

ANC

# MANHUNT

## ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

I slapped her across the face.  
"You —! I ought to kill you!"

**JOHN ROSS  
MACDONALD**  
**CRAIG RICE**  
**FRANK KANE**  
**HAROLD Q.  
MASUR**  
**RICHARD  
DEMING**

*Pattern for Panic*  
by **RICHARD  
S. PRATHER**

**JANUARY**  
35 CENTS

**EVERY  
STORY  
NEW!**

*The Wrong Touch* by **HENRY KANE**

### CONTENTS

Cover: by *Michael*

#### FULL-LENGTH NOVEL

- PATTERN FOR PANIC, featuring SHELL SCOTT  
by *Richard S. Prather* . . . . . 91

#### NOVELETTE

- THE WRONG TOUCH, featuring PETER CHAMBERS  
by *Henry Kane* . . . . . 51

#### SHORT STORIES

- GUILT-EDGED BLONDE, featuring LEW ARCHER  
by *John Ross Macdonald* . . . . . I
- . . . AND BE MERRY, featuring JOHN J. MALONE  
by *Craig Rice* . . . . . 88
- FINISH THE JOB, featuring JOHNNY LIDDELL  
by *Frank Kane* . . . . . 24
- OVER MY DEAD BODY, featuring SCOTT JORDAN  
by *Harold Q. Masur* . . . . . 39
- THE SIX-BIT FEE, featuring MANVILLE MOON  
by *Richard Deming* . . . . . 13

#### FEATURE

- CRIME CAVALCADE by *Vincent H. Gaddis* . . . . . 85

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# Guilt-Edged Blonde

*A Lew Archer Story*

By **JOHN ROSS MACDONALD**

*Everybody thought Nick was a farmer. But he wasn't — and that was why he died.*

A MAN was waiting for me at the gate at the edge of the runway. He didn't look like the man I expected to meet. He wore a stained tan windbreaker, baggy slacks, a hat as squashed and dubious as his face. He must have been forty years old, to judge by the grey in his hair and the lines around his eyes. His eyes were dark and evasive, moving here and there as if to avoid getting hurt. He had been hurt often and badly, I guessed.

"You Archer?"

I said I was. I offered him my hand. He didn't know what to do with it. He regarded it suspiciously, as if I was planning to try a Judo hold on him. He kept his hands in the pockets of his windbreaker.

"I'm Harry Nemo." His voice



was a grudging whine. It cost him an effort to give his name away. "My brother told me to come and pick you up. You ready to go?"

"As soon as I get my luggage."

I collected my overnight bag at the counter in the empty waiting room. The bag was very heavy for its size. It contained, besides a toothbrush and spare linen, two guns and the ammunition for them. A .38 special for sudden work, and a .32 automatic as a spare.

Harry Nemo took me outside to his car. It was a new seven-passenger custom job, as long and black as death. The windshield and side windows were very thick, and they had the yellowish tinge of bullet-proof glass.

"Are you expecting to be shot at?"

"Not me." His smile was dismal. "This is Nick's car."

"Why didn't Nick come himself?"

He looked around the deserted field. The plane I had arrived on was a flashing speck in the sky above the red sun. The only human being in sight was the operator in the control tower. But Nemo leaned towards me in the seat, and spoke in a whisper:

"Nick's a scared pigeon. He's scared to leave the house. Ever since this morning."

"What happened this morning?"

"Didn't he tell you? You talked to him on the phone."

"He didn't say very much. He

told me he wanted to hire a body-guard for six days, until his boat sails. He didn't tell me why."

"They're gunning for him, that's why. He went to the beach this morning. He has a private beach along the back of his ranch, and he went down there by himself for his morning dip. Somebody took a shot at him from the top of the bluff. Five or six shots. He was in the water, see, with no gun handy. He told me the slugs were splashing around him like hailstones. He ducked and swam under water out to sea. Lucky for him he's a good swimmer, or he wouldn't of got away. It's no wonder he's scared. It means they caught up with him, see."

"Who are 'they', or is that a family secret?"

Nemo turned from the wheel to peer into my face. His breath was sour, his look incredulous. "Christ, don't you know who Nick is? Didn't he tell you?"

"He's a lemon-grower, isn't he?"

"He is now."

"What did he used to be?"

The bitter beaten face closed on itself. "I oughtn't to be flapping at the mouth. He can tell you himself if he wants to."

