know the horrible impact of a fist against your flesh and the uncontrollable spasms that come after a pointed shoe bites into the muscle and bone of your side.

So much so that when you're almost there and a hand grabs your arm you don't do anything except look at the face above it and wait until it says, "Where you been, kid?"

I felt the hand tighten with a gentle pressure, pulling me in close. "Lay off me. I'm minding my own . . ."

"I said something, sonny."

"So I was out. What's it to you?"

His expression said he didn't give a hang at all. "Somebody wants to know. Feel like taking a little ride?"

"You asking?"

"I'm telling." The hand tightened again. "The car's over there, bud. Let's go get in it, huh?"

For a second I wondered if I could take him or not and knew I couldn't. He was too big and too relaxed. He'd known trouble all his life, from little guys to big guys and he didn't fool easily. You can tell after you've seen a lot of them. They knew that some day they'd wind up holding their hands over a bullet hole or screaming through the bars

of a cell, but until then they were trouble and too big to buck.

I got in the car and sat next to the guy in the back seat. I kept my mouth shut and my eyes open and when we started to head the wrong way, I looked at the guy next to me. "Where we going?"

He grinned on one side of his face and looked out the window again.

"Come on, come on, quit messing around! Where we going?"

"Shut up."

"Nuts, brother. If I'm getting knocked off I'm doing a lot of yelling first, starting right now. Where . . ."

"Shut up. You ain't getting knocked off." He rolled the window down, flipped the dead cigar butt out and cranked it back up again. He said it too easily not to mean it and the jumps in my hands quieted down a little.

No, they weren't going to bump me. Not with all the trouble they went to in finding me. You don't put a couple dozen men on a mug like me if all you wanted was a simple kill. One hopped up punk would do that for a week's supply of snow.

We went back through town, turned west into the suburbs and kept right on going to where the suburbs turned into estates and when we came to the right one the car turned into a surfaced driveway that would past a dozen flashy heaps parked bumper to bumper and stopped in front of the fieldstone mansion.

The guy beside me got out first. He jerked his head at me and stayed at my back when I got out too. The driver grinned, but it was the kind of face a dog makes when he sees you with a chunk of meat in your fist.

A flunky met us at the door. He didn't look comfortable in his monkey suit and his face had scar tissue it took a lot of leather-covered punches to produce. He waved us in, shut the door and led the way down the hall to a room cloudy with smoke, rumbling with the voices of a dozen men.

When we came in the rumble stopped and I could feel the eyes crawl over me. The guy who drove the car looked across the room at the one in the tux, said, "Here he is, boss," and gave me a gentle push into the middle of the room.

"Hi, kid." He finished pouring out of the decanter, stopped it and picked up his glass. He wasn't an inch bigger than me, but he had the walk of a cat and the eyes of something dead. He got up close to me, faked a smile and held out the glass. "In case the boys had you worried."

"I'm not worried."

He shrugged and sipped the top off the drink himself. "Sit down, kid. You're among friends here." He looked over my shoulder. "Haul a chair up, Rocco."

All over the room the others settled down and shifted into position. A chair seat hit the back of my legs and I sat. When I looked around

everybody was sitting, which was the way the little guy wanted it. He didn't like to have to look up to anybody.

He made it real casual. He introduced the boys when they didn't have to be introduced because they were always in the papers and the kind of guys people point out when they go by in their cars. You heard their names mentioned even in the junk business and among the punks in the streets. These were the big boys. Top dogs. Fat fingers. Big rings. The little guy was biggest of all. He was Phil Carboy and he ran the West Side the way he wanted it run.

When everything quieted down just right, Carboy leaned on the back of a chair and said, "In case you're wondering why you're here, kid, I'm going to tell you."

"I got my own ideas," I said.

"Fine. That's just fine. Let's check your ideas with mine, okay? Now we hear a lot of things around here. Things like that note you delivered to Renzo and who gave it to you and what Renzo did to you." He finished his drink and smiled. "Like what you did to Johnny, too. That's all straight now, isn't it?"

"So far."

"Swell. Tell you what I want now. I want to give you a job. How'd you like to make a cool hundred a week, kid?"

"Peanuts."

Somebody grunted. Carboy smiled again, a little thinner. "The

kid's in the know," he said. "That's what I like. Okay, kid. We'll make it five hundred per for a month. If it don't run a month you get it anyway. That's better than having Renzo slap you around, right?"

"Anything's better than that." My voice started getting chalky.

Carboy held out his hand and said, "Rocco . . ." Another hand slid a sheaf of bills into his. He counted it out, reached two thousand and tossed it into my lap. "Yours, kid."

"For what?"

His lips were a narrow gash between his cheekbones. "For a guy named Vetter. The guy who gave you a note. Describe him."

"Tall," I said. "Big shoulders. I didn't see his face. Deep voice that sounded tough. He had on a trench coat and a hat."

"That's not enough."

"A funny way of standing," I told him. "I saw Sling Herman when I was a kid before the cops got him. He stood like that. Always ready to go for something in his pocket the cops said.

"You saw more than that, kid."

The room was too quiet now. They were all hanging on, waiting for the word. They were sitting there without smoking, beady little eyes waiting for the finger to swing until it stopped and I was the one who could stop it.

My throat squeezed out the words. I went back into the night to remember a guy and drag up the little things that would bring him

into the light. I said, "I'd know him again. He was a guy to be scared of. When he talks you get a cold feeling and you know what he's like." My tongue ran over my lips and I lifted my eyes up to Carboy. "I wouldn't want to mess with a guy like that. Nobody's ever going to be tougher."

"You'll know him again. You're sure?"

"I'm sure." I looked around the room at the faces. Any one of them a guy who could say a word and have me dead the next day. "He's tougher than any of you."

Carboy grinned and let his tiny white teeth show through. "Nobody's that tough, kid."

"He'll kill me," I said. "Maybe you too. I don't like this."

"You don't have to like it. You just do it. In a way you're lucky. I'm paying you cash. If I wanted I could just tell you and you'd do it. You know that?"

I nodded.

"Tonight starts it. From now on you'll have somebody close by, see? In one pocket you'll carry a white handkerchief. If you gotta blow, use it. In the other one there'll be a red wiper. When you see him blow into that."

"That's all?"

"Just duck about then, kid," Phil Carboy said softly, "and maybe you'll get to spend that two grand. Try to use it for run-out money and you won't get past the bus station." He stared into his glass, looked up at Rocco expectantly and held it

out for a refill. "Kid, let me tell you something. I'm an old hand in this racket. I can tell what a guy or a dame is like from a block away. You've been around. I can tell that. I'm giving you a break because you're the type who knows the score and will play on the right side. I don't have to warn you about anything, do I?"

"No. I got the pitch."

"Any questions?"

"Just one," I said. "Renzo wants me to finger Vetter too. He isn't putting out any two grand for it. He just wants it, see? Suppose he catches up with me? What then?"

Carboy shouldn't've hesitated. He shouldn't have let that momentary look come into his eyes because it told me everything I wanted to know. Renzo was bigger than the whole pack of them and they got the jumps just thinking about it. All by himself he held a fifty-one percent interest and they were moving slowly when they bucked him. The little guy threw down the fresh drink with a quick motion of his hand and brought the smile back again. *In that second he had done a lot of thinking and spilled the answer straight out.* "We'll take care of Mark Renzo," he said. "Rocco, you and Lou take the kid home."

So I went out to the car and we drove back to the slums again. In the rear the reflections from the headlights of another car showed and the killers in it would be waiting for me to show the red handker-

chief Carboy had handed me. I didn't know them and unless I was on the ball every minute I'd never get to know them. But they'd always be there, shadows that had no substance until the red showed, then the ground would get sticky with an even brighter red and maybe some of it would be mine.

They let me out two blocks away. The other car didn't show at all and I didn't look for it. My feet made hollow sounds on the sidewalk, going faster and faster until I was running up the steps of the house and when I was inside I slammed the door and leaned against it, trying hard to stop the pain in my chest.

Three-fifteen, the clock said. It ticked monotonously in the stillness, trailing me upstairs to my room. I eased inside, shut the door and locked it, standing there in the darkness until my eyes could see things. Outside a truck clashed its gears as it pulled up the hill and off in the distance a horn sounded.

I listened to them; familiar sounds, my face tightening as a not-so-familiar sound echoed behind them. It was a soft thing, a whisper that came at regular intervals in a choked-up way. Then I knew it was a sob coming from the other room and I went back to the hall and knocked on Nick's door.

His feet hit the floor, stayed there and I could hear his breathing coming hard. "It's Joe — open up."

I heard the wheeze his breath made as he let it out. The bed-

springs creaked, he fell once getting to the door and the bolt snapped back. I looked at the purple blotches on his face and the open cuts over his eyes and grabbed him before he fell again. "Nick! What happened to you?"

"I'm . . . okay." He steadied himself on me and I led him back to the bed. "You got . . . some friends, pal."

"Cut it out. What happened? Who ran you through? Damn it, who did it?"

Nick managed to show a smile. It wasn't much and it hurt, but he made it. "You . . . in pretty big trouble, Joe."

"Pretty big."

"I didn't say nothing. They were here . . . asking questions. They didn't . . . believe what I told them, I guess. They sure laced me."

"The miserable slobs! You recognize them?"

His smile got sort of twisted and he nodded his head. "Sure, Joe . . . I know 'em. The fat one sat in . . . the car while they did it." His mouth clamped together hard. "It hurt . . . brother, it hurt!"

"Look," I said. "We're . . ."

"Nothing doing. I got enough. I don't want no more. Maybe they figured it's enough. That Renzo feller . . . he got hard boys around. See what they did, Joe? One . . . used a gun on me. You shoulda stood with Gordon, Joe. What the hell got into you to mess with them guys?"

"It wasn't me, Nick. Something came up. We can square it. I'll nail that fat slob if it's the last thing I do."

"It'll be the last thing. They gimme a message for you, pal. You're to stick around, see? You get seen with any other big boys in this town . . . and that's all. You know?"

"I know. Renzo told me that himself. He didn't have to go through you."

"Joe . . ."

"Yeah?"

"He said for you to take a good look . . . at me. I'm an example. A little one. He says to do what he told you."

"He knows what he can do."

"Joe . . . for me. Lay off, huh? I don't feel so good. Now I can't work for a while."

I patted his arm, fished a hundred buck bill out of my pocket and squeezed it into his hand. "Don't worry about it," I told him.

He looked at the bill unbelievably, then at me.

"Dough can't pay for . . . this, Joe. Kind of . . . stay away from me . . . for awhile anyway, okay?" He smiled again, lamely this time. "Thanks for the C anyway. We been pretty good buddies, huh?"

"Sure, Nick."

"Later we'll be again. Lemme knock off now. You take it easy." His hands came up to his face and covered it. I could hear the sobs starting again and cursed the whole

damn system up and down and Renzo in particular. I swore at the filth men like to wade in and the things they do to other men. When I was done I got up off the bed and walked to the door.

Behind me Nick said, "Joey . . ."

"Right here."

"Something's crazy in this town. Stories are going around . . . there's gonna be a lot of trouble. Everybody is after . . . you. You'll . . . be careful?"

"Sure." I opened the door, shut it softly and went back to my room. I stripped off my clothes and lay down in the bed, my mind turning over fast until I had it straightened out, then I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

My landlady waited until a quarter to twelve before she gave it the business on my door. She didn't do it like she usually did it. No jarring smashes against the panels, just a light tapping that grew louder until I said, "Yeah?"

"Mrs. Stacey, Joe. You think you should get up? A man is downstairs to see you."

"What kind of a man?"

This time the knob twisted slowly and the door opened a crack. Her voice was a harsh whisper that sounded nervous. "He's got on old clothes and a city water truck is parked outside. He didn't come to look at my water."

I grinned at that one. "I'll be right down," I said. I splashed water over my face, shaved it close

and worked the adhesive off the bridge of my nose. It was swollen on one side, the blue running down to my mouth. One eye was smudged with purple.

Before I pulled on my jacket I stuffed the wad of dough into the lining through the tear in the sleeve, then I took a look in Nick's room. There were traces of blood on his pillow and the place was pretty upset, but Nick had managed to get out somehow for a day's work.

The guy in the chair sitting by the window was short and wiry looking. There was dirt under his fingernails and a stubble on his chin. He had a couple of small wrenches in a leather holster on his belt that bulged his coat out but the stuff was pure camouflage. There was a gun further back and I saw the same thing Mrs. Stacey saw. The guy was pure copper with badges for eyes.

He looked at me, nodded and said, "Joe Boyle?"

"Suppose I said no?" I sat down opposite him with a grin that said I knew all about it and though I knew he got it nothing registered at all.

"Captain Gerot tells me you'll cooperate. That true?"

There was a laugh in his eyes, an attitude of being deliberately polite when he didn't have to be. "Why?" I asked him. "Everybody seems to think I'm pretty hot stuff all of a sudden."

"You are, junior, you are. You're the only guy who can put his finger

on a million dollar baby that we want bad. So you'll cooperate."

"Like a good citizen?" I made it sound the same as he did. "How much rides on Vetter and how much do I get?"

The sarcasm in his eyes turned to a nasty sneer. "Thousands ride, junior . . . and you don't get any. You just cooperate. Too many cops have worked too damn long on Vetter to let a crummy kid cut into the cake. *Now I'll tell you why you'll cooperate. There's a dame, see? Helen Troy. There's ways of slapping that tomato with a fat conviction for various reasons and unless you want to see her slapped, you'll cooperate. Catch now?*"

I called him something that fitted him right down to his shoes. He didn't lose a bit of that grin at all. "Catch something else," he said. "Get smart and I'll make your other playmates look like school kids. I like tough guys. I have fun working 'em over because that's what they understand. What there is to know I know. Take last night for instance. The boys paid you off for a finger job. Mark Renzo pays but in his own way. Now I'm setting up a deal. Hell, you don't have to take it . . . you can do what you please. Three people are dickering for what you know. I'm the only one who can hit where it really hurts.

"Think it over, Joey boy. Think hard but do it fast. I'll be waiting for a call from you and wherever you are, I'll know about it. I get

impatient sometimes, so let's hear from you soon. Maybe if you take too long I'll prod you a little bit." He got up, stretched and wiped his eyes like he was tired. "Just ask for Detective Sergeant Gonzales," he said. "That's me."

The cop patted the tools on his belt and stood by the door. I said, "It's stinking to be a little man, isn't it? You got to keep making up for it."

There was pure, cold hate in his eyes for an answer. He gave me a long look that a snake would give a rabbit when he isn't too hungry yet. A look that said wait a little while, feller. Wait until I'm real hungry.

I watched the car pull away, then sat there at the window looking at the street. I had to wait almost an hour before I spotted the first, then picked up the second one ten minutes later. If there were more I didn't see them. I went back to the kitchen and took a look through the curtains at the blank behinds of the warehouses across the alley. Mrs. Stacey didn't say anything. She sat there with her coffee, making clicking noises with her false teeth.

I said, "Somebody washed the windows upstairs in the wholesale house."

"A man. Early this morning."

"They haven't been washed since I've been here."

"Not for two years."

I turned around and she was looking at me as if something had scared her to death. "*How much are they*

paying you?" I said.

She couldn't keep that greedy look out of her face even with all the phony indignation she tried to put on. Her mouth opened to say something when the phone rang and gave her the chance to cover up. She came back a few seconds later and said, "It's for you. Some man."

Then she stood there by the door where she always stood whenever somebody was on the phone. I said, "Joe Boyle speaking," and that was all. I let the other one speak his few words and when he was done I hung up.

I felt it starting to burn in me. A nasty feeling that makes you want to slam something. Nobody asked me . . . they just told and I was supposed to jump. I was the low man on the totem pole, a lousy kid who happened to fit into things . . . just the right size to get pushed around.

Vetter, I kept saying to myself. They were all scared to death of Vetter. The guy had something they couldn't touch. He was tough. He was smart. He was moving in for a kill and if ever one was needed it was needed now. They were all after him and no matter how many people who didn't belong there stood in the way their bullets would go right through them to reach Vetter. Yeah, they wanted him bad. So bad they'd kill each other to make sure he died too.

Well, the whole pack of 'em knew what they could do.

I pulled my jacket on and got outside. I went up the corner, grabbed a downtown bus and sat there without bothering to look around. At Third and Main I hopped off, ducked into a cafeteria and had a combination lunch. I let Mrs. Stacey get her calls in, gave them time to keep me well under cover, then flagged down a roving cab and gave the driver Helen's address. On the way over I looked out the back window for the second time and the light blue Chevvy was still in place, two cars behind and trailing steadily. In a way it didn't bother me if the boys inside were smart enough to check the black Caddie that rode behind it again.

I tapped the cabbie a block away, told him to let me out on the corner and paid him off. There wasn't a parking place along the street so the laddies in the cars were either going to cruise or double park, but it would keep them moving around so I could see what they were like anyway.

When I punched the bell I had to wait a full minute before the lobby door clicked open. I went up the stairs, jolted the apartment door a few times and walked right into those beautiful eyes that were even prettier than the last time because they were worried first, then relieved when they saw me. She grabbed my arm and gave me that quick grin then pulled me inside and stood with her back to the door.