Two hundred horses yanked us away from the curb. I rode with my heavy leather bag on my knees. Nemo drove as if driving was the one thing in life he enjoyed, rapt in silent communion with the engine. It whisked us along the high-

way, then down a gradual incline between geometrically planted lemon groves. The sunset sea glimmered red at the foot of the slope.

Before we reached it, we turned off the blacktop into a private lane which ran like a straight hair-parting between the dark green trees. Straight for half-a-mile or more to a low house in a clearing.

The house was flat-roofed, made of concrete and fieldstone, with an attached garage. All of its windows were blinded with heavy drapes. It was surrounded with well-kept shrubbery and lawn, the lawn with ten-foot wire fence surmounted by barbed wire.

Nemo stopped in front of the closed and padlocked gate, and honked the horn. There was no response. He honked the horn again.

About halfway between the house and the gate, a crawling thing came out of the shrubbery. It was a man, moving very slowly on hands and knees. His head hung down almost to the ground. One side of his head was bright red, as if he had fallen in paint. He left a jagged red trail in the gravel of the driveway.

Harry Nemo said, "Nick!" He scrambled out of the car. "What happened, Nick?"

The crawling man lifted his heavy head and looked at us. Cumbrously, he rose to his feet. He came forward with his legs spraddled and loose like a huge infant learning to walk. He breathed loudly and horribly, looking at us with a dreadful hope-

fulness. Then died on his feet, still walking. I saw the change in his face before it struck the gravel.

Harry Nemo went over the fence like a weary monkey, snagging his slacks on the barbed wire. He knelt beside his brother and turned him over and palmed his chest. He stood up shaking his head.

I had my bag unzipped and my hand on the revolver. I went to the gate. "Open up, Harry."

Harry was saying, "They got him," over and over. He crossed himself several times. "The dirty bastards."

"Open up," I said.

He found a keyring in the dead man's pocket and opened the padlocked gate. Our dragging footsteps crunched the gravel. I looked down at the specks of gravel in Nicky Nemo's eyes, the bullet-hole in his temple.

"Who got him, Harry?"

"I dunno. Fats Jordan, or Artie Castola, or Faronese. It must have been one of them."

"The Purple Gang."

"You called it. Nicky was their treasurer back in the thirties. He was the one that didn't get into the papers. He handled the payoff, see. When the heat went on and the gang got busted up, he had some money in a safe deposit box. He was the only one that got away."

"How much money?"

"Nicky never told me. All I know, he come out here before the war and bought a thousand acres of

lemon land. It took them fifteen years to catch up with him. He always knew they were gonna, though. He knew it."

"Artie Castola got off the Rock last Spring."

"You're telling me. That's when Nicky bought himself the bullet-proof car and put up the fence."

"Are they gunning for you,?"

He looked around at the darkening groves and the sky. The sky was streaked with running red, as if the sun had died a violent death.

"I dunno," he answered nervously. "They got no reason to. I'm as clean as soap. I never been in the rackets. Not since I was young, anyway. The wife made me go straight, see?"

I said: "We better get into the house and call the police."

The front door was standing a few inches ajar. I could see at the edge that it was sheathed with quarter-inch steel plate. Harry put my thoughts into words:

"Why in hell would he go outside? He was safe as houses as long as he stayed inside."

"Did he live alone?"

"More or less alone."

"What does that mean?"

He pretended not to hear me, but I got some kind of an answer. Looking through the doorless arch into the living room, I saw a leopard-skin coat folded across the back of the chesterfield. There were red-tipped cigarette butts mingled with cigar butts in the ashtrays.

"Nicky was married?"

"Not exactly."

"You know the woman?"

"Naw." But he was lying.

Somewhere behind the thick walls of the house, there was a creak of springs, a crashing bump, the broken roar of a cold engine, grinding of tires in gravel. I got to the door in time to see a cerise convertible hurtling down the driveway. The top was down, and a yellow-haired girl was small and intent at the wheel. She swerved around Nick's body and got through the gate somehow, with her tires screaming. I aimed at the right rear tire, and missed. Harry came up behind me. He pushed my gun-arm down before I could fire again. The convertible disappeared in the direction of the highway.

"Let her go," he said.

"Who is she?"

He thought about it, his slow brain clicking almost audibly. "I dunno. Some pig that Nicky picked up some place. Her name is Flossie or Florrie or something. She didn't shoot him, if that's what you're worried about."

"You know her pretty well, do you?"