"Joe, Joe, you little jughead," she

laughed. "You had me scared silly. Don't do anything like that again."

"Had to Helen. I wasn't going to come back but I had to do that too."

Maybe it was the way I said it that made her frown. "You're a funny kid."

"Don't say that."

Something changed in her eyes. "No. Maybe I shouldn't, should I?" She looked at me hard, her eyes soft, but piercing. "I feel funny when I look at you. I don't know why. Sometimes I've thought it was because I had a brother who was always in trouble. Always getting hurt. I used to worry about him too."

"What happened to him?"

"He was killed on the Anzio beachhead."

"Sorry."

She shook her head. "He didn't join the army because he was patriotic. He and another kid held up a joint. The owner was shot. He was dead by the time they found out who did it."

"You've been running all your life too, haven't you?"

The eyes dropped a second. "You could put it that way."

"What ties you here?"

"Guess."

"If you had the dough you'd beat it? Some place where nobody knew you?"

She laughed, a short jerky laugh. It was answer enough. I reached in the jacket, got out the pack of bills and flipped off a couple for myself.

I shoved the rest in her hand before she knew what it was. "Get going. Don't even bother to pack. Just move out of here and keep moving."

Her eyes were big and wide with an incredulous sort of wonder, then slightly misty when they came back to mine and she shook her head a little bit and said, "Joe . . . why? Why?"

"It would sound silly if I said it."

"Say it."

"When I'm all grown up I'll tell you maybe."

"Now."

I could feel the ache starting in me and my tongue didn't want to move, but I said, "Sometimes even a kid can feel pretty hard about a woman. Sad, isn't it?"

Helen said, "Joe," softly and had my face in her hands and her mouth was a hot torch that played against mine with a crazy kind of fierceness and it was all I could do to keep from grabbing her instead of pushing her away. My hands squeezed her hard, then I yanked the door open and got out of there. Behind me there was a sob and I heard my name said again, softly.

I ran the rest of the way down with my face all screwed up tight.

The blue Chevvy was down the street on the other side. It seemed to be empty and I didn't bother to poke around it. All I wanted was for whoever followed me to follow me away from there. So I gave it the full treatment. I made it look great. To them I must have seemed pretty

jumpy and on my way to see somebody important. It took a full hour to reach THE CLIPPER that way and the only important one around was Bucky Edwards and he wasn't drunk this time.

He nodded, said, "Beer?" and when I shook my head, called down the bar for a tall orange. "Figured you'd be in sooner or later."

"Yeah?"

That wise old face wrinkled a little. "How does it feel to be live bait, kiddo?"

"You got big ears, grandma."

"I get around." He toasted his beer against my orange, put it down and said, "You're in pretty big trouble, Joe. Maybe you don't know it."

"I know it."

"You don't know how big. You haven't been here that long. Those boys put on the big squeeze."

It was my turn to squint. His face was set as if he smelled something he didn't like and there was ice in his eyes. "How much do you know, Bucky?"

His shoulders made a quick shrug. "Phil Carboy didn't post the depot and the bus station for nothing. He's got cars cruising the highways too. Making sure, isn't he?"

He looked at me and I nodded.

"Renzo is kicking loose too. He's pulling the strings tight. The guys on his payroll are getting nervous but they can't do a thing. No, sir, not a thing. Like a war. Everybody's just waiting." The set mouth flashed

me a quick grin. "You're the key, boy. *If there was a way out I'd tell you to take it.*"

"Suppose I went to the cops?"

"Gerot?" Bucky shook his head. "You'd get help as long as he could keep you in a cell. People'd like to see him dead too. He's got an awfully bad habit of being honest. Ask him to show you his scars someday. It wouldn't be so bad if he was just honest, but he's smart and mean as hell too."

I drank half the orange and set it down in the wet circle on the bar. "Funny how things work out. All because of Vetter. And he's here because of Jack Cooley."

"I was wondering when you were gonna get around to it, kid," Bucky said.

"What?"

He didn't look at me. "Who *are* you working for?"

I waited a pretty long time before he turned his head around. I let him look at my face another long time before I said anything. Then: "I was pushing a junk cart, friend. I was doing okay, too. I wasn't working for trouble. Now I'm getting pretty curious. In my own way I'm not so stupid, but now I want to find out the score. One way or another I'm finding out. So they paid me off but they aren't figuring on me spending much of that cabbage. After it's over I get chopped down and it starts all over again, whatever it is. That's what I'm finding out. Why I'm bait for whatever it is.

Who do I see, Bucky? You're in the know. Where do I go to find out?"

"Cooley could have told you," he said quietly.

"Nuts. He's dead."

"Maybe he can still tell you."

My fingers were tight around the glass now. "The business about Cooley getting it because of the deal on Renzo's tables is out?"

"Might be."

"Talk straight unless you're scared silly of those punks too. Don't give me any puzzles if you know something."

Bucky's eyebrows went up, then down slowly over the grin in his eyes. "Talk may be cheap, son," he said, "but life comes pretty expensively." He nodded sagely and said, "I met Cooley in lotsa places. Places he shouldn't have been. He was a man looking around. He could have found something."

"Like what?"

"Like why we have gangs in this formerly peaceful city of ours. Why we have paid-for politicians and clambakes with some big faces showing. They're not eating clams . . . they're talking."

"These places where you kept seeing Cooley . . ."

"River joints. Maybe he liked fish."

You could tell when Bucky was done talking. I went down to Main, found a show I hadn't seen and went in. There were a lot of things I wanted to think about.

(To be continued)



So Dark FOR April

There were three funny things about the man in Paul Pine's waiting-room. One was that he wore an expensive coat — and a pair of paint-stained trousers. Another was that he wore expensive shoes — and no socks. And the third was that he had a knife buried deep in his chest.

BY JOHN EVANS

WHEN I got through telling the sergeant at Central Homicide about it, he said to sit tight and not touch anything, that somebody would be right over. I told him I wouldn't even breathe any more than was absolutely necessary and put back the receiver and went into the reception room to take another look at the body.

He was at the far end of the couch, slumped in a sitting position, with his chin on his chest and an arm hanging down. A wick of iron-gray hair made a curve against the waxen skin of a high forehead, his half-open eyes showed far too much white, and a trickle of dark blood had traced a crooked line below one corner of a slack-lipped mouth. His coat hung open, letting me see a circular red

stain under the pocket of a soiled white shirt. From the center of the stain protruded the brown bone handle of a switch-blade knife.

I moved over to lean against the window frame and light a cigarette. It was one of those foggy wet mornings we get early in April, with a chill wind off the lake and the sky as dull as a deodorant commercial. Umbrellas blossomed along the walks eight floors below and long lines of cars slithered past with a hooded look.

I stood there breathing smoke and staring at the dead man. He was nobody I had ever seen before. He wore a handsomely tailored suit coat of gray flannel, dirty brown gabardine slacks spattered with green paint and an oil stain across

one knee, and brown bench-made shoes. His shirt was open at the throat, showing a fringe of dark hair, and he wasn't wearing a tie.

The rummage-sale air of those slacks bothered me. This was no Skid Row fugitive. His nails had that cared-for look, his face, even in death, held a vague air of respectability, and they didn't trim hair that way at barber college.

I bent down and turned back the left side of his coat. The edge of a black wallet showed in the inner pocket. That was where I stopped. This was cop business. Let the boys who were paid for it paw the corpse.

A black satin label winked up at me. I put my eyes close enough to read the stitched letters in it. A C G — in a kind of Old English script. The letters seemed too big to be simply a personal monogram, but then there's no accounting for tastes.

I let the lapel drop back to the way I had found it. The dead man didn't seem to care either way. Something glistened palely between the frayed cuffs and the tops of the custom-made shoes. I said, "Huh?" out loud and bent down to make sure.

No mistake. It made no sense but there it was. The pale white shine was naked flesh.

The dead man wasn't wearing socks.

II

DETECTIVE Sergeant Lund said, "Right smack-dab through the old

ticker. He never even had time to clear his throat. Not this guy."

His curiously soft voice held a kind of grim respect. He straightened up and backed away a couple of steps and took off his hat and shook rain water from it onto the carpet and stared thoughtfully at me out of gun-metal eyes.

I moved a shoulder and said nothing. At the wicker table across the room the two plainclothes men were unshipping tape measures and flashbulbs and fingerprint kits. Rain tapped the glass behind me with icy fingers.

"Your turn, Pine," Lund said in the same soft voice.

"He was like that when I came in," I said promptly. I looked at my strapwatch. "Exactly thirty-two minutes ago."

"How'd he get in here?"

"I usually leave the reception room unlocked, in case I have a client and the client cares to wait."

One corner of his mouth moved up faintly. "Somebody sure wanted this guy to wait, hey?"

I shrugged. He took a turn along the room and back again, hands deep in the pockets of his topcoat. Abruptly he said, "It says on your door you're a private dick. This a client?"

"No. I never saw him before."

"What's his name?"

"I don't know."

"No identification on him?"

"I didn't look. The sergeant at Central said not to."

He seemed mildly astonished. "A man dies in your office and you don't even show a little healthy curiosity? Don't be afraid of me, Pine. I haven't chewed off anybody's arm in over a week."

"I obey the law," I said mildly.

"Well, well," he said. He grinned suddenly, and after a moment I grinned back. Mine was no phonier than his. He snapped a thumb lightly against the point of his narrow chin a time or two while thinking a secret thought, then turned back to the body.

He went through the pockets with the deft delicacy of a professional dip. The blood, the knife handle, the sightless eyes meant about half as much to him as last week's laundry. When he straightened again there was a small neat pile of personal effects on one of the couch pillows and the dead man's pockets were as empty as his eyes.

The wallet was on top. Lund speared it, flipped it open. The transparent identification panels were empty, as was the bill compartment. Shoved into the latter, however, were three or four cards. Lund looked them over slowly and carefully, his thick brows drawn into a lazy V above his long, pointed nose.

"Credit cards on a couple Loop hotels," he said, almost to himself. "Plus one of these identification cards you get with a wallet. According to what it says here, this guy is Franklin Andrus, 5861 Winthrop

Avenue. One business card. It calls him a sales representative for the Reliable Amusement Machine Corporation, Dayton, Ohio. No telephone shown and nobody listed to notify. Any of this mean anything to you, Mr. Pine?"

"Sorry."

"Uh-huh. You ain't playing this too close, are you?"

"I'm not even in the game," I said.

"Initials in his coat don't agree with the name on these here cards. That must mean something, hey?"

I stared at the bridge of his nose. "His coat and somebody else's cards. Or his cards and somebody else's coat. Or neither. Or both."

His mouth hardened. "You trying to kid me, mister?"

"I guess that would be pretty hard to do, Sergeant."

He turned on his heel and went through the communicating door to my inner office, still carrying the wallet. He didn't bother to shut it, and through the opening I could see him reach for the phone without sitting down and dial a number with quick hard stabs of a forefinger. What he said when he got his party was too low-voiced for me to catch.

Two minutes later, he was back. He scooped up the stuff from the couch and said, "Let's talk, hey? Let's us try out that nice private office of yours."

I followed him in and drew up the Venetian blind and opened the window a crack to let out the smell

of yesterday's cigarettes. On the outer ledge four pigeons were organizing a bombing raid. Lund shoved the phone and ashtray aside, dumped his collection on the desk pad and snapped on the lamp. I sat down behind the desk and watched him pull up the customer's chair across from me.

I got out my cigarettes. He took one, sniffed at it for no reason I knew of and struck a match for us both. He leaned back and hooked an arm over the chair back and put his dull gray eyes on me.

"Nice and cozy," he said. "All the comforts. Too bad they're not all like this."

"I could turn on the radio," I said. "Maybe get a little dance music."

He grunted with mild amusement. All the narrow-eyed suspicion had been tucked out of sight. He drew on his cigarette and blew a long blue plume of smoke at the ceiling. Another minute and he'd have his shoes off.

He let his gaze drift about the dingy office, taking in the Varga calendar, the filing cases, the worn tan linoleum. He said, "The place could stand a little paint, hey?"

"You drumming up business for your day off?" I asked.

That got another grunt out of him. "You sound kind of on the excited side, Pine. Don't be like that. You wouldn't be the first private boy got a customer shot out from under him, so to speak."

I felt my face burn. "He's not a customer. I told you that."

"I guess you did, at that," he said calmly. "It don't mean I have to believe it. Client getting pushed right in your own office don't look so good, hey? What the newshounds call a bad press."

I bit down on my teeth. "You just having fun, Sergeant, or does all this lead somewhere?"

"Why, we're just talking," he said mildly. "Just killing time, you might say, until the coroner shows up. That and looking over the rest of what the guy had on him."

He stuck out an untidy finger and poked at the pile. Besides the wallet, there were several small square transparent envelopes, some loose change, a pocket comb, and a small pair of gold tweezers.

He brought his eyes up to stare coldly at me, his mellow mood gone as quickly as it had arrived. He said harshly, "Let's lay off the clowning around, mister. You were working for him. I want to know doing what."

"I wouldn't bother to lie to you," I said. "I never saw the guy before in my life, I never talked to him on the phone, or got a letter from him. Period."

His sneer was a foot wide. "Jesus, you must think I'm green!"

"I'm not doing any thinking," I said.

"I hope to tell you, you aren't. Listen, I can book you, brother!"

"For what?"

"Obstructing justice, resisting an officer, indecent exposure. What the hell do you care? I'm saying I can book you!"

I didn't say anything. Some of the angry color faded slowly from his high cheeks. Finally he sighed heavily and picked up the necktie and gave it a savage jerk between his square hands and threw it down again.

"Nuts," he said pettishly. "I don't want to fight with you. I'm trying to do a job. All I want is a little cooperation. This guy just don't walk in here blind. You're a private dick, or so your door says. Your job is people in trouble. I say it's too damn big a coincidence him picking your office to get knocked off in. Go on, tell me I'm wrong."

"I'm not saying you're wrong," I said. "I'm saying what I've already said. He's a stranger to me. He could have come in here to get out of the wet or to sell me a slot machine or to just sit down and rest his arches. I admit he might have come here to hire me. It has happened, although not often enough. Maybe somebody didn't want him spilling any touchy secrets to me, and fixed him so he couldn't."

"But you never saw him before?"

"You're beginning to get the idea," I said.

"Go ahead," he said bitterly. "Crack wise. Get out the office bottle and toss off three inches of Scotch without a chaser and spit in my eye. That's the way you private

eyes do it on TV eight times a night."

"I don't have an office bottle," I said.

The sound of the reception room door opening and closing cut off what Lund was about to say. A short plump man went past the half-open door of the inner office, carrying a black bag. Lund got up without a word and went out there, leaving me where I sat.

Some time passed. Quite a lot of time. The murmur of voices from the next room went on and on. Flash bulbs made soundless explosions of light and a small vacuum cleaner whirred. I stayed where I was and burned a lot of tobacco and crossed my legs and dangled my foot and listened to the April rain and thought my thoughts.

Thoughts about a man who might still be alive if I hadn't slept an hour later than usual. A man with mismatched clothing and no socks and an empty wallet. A man who would want to go on living, even in an age when living was complicated and not very rewarding. A man who had managed for fifty-odd years to hang on to the only life he'd ever be given to live before a switchblade knife and a strong hand combined to pinch it off.

I went on sitting. The rain went on falling. It was so dark for April.

After a while the corridor door opened to let in two men in white coats. They carried a long wicker basket between them. They passed

my door without looking in. There was more indistinct murmuring, then a young voice said, "Easy with them legs, Eddie," and the basket was taken out again. It was harder to carry the second time.

Sergeant Lund walked in, his face expressionless. He sat down heavily and lighted a cigarette and waved out the match and continued to hold it. He said, "Andrus died between eight-thirty and ten. The elevator man don't recall bringing him up. What time did you get here?"

"Ten-thirty, about. Few minutes either way."

"You wouldn't happen to own a switch-blade knife, hey?"

"With a brown bone handle?" I said.

He bent the used match and dropped it in the general vicinity of the ashtray. "Seven-inch blade," he muttered. "Like a goddam bayonet." He put the cigarette in a corner of his mouth and left it there. "This is a real cute killing, Pine. You notice how Andrus was dressed?"

"No socks," I said.

"That isn't the half of it, brother. New coat, old pants, fancy shoes. No hat and no topcoat. In weather like this? What's the sense?"

I spread my hands. "By me, Sergeant."

"You sure you wasn't work —"

"Don't say it!" I shouted.

The phone rang. A voice like a buzz-saw asked for Lund. He

grunted into the mouthpiece, listened stolidly for nearly a full minute, then said, "Yeah," twice and passed back the receiver. I replaced it and watched him drag himself out of the chair, his expression a study in angry frustration.

"I had Rogers Park send a squad over to that Winthrop Avenue address," he growled. "Not only they don't find no trace of a Franklin Andrus; they don't even find the address! An empty lot, by God! All right. Hell with it. The lab boys will turn up something. Laundry marks, cuff dust, clothing labels. It'll take 'em a day or two, but I can wait. The old routine takes time but it always works."