"The hell I do. I don't mess with Nicky's dames." He tried to work up a rage to go with the strong words, but he didn't have the makings. The best he could produce was petulance: "Listen, mister, why should you hang around? The guy that hired you is dead."

"I haven't been paid, for one thing."

"I'll fix that."

He trotted across the lawn to the body and came back with an alligator billfold. It was thick with money.

"How much?"

"A hundred will do it."

He handed me a hundred-dollar bill. "Now how about you amscray, bud, before the law gets here?"

"I need transportation."

"Take Nicky's car. He won't be using it. You can park it at the airport and leave the key with the agent."

"I can, eh?"

"Sure. I'm telling you you can."

"Aren't you getting a little free with your brother's property?"

"It's my property now, bud."

A bright thought struck him, disorganizing his face. "Incidentally, how would you like to get off of my land?"

"I'm staying, Harry. I like this place. I always say it's people that make a place."

The gun was still in my hand. He looked down at it.

"Get on the telephone, Harry. Call the police."

"Who do you think you are, ordering me around? I took my last order from anybody, see?" He glanced over his shoulder at the dark and shapeless object on the gravel, and spat venomously.

"I'm a citizen, working for Nicky. Not for you."

He changed his tune very suddenly. "How much to go to work for me?"

"Depends on the line of work."

He manipulated the alligator wallet. "Here's another hundred. If you got to hang around, keep the lip buttoned down about the dame, eh? Is it a deal?"

I didn't answer, but I took the money. I put it in a separate pocket by itself. Harry telephoned the county sheriff.

He emptied the ashtrays before the sheriff's men arrived, and stuffed the leopardskin coat into the woodbox. I sat and watched him.

We spent the next two hours with loud-mouthed deputies. They were angry with the dead man for having the kind of past that attracted bullets. They were angry with Harry for being his brother. They were secretly angry with themselves for being inexperienced and incompetent. They didn't even uncover the leopardskin coat.

Harry Nemo left the courthouse first. I waited for him to leave, and tailed him home, on foot.

Where a leaning palm-tree reared its ragged head above the pavements, there was a court lined with jerry-built frame cottages. Harry turned up the walk between them and entered the first cottage. Light flashed on his face from inside. I heard a woman's voice say something to him. Then light and sound were cut off by the closing door.

An old gabled house with boarded-up windows stood opposite the court. I crossed the street and settled down in the shadows of its verandah to watch Harry Nemo's cottage. Three cigarettes later, a tall woman in a dark hat and a light coat came out of the cottage and walked briskly to the corner and out of sight. Two cigarettes after that, she reappeared at the corner on my side of the street, still walking briskly. I noticed that she had a large straw handbag under her arm. Her face was long and stony under the streetlight.

Leaving the street, she marched up the broken sidewalk to the verandah where I was leaning against the shadowed wall. The stairs groaned under her decisive footsteps. I put my hand on the gun in my pocket, and waited. With the rigid assurance of a WAC corporal marching at the head of her platoon, she crossed the verandah to me, a thin high-shouldered silhouette against the light from the corner. Her hand was in her straw bag, and the end of the bag was pointed at my stomach. Her shadowed face was a gleam of eyes, a glint of teeth.

"I wouldn't try it if I were you," she said. "I have a gun here, and the safety is off, and I know how to shoot it, mister."

"Good for you."

"I'm not joking." Her deep contralto rose a notch. "Rapid fire used to be my specialty. So you

better take your hands out of your pockets."

I showed her my hands, empty. Moving very quickly, she relieved my pocket of the weight of my gun, and frisked me for other weapons.

"Who are you, mister?" she said as she stepped back. "You can't be Arturo Castola, you're not old enough."

"Are you a policewoman?"

"I'll ask the questions. What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for a friend."

"You're a liar. You've been watching my house for an hour and a half. I tabbed you through the window."

"So you went and bought yourself a gun?"

"I did. You followed Harry home. I'm Mrs. Nemo, and I want to know why."

"Harry's the friend I'm waiting for."

"You're a double liar. Harry's afraid of you. You're no friend of his."

"That depends on Harry. I'm a detective."

She snorted. "Very likely. Where's your buzzer?"

"I'm a private detective," I said. "I have identification in my wallet."

"Show me. And don't try any tricks."

I produced my photostat. She held it up to the light from the street, and handed it back to me. "So you're a detective. You better

do something about your tailing technique. It's obvious."

"I didn't know I was dealing with a cop."

"I was a cop," she said. "Not any more."

"Then give me back my .38. It cost me seventy dollars."