"Almost always," I said absently.

He glowered down across the desk at me. "One thing I hope, mister. I hope you been holding out on me and I find it out. That's going to be jake with me."

He gathered up the dead man's possessions and stalked out. A little later one of the plainclothes men slipped in with his kit and took my fingerprints. He was nice about it, explaining they were only for elimination purposes.

III

BY ONE o'clock I was back from having a sandwich and coffee at the corner drugstore. The reception room was empty, with only a couple of used flash bulbs, some smudges of fingerprint powder here and there and the smell of cheap cigars and

damp cloth to remind me of my morning visitors. Without the dead man on it, the couch seemed larger than usual. There were no bloodstains. I looked to make sure.

I walked slowly into the other room and shucked off my trench coat. From the adjoining office came the faint whine of a dentist's drill. A damp breeze crawled in at the window and rattled the cords on the blind. Cars hooted in the street below. Sounds that made the silence around me even more silent. And the rain went on and on.

I sat down behind the desk and emptied the ashtray into the wastebasket and wiped off the glass top. I put away the cloth and got out a cigarette and sat there turning it, unlighted, between a thumb and forefinger.

He had been a nice-looking man. Fifty-five at the most. A man with a problem on his mind. Let's say he wakes up this morning and decides to take his problem to a private detective. So he gets out the classified book and looks under the right heading. There aren't many, not even for a town the size of Chicago. The big agencies he passes up, maybe because he figures he'll have to go through a handful of henna-haired secretaries before reaching the right guy. Then, not too far down the column, he comes across the name Paul Pine. A nice short name. Anybody can pronounce it.

So he takes a cab or a bus and comes on down. He hasn't driven

a car; no car keys and no license on him. The waiting room is unlocked but no alert gimlet-eyed private detective around. The detective is home in bed, like a man with a working wife. So this nice-looking man with a problem sits down to wait . . . and somebody walks in and sticks a quarter-pound of steel in him.

That was it. That explained everything. Everything but what his problem was and why he wasn't wearing socks and why his wallet was empty and why his identification showed an address that didn't exist.

I got up and took a couple of turns around the room. This was no skin off my shins. The boys from Homicide would have it all wrapped up in a day or so. The old routine Lund had called it. I didn't owe that nice old man a thing. He hadn't paid me a dime. No connection between us at all.

Except that he had come to me for help and got a mouthful of blood instead.

I sat down again and tried the phone book. No Franklin Andrus listed. No local branch of the Reliable Amusement Machine Corp. I shoved the book away and began to think about the articles that had come out of the dead man's pockets. Gold tweezers, a pocket comb, five small transparent envelopes, seventy-three cents in change, a dark blue necktie. There had been a department store label on

the tie — Marshall Field. I knew that because I had looked while Lund was out of the room. But Field's has more neckties than Pabst has bottles. No help there.

Is that all, Pine, I thought to myself. End of the line? You mean you're licked? A nice, clean-necked, broad-shouldered, late-sleeping detective like you?

I walked the floor some more. I went over to the window and leaned my forehead against its coolness. My breath misted the glass and I wrote my name in the mist with the end of my finger. That didn't seem to help any. I went on thinking.

Maybe what *hadn't* come out of his pockets was important. No keys, for instance. Not even to his apartment. Maybe he lived in a hotel. Not even cigarettes or a book of matches. Maybe he didn't smoke. Not even a handkerchief. Maybe he didn't have a cold.

I sat down again. There had been initials in his coat. A C G. No periods and stitched professionally in fancy letters against a square of black satin. Rather large, as I recalled. Too bad I hadn't looked inside the pocket for the tailor's label. Unless . . .

This time I used the classified book. T — for Tailors — Men's. I ran through the columns to the G's. There it was, bright and shining and filled with promise. A. Cullinham Grandfils, Custom Tailor. On Michigan Avenue, in the 600 block.

Right in the center of the town's swankiest shopping district.

I closed the window, climbed into my trench coat and hat and locked up. The smell of dime cigars still hung heavy in the outer office. Even the hall seemed full of it.

IV

It was made to look like a Greek temple, if you didn't look too close. It had a white limestone front and a narrow doorway with a circular hunk of stained glass above that. Off to one side was a single display window about the size of a visiting card. Behind the glass was a slanting pedestal covered with black velvet and on the velvet a small square of gray cloth that looked as though it might be of cheviot. Nothing else. No price tags, no suits, no firm name spelled out in severely stylized letters.

And probably no bargain basement.

I heaved back the heavy glass door and walked into a large room with soft dusty rose walls, a vaulted ceiling, moss green carpeting, and indirect lighting like a benediction. Scattered tastefully about were upholstered chairs and couches, blond in the wood and square in the lines. A few chrome ashstands, an end table or two, and at the far end a blond desk and a man sitting behind it.

The man stood up as I came in. He floated down the room toward me, a tall slender number in a cut-

away coat, striped trousers and a gates-ajar collar. He looked like a high-class undertaker. He had a high reedy voice that said:

"Good afternoon, sir. May I be of service?"

"Are you the high priest?" I said.

His mouth fell open. "I beg your pardon?"

"Maybe I'm in the wrong place," I said. "I'm looking for the tailor shop. No name outside but the number checks."

His backbone got even stiffer although I hadn't thought that possible. "This," he said in a strangled voice, "is A. Cullinham Grandfils. Are you interested in a garment?"

"A what?"

"A garment."

"You mean a suit?"

"Ah — yes, sir."

"I've got a suit," I said. I unbuttoned my coat and showed it to him. All he did was look pained.

"What I came by for," I said, "was to get the address of a customer of yours. I'm not sure but I think his name's Andrus — Franklin Andrus."

He folded his arms and brought up a hand and turned his wrist delicately and rested his chin between his thumb and forefinger. "I'm afraid not. No. Sorry."

"You don't know the name?"

"I'm not referring to the name. What I am attempting to convey to you is that we do not give out information on our people."

I said, "Oh," and went on staring at him. He looked like the type you can bend easy. I dug out the old deputy sheriff's star I carried for emergencies like this and showed it to him, keeping the lettering covered with the ball of my thumb. He jerked down his arms and backed away as though I'd pulled a gun on him.

"This is official," I said in a tough-cop voice. "I'm not here to horse around. Do you cooperate or do we slap you with a subpoena?"

"You'll have to discuss the matter with Mr. Grandfils," he squeaked. "I simply am not — I have no authority to — You'll just have to —"

"Then trot him out, Curly. I don't have all day."

"Mr. Grandfils is in his office. Come this way, please."

We went along the room and through a glass door at the far end and along a short hall to another door: a solid panel of limed oak with the words A. Cullinham Grandfils, Private, on it in raised silver letters. The door was knocked on and a muffled voice came through and I was inside.

A little round man was perched in an enormous leather chair behind an acre of teakwood and glass. His head was as bald as a collection plate on Monday morning. A pair of heavy horn-rimmed glasses straddled a button nose above a tiny mouth and a chin like a ping-pong ball. He blinked owlishly at me and said,

"What is it, Marvin?" in a voice so deep I jumped.

"This — ah — gentleman is the police, Mr. Grandfils. He has demanded information I simply haven't the right to —"

"That will be all, Marvin."

I didn't even hear him leave.

"I can't stand that two-bit diplomat," the little man said. "He makes the bottom of my foot itch."

I didn't say anything.

"Unfortunately he happens to be useful," he went on. "The women gush at him and he gushes back. Good for business."

"I thought you only sold men's suits," I said.

"Who do you think picks them out? Take off that coat and sit down. I don't know your name."

I told him my name and got rid of the trench coat and hat and drew up a teakwood chair trimmed in silver and sat on it. He made a quarter-turn in the big chair and his glasses flashed at me in the soft light.

"Police, eh?" he said suddenly. "Well, you've got the build for it. Where did you get that ridiculous suit?"

"This ridiculous suit set me back sixty-five bucks," I said.

"It looks it. What are you after, sir?"

"The address of one of your customers."

"I see. Why should I give it to you?"

"He was murdered. The address

on his identification was incorrect."

"Murdered!" His mouth dropped open, causing the glasses to slip down on his nose. "Good heavens! One of my people?"

"He was wearing one of your coats," I said.

He passed a tremulous hand across the top of his head. All it smoothed down was scalp. "What was his name?"

"Andrus. Franklin Andrus."

He shook his head immediately. "No, Mr. Pine. None of my people has that name. You have made a mistake."

"The coat fitted him," I said doggedly. "He belonged in it. I might have the name wrong but not the coat. It was his coat."

He picked a silver paper-knife from the silver trimmed tan desk blotter and rapped it lightly over and over against the knuckles of his left hand. "Perhaps you're right," he said. "My coats are made to fit. Describe this man to me."

I gave the description, right down to the kidney-shaped freckle on the lobe of the left ear. Grandfils heard me out, thought over at length what I'd said, then shook his head slowly.

"In a general way," he said, "I know of a dozen men like that who come to me. The minor touches you've given me are things I never noticed about any of them. I'm not a trained observer and you are. Isn't there something else you can tell me about him? Something you've

perhaps inadvertently overlooked?"

It hardly seemed likely but I thought back anyway. I said, "The rest of his clothing was a little unusual. That might mean something to you."

"Try me."

I described the clothing. By the time I was down to where the dead man hadn't been wearing socks, Grandfils had lost interest. He said coldly, "The man was obviously some tramp. None of my people would be seen on the street in such condition. The coat was stolen and the man deserved what happened to him. Frayed slacks! Heavens!"

I said, "Not much in his pockets, but I might as well tell you that too. A dark blue necktie with a Marshall Field label, a pair of gold-plated tweezers, several transparent envelopes about the size of a postage stamp, a pocket comb and some change . . ."

My voice began to run down. A. Cullinham Grandfils had his mouth open again, but this time there was the light of recognition in his eyes. He said crisply, "The coat was a gray flannel, Mr. Pine?"

"Yeah?"

"Carlton weave?"

"Hunh?"

"Never mind. You wouldn't know that. Quite new?"

"I thought so."

He bent across the desk to move a key on an intercom. "Harry," he snapped into the box. "That gray flannel lounge suit we made

for Amos Spain. Was it sent out?"

"A week already," the box said promptly. "Maybe ten days, even. You want I should check exactly?"

"Never mind." Grandfils flipped back the key and leaned into the leather chair and went on tapping his knuckles with the knife. "Those tweezers and envelopes did it, sir. He's an enthusiastic stamp collector. Less than a month ago I saw him sitting in the outer room lifting stamps delicately with those tweezers and putting them in such envelopes while waiting for a fitting."

"Amos Spain is his name?"

"It is."

"He fits the description I gave?"

"Physically, exactly. But not the frayed slacks and dirty shirt. Amos Spain wouldn't be found dead in such clothes."

"You want to bet?"

". . . Oh. Of course. I simply can't understand it!"

"How about an address on Spain, Mr. Grandfils?"

He dug a silver-trimmed leather notebook out of a desk drawer and looked inside. "8789 South Shore Drive. Apartment 3C. It doesn't show a telephone, although I'm confident he has one."

"Married?"

He dropped the book back in the drawer and closed it with his foot. "We don't inquire into the private lives of our people, Mr. Pine. It seems to me Mrs. Spain is dead, although I may be wrong. I do know Amos Spain is reasonably wealthy

and, I think, retired."

I took down the address and got up and put on my coat and said, "Thanks for your help, Mr. Grandfils." He nodded and I opened the door. As I started out, he said:

"You really should do something about your suits, Mr. Pine."

I looked back at him sitting there like one of those old Michelin tire ads. "How much," I said, "would you charge me for one?"

"I think we could do something quite nice for you at three hundred."

"For that price," I said, "I would expect two pairs of pants."

His chin began to bob and he made a sound like roosters fighting. He was laughing. I closed the door in the middle of it and went on down the hall.

V

THE address on South Shore Drive was a long low yellow-brick apartment building of three floors and an English basement. A few cars were parked along a wide sweep of concrete running past the several entrances, and I angled the Plymouth into an open spot almost directly across from 8789.

The rain got in a few licks at me before I could reach the door. Inside was a small neat foyer, complete with bright brass mail boxes and an inner door. The card on the box for 3C showed the name Amos Spain.

I pressed the right button and

after a longish moment a woman's voice came down the tube. "Yes?"

That jarred me a little. I hadn't actually expected an answer. I said, "Mrs. Spain?"

"This is Mrs. Monroe," the voice said. "Mr. Spain's daughter. Are you from the post office?"

"Afraid not. I'm an officer, Mrs. Monroe. Want to talk to you."

"An officer? Why, I don't believe . . . What about?"

"Not from down here, Mrs. Monroe. Ring the buzzer."

"I'll do no such thing! How do I know you're a policeman? For all I know you could be a — a —"

"On a day like this? Don't be silly."

There was some silence and then the lock began to stutter. I went through and on up carpeted steps to the third floor. Halfway along a wide cheerful hallway was a partially open door and a woman in a flowered housecoat looking out at me.

She was under thirty but not very far under. She had wicked eyes. Her hair was reddish brown and there was a lot of it. Her skin was flawless, her cheekbones high, her mouth an insolent curve. She was long and slender in the legs, small in the waist, high in the breasts. She was dynamite.

I was being stared at in a coolly impersonal way. "A policeman you said. I'm fascinated. What is it you want?"

I said, "Do I get invited in or do we entertain the neighbors?"

Her eyes wavered and she bit her lip. She started to look back over her shoulder, thought better of it, then said, "Oh, very well. If you'll be brief."

She stepped back and I followed her across a tiny reception hall and on into an immense living room, with a dinette at one end and the open door to a kitchen beyond that. The living room was paneled, with beautiful leather chairs, a chesterfield, lamps with drum shades, a loaded pipe rack, a Governor Winthrop secretary, a fireplace with a gas log. Not neat, not even overly clean, but the right place for a man who puts comfort ahead of everything else.

I dropped my coat on a hassock and sat down on one of the leather chairs. Her lips hardened. "Don't get too comfortable," she said icily. "I was about to leave when you rang."

"It's a little chilly out for a housecoat," I said.

Her jaw hardened. "Just who do you think you are, busting in here and making smart remarks? You say you're a cop. As far as manners go, I believe it. Now I think I'd like to see some real proof."

I shrugged. "No proof, Mrs. Monroe. I said officer, not policeman. A private detective can be called an officer without stretching too far."

"Private—" Her teeth snapped shut and she swallowed almost convulsively. Her face seemed a little

pale now but I could have imagined that. "What do you want?" she almost whispered.

"Where's Amos Spain?" I said.

"My . . . father?"

"Uh-huh."

". . . I don't know. He went out early this morning."

"He say where?"

"No." Whatever had shocked her was passing. "Tom and I were still sleeping when he went out."

"Tom?"

"My husband."

"Where's he?"

"Still asleep. We got in late. Why do you want to know where my father is?"

I said, "I think it would be a good idea if you sat down, Mrs. Monroe. I'm afraid I've brought some bad news."

She didn't move. Her eyes went on watching me. They were a little wild now and not at all wicked. She wet her lips and said, "I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about. Bad news about what?"

"About your father. He's dead, Mrs. Monroe. Murdered."

"I don't believe it," she said quickly. Almost too quickly.

"He's been identified. Not much chance for a mistake."

She turned away abruptly and walked stiffly over to a lamp table and took a cigarette from a green cloisonné box. Her hand holding the match wavered noticeably but nothing showed in her face. She blew out a long streamer of smoke and

came back and perched carelessly on an arm of the couch across from me. The housecoat slipped open slightly, letting me see most of the inner curve of a freshly powdered thigh. I managed to keep from chewing a hole in the rug.

"There's been some mistake, Mr. Pine. Dad never had an enemy in the world. What do you suggest I do?"

I thought back to be sure. Then I was sure. I said, "The body's probably at the morgue by this time and already autopsied. Might be a good idea to send your husband over. Save you from a pretty unpleasant job."

"Of course. I'll wake him right away and tell him about it. You've been very kind. I'm sorry if I was rude."

She hit me with a smile that jarred my back teeth and stood up to let me know the interview was over and I could run along home now and dream about her thigh.

I slid off the chair and picked up my hat and coat. While putting them on I moved over to the row of windows and looked down into the courtyard. Nobody in sight. Not in this weather. Rain blurred the glass and formed widening puddles in thin brown grass that was beginning to turn green.

I turned and said, "I'll be running along, Mrs. Monroe," and took four quick steps and reached for the bedroom door.

There was nothing wrong with

her reflexes, I'll say that for her. A silken rustle and the flash of flowered cloth and she was standing between me and the door. We stood there like that, breathing at each other, our faces inches apart. She was lovely and she smelled good and the housecoat was cut plenty low.

And her face was as hard as four anvils.

"I must have made a mistake," I said. "I was looking for the hall door."

"Only two doors," she said between her teeth. "Two doors in the entire apartment. Not counting the bathroom. One that lets you out and one to the bedroom. And you picked the wrong one. Go on. Get out of here before I forget you're not a cop."

On my way out I left the inner door downstairs unlocked. In case.

VI

THE rain went on and on. I sat there listening to it and wondering if Noah had felt this way along about the thirty-ninth day. Smoke from my fourth cigarette eddied and swirled in the damp air through the no-draft vent.

The Plymouth was still parked across from 8789, and I was in it, knowing suddenly who had killed Amos Spain and why Spain had been wearing what he wore and why he wasn't wearing what he hadn't worn. It was knowledge built piece by piece on what I had seen and heard from the moment I walked

in and found the body on the couch. It was the kind of knowledge you can get a conviction with — if you have that one key piece.

The key piece was what I didn't have.

Now and then a car came into the wide driveway and stopped at one of the entrances to let somebody out or to pick somebody up. None of them was for the rat hole to which I was glued. A delivery truck dropped off a dinette set a couple of doors down and I couldn't have cared less.

I lighted another cigarette and crossed my legs the other way and thought about hunting up a telephone and calling Lund and telling him to come out and get the knife artist and sweat that key piece out in the open. Only I didn't want it that way. This was one I wanted to wrap up myself. It had been my office and my couch and almost my client, and I was the one the cops had tromped on. Not that the tromping had amounted to much. But even a small amount of police displeasure is not what you list under assets.

Another twenty minutes floated by. They would still be up there in that apartment wearing a path in the rug. Waiting, sweating blood, hanging on desperately, risking the chance that I had known more than I let on and was already out yelling for the cops.

I would have loved to know what they were waiting for.

When the break did come I almost missed it. An ancient Ford with a pleated front fender wheezed into the curb. A hatless young man in a rained-on gray uniform got out to look at the number over the entrance to 8789. He had a damp-looking cigarette pasted to one corner of his mouth and a white envelope in his left hand. The local postoffice dropping off a piece of registered mail.

And then I remembered Mrs. Monroe's first question.

I slapped open the glove compartment and got out my gun and shoved it under the band of my trousers while I was reaching for the door. I crossed the roadway at a gallop and barged into the foyer just as the messenger took a not too clean thumb off the button for 3C. I made a point of getting out my keys to keep him from thinking Willie Sutton was loose again.

He never even knew I was in town. He said, "Postoffice; registered letter," into the tube and the buzzer was clattering before he had the last word out. He went through and on up the steps without a backward glance.

The door was off the latch, the way I had left it earlier. By the time the door to 3C opened, I was a few feet away staring vaguely at the closed door to 3B and trying to look like somebody's cousin from Medicine Hat. The uniformed man said, "Amos Spain?" and a deeper voice said, "I'm Mr. Spain," and a

signature was written and a long envelope changed hands.

Before the door could close I was over there. I said, "It's me again."

He was a narrow-chested number with a long sallow face, beady eyes, a thin nose that leaned slightly to starboard, and a chin that had given up the struggle. Hair like black moss covered a narrow head. This would be Tom Monroe, the husband.

Terror and anger and indecision were having a field day with his expression. His long neck jerked and his sagging jaw wobbled. He clutched the edge of the door, wanting to slam it but not quite daring to. The silence weighed a ton.

All this was lost on the messenger. He took back his pencil and went off down the hall, his only worry the number of hours until payday. I leaned a hand against the thin chest in front of me and pushed hard enough to get us both into the room. I shut the door with my heel, said, "I'll take that," and yanked the letter out of his paralyzed fingers. It had sealing wax along the flap and enough stamps pasted on the front to pay the national debt.

Across the room the girl in the flowered housecoat was reaching a hand under a couch pillow. I took several long steps and stiff-armed the small of her back and she sat down hard on the floor. I put my empty hand under the pillow and found a

snub-nosed Smith & Wesson .32, all chambers filled and dark red nail polish on the sight. I held it loosely along my leg and said, "Well, here we are," in a sprightly voice.

Monroe hadn't moved. He stared at me sullenly, fear still flickering in his small nervous eyes. The girl climbed painfully to her feet, not looking at either of us, and dropped down on the edge of a leather chair and put her face in her hands.

The man's restless eyes darted from me to the girl and back to me again. A pale tongue dabbed furtively at lips so narrow they hardly existed. He said hoarsely, "Just what the hell's the bright idea busting in here and grabbing what don't belong to you?"

I flapped the envelope loosely next to my ear. "You mean this? Not yours either, buster."

"It belongs to my father-in-law. I simply signed for it."

"Oh, knock it off," I said wearily. "You went way out of your league on this caper, Tom. You should have known murder isn't for grifters with simple minds."

A sound that was half wail, half sob filtered through the girl's fingers. The man said absently, "Shut up, Cora." His eyes skittered over my face. "Murder? Who's talking about murder? You the one who shoved in here a while ago and told Cora about Amos Spain?"

"I wasn't telling her a thing," I said. "She knew it long before. You told her."

"You might like to try proving that," he said.

"You bet," I said. I put the gun on the couch arm and looked at the envelope. Yesterday's postmark, mailed from New York City. Addressed in a spidery handwriting, with the return address reading: "B. Jones, General Delivery, Radio City Station, New York, N. Y." I ripped open the flap and shook out the contents. A plain sheet of bond paper wrapped around three odd-looking stamps. One was circular with a pale rose background and black letters. The other two were square, one orange and one blue, with the same crude reproduction of Queen Victoria on both. All three wouldn't have carried a post-card across the street.

Monroe was staring at the stamps and chewing his lip. He looked physically ill. The girl was watching me now, her fingers picking at the edge of the housecoat, her face white and drawn and filled with silent fury.

I said, "It would almost have to be stamps. I should have guessed as much two hours ago. How much are they worth?"

"How would I know?" Monroe said sulkily. "They weren't sent to me. I never saw them before."

I slid the stamps back into the envelope and put the envelope in my pocket. "You'd know, brother. If you'd kept a better eye on Amos Spain you might even have gotten away with the whole thing."

"You've got nothing on us. Why don't you just shove off?"

"I've got everything on you," I said. "Not that I deserve any credit. The Army mule could have done the job. I can give you the State Attorney's case right now."

I picked up the gun and swung it lightly between a thumb and finger and sat on the couch arm. Rain beat against the windows in a muted murmur. From the kitchen came the lurch and whine of the refrigerator motor.

"Somebody named B. Jones, "I said, "gets hold of some rare stamps. Illegally. Jones knows there are collectors around who will buy stolen stamps. Amos Spain is such a collector. A deal is made by phone or letter and the stamps are mailed to Spain. In some way you two find out about it. After the stamps are in the mail, perhaps. No point in trying to get them away from Uncle Sam; but there's another way. So the two of you show up here early this morning and force your way in on old Amos, who is still in bed. You tie him up a little, let's say, and gag him, leave him on the bed and come out here in the living room to wait for the postman with the stamps.

"But Amos isn't giving up. He gets loose, dresses and goes down the fire escape. He can't be sure when you're going to open the door and look in on him, so he puts on just enough clothes to keep from being pinched for indecent exposure.

That's why he wasn't wearing socks, and why his clothes were mismatched.

"But by the time he's going down the fire escape, you look in. No Amos, and the window is open. You look out, spot him running away without topcoat or hat, and out you go after him. Tackling him on the street wouldn't do at all; your only hope is to nail him in some lonely spot and knock him off. How does it sound so far, neighbor?"

"Like a lot of words," Monroe growled.

"Words," I said, "are man's best friend. They get you fed, married, buried. Shall I tell you some more about words?"

"Go to hell."

I put down the gun and lit a cigarette and smiled. "Like I told you," I said, "you've got a simple mind. But I was telling you a story. I wouldn't want to stop now, so let's get back to Amos. You see, Amos had a big problem at this stage of the game. He couldn't go to the boys in blue and tell them about you and Cora, here. Doing that could bring out the business about the stamps and get him nailed for receiving stolen property. He had to get the two of you thrown out of his apartment before the envelope showed up.

"How to do it? Hire a strong-arm boy who won't ask questions. Where do you find a strong-arm boy on a moment's notice? The phone book's

got half a column of them. Private detectives. Not the big agencies; they might ask too many questions. But one of the smaller outfits might need the business bad enough to do it Amos's way. At least it's worth trying.

"So Amos gets my address out of the phone book, the nearest one to him, and comes up to hire me. He has no idea you're following him, which means he's not too careful about keeping out in the open where nothing can happen to him. He comes up to my office and I'm not in yet. He sits down to wait. You walk in and leave a switch knife in him. But that's only part of your job. You've got to fix it so there'll be a delay in identifying him — enough of a delay, at least, to keep the cops away from here until the mailman comes and goes. Lifting his papers may slow things down, but you want more than that. Being a crook, you make a habit of carrying around phony identification cards. You substitute these for his own, lift whatever cash Amos had on him, slip out quick and come back here. Right so far?"

The fear had gone out of Monroe's eyes and there was the first faint signs of a smirk to his thin bloodless lips. He said airily, "If this is your idea of a way to kill a rainy afternoon, don't let me stop you. Mind if I sit down?"

"I don't care if you fall down," I said. "There's a little more and then we can all sit around and

discuss the election until the cops arrive. A little more, like Cora knowing my name the first time I was here this afternoon. I hadn't told her my name, you see; just that I was a private dick. But to Cora there was only one private detective — the one whose office you'd killed Amos Spain in."

Behind me a quiet voice said, "Raise your hands."

I froze. Cora Monroe's .32 was on the couch arm, no more than six inches from my hand. I could have grabbed for it — and I could get buried for grabbing. I didn't grab.

A slender stoop-shouldered man in his early forties came padding on stocking feet in front of me. He had bushy graying hair, a long intelligent face and a capable-looking hand containing a nickel-plated Banker's Special revolver. The quiet voice belonged to him and he used it again, saying, "I won't tell you again. Put up your hands."

I put them up.

He went on pointing the gun at me while knocking the .32 off the couch with a single sweep of his other hand. It bounced along the carpet and hit the wall. He said gently, "I'll take those stamps."

"You will indeed," I said. My tongue felt as stiff as Murphy, the night he fell off the streetcar. "I guess I should have looked in the bedroom after all. I guess I thought two people should be able to lift three little stamps."

"The stamps, Mr. Pine." The

voice wasn't as gentle this time.

"Sure," I said. I put my hand in my coat and took out the envelope. I did it nice and slow, showing him I was eager to please. I held it out and he reached for it and I slammed my shoe down on his stocking foot with every pound I could spare.

He screamed like a woman and the gun went off. Behind me a lamp base came apart. I threw a punch, hard, and the gray-haired man threw his hands one way and the gun the other and melted into the rug without a sound.

Monroe was crouched near the side wall, the girl's .32 in his hand and madness in his eyes. While he was still bringing up the gun I jerked the Police Special from under the band of my trousers and fired.

He took a week to fall down. He put his hands together high on his chest and coughed a broken cough and took three wavering steps before he hit the floor with his face and died.

Cora Monroe hadn't moved from the leather chair. She sat stiff as an ice floe off Greenland, her face blank with shock, her nails sunk in her palms. I felt a little sorry for her. I bent down and picked the envelope off the floor and shoved it deep into a side pocket. I said, "How much were they worth, Cora?"

Only the rain answered.

I found the telephone and said what had to be said. Then I came back and sat down to wait.

It was ten minutes before I heard the first wail of distant sirens.

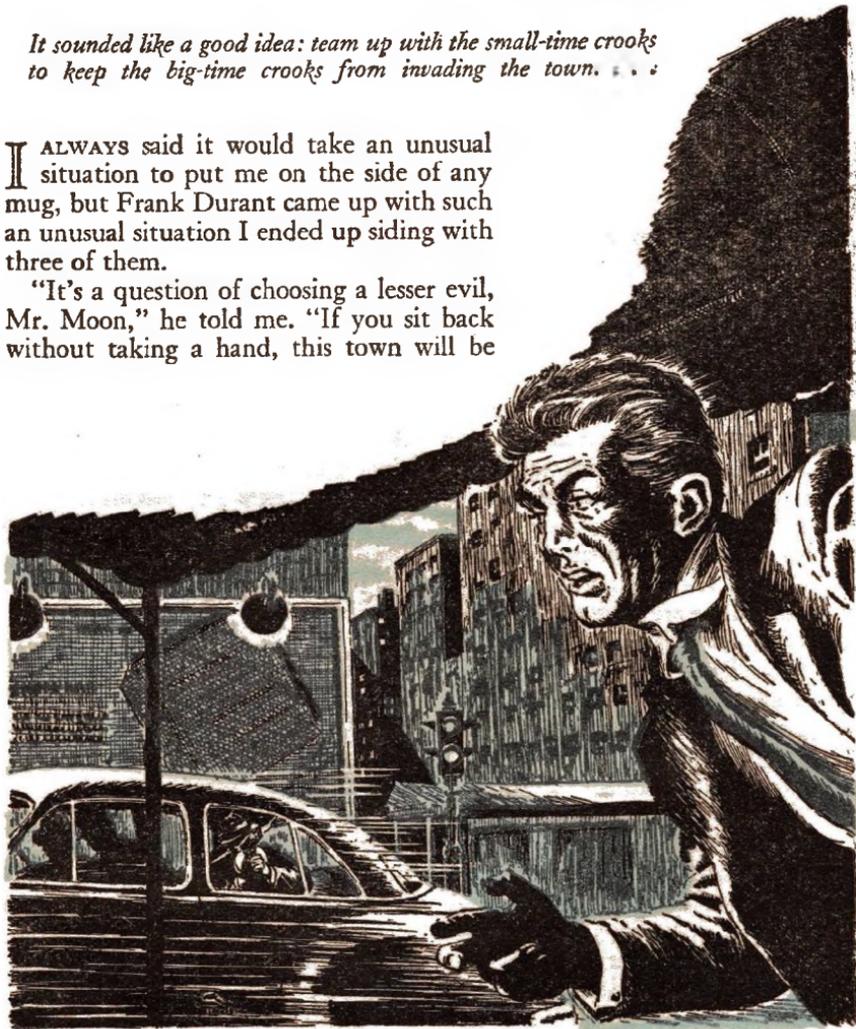
The Lesser Evil

BY RICHARD DEMING

It sounded like a good idea: team up with the small-time crooks to keep the big-time crooks from invading the town. . . .

I ALWAYS said it would take an unusual situation to put me on the side of any mug, but Frank Durant came up with such an unusual situation I ended up siding with three of them.

"It's a question of choosing a lesser evil, Mr. Moon," he told me. "If you sit back without taking a hand, this town will be



syndicated in a year. Certainly none of us local boys have got the stuff to make the syndicate back down."

Though Frank Durant was king-pin of the local bookies by virtue of controlling the wire service in town, he didn't look like a racketeer. He looked like the deacon of a church, which as a matter of fact he was, for he took active part in church affairs in order to cloud the truth that he was a mug.

He had caught me coming out of my apartment house in search of lunch, and presented his proposition as he accompanied me the four blocks to the restaurant I was currently patronizing.

He said, "This is a fairly clean town at present, Mr. Moon, mainly because we local boys don't step on each other's toes. I stick to horses, Max Gruder keeps his nose out of everything but the numbers, and Harry Delanco confines himself to slots and a few floating crap games. Vice and dope are both unorganized, and the cops make it uncomfortable for what little there is. You might say there isn't any organized crime in its usual sense."

I said, "Five hundred book shops sounds organized to me."

"Only four eighty," he said quickly. "But think what you'd have if a national syndicate moved in. A thousand bookies, every industry and business place in town flooded with numbers tickets, slots in every tavern, wide open gambling, vice and dope shops. You

want that sort of thing?"

"No. But it takes paid-off cops to make a town wide open, and no syndicate has enough money to buy Chief George Chester."

Durant smiled at me benignly. "You've never seen them work, Mr. Moon. They'll gather together all us local boys, tell us how much more we'll make under syndicate auspices, and if we squawk, push us out and put their own boys in. At the start they won't expand activities. They'll just feel out the town, line up politicians they can get to. When it's all cased, they'll start pouring in money. Millions of it. They'll buy aldermen, ward committeemen, everybody they can reach who has a finger in politics. And by the time of next election, they'll have enough stooges to take over the whole city administration. George Chester won't even have a job."

I frowned sidewise at him. "If the syndicate can bring you more money, what's your objection? You've never turned down a dishonest nickel before."

He looked at me reproachfully. "I have a certain amount of civic consciousness, Mr. Moon."

When I snorted, he added candidly, "Max, Harry and I got more money than we can spend now. We'd rather be top men in a small setup than employees in a big one."

"So what makes you think I can help you?"

"If the syndicate thought there

was an organized local group willing to fight, they might figure it wasn't worth the battle. Max Gruder, Harry Delanco and I talked it over and decided none of us would make much impression on this Marty Swan the syndicate is sending to line us up. But you've made the news wire services at least twice for knocking off hoods who were supposed to be so tough even the Feds were afraid to go after them in less than platoon strength. Marty Swan will know who you are, and he'll listen to you because he'll figure you're at least as tough as he is."

I said, "What am I supposed to do? Make a face at this Marty Swan? You've got an exaggerated idea of my reputation if you think it will scare a whole syndicate."

"No, no, Mr. Moon. You're just to be the spokesman. You're to give Swan the impression all the local boys are solidly organized under you to resist the syndicate. If we convince him you're top man of a sizeable army of guns, he'll think twice before committing the syndicate to a pitched battle."