"First tell me, what's your interest in my husband? Who hired you?"

"Nick, your brother-in-law. He called me in Los Angeles today, said he needed a bodyguard for a week. Didn't Harry tell you?"

She didn't answer.

"By the time I got to Nick, he didn't need a bodyguard, or anything. But I thought I'd stick around and see what I could find out about his death. He was a client, after all."

"You should pick your clients more carefully."

"What about picking brothers-in-law?"

She shook her head stiffly. The hair that escaped from under her hat was almost white. "I'm not responsible for Nick or anything about him. Harry is my responsibility. I met him in line of duty and I straightened him out, understand? I tore him loose from Detroit and the rackets, and I brought him out here. I couldn't cut him off from his brother entirely. But he hasn't been in trouble since I married him. Not once."

"Until now."

"Harry isn't in trouble now."

"Not yet. Not officially."

"What do you mean?"

"Give me my gun, and put yours down. I can't talk into iron."

She hesitated, a grim and anxious woman under pressure. I wondered what quirk of fate or psychology had married her to a hood, and decided it must have been love. Only love would send a woman across a dark street to face down an unknown gunman. Mrs. Nemo was horsefaced and aging and not pretty, but she had courage.

She handed me my gun. Its butt was soothing to the palm of my hand. I dropped it into my pocket. A gang of Negro boys at loose ends went by in the street, hooting and whistling purposelessly.

She leaned towards me, almost as tall as I was. Her voice was a low sibilance forced between her teeth:

"Harry had nothing to do with his brother's death. You're crazy if you think so."

"What makes you so sure, Mrs. Nemo?"

"Harry couldn't, that's all. I know Harry, I can read him like a book. Even if he had the guts, which he hasn't, he wouldn't dare to think of killing Nick. Nick was his older brother, understand, the successful one in the family." Her voice rasped contemptuously. "In spite of everything I could do or say, Harry worshipped Nick right up to the end."

"Those brotherly feelings some-

times cut two ways. And Harry had a lot to gain."

"Not a cent. Nothing."

"He's Nick's heir, isn't he?"

"Not as long as he stays married to me. I wouldn't let him touch a cent of Nick Nemo's filthy money. Is that clear?"

"It's clear to me. But is it clear to Harry?"

"I made it clear to him, many times. Anyway, this is ridiculous. Harry wouldn't lay a finger on that precious brother of his."

"Maybe he didn't do it himself. He could have had it done for him. I know he's covering for somebody."

"Who?"

"A blonde girl left the house after we arrived. She got away in a cherry-colored convertible. Harry recognized her."

"A cherry-colored convertible?"

"Yes. Does that mean something to you?"

"No, nothing in particular. She must have been one of Nick's girls. He always had girls."

"Why would Harry cover for her?"

"What do you mean, cover for her?"

"She left a leopardskin coat behind. Harry hid it, and paid me not to tell the police."

"Harry did that?"

"Unless I'm having delusions."

"Maybe you are at that. If you think that Harry paid that girl to shoot Nick, or had anything —"

"I know. Don't say it. I'm crazy."

Mrs. Nemo laid a thin hand on my arm. "Anyway, lay off Harry. Please. I have a hard enough time handling him as it is. He's worse than my first husband. The first one was a drunk, believe it or not." She glanced at the lighted cottage across the street, and I saw one half of her bitter smile. "I wonder what makes a woman go for the lame ducks the way I did."

"I wouldn't know, Mrs. Nemo. Okay. I lay off Harry."

But I had no intention of laying off Harry. When she went back to her cottage, I walked around three-quarters of the block and took up a new position in the doorway of a dry-cleaning establishment. This time I didn't smoke. I didn't even move, except to look at my watch from time to time.

Around eleven o'clock, the lights went out behind the blinds in the Nemo cottage. Shortly before midnight the front door opened and Harry slipped out. He looked up and down the street and began to walk. He passed within six feet of my dark doorway, hustling along in a kind of furtive shuffle.

Working very cautiously, at a distance, I tailed him downtown. He disappeared into the lighted cavern of an all-night garage. He came out of the garage a few minutes later, driving a prewar Chevrolet.

My money also talked to the attendant. I drew a prewar Buick which would still do seventy-five. I

proved that it would, as soon as I hit the highway. I reached the entrance to Nick Nemo's private lane in time to see Harry's lights approaching the dark ranch-house.