When I didn't say anything for a few moments, he went on. "We picked you for the psychological effect, Mr. Moon. Not only have you a reputation for being tough, you're ug . . . ah . . . you *look* tough. None of us would make much of an impression on a big operator like Marty Swan, but we think you would. It's worth five thousand to us if you'll try it."

We reached the restaurant and stopped in front.

"I'll take a crack at it," I said abruptly. "Not because I like you or either of your mug pals, but because you're just what you called yourself. A lesser evil. And I'll have the fee in advance."

He was all prepared for me. He had five one-thousand-dollar bills in his wallet.

As befitted his social position as one of the important lice in the vermin world, Marty Swan had an entire suite at the Jefferson. Not anticipating trouble, he had brought along only one bodyguard, and the two of them were roughing it together in the five room, fifty-dollar-a-day suite.

The bodyguard met me at the door. He was a burly man over six feet tall with wide shoulders and arms as thick as my neck.

"You're Mr. Moon, I guess," he decided after studying the bent nose and drooping eyelid I carry around as a permanent reminder to duck when anyone swings brass knuckles. Apparently he had been given my description. "The boss is expecting you. I'm Bugs."

"I'm a little nuts myself," I told him.

For a moment he looked at me puzzledly. Then he threw back his head and emitted a guffaw which shook the walls. It stopped abruptly and he led the way through a sitting room to a wide balcony which over-

looked the park across the street.

As we stepped out through the French doors, Bugs said, "This guy is a card, Boss. Wait'll I tell you the crack he just made."

The man seated on a lounge chair on the balcony rose, said in a quiet voice, "Save it, Bugs," and extended his hand. "Glad to see you, Mr. Moon."

Marty Swan was as gaunt and gray as an alley cat, and about as predatory as an alley cat too. He sent Bugs off to order drinks sent up, resumed his seat and waved me to an identical one next to it.

"I was rather surprised when Durant, Gruder and Delanco all told me you were representing them, Mr. Moon," Swan said. "I was under the impression there wasn't much local organization here."

"There is now," I told him. "I have authority to deal with the syndicate."

"I'm glad to hear it," he said pleasantly. "We've been afraid no one in the local setup was strong enough to hold the town together. We contemplated moving a syndicate man in to head things up."

Bugs appeared in the doorway and leaned against one side of it with his hands in his pockets. "Drinks will be right up," he said.

Marty Swan nodded without looking at him. "I'm familiar with your record, Mr. Moon, and I'm sure you're strong enough to keep the top spot. We won't bother bringing in a syndicate organizer."

"Don't bother bringing in anybody from your syndicate," I told him casually.

His expression did not change, but there was a sudden alertness about him. From the doorway Bugs frowned at me.

Swan said, "I don't follow."

"It's simple," I said. "I like the status quo. If you try to move in, you'll have to make it a military operation. I got fifty guns taking orders from me, and as of tomorrow, after you leave town, every syndicate gunnie who shows up here will be met by a slug. I don't want your syndicate."

Bugs straightened, scowled at me, removed his hands from his pockets and began fiddling with the top button of his coat. Coincidentally this put his hand within inches of his armpit.

"Get the idea out of your head," I told him. "I could count to three and still beat you."

Swan glanced at his bodyguard sharply. "Don't try anything foolish, Bugs. This is a friendly discussion."

"Sure it is," I agreed, rising from my chair. "But it's all over. I won't wait for my drink. You've got the point, haven't you, Swan? Tomorrow. Noon by the latest."

His lips formed a thin smile. "Suppose the syndicate insists?"

I shrugged. "Then it better stock up on coffins." To Bugs I said, "Move aside, son. I want to go home."

I think he was preparing to move

before I spoke, but the "son" stopped him, which was just what I hoped it would do. Marty Swan had talked to too many tough guys to be impressed by mere words, and I wanted to leave a more solid impression.

Bugs' flat eyes glittered at me as he settled himself in the doorway. Without taking his gaze from my face he said, "We gonna take this from a small-town punk, Boss? Or shall I teach him respect for his elders?"

Before Swan could reply, I let Bugs have a backhand left across the mouth. It was not a hard blow, just enough to rock back his head and make him blink. His hand dived under his coat.

As I had warned him, I was somewhat faster than he. He was looking at my cocked P-38 before his hand more than touched his own gun. Carefully he dropped both hands to his sides.

I jabbed my pistol barrel into his stomach, and when he bent in the middle, I smashed the barrel across the center of his face. Staggering back, he fell to one knee and stared up with incredulous disbelief that anyone would dare use him so. His nose was a pulp from which blood spurted downward and both eyes were going to be black.

I let him know it hadn't been an impulsive mistake by casually kicking him beneath the chin. Below the knee my right leg ends in a stump to which is strapped a contrivance of

cork and aluminum. It packs a heavier wallop than a flesh and blood foot, and it literally lifted Bugs off the floor.

I dropped the hammer to quarter cock, put the P-38 back under my arm, nodded politely to Marty Swan, and stepped over the unconscious bodyguard.

My job was now completed, and anything which resulted was between the syndicate and the local mobs. Either Marty Swan would report to the syndicate the local setup would require too big a war to make taking it over worth while, or he would start importing gunmen. Either way the decision would be based on cold percentages, without revenge being a factor. I hoped the surprise of encountering apparently solid and organized resistance where he had expected to meet none would swing him toward the former decision.

I went to sleep on that thought, and awakened the next morning just in time to catch the radio report that Max Gruder and Harry Delanco had been killed and Frank Durant wounded in a triple gangland machine-gunning.

With the short hairs along the base of my neck standing straight out, I listened to how Max Gruder had gotten it just before midnight as he stepped from a night club, a few minutes later Harry Delanco had been sprayed through an open window while supervising one of his

basement crap games, and a few minutes after that Frank Durant had been wounded by machine-gun fire on his own doorstep. According to the newscaster the latter, accompanied by his younger brother, Dr. Charles Durant, was just ascending the steps of the home where they both lived when a machine-gunner in a passing car fired with such accuracy he nailed the racketeer without even scratching his brother.

"Both Gruder and Delanco died instantly of the assassin's bullets," the radio reporter said. "Durant, struck in the leg, shoulder and chest, probably owes his life to the quick action of his physician brother, who carried him into the infirmary attached to the house, administered plasma to combat shock and immediately dressed the wounds. His condition too critical to risk removal to a hospital, Durant remains in his brother's infirmary under heavy police guard.

"No motive is yet known for the triple shooting. Tentatively the police ascribe it to gangland vengeance, since all three victims are known to have underworld connections. So far the survivor's condition has prevented questioning by the police."

Still in my robe and slippers, I checked both the front and back doors of my apartment to make sure they remained soundly bolted, then consumed a pot of coffee while I tried to figure out where the shootings put me.

In the soup, was the first answer I got, but after further cogitation I began to wonder if they put me anywhere at all. If Marty Swan had swallowed my act, I should have been first victim on the list, yet I had slept next to an open window less than a dozen feet off the ground without even being bothered by a mosquito.

I was still ruminating over this oddity forty-five minutes later when I parked in front of the Durant home, a three story building as broad as it was tall.

A sign on the ten foot iron gate in front read *Dr. Charles Durant, M.D.* Beneath it was another sign simply stating *Frank Durant*, and beneath them both stood a uniformed cop.

The cop was just telling me no one was allowed in when a sleek convertible pulled up and a thin man got out, carrying a black medical bag.

The man peered at me in surprise and asked, "You Manville Moon?"

I admitted I was.

"I'm Dr. Durant, Frank's brother. We must have passed each other, for I just stopped at your flat. Frank wants to see you." To the cop he said, "It's all right, officer. Friend of my brother's."

I followed him up a flagstone walk and into a wide front hall, noticing as we entered the scars of a half dozen machine gun bullets in the wood to one side of the entrance. A fat butler appeared, took the

doctor's bag and my hat and went away again.

"Generally use the side entrance into my infirmary waiting room," the doctor said. "But now it's full of police and reporters. This thing has played hob with my practice. Police won't let patients past the gate, so I've had to make fifteen home calls already today, and it's barely noon."

He led me through a half dozen rooms to the rear of the house and opened a door into a small surgery. Two other doors, one on either side, led into the surgery, and from the drone of conversation coming through the one on the right, I judged this led into the waiting room containing the police guards and reporters Dr. Durant had complained about.

He opened the door on the left and motioned me into an infirmary containing two hospital beds. In one of the beds, sitting upright with his back against a pillow and smoking a cigar, was Frank Durant.

Before I could recover from the surprise of finding a man who was supposedly in critical condition so healthy, I got another surprise. The white uniformed nurse sitting in a straight chair next to the bed casually elevated her face and the doctor planted a preoccupied kiss on her lips.

The doctor's preoccupation startled me as much as the act itself. I had an idea it was not a requirement of professional ethics for a doctor to

greet the nurse on one of his cases with a kiss, but as long as he was doing it, I couldn't understand his lack of enthusiasm. She was a flaming redhead with glowing green eyes and a torso which would have made her a menace to any patient with high blood pressure. When my eyes got down that far, I noticed she had nice legs too.

Dr. Durant immediately cleared up the mystery of the kiss by introducing the nurse as his wife.

"Ann doesn't practice any more," he said brusquely. "But she's still registered, and under the circumstances I didn't want to bring in a strange nurse."

I turned my attention to the second mystery. "I thought you were half dead, Durant?"

He grinned at me. "Only about a quarter." Unbuttoning his pajama tops, he exposed bandages strapped to his shoulder and across his chest. "Got another on my leg," he said ruefully. "But they're all three flesh wounds. Guess I'm the luckiest guy who ever got machine-gunned. Charlie says I can be up in a week."

I asked puzzledly, "Why the report you're knocking at death's door?"

"To gain time. Keep the cops off my neck until we can plan out this war. That's why I sent Charlie after you."

"Plan it after I get out of here," the doctor interrupted. "My wife and I don't want to be accessories. Come on, Ann."

Her green eyes gleamed up at him. "I'd love to be an accessory," she said in a venomous purr. "I'd like any kind of excitement which might make me better appreciate the quiet beauty of our marriage. But you run along, darling, and keep your conventional little nose clean."

Flushing, the doctor stared at her, then turned and left the room.

The patient frowned at his nurse. "Charlie's going to surprise you some day, Ann, and bust you square in your beautiful mouth."

"Shut up or I'll give you another enema," she said amiably.

Frank grinned at her and she grinned back. Apparently relations between the woman and her brother-in-law were better than between her husband and herself.

I said, "I don't follow your reference to *we* a minute ago, Durant. I'm not planning to get involved in any war."

Drawing on his cigar, he blew a calm stream of smoke toward me. "You're already involved, Mr. Moon. With the syndicate believing you're top man, you think they'll be satisfied with less than a clean sweep?"

"I think they've already guessed it was a bluff. Or else someone spilled. If they thought I was really top man, they'd have come after me before shooting up you underlings."

He frowned at me, rolled the cigar between his lips thoughtfully and

muttered, "I been counting on you to really head up the resistance. You leave me in a spot if you walk out while I'm flat on my back."

"Walk out? I never walked in except for one performance."

"All right," he said in an agreeable tone. "But if you change your mind, drop back at seven tonight. I'm holding a meeting with Gruder's and Delanco's lieutenants and one of my own boys to work out a consolidated fighting plan."

"How you going to get them in past the cops?" I asked.

He grinned again. "They're coming as guests of Dr. and Mrs. Charles Durant." Then his grin faded. "Even if you're not siding with us, you won't let it out that I'm not as sick as reported, will you, Mr. Moon?"

I told him I would cooperate that far unless they put me under oath.

On my way out I met Inspector Warren Day and his satellite, Lieutenant Hannegan, coming in the gate. The Chief of Homicide dipped his skinny head to peer at me over his glasses, aimed the unlighted cigar in his mouth at my nose and demanded, "You got a client in this mess, Moon?"

"Sure," I said. "The guy who shot Gruder, Delanco and Durant."

The inspector said a word frequently used in parlor conversation. Pool parlor, that is.

Needling Inspector Warren Day always leaves me mildly exhilarated, and I was almost happy when I re-

turned my car to the garage and began to walk back to my flat. My feeling of exhilaration lasted until I reached the walk leading to the door of the apartment house, then was subdued by a gentleman in a blue sedan with a machine gun.

The car shot toward the curb so fast, I didn't even have time to get scared until it was all over. I caught the glint of a Tommy gun barrel, without even thinking realized there was nothing to drop behind and no holes to fall into, and instinctively dived straight toward the gun, beyond it and into the gutter behind the car.

There was a chattering roar, followed by the throb of a powerful motor, as the car spurted away and wheeled around the next corner. As I picked myself up, I noticed with some surprise I had a gun in my hand.

I put it away, then noticed with even more surprise the lawn I share with the other tenants was chewed up a good six feet from the walk where I had been standing. Apparently my swan dive had been unnecessary, because the machine-gunner would have missed me anyway.

A quick glance around told me no one at all was in sight. It was impossible that no one would have heard the shots, however, and without waiting for the crowd which would inevitably gather, I walked swiftly to the alley, marched up it and made my apartment by the rear

door. Locking myself in, I had a double shot of rye to settle my nerves, then found Dr. Charles Durant's number in the phone book and dialed it.

Assuming that as a matter of course the police would have tapped the line, I asked the butler for Mrs. Durant.

When the soft purr of her voice tickled my ear, I said, "Manny Moon, Mrs. Durant. I've discovered I'll be able to keep that dinner appointment after all. Was seven the time?"

"Yes, seven. The doctor will be delighted that you're able to come. I'll let the police guard know so you won't have any trouble getting in."

They probably knew the minute I made the statement, I thought, but forbore making the comment aloud. After all, wire tapping is illegal, and I didn't want to make the listening cop blush.

The red-haired nurse was present during the entire meeting that night. Frank Durant made a halfhearted attempt to chase her out when we got down to business, but acquiesced to her argument that she had to remain in case one of the cops or reporters in the waiting room got nosy and knocked on the door. Obviously her real reason for wanting to stay was that she was thrilled to death at being in on a bit of gangland planning.

Since Durant agreed to his sister-in-law's presence, I made no objection. In fact I thought she added a

pleasant note to an otherwise drab gathering, for none of the others present could be described as joys to look at.

Buttons Sharkey, Frank Durant's number one strong-arm man, was a heavy-set man with a bullet head and the expression of a person just coming out of anesthesia. The name Buttons was a misnomer, for he definitely lacked most of his.

Tall, lank and slow moving Hub Topping, lieutenant of the deceased Max Gruder and now presumably top man in the numbers racket, had a long sad face and eyes as blank as a dead man's. He had at least two killings to his credit and gave the impression of patiently awaiting an opportunity to add to his score.

Little Joe Tecca, right bower of the dead Harry Delanco, was barely five feet two, narrow shouldered and with a pinched and wizened face perennially set in a meaningless grin. He was probably the most dangerous of the three because he was so unpredictable. Besides having a violent temper out of all proportion to his size, he was a cokie and was usually hopped to the eyebrows.

The first part of the meeting was over fast. Both Little Joe Tecca and Hub Topping admitted they could not fight the syndicate alone, and agreed to pool forces with Durant at least long enough to push their common enemy out of town. They were not so agreeable about having me run the show, however, but Durant brought them around by

reminding them if they didn't stick together, they'd all end up in an alley.

"And neither of you think *you* could general this war, do you?" he asked.

Both were candid enough to admit they couldn't.

I took this as acquiescence to my leadership, and took over the rest of the meeting. I started by bluntly informing them, just to keep the record straight, they were still mugs in my book and I didn't like them any better than they liked me.

"This is a marriage of convenience, not love," I told them. "Step out of line just once and you'll think the syndicate is a society for brotherly love."

They understood this language. In fact they understood no other. They looked sullen, but they also looked cooperative.

Then we got down to military strategy. It developed the three lieutenants together had under them a total of thirty-seven guns.

"Any of you have boys originally from Chicago?" I asked.

Buttons said, "I got a couple."

"New Orleans?"

"One," Little Joe Tecca offered.

"L.A.?"

All three had immigrants from L.A. on their payrolls.

I went down the list of all the major cities from which the syndicate might import gunmen until we had a fairly complete roster of local men who were familiar enough with

the mentioned cities to be able to recognize at least some of the better known hoods if they started drifting into town.

"I want these guys assigned to check every incoming bus, train and plane from their home towns," I ordered. "The minute they spot a syndicate man, I want him taken alive."

"What's that for?" Buttons asked. "Why not just bump him?"

"You'd make a lousy general," I told him. "When you don't know the enemy's next move, the first thing you do is capture a live prisoner and pump some information out of him."

"Oh, I got you." His undersized eyes glittered. "Cigarettes on the soles of the feet, huh?"

I looked at him coldly. "If we net anything, I'll do the questioning."

Then I told them I wanted everyone in their organizations who wasn't on spotting duty to start feeling out the town to find out where Marty Swan and whatever other syndicate men he had with him were holed up. When they looked at me as though I had handed them an impossible assignment, I patiently outlined it for them.

I told Buttons Sharkey, "Yesterday Durant said he services four hundred and eighty book shops. If you average three men to a spot, you've got nearly fifteen hundred guys you can start looking." I turned to Hub Topping. "There must be at

least five thousand guys running numbers tickets for you. The three of you are sitting on top of a grapevine that reaches into every nook and cranny in town. Shake the fuzz out of your brains and use it."

They looked at me with awe. Their combined I.Q.s I guessed would add up to about one hundred, which is normal. Normal for one person, that is.

"As soon as you learn anything, phone me. My apartment is listed in the book. Don't phone here, because the police probably have Durant's phone tapped. Any questions?"

They shook their heads dumbly. "Then scram out of here and get to work. And look where you're going. I wouldn't want you to bump into any soft-nosed bullets before you get your jobs done."

Buttons Sharkey and Hub Topping snapped to instant obedience, departing with frowns of concentration marring the normal blankness of their expressions. But Little Joe Tecca lingered.

"You don't have to treat us like we're idiots or something, Moon," he said resentfully.

"Mister Moon, Tecca. Don't drop it again, or I'll knock your head off. I'm not treating you like idiots. Idiots have only the mental development of two year olds. I'm treating you like morons, who have the mental development of ten year olds. Want to make something out of it?"

He blinked at me, for a moment undecided whether he did or not, then decided he didn't and departed after the rest.

Ann Durant started to accompany me to the front door, but we didn't make it all the way. As we passed through the dining room, which was half dark, its gloom cut only by what light filtered in from the hall beyond it, she pointed out a sideboard well stocked with bottles and asked if I'd like a drink. A subtle note of intimacy in the invitation warned me I had better not accept it.

"Not tonight, thanks," I said.

She stopped me by putting a hand on my arm. "Don't be in such a hurry, Mr. Moon. Why do you insist on the *mister*?"

"That's only for mugs. You can call me anything you want if you don't do it in baby talk."

"I think I like Manny," she decided. "Isn't that what your friends call you? You know, Manny, I was quite impressed by the way you ordered around those gangsters. They are gangsters, aren't they? As long as Frank's lived with us, I've never met any of his business associates before. Would you consider Frank a gangster, Manny? Let me give you a drink."

As she rattled this out in a kind of compulsive monologue, she gently steered me toward the sideboard until we were both practically leaning against it. One hand rested on my shoulder, and while no other part

of her touched me, I sensed without checking it would have been difficult to slide a dime between our bodies. When she said, "Let me give you a drink," she said it with her lips two inches from mine, as though she were holding the drink in her mouth.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What's started you rattling all of a sudden?"

Her green eyes gleamed up at me and I felt her free hand between us doing something to her starched white uniform. "Being alone with you in a dimly lighted room maybe."

The hand went away from between us to rest on my other shoulder. I looked down and got a shock, though not exactly a surprise.

There were three buttons to the top of her uniform, but from the waist to the hem it was snapped. The three buttons were open, and as I looked she pressed both knees outward and the snaps came loose with a series of little popping sounds. She didn't have a stitch on under the uniform.

She leaned away from me slightly to let me have a better look, arching her back to make her breasts jut upward. She had reason to be proud of them. In burlesque they would have made her a fortune.

Pushing her hands away from my shoulders, I said unsteadily, "If you were single I'd pour salt and pepper on you and eat you up, madam. But there are too many fish in the sea to swipe from another guy's hook."

There was a sudden sound of foot-

steps at the doorway behind Ann.

Both her hands moved so rapidly it made me blink. When she swung to stare at her husband haughtily, the three buttons were in place. The snaps, of course, were still loose, but he couldn't see that as long as she stood still.

"Evening, Doctor," I said casually. "Thanks for the offer anyway, Ann. The drink I mean."

She glared at me furiously and stalked toward the infirmary.

Dr. Durant was still gazing at her with a set expression on his face when I brushed past him on the way to the front door.

The next morning I discovered my elaborate intelligence organization had netted not a single rumor. Buttons Sharkey, Little Joe Tecca and Hub Topping all phoned to tell me they had been unable to uncover evidence of a single syndicate man in town.

I ordered a systematic check of tourist courts within a radius of ten miles from the city.

At noon I got a long distance call from Marty Swan. It came from Elmsterville, Illinois, a little town ten miles beyond the river.

"Hear you've been having shooting over there, Mr. Moon," he said.

"A little," I admitted. "Nothing very bothersome."

"Wonder if maybe the syndicate could give you a hand in straightening things out?"

"No thanks," I said politely.

"We'll manage."

"Hmm. Might save you a lot of trouble. We've got some pretty effective techniques in putting a stop to civil war."

"So have we," I informed him, and hung up.

Fifteen minutes later I had a carload of gunmen streaking toward Elmsterville. By four in the afternoon they were back with the report Swan must have used a pay phone while passing through town, for there was no sign of the advance man nor any other syndicate employee in Elmsterville.

When evening came, my elaborate defense setup had accomplished exactly nothing. I had not the vaguest idea how many syndicate guns we were up against, nor from what point the syndicate was operating. Mentally I reviewed the negative reports which had been pouring in all day, and again went over the conversation I had had over the phone with Marty Swan.

And then, in what I can modestly describe only as a flash of genius, I got the whole picture. I knew where the syndicate men we had been searching for were, I knew who had operated the decreasingly accurate machine gun, and I knew what a patsy I was for getting involved in a gang war.

I dialed the number of the Durant home and asked for Mrs. Durant.

When she came to the phone, I asked, "You have to stay by your patient's side all the time, or can

you manage to get out?"

"Why should you care?" she inquired coldly. "Aren't any of those other fish in the sea biting tonight?"

"They've all got dates. And I've been sitting here all day talking myself out of last night's scruples. I still have two more single girls to ask as soon as their lines stop giving a busy signal, but in case both of them are busy, how about meeting you?"

She gave an indignant little snort, then suddenly laughed. "With your technique, no wonder you've stayed single. Did a woman give you that bent nose and funny eyelid, by any chance?"

"My mother," I said. "What time tonight?"

She was silent for a minute. "I really shouldn't leave the house," she said finally. "Why don't you come here?" There was another pause before she said, "The doctor will be out on calls until at least one A.M."

"Clear me with the gate guard and expect me at ten," I told her.

When I arrived she led me to a small play room across the hall from the surgery. It was furnished like a cocktail lounge, complete with bar and glass topped tables. Over the door on the inside was a tiny frosted bulb in a socket fixed to the sill, which she explained was connected to a switch in the infirmary. If her patient needed her, the light would go on.

She indicated she wanted me to

sit behind one of the glass topped tables on a leather bench running the length of one wall, and after mixing two drinks at the bar she slid in next to me. Although there was plenty of room on the bench, she crowded in so close her hip and thigh pressed against mine.

"To my transparent cavalier," she said, raising her glass.

We drank to her transparent cavalier before I asked, "Who's he?"

"You," she told me. "I can see right through you. It wasn't my lovely green eyes that brought you here tonight. You've got some ulterior motive, and you've drowned your scruples against married women because of it."

I managed to look wounded.

Setting down her glass, she removed mine from my hand and set it on the table also. "Whatever you're after, friend, you're going to pay for it." Putting a hand to either side of my face, she jerked my head around until my bent nose was aimed at her straight one.

I bent to kiss her, and immediately had an armful of squirming wildcat. Her tongue explored my mouth with greedy expertness, suddenly drew away and small but uncomfortably sharp teeth gripped my ear.

"Hey!" I said.

Her hand fumbled with the buttons across her bosom and I heard the familiar popping of snaps.

Calmly, I drew her head to my shoulder and pulled shut the gaping

uniform with a clenched hand.

"It's not that I don't like the view," I explained. "But it distracts me. If I'm going to pay for information, let's have the information first."

The white uniform, inadequately held together at the waist by my hand, still exposed the full roundness of her breasts, her naked thighs and about half of one hip. I felt myself sweating and looked at the ceiling.

"Were you in the house when the machine gunner got Frank the other night?" I asked.

"Just coming home," she said into my shoulder. "I'd been to the symphony while Frank and Charlie were at a stag. That's one."

"One what?"

"One payment you owe me."

"Oh. None of the servants even got out of bed when it happened, did they?"

She shook her head. "They slept right through. Two."

"Stop counting out loud, dammit. You arrived just as the shooting took place?"

"Just after. I heard the shots as I turned in the driveway gate. Was that four or five?"

"Three," I said. "You think I'm a marathon champion? So you were present when your husband patched Frank up?"

"Oh yes. Four. Charlie put the car up for me, and then we took Frank into the infirmary together . . ." She stopped abruptly.

"Go on," I said softly. "Your husband put the car up for you, leaving his brother lying there full of machine gun bullets. He must be a miraculous diagnostician to have been able to decide in the dark the wounds weren't serious enough to require immediate treatment."

I could feel her body stiffen. "I can't make the sharp turn into the garage," she mumbled against my neck. "He . . ." She hesitated and ended weakly, "He always puts the car up for me, and I guess with the excitement and all, he just did it automatically."

"Wouldn't it be automatic for a doctor to take care of a wounded patient?" I asked dryly.

Jerking my hand loose from her uniform, she wound her arms about my neck. "Don't ask me any more questions," she said.

The little frosted light over the door flicked on.

"Damn!" she said, and jumped up.

Rapidly buttoning and snapping herself, she hurried from the room.

She was gone ten minutes. When she came back we dropped the subject of Frank Durant's shooting while I paid off like a gentleman. I was still evading her questions about why I was asking my questions when I left. . . .

I had parked my car across the street, which in the darkness put it beyond the range of vision of the guard on the gate. I was pulling away from the curb before I discovered I had a passenger.

"Just keep both hands on the wheel and turn left at the next corner," he said.

Glancing in the mirror, I could dimly make out the silhouette of Buttons Sharkey, Durant's lieutenant, and the metallic glint of a pistol pointed at my back. I kept my hands on the wheel and turned left at the corner.

Two blocks from the river Buttons had me turn left again, and then into the open entrance of what seemed to be an empty warehouse. I stopped with my front bumper resting against the far wall.

Backing out first, Buttons covered me while I got out. Relieving me of my P-38, he ordered me to close the truck door by which we had entered, and while I was complying he flicked a switch which turned on a dim overhead light.

Glancing around the huge room we were in, I saw the walls were lined with slot machines, most of which seemed to lack handles or in some other respect require repairs.

"This must be Little Joe Tecca's warehouse," I remarked. "Haven't you got a quiet place of your own to pull your killings, Buttons?"

"This is good enough," Buttons said, and was raising his gun when a door across the room opened and Little Joe Tecca suddenly appeared. Through the open door I could see the room he emerged from was a small office.

Tecca halted in astonishment, his eyes moving from me to the gun in

Buttons' hand. "Hey, what's going on here?"

"Moon is leaving us," Buttons said quickly. "He sold out to the syndicate. I brought him over so you could help me get rid of the body."

"He brought me here because he thought you weren't within miles," I told Tecca, then stopped talking when I saw the murderous light in Buttons' eyes. Another word and I realized he would press the trigger and explain to Little Joe afterward.

Little Joe's wizened face suddenly darkened with suspicion. "Let him talk, Buttons. Who told you he sold out to the syndicate?"

Buttons' gun moved slightly to include the little man in the coverage. The question stumped him, for he had too little brains to ad lib, and apparently his instructions had failed to cover what to say if he got caught in the act of rubbing me out. He just stood there and looked at Tecca stubbornly.

Little Joe's eyes suddenly blazed with anger. "Point that thing away from me, stupid! You didn't expect to find me here. You brought him here to bump him and leave the body for me to explain. Start talking."

Buttons aimed the pistol directly at Little Joe. "Now take it easy, Tecca. I don't want to shoot you."

With the gun momentarily pointed in another direction, I decided to take a chance. "Buttons is the machine gunner who killed Max Gruder and your boss, Joe."

Why the little man believed me I don't know. Coming cold, the statement sounded preposterous even to me. But Little Joe believed it instantly.

Buttons missed the expression of maniacal fury which suddenly contorted Little Joe's face, for he was swinging his gun to silence me once and for all. I dropped flat just as it boomed, and the bullet whistled so close over my head it warmed my scalp.

He never had a chance for a second shot. Like an echo came the flat report of a small caliber automatic. Buttons' normally stupid expression grew even more stupid. He turned his head to look at Little Joe reproachfully, suddenly buckled at the knees and pitched forward on his face.

I got to my feet and dusted myself off with unnecessary thoroughness. When I thought I could manage to speak without a quake in my voice, I said, "Thanks, Joe. Now let's go pick up Hub Topping and a couple of cops, and I'll take you all over to the Durants' to explain what a bunch of suckers we've all been."

The group which arrived at the Durant mansion at one thirty in the morning was equally representative of both sides of the law. Day and Hannegan represented its guardians, Tecca and Hub Topping its infringers, and I, as a normal champion of law and order but temporary overseer of local gangland, could be

regarded as a compromise between both.

I got both Ann and her husband out of bed and headed the whole group toward the infirmary. But when we got there, Ann put her back to the door.

"He's still unconscious and you can't see him," she said, but I merely took her shoulders and lifted her out of the way.

Inside Frank Durant was flat on his back attempting to look unconscious. As I approached the bed Dr. Durant started yapping about holding me personally responsible if I disturbed his patient, but I calmly pulled aside the patient's pajama top, hooked a finger under the bandage across his chest and pulled it loose.

There was no sign of a wound of any sort.

"You can sit up now, Frank," I told him. "Buttons is dead and your whole scheme collapsed."

"I don't get it," Hub Topping said in a bewildered voice.

So I explained it, first bringing Inspector Day and Hannegan up to date on the part they didn't know, the syndicate's sending in an advance agent and my attempt to bluff him out. I told them that as Frank Durant had guessed it would, my bluff actually worked, for the syndicate wasn't enough interested in the town to fight a war over it. Swan had moved on to organize some other town.

"Buttons Sharkey was the 'syndi-

cate' machine-gunner who killed Gruder and Delanco," I said. "To remove suspicion from himself Frank had Buttons throw a few slugs in the front door, then had his doctor brother put on fake bandages and further cover him by assigning his wife as nurse. Tonight I asked Ann a few questions, and after I tripped her up a few times, she told Frank she thought I knew he hadn't been wounded at all. So Frank ordered his stooge Buttons to rub me out."

"But what was behind all this?" Day asked bewilderedly.

"Frank Durant wanted to absorb the other rackets. With both Gruder and Delanco dead, and with neither Tecca nor Hubbing having enough brains to run the rackets they had inherited, Durant knew once he managed to consolidate all three factions, he would be able to hold them together taking his orders, and he'd be kingpin of the local underworld.

"Frank made two tactical errors, though. First, no one tried to get me, yet Marty Swan was supposed to think I was the local big wheel.

When I mentioned this to Durant, he belatedly had Buttons squirt a few slugs at me which were intended to miss. He wanted me alive, and at the same time mad enough at the syndicate to take over the leadership of a non-existent gang war.

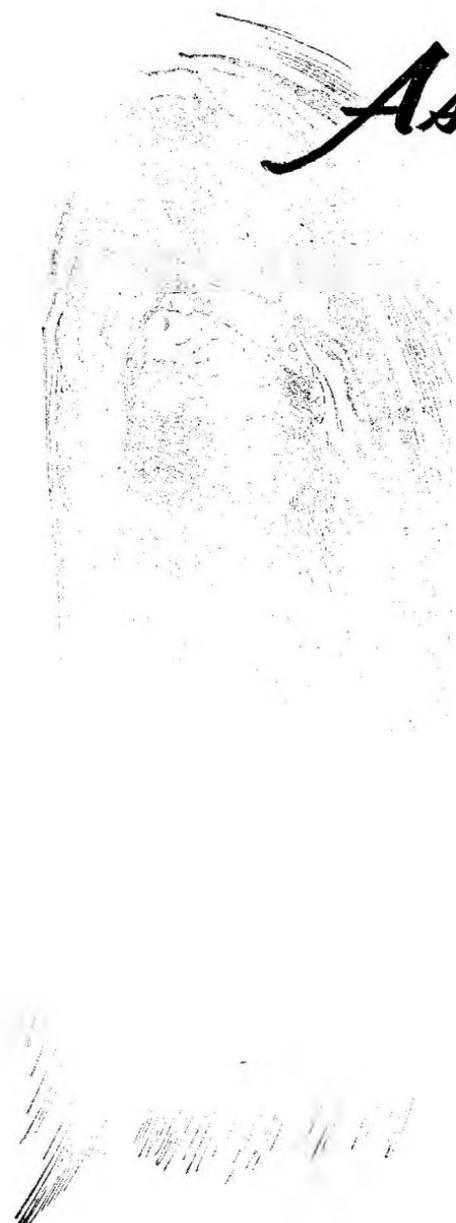
"The second error was not realizing the machine-gunnings would make the news wire services. When Marty Swan read about them, he phoned me long distance to find out if I'd like the syndicate's help. He assumed it was a local war, you see, and if the syndicate was invited in, naturally they would stay after helping put down the rebellion."