I cut my lights and parked at the roadside a hundred yards below the entrance to the lane, and facing it. The Chevrolet reappeared in a few minutes. Harry was still alone in the front seat. I followed it blind as far as the highway before I risked my lights. Then down the highway to the edge of town.

In the middle of the motel and drive-in district he turned off onto a side road and in under a neon sign which spelled out TRAILER COURT across the darkness. The trailers stood along the bank of a dry creek. The Chevrolet stopped in front of one of them, which had a light in the window. Harry got out with a spotted bundle under his arm. He knocked on the door of the trailer.

I U-turned at the next corner and put in more waiting time. The Chevrolet rolled out under the neon sign and turned towards the highway. I let it go.

Leaving my car, I walked along the creek bank to the lighted trailer. The windows were curtained. The cerise convertible was parked on its far side. I tapped on the aluminum door.

"Harry?" a girl's voice said. "Is that you, Harry?"

I muttered something indistinguishable. The door opened, and the

yellow-haired girl looked out. She was very young, but her round blue eyes were heavy and sick with hang-over, or remorse. She had on a nylon slip, nothing else.

"What is this?"

She tried to shut the door. I held it open.

"Get away from here. Leave me alone. I'll scream."

"All right. Scream."

She opened her mouth. No sound came out. She closed her mouth again. It was small and fleshy and defiant. "Who are you? Law?"

"Close enough. I'm coming in."

"Come in then, damn you. I got nothing to hide."

"I can see that."

I brushed in past her. There were dead Martinis on her breath. The little room was a jumble of feminine clothes, silk and cashmere and tweed and gossamer nylon, some of them flung on the floor, others hung up to dry. The leopardskin coat lay on the bunk bed, staring with innumerable bold eyes. She picked it up and covered her shoulders with it. Unconsciously, her nervous hands began to pick the wood-chips out of the fur. I said:

"Harry did you a favor, didn't he?"

"Maybe he did."

"Have you been doing any favors for Harry?"

"Such as?"

"Such as knocking off his brother."

"You're way off the beam, mister. I was very fond of Uncle Nick."

"Why run out on the killing then?"

"I panicked," she said. "It could happen to any girl. I was asleep when he got it, see, passed out if you want the truth. I heard the gun go off. It woke me up, but it took me quite a while to bring myself to and sober up enough to put my clothes on. By the time I made it to the bedroom window, Harry was back, with some guy." She peered into my face. "Were you the guy?"

I nodded.

"I thought so. I thought you were law at the time. I saw Nick lying there in the driveway, all bloody, and I put two and two together and got trouble. Bad trouble for me, unless I got out. So I got out. It wasn't nice to do, after what Nick meant to me, but it was the only sensible thing. I got my career to think of."

"What career is that?"

"Modeling. Acting. Uncle Nick was gonna send me to school."

"Unless you talk, you'll finish your education at Tehachapi. Who shot Nick?"

A thin edge of terror entered her voice. "I don't know, I tell you. I was passed out in the bedroom. I didn't see nothing."

"Why did Harry bring you your coat?"

"He didn't want me to get involved. He's my father, after all."

"Harry Nemo is your father?"

"Yes."

"You'll have to do better than that. What's your name?"

"Jeannine. Jeannine Larue."

"Why isn't your name Nemo if Harry is your father? Why do you call him Harry?"

"He's my stepfather, I mean."

"Sure," I said. "And Nick was really your uncle, and you were having a family reunion with him."

"He wasn't any blood relation to me. I always called him uncle, though."

"If Harry's your father, why don't you live with him?"

"I used to. Honest. This is the truth I'm telling you. I had to get out on account of the old lady. The old lady hates my guts. She's a real creep, a square. She can't stand for a girl to have any fun. Just because my old man was a rummy —"

"What's your idea of fun, Jeannine?"

She shook her feathercut hair at me. It exhaled a heavy perfume which was worth its weight in blood. She bared one pearly shoulder and smiled an artificial hustler's smile. "What's yours? Maybe we can get together."

"You mean the way you got together with Nick?"

"You're prettier than him."

"I'm also smarter. I hope. Is Harry really your stepfather?"

"Ask him if you don't believe me. Ask him. He lives in a place on Tule Street — I don't remember the number."

"I know where he lives."

But Harry wasn't at home. I knocked on the door of the frame cot-

tage and got no answer. I turned the knob, and found that the door was unlocked. There was a light behind it. The other cottages in the court were dark. It was long past midnight, and the street was deserted. I went into the cottage, preceded by my gun.