Ann Durant said suddenly, "I didn't know Frank was going to order you killed, Manny. If I had, you don't think I would have told him . . . after we . . ."

She stopped and looked at her husband from wide eyes.

"No, I don't think you would, Ann," I said gently. "Anyhow, I hope you didn't. Where you're going as accessory, you'll be able to think about it for a long, long time.





As I Lie Dead

BY FLETCHER FLORA

The murder itself was a cinch, no trouble at all. The things that were hard to do came later. . . .

I ROLLED over in the hot sand and sat up. Down the artificial beach about fifty yards, the old man was coming toward us with a bright towel trailing from one hand. He was wearing swimming trunks, and with every step he took, his big belly bounced like a balloon tied up short on the end of a stick. Dropping the towel on the sand, he turned and waded into the water.

"The old man's taking a swim," I said.

Beside me on the beach, Cousin Cindy grunted. She was stretched out flat on her belly with her head cradled on her arms and her long golden legs spread in a narrow V. Her white lastex trunks curved up high over the swell of her body, and the ends of her brassiere lay unattached on the sand. When she shifted position, raising herself a little on her elbows, my reaction was not cousinly. Not cousinly at all.

"Hook me in back," she said.

I reached over and brought the loose ends of her brassiere together below her shoulder blades, letting my fingers wander off lightly down the buttons of her spine. She sat up, folding the golden legs Indian style and shaking sand from the ends of her golden hair. She was gold all over in the various shades that gold can take. Even her brown eyes, behind dark glass in white harlequin frames, were flecked with gold.

Out in the lake, Grandfather was swimming toward the raft that was a small brown square on the blue surface of the water. He was swimming breast stroke, as many old men swim, and the water bulged out ahead of him in smooth, sweeping undulations.

"The old man's strong as a bull," I said.

Cindy didn't answer. She just handed me a bottle with a white label and a white cap and some brown lotion inside. I unscrewed the cap and poured some of the lotion on her shoulders and back, rubbing it in gently with my fingers until it had disappeared and her skin was like golden satin to my touch.

Looking over her shoulder, past the soft sheen of her hair and out across the glittering blue lake, I saw that Grandfather had reached the raft. He was sitting on the far side, his back to us, legs dangling in the water. He'd made it out there in good time. For an old man, damn good time. He was strong, in spite of his fat belly. It didn't look like

he was ever going to die.

"It's hot," Cindy said, her voice slow and sleepy like the purring of a kitten, "but it's not as hot as it gets in Acapulco. You ever been in Acapulco, Tony? It's beautiful there. The harbor is almost land-locked, with mountains all around, and the ships come right up against the shore."

I didn't say anything. My hands moved across her shoulders and down along the soft swells of flat muscle that padded the blades. The perfumes of her hair and the lotion were a strange, exotic blend in my nostrils. Out on the raft, Grandfather still sat with his legs in the water.

"I was there for two weeks once," Cindy said. "In Acapulco, I mean. I went with a man from Los Angeles who wanted me to wear red flowers in my hair. He was very romantic, but he was also very fat, and the palms of his hands were always damp. It would be better in Acapulco with you, Tony. Much better."

My hands reversed direction, moving up again into her hair, cupping it between palms as water is cupped. The raft, out on the lake, rose and dipped on a slight swell. Grandfather rode it easily, still resting.

"He just sits," I said bitterly. "He'll be sitting forever."

Her head fell back slowly until it was resting on my shoulder, and her golden hair was hanging down my back, and I could look down along

the slim arch of her throat into the small valley of shadow under the white band she wore. Behind dark glass, her lids lowered, and she looked dreamily through slits into the brash blue of the sky.

"Acapulco, Tony. You and me and Acapulco. It's hot and beautiful there by the harbor in a ring of mountains, but it wouldn't be good unless you and I were hot and beautiful, too. It wouldn't be good if we were too old, Tony."

"He's strong as a bull," I said. "He'll live forever."

A shiver rippled her flesh, and the tip of her pink tongue slipped out and around her oiled lips.

"It's a nice day, Tony. A hot, dreamy day with a blue sky and white clouds drifting. If I were old and ugly, I'd like to die on a day like this."

She remained quiet a minute longer, lying against me with her hair splashing down my back, and then she slipped away, rising in the hot sand.

"I want a drink," she said. "A long, long drink with lots of ice and a sprig of mint. You coming, Tony?"

I stood up too, and we stood looking at each other across the sand of the artificial beach that had cost Grandfather a small fortune.

"I'll be up in a little," I said. "I think I'll swim out to the raft and back."

Her breasts rose high against the restraint of the white band and descended slowly on a long whisper

of air. She wet her lips again. "I'll have your drink waiting," she said.

I watched her walk away up the beach, her legs moving from the hips with fluid ease, even in the soft sand, and after she was gone, I went down to the water and waded out into it to my waist. The water was cool on my hot skin and seemed to make everything clear and simple in my mind. Swimming with a powerful crawl, I was nearing the raft in almost no time. A few feet from it, treading water, I stopped and looked at Grandfather's motionless back. I wasn't worried about his hearing me. He'd been partially deaf for years and usually wore a little button attached to a battery. After a few seconds, I sank in the water and swam under the raft.

The first time I reached for his ankle, my fingers barely brushed it, and it jerked away. Reaching again, I got my fingers locked around the ankle and lunged down with all the force I could manage in the buoyant water. He came in with a splash, and even under the water I could see his veined eyes bulging with terror as my hands closed around the sagging flesh of his throat.

He was strong. Stronger, even, than I'd thought. His hands clawed at mine, tearing at my grip, and I scissored my legs, kicking up to a higher level so that I could press my weight down upon him from above. My fingers kept digging into his throat, but he put up a hellish

threshing, and when I broke water for air, it was all I could do to hold him below the surface. It was a long time before he was quiet and I could let him slip away into the green depths.

There was a fire under my ribs. My arms and legs were throbbing, heavy with the poisonous sediment of fatigue. I wanted to crawl onto the raft and collapse, but I didn't. I lay floating on my back for a minute, breathing deeply and evenly until the fire went out in my lungs, and then I rolled in the water and crawled slowly to shore.

On the white sand where he had dropped it, Grandfather's towel was a bright splash of color. Leaving it lying there, I crossed the beach and went up through a sparse stand of timber to the eight room house we called the lodge.

Cindy was waiting for me on the sun porch. She had removed the dark glasses but was still wearing the two scraps of white lastex. In one hand was a tall glass with ice cubes floating in amber liquid and a green sprig of mint plastered to the glass above the amber. Her eyes were lighted hotly by their golden flecks. Between us, along a vibrant intangible thread of dark understanding, passed the unspoken question and the unspoken answer.

"Tell me more about Acapulco," I said.

She set the glass with great deliberateness on a glass-topped table and moved over to me. Still with that

careful deliberateness, she passed her arms under mine and locked her hands behind my back. There was surprising strength in her. I could feel the hard, hot pressure of her body clear through to my spine. Her lips moved softly against my naked shoulder.

"Was it bad, Tony? Was it very bad?"

"No. Not bad."

"Will anyone guess?"

"I had to choke him pretty hard. There may be bruises. But it won't matter, even if they do get suspicious. It's proof that hurts. All we have to remember is that we were here together all afternoon."

"What do we do now?"

"We have a drink. We wait until dusk. Then we call the sheriff and tell him we're worried about Grandfather. We tell him the old man went swimming and hasn't returned."

"Why the sheriff?"

"I don't know. It seems like the sheriff should be the one to call."

"The will, Tony. Are you sure about the will?"

"Yes, I'm sure. It's all ours, honey. Every stick, stone, stock and penny, share and share alike."

It was only then that she began to tremble. I could feel her silken flesh shivering against mine all the way up and down. Her lips made a little wet spot on my shoulder. Under my fingers, the fastening of her white brassiere was a recalcitrant obstacle, thwarting the relief of my primitive drive. Finally it parted, the white

scrap hanging for a moment between us and then slipping away. My hands traced the beautiful concave lines of her sides and moved with restrained, savage urgency.

Her voice was a thin, fierce whisper.

"Tony," she said. "Tony, Tony, Tony. . . ."

2

Out on the lake, they were blasting for Grandfather. All day, at intervals, we'd heard the distant, muffled detonations, and every time the hollow sound rolled up through the sparse timber to reverberate through the rooms of the lodge, I could see the bloated body of the old man wavering in terrible suspension in the dark water.

On the sun porch, Cindy stood with her back to me, staring out across the cleared area of the yard to the standing timber. She was wearing a slim black sheath of a dress without shoulders. Beautiful in anything or nothing, in black she was most beautiful of all. She was smoking a cigarette, and when she lifted it to her lips, the smoke rose in a thin, transparent cloud to mingle with the golden haze the light made in her hair.

"It's been a long time," she said. "Almost an hour."

"What's been almost an hour?"

"Since the last explosion. They've been coming at half-hour intervals."

"Maybe they've raised him."

"Maybe."

She moved a little, lifting the cigarette to her lips again, and the sunlight slipped up her arm and over her shoulder. I went up behind her and trailed my hands down the black sheath to where it flared tautly over firm hips and then back up to her shoulders. I pulled her back against me hard, breathing her hair.

"Nervous, Cindy?"

"No. You?"

"A little. It's the waiting, I guess."

She turned to face me, her arms coming up fiercely around my neck.

"Sorry, Tony? Will you ever be sorry?"

I looked down into the hot, gold-flecked eyes, and I said, "No, I'll never be sorry," and her cigarette dropped with a small sound to the asphalt tile behind me. Out on the front veranda, there was a loud knocking at the door.

I went in through the living room and on out through the hall to the front door, and there on the veranda stood Aaron Owens, the sheriff of the county. He was a short, fat little man with round cheeks and a bowed mouth, and it crossed my mind that maybe he'd been elected sheriff because the voters thought he was cute. Looking in at me through the screen, he mopped his face with a bright bandana and blew out a wet sigh.

"Hello, Mr. Wren. It's a hot walk up from the lake."

I opened the screen door and told him to come in. "My cousin's on the sun porch. She'll mix you a drink."

We went back to the sun porch, and Cindy put bourbon and soda and ice in a glass and handed it to him. He took the drink eagerly.

"We've been listening to the blasting," Cindy said. "We haven't heard any now for an hour."

He looked at her over the rim of his glass, his face and voice taking on a studied solemnity.

"We've brought him up. Poor old guy. I came to tell you."

Cindy turned quickly away, looking again out across the yard to the timber, and the little sheriff's eyes made a lingering, appreciative tour of the black sheath.

"He'll be taken right into town," he said. "Twenty-four hours in the water, you know. Didn't do him any good. We thought you'd prefer it that way."

"Yes," I said. "Of course."

He lifted his glass again, draining the bourbon and soda off the cubes. He let one of the cubes slip down the glass into his mouth, then spit it back into the glass.

"The coroner'll look him over. Just routine. An old man like that shouldn't swim alone in deep water. Maybe a cramp. Maybe a heart attack. Never can tell with an old man."

"Grandfather was always active," I said.

He looked wistfully at his empty glass for a minute and then set it down on the glass-topped table.

"Sure. Some old men never want to give up. Ought to know better.

Well, time to be running along. Lucky to get him up so soon. Can't tell you how sorry I am."

"Thanks very much," I said.

I took him back to the front door and watched him cross the veranda and go down across the cleared area into the timber. Turning away, I went back to Cindy.

She was facing me when I came in, black and gold against the bright glass. Her lips were parted, and her breasts rose and fell with a slow, measured cadence.

"Everything's all right, Tony. Everything's going to be all right."

"Sure. They can't touch us, honey."

"He was an old man. We didn't take much of his life away."

"Don't think about that. Don't think about it at all."

"I won't, Tony. I'll just think about the time when we can go away. I'll think of you and me and more money than we can spend in a dozen lifetimes. You and me and the long, hot days under a sky that's bluer than any blue you've ever seen. Oh, Tony. . . ."

I went over and held her tightly until she whimpered with pain and her eyes were blind with the pleasure of suffering.

"It won't be long, honey. Not long. After the will's probated. After everything's settled."

She snarled her fingers in my hair and pulled my face down to her hungry lips, and it must have been a century later when I became aware

of the shrill intrusion of the telephone in the hall behind me.

I went out to answer it, and when I spoke into the transmitter my mind was still swimming in a kind of steaming mist. The voice that answered mine was clear and incisive but very soft. I had to strain to understand.

"Mr. Wren? My name is Evan Lane. I have a lodge across the lake. I see the sheriff's men have quit blasting. Does that mean they've found the old man?"

"Yes," I said. "They found him."

"Permit me to extend my sympathy." The country line hummed for a long moment in my ear, and it seemed to me that I could hear, far off at the other end, the soft ghost of a laugh. "Also my congratulations," the voice said.

A cold wind seemed to come through the wire with the voice. The warm mist inside my skull condensed and fell, leaving my mind chill and gray and very still. Inside my ribs, there was a terrible pain, as if someone had thrust a knife between them.

"I beg your pardon," I said.

The laugh was unmistakable this time, rising on a light, high note. "I offered my congratulations, Mr. Wren. For getting away with it, I mean."

"I don't understand."

"I think you do. You see, Mr. Wren, you made one small mistake. You made the mistake of acting too soon after your lovely friend had

been sun bathing on the beach. A girl like that is an open invitation to a man like me to use his telescope. I have a clear shot from my veranda. Now do you understand, Mr. Wren?"

"What do you want?"

"I think you'll find me a reasonable man. Perhaps we'd better meet and discuss terms."

"Where?"

"Say the barroom of the Lakeshore Inn."

"When?"

"Tonight? At nine?"

"I'll be there," I said.

I cradled the phone and went back through the living room to the sun porch. Cindy was standing at a liquor cabinet in the corner, moving a swizzle stick in the second of two drinks she'd mixed. She stopped stirring and looked across at me, becoming suddenly very quiet.

"Who was it, Tony?"

"He said his name's Evan Lane. He has a lodge across the lake."

"What did he want?"

"He wants to meet me at the Lakeshore Inn. Tonight."

"Why?"

"He has a habit of watching you on the beach through a telescope. He was watching yesterday. He saw me and the old man in the lake."

She took two stiff steps toward me, her slim body rigid in its black sheath. Bright spots were burning in her cheeks.

"Blackmail?"

"It looks like it."

"What shall we do, Tony? What shall we do?"

"Find out what he's after, first of all. After that, we'll see."

"He'll bleed us, Tony. He'll bleed us white."

"No," I said. "It won't be like that. It won't be like that at all."

Then she came the rest of the way to me, but her body was cold and rigid in my arms, and it was a long time before it got back the way it was before the telephone rang.

3

The Lakeshore Inn was on an arm of the lake that was almost at a right angle to the main body. In the barroom, they'd tried to make an effect with rafters. After they'd finished, the effect was just rafters, but you felt friendly because they'd tried.

I crawled onto a stool. A clock on the wall behind the bar said five to nine. I looked at my reflection in the mirror below the clock and was a little astonished to see that I didn't look any different from the way I'd looked yesterday or the day before. Same brown hair. Same eyes a little browner. Same face in general.

The bartender said, "Good evening, Mr. Wren," and cocked an eyebrow to show that he was tuned in.

"The usual," I said.

He put a couple of cubes in a glass and covered them with White Horse. Down the bar, around the

curve to the wall, a heavy man with a bald head was drinking beer. The bartender went down to him and resumed a conversation I'd interrupted. At nine precisely, someone came up behind me and got onto the stool on my left. I looked up into the mirror.

The face I saw went on from where mine stopped. Thin and dark, with a clean, chiseled look, burned mahogany by wind and sun. Above it, black hair was feathered with white around the ears and almost mathematically divided by a single white streak. It was a head to make the ladies itch. The head of a man who might have been a heavy actor but thought he was too good for it. I sat and watched it until the bartender had done his job and gone back to his beer drinker.

"You don't look like a black-mailer," I said.

An incisive white smile flashed in the shadows of the mirror. "Thanks. You don't look like a murderer, either."

"It's a funny world," I said.

We drank in silence, two congenial guys, and after a while I said, "You're a little previous. Right now I'm a poor relation. So's Cindy. You know Cindy, don't you? She's the girl you peep at through a telescope. We're just a pair of lovable young parasites, Cindy and I. We won't have any money for blackmailers until the estate's settled."

The smile reappeared in the mirror, growing to a laugh, the soft, sub-

stantial embodiment of the ghost on the wire.

"You think I want money? My friend, I have more of the stuff than I can ever use. More, I imagine, than you'll get from Grandfather."

"In that case, what the hell are you after?"

Our eyes came together, locking in the glass, and his, I saw, were darkly swimming with the amused and cynical tolerance that doesn't come from compassion or conviction, but from a kind of amoral indifference to all standards.

"Nothing that need worry you, if you're reasonable. Believe me, I feel no compulsion to see you punished merely for killing a man old enough to die." He lit a cigarette, doing it neatly with a silver lighter. In the mirror, the light flared up across planes and projections, giving his face for a moment the quality of fancy photography. "I'm a tenacious man, Mr. Wren. I know what I want, and I'll use any available means to *get* what I want. In the light of yesterday's events, you should be able to understand that."

"You're talking all around it," I said. "The point, I mean."

The coal of his cigarette glowed brighter and faded. "I'm thinking about the girl. Cindy, I believe you called her."

I guess I'd known all along what was coming. I guess I'd known from the instant I looked into the mirror and saw that thin, patrician face with its ancient eyes. Strangely,

there was no anger in me. There was only a cold, clear precision of thought: *This time it'll be easy. This time it'll be fun. Not just a job, like it was with the old man.*

"You can go to hell," I said.

His white teeth showed pleasantly. "My friend, you are the one in peril of going to hell. I can send you with a few words."

Killing the White Horse and turning to face him directly for the first time, I said, "You're lousy with dough. You said it yourself. Buy yourself a girl."

I got off the stool to go, and his hand came out to lie lightly on my sleeve.

"Since she's involved in this, it might be smart to let Cindy make the decision. She may not be as ready as you for that trip to hell. In case she isn't, I'll be here until eleven."

"You can stay forever," I said. "You can stay forever and to hell with you."

I went away without looking at him again, because I was afraid if I looked at him that I couldn't resist ruining his pretty face. Outside, standing by my convertible in front of the Inn, I felt the cool wind come up off the lake and hit me, and all the strength went out of me. My hands began to tremble, and I clutched the edge of the door. After a long time, I got into the convertible and drove back down the lake road to the lodge.

In the drive, I killed the motor

and sat quietly under the wheel. Beyond the timber, a cold slice of moon was rising. In the lodge, all lights were out except the one in the room where Cindy slept. Cindy, Cindy, Cindy. Golden, sultry Cindy. The thought of her and Evan Lane brought the hot trembling back into my body, and I gripped the wheel until I was quiet.

I'd kill him, of course. I'd kill him, and it would be a pleasure. It would be the greatest pleasure I'd ever have on earth, except the pleasure that Cindy brought. Thinking of it clearly that way made me feel better, almost uplifted, and I got out of the convertible and went into the lodge and up to the room with the light burning.

Cindy was in bed with a book open, but I could tell she hadn't been reading. I stood leaning against the door, looking across at her, and pretty soon, she said, "I heard you drive up several minutes ago."

"Yes," I said. "I've been sitting down there thinking. I've been thinking about how to kill a man."

"No, Tony. Not again."

"It's the only way. I've always heard that one murder begets another, and I guess that's the way it is."

"We'll have money, Tony. Lots of money. We can pay."

"Like you said, he'd bleed us. He'd bleed us as long as we lived. Besides, he's got money. He isn't interested in getting any more."

"What does he want?"

"He wants you."

Her eyes dilated, and the breath rattled in her throat. I watched her lips come open and bright color creep under gold, and I thought again of the pleasure of killing Evan Lane.

"What do you mean, Tony?"

"Just what I said, honey. He wants you. The same way I want you. The same way any man who looks at you this side of eighty must want you. He's the guy with the telescope. Remember?"

She came out of the bed in a mist of white nightgown that barely existed, and I went to meet her. Against my shoulder, she said, "What now, Tony? What'll we do?"

"I told you, honey. I'll kill him before the night's over."

"No. We'll find another way, Tony. There is another way."

"There is, honey. The way he wants. Is it the way you want?"

"It'd be better than prison, Tony. Better than the death house."

I dug my fingers into her arms until she gasped with pain.

"Don't say that, Cindy. Don't."

"I'm thinking of us, Tony. You and me and the big dream. Are we going to throw it all away because some louse wants a cheap experience? We can't do that now."

"We won't throw anything away. If he wants an experience, he can die. Dying's the biggest experience of all."

"It'll point. Oh, Tony, can't you see? Two deaths like that, the loca-

tion of his lodge, all the things together. Together, they'll point right back at us. They'll dig it all out. Besides, maybe he's already on his way to the sheriff."

I shook my head. "No. He's at the Inn waiting for you. He said he'd wait until eleven."

"I'd better go, Tony. I'd better go see him. Maybe we can work it out short of what he really wants."

"No. Not a prayer. If you saw him, you'd know."

"Give me a chance, Tony."

"There isn't any chance."

"I don't want to die, Tony. I don't want you to die. If we have to kill him, let it be later. Let it be when the time's exactly right. Oh, Tony, give me a chance to save us."

Her golden flesh burned through the white mist, but I was suddenly spent and impotent, and I turned and went away to my own room and lay down in the darkness.

After a while, I heard the convertible come to life below my window and move off down the drive.

I kept on lying there in the darkness.

There was no warmth in the sun, and the wind blowing in across the lake was very cold. The timber stood naked against the sky above its fallen leaves.

In her room, Cindy was packing. I went in and closed the door and stood leaning against it.

"Going somewhere, Cindy?"

"Yes. Back to town. Summer's over, and it's getting cold, and it's time to go back."

"Going alone, Cindy?"

"Please, Tony. We've been over it all so often. You know how it is."

"Sure," I said. "Like you said a long time ago, you're saving us. Two months ago, Cindy. A long time."

She kept going back and forth between the closet and her bag, not looking at me. She was wearing brown velvet pajamas with six inches of golden skin between the pants and the top, and the effect of the brown velvet and the golden skin was a matter of shading that made my heart ache.

"You're going with Evan. Evan, the pretty blackmailer."

"It's for us, Tony. For you and me."

"I know. That's what I keep telling myself. She's making a big sacrifice, I keep telling myself. But now maybe it's time to let Evan Lane start sacrificing. Maybe it's time now to let him make the big sacrifice for us, the same way Grandfather made it."

She stopped halfway to the bag and turned toward me, holding in her hands a scarlet cashmere sweater that was like a great soft splash of blood against the brown velvet.

"He's got us, Tony. However much we hate him, he's got us, and you know it."

"I should've killed him the first night."

"He'll get tired of it pretty soon, Tony. I know he will. Then it'll be you and me again."

"Sure. You and me and Acapulco. You and me and the hot nights."

"It will, Tony. It will."

I went over to her fast and took a handful of her golden hair. I pulled her head back hard until her slender throat was a tight arch and her lips were pulled apart.

"Is that the truth, Cindy?"

"Yes. Oh, yes."

"Say it. Say it's the truth and the whole truth, so help you God."

"It is, Tony. It's the truth and the whole truth, so help me God."

I let go of her hair, and her head came forward and down until her mouth was warm and alive on the base of my neck, and her arms came up around me.

"I love you, Cindy. I've murdered for you, and I'd die for you, and there's no place to go without you but hell."

"It won't be long now, Tony," she whispered. "Not long now."

Then I went out of her room and downstairs. From a desk in the den behind the living room, I got a .38 calibre revolver and put it in the pocket of my tweed jacket. Outside, I angled down through the naked timber to the artificial beach and turned right along the shore.

The grass around the lake was dying, but it was still long and tough and hard to walk in, and in spite of the chill, the shirt under my jacket was soon wet with sweat. It was a

small lake, but it took me well over an hour to walk around it to Evan Lane's lodge.

The lodge sat among the trees. I went up the slope and across the front veranda to the door and knocked, but there was no response. I thought at first that I'd come too late, but when I went around back, I saw his car still in its shed, so I returned to the veranda and sat down on the top step.

From where I sat, I could look at an easterly angle and see the timber growing west of our lodge across the lake. Swinging my eyes a little farther east, I saw more trees, but they were thicker and closer and growing on a kind of little peninsula that jutted out into the water from the end of the lake. I got up and went down to the west end of the veranda, where the angle of vision was sharper, but I still couldn't see anything but the heavy growth of scrub trees on the little peninsula. I went back to the top step and sat down again.

Except for the soft sighing of the trees, there was no sound. Under the pale sun, the lake was quiet. My mind was quiet with the quiet that comes when things are accepted.

Down by the lake, beyond the trees, there was suddenly the faint sound of whistling. The whistling grew louder as it came nearer through the trees, and pretty soon Evan Lane appeared on the slope, dressed in a bright plaid shirt, open at the throat, and corduroy trousers.

ers. When he saw me sitting on the step, the whistling broke for a moment and then resumed.

A few steps from the veranda, Lane pulled up, saying, "Well. Mr. Wren. Your neighborliness is appreciated, but it comes a little late. I'm returning to town tonight."

"I know," I said. "Cindy's home packing."

"Yes? I still have mine to do. I know you'll understand."

"Sure. I'll only stay a minute. I was just sitting here admiring your view. You could improve it, you know, by having the trees cut off that little peninsula. If you had the trees cut down, you could see our place across the lake. *You could even see the beach and the raft.*"

He turned slowly to follow the direction of my gaze, and when he turned back, his eyes were alive with that swimming, cynical amusement I had seen in the Inn's barroom.

"Oh, yes. I did say I spotted you from the veranda, didn't I? But, of course, it no longer matters."

"Sure," I said. "It no longer matters. As far as you're concerned, nothing will ever matter again."

I took the gun out of my pocket and pointed it at him, and then I saw what I'd been living to see. I saw the smooth assurance go sick in his eyes and fear come flooding in. When I'd seen that, I'd had everything from him I'd ever want, so I shot him. I shot him where I hated him most. Right in his pretty face. The bullet struck him just under

the nose, and he went down like an empty sack.

I sat there a little longer, looking with a kind of cold detachment at the crumpled body, and then I got up and went back down the slope and around the end of the lake. By the time I got back to our side and the beach, the afternoon was almost gone. Crossing the beach toward the timber in front of the lodge, I thought for a moment that I saw Grandfather's bright towel lying on the sand where he'd dropped it over two months ago, but of course the towel wasn't really there at all.

I went up through the timber and into the lodge, and Cindy was in the living room with a glass in her hand. She was still wearing the brown velvet pajamas, and when I looked at her, there was still in my heart, in spite of everything, the pain of my love and the sadness of a great loss.

"It's late, Tony. You've been gone a long time."

"I went around to the other side of the lake," I said. "I called on Evan Lane."

The glass moved sharply in her hand. "Why, Tony? Why?"

"He wasn't home when I got there," I said, "and I sat on the veranda until he came. I learned something while I was sitting there, honey. I learned that you can't see our beach or the raft at all from his place. He never used a telescope, as he said he did. He never saw me drown the old man. I kept trying to

think how he could have known, and the only thing I could think was that you told him."

I waited a few seconds, and she tried to speak, but no sound could pass through her constricted throat. After a while, I went on talking in a quiet kind of way with no anger in my voice, because there was really no anger in me.

"Yes, honey. You told him. You told him because you were hot for each other, and he could move in with a new kind of blackmail, and there would be nothing I could do about it because he knew I was a murderer. You talked about the big dream. The dream was there, all right, but I was never in it. When the time came, you'd have gone away, all right, but never with me. He was the one, honey. He was the one from the beginning, but first you had to have Grandfather dead. You had to have him dead for his money, because you wanted his money in addition to Evan's. He didn't have the guts to do his own killing. He didn't have the guts, and you didn't have the strength. So you drafted me. Well, the old man's dead now, as you wanted him, and Evan Lane is dead, too. He's lying on the slope in front of his lodge, and he's dead forever."

She tried again to speak, but nothing came from her throat except a dry sob.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You'll never know how sorry."

I took out the gun, and the glass fell from her hand, and her voice came at last with a hot rush.

"I don't care if he's dead, Tony. Honest to God, I don't. We can still go away together. We can still have the dream."

"Yes," I said. "We'll go away together, honey. I've got our tickets right here in the gun. One way and a long way."

"No, Tony. For God's sake, no."

I pulled the trigger then, and there was only a little bang that wasn't very loud at all, and a black spot appeared as if by magic in the golden area of skin just below the place where her heart lay hidden. Her legs folded slowly, lowering her to her knees, and she pressed one hand, with the fingers spread, over the black spot. A thin trickle of blood seeped out brightly between two of the fingers. The gold-flecked eyes were wide with shock and terrible supplication.

"Please, Tony. Please, please. . . ."

Then she lay quietly on the floor, and I turned and walked out onto the veranda. I leaned against the railing, looking off into the timber where night had come, and from one of the trees came the crying of a crazy-voiced loon. I put the barrel of the gun into my mouth until the sharp sight was digging into the roof, and even then, when there was no reasonable alternative, I was a little surprised to realize I was actually going to do it.

SUDDEN DEATH . . .

We heard the feet at the same time. They were light as a cat, fast. Then he came out of the darkness and all I could see was the glint of the knife in his hand, and the yell that was in my throat choked off when his fingers bit into my flesh. I had time to see that same face that had looked into mine not so long ago, catch an expressionless grin from the hard boy; then the other shadows opened and the side of a palm smashed down against his neck.

He pitched forward with his head at a queer, stiff angle, his mouth wrenched open, and I knew it was only a reflex that kept it that way because the hard boy was dead. You could hear the knife chatter across the sidewalk and the sound of the body hitting, a sound that really wasn't much, yet was a thunderous crash that split the night open.

And more than the night is splitting open in the third installment of Mickey Spillane's *Everybody's Watching Me*. It sets the pace for the big all-star March issue, and the tempo continues through the rest of the top-drawer lineup.

We're bringing you a Leslie Charteris novelette, *The Loaded Tourist*, featuring the famous, devil-may-care buccaneer, The Saint, in a brand-new, rapid-paced adventure. Fast on its heels is a new John J. Malone story by Craig Rice, author of *Having Wonderful Crime*, *Home Sweet Homicide*, *The Lucky Stiff*, and many others.

There's also a shocker by Bruno Fischer, author of *The Restless Hands*, *The Paper Circle*, *The Silent Dust*, and other famous mystery novels. A new, hard-hitting story by Harold Q. Masur, *The Mourning After*, features Scott Jordan, who rampaged through *Bury Me Deep*, *Suddenly A Corpse*, *You Can't Live Forever*, and others.

William Lindsay Gresham has done a *crime of passion* story.

Richard S. Prather has written a new Shell Scott novelette for us, with Scott raising hell in Mexico City and apparently enjoying it. And Frank Kane has come up with a tough new Johnny Liddell story that packs a man-sized wallop. Evan Hunter's disillusioned peeper, Matt Cordell, is on hand, too, and Robert Patrick Wilmot — the new writer whom *The New York Times* has lauded as the best in the tough tradition since Raymond Chandler — is represented with a yarn, *Triple-Cross*, as hard as a chunk of granite.

All these and more are in the March issue — and we think you'll agree it's an all-star line-up of hard-boiled crime fiction that can't be passed by.

Look for it on your newsstands!

MUGGED AND PRINTED

MICKEY SPILLANE continues to amaze the publishing world with the phenomenal response



to his books. His first novel, *I, The Jury*, is still on sale and has reached the 4,000,000 mark. His last, *The Long Wait*, sold 3,000,000 copies in a single week, and his new book, *Kiss Me Deadly*, appears likely to do the same. Spillane probably comes

closest to explaining his success when he says, "Hell, I'm not an author, I'm a writer. I'm not just writing for fun. I'm not trying to educate the people. I'm just trying to entertain." And that he does! Witness this month's installment of *Everybody's Watching Me* on p. 51.

MICHAEL FESSIER, while a reporter in San Francisco, started to write short stories on the side, and soon decided to give all his time to the typewriter. The story on p. 28 is an example of the stuff that's been coming from that machine ever since. The author of two novels, *Fully Dressed And In His Right Mind*, and *Clovis*, he is now under contract to Paramount Pictures. We wonder how they'd do *Sex Murder*.

JOHN EVANS, whose real name is Howard Browne, is author of the famous "Halo"



novels—*Halo In Blood*, *Halo For Satan*, and *Halo In Brass*—all featuring Paul Pine, who makes his *Manhunt* debut on p. 94. In addition to these, Evans has had four other novels published, and has scripted more than 150

magazine stories, 600 radio programs, and two motion pictures. He now resides in Larchmont with his wife and two children, all of whom are avid Paul Pine fans.

There has been almost as much guessing about the identity of pseudonymous JOHN ROSS



MACDONALD as there has been high praise for his Lew Archer mystery novels, *The Way Some People Die*, *The Moving Target*, *The Drowning Pool* and *The Ivory Grin*. To settle the question, Macdonald has had a photo of himself taken, the results of which

are printed here. Anyone with half an eye can tell who he is from this. His latest Lew Archer novelette is on p. 1.

RICHARD DEMING, creator of Manville Moon, featured in the novels *The Gallows In My Garden* and *Tweak The Devil's Nose*, has this to say about himself: "In a negative sort of way I have had a profound influence on the publishing industry. Shortly after buying scripts of mine, six different magazines died. As it happens, a number of others continue to flourish in spite of my contributions, but you can't be expected to render a death stab with every thrust." Deming now resides in Dunkirk, New York where he wrote the new Manville Moon story, *The Lesser Evil*, on p. 113.

ELEAZAR LIPSKY, two of whose novels have reached the motion picture screen



The Kiss of Death and *The People Against O'Hara*—now practices law in New York City. Since his main legal interest is literary law, his writing is a combination of business and pleasure. For the reader, it's strictly pleasure, though. His *A Stabbing In The Streets* is on p. 51, and

features David Wiley, D.A.