A ceiling bulb glared down on sparse and threadbare furniture, a time-eaten rug. Besides the living-room, the house contained a cubby-hole of a bedroom and a closet kitchenette. Everything in the poverty-stricken place was pathetically clean. There were moral mottoes on the walls, and one picture. It was a photograph of a tow-headed girl in a teen-age party dress. Jeannine, before she learned that a pretty face and a sleek body could buy her the things she wanted. The things she thought she wanted.

For some reason, I felt sick. I went outside. Somewhere out of sight, an old car-engine muttered. Its muttering grew on the night. Harry Nemo's rented Chevrolet turned the corner under the streetlight. Its front wheels were weaving. One of the wheels climbed the curb in front of the cottage. The Chevrolet came to a halt at a drunken angle.

I crossed the sidewalk and opened the car door. Harry was at the wheel, clinging to it desperately as if he needed it to hold him up. His chest was bloody. His mouth was bright with blood. He spoke through it thickly:

"She got me."

"Who got you, Harry? Jeannine?"

His mouth grinned, ghastly red like a clown's. "No. Not her. She was the reason for it, though. We had it coming."

Those were his final words. I caught his body as it fell sideways out of the seat. Laid it out on the sidewalk and left it for the cop on the beat to find.

I drove across town to the trailer court. Jeannine's trailer still had light in it, filtered through the curtains over the windows. I pushed the door open.

The girl was packing a suitcase on the bunk bed. She looked at me over her shoulder, and froze. Her blonde head was cocked like a frightened bird's, hypnotized by my gun.

"Where are you off to, kid?"

"Out of this town. I'm getting out."

"You have some talking to do first."

She straightened up. "I told you all I know. You didn't believe me. What's the matter, didn't you get to see Harry?"

"I saw him. Harry's dead. Your whole family is dying like flies."

She half-turned and sat down limply on the disordered bed. "Dead? You think I did it?"

"I think you know who did. Harry said before he died that you were the reason for it all."

"Me the reason for it?" Her eyes widened in false naivete, but there was thought behind them, quick and desperate thought. "You mean

that Harry got killed on account of me?"

"Harry and Nick both. It was a woman who shot them."

"God," she said. The desperate thought behind her eyes crystallized into knowledge. Which I shared.

The aching silence was broken by a big diesel rolling by on the highway. She said above its roar:

"That crazy old bat. So *she* killed Nick."

"You're talking about your mother. Mrs. Nemo."

"Yeah."

"Did you see her shoot him?"

"No, I was blotto like I told you. But I saw her out there this week, keeping an eye on the house. She's always watched me like a hawk."

"Is that why you were getting out of town? Because you knew she killed Nick?"

"Maybe it was. I don't know. I wouldn't let myself think about it."

Her blue gaze shifted from my face to something behind me. I turned. Mrs. Nemo was in the doorway. She was hugging the straw bag to her thin chest.

Her right hand dove into the bag. I shot her in the right arm. She leaned against the door-frame and held her dangling arm with her left hand. Her face was granite in whose crevices her eyes were like live things caught.

The gun she dropped was a cheap .32 revolver, its nickel plating worn and corroded. I spun the cylinder.

One shot had been fired from it.

"This accounts for Harry," I said. "You didn't shoot Nick with this gun, not at that distance."

"No." She was looking down at her dripping hand. "I used my old police gun on Nick Nemo. After I killed him, I threw the gun into the sea. I didn't know I'd have further use for a gun. I bought that little suicide gun tonight."

"To use on Harry?"

"To use on you. I thought you were on to me. I didn't know until you told me that Harry knew about Nick and Jeannine."

"Jeannine is your daughter by your first husband?"

"My only daughter." She said to the girl: "I did it for you, Jeannine. I've seen too much — the awful things that can happen."

The girl didn't answer. I said:

"I can understand why you shot Nick. But why did Harry have to die?"

"Nick paid him," she said. "Nick paid him for Jeannine. I found Harry in a bar an hour ago, and he admitted it. I hope I killed him."

"You killed him, Mrs. Nemo. What brought you here? Was Jeannine the third on your list?"

"No. No. She's my own girl. I came to tell her what I did for her. I wanted her to know."

She looked at the girl on the bed. Her eyes were terrible with pain and love. The girl said in a stunned voice:

"Mother. You're hurt. I'm sorry."

"Let's go, Mrs. Nemo," I said.

*Jerry was going to expose Gauman. Jerry was killed. It looked very simple — but not to Manville Moon.*

*A Manville Moon Story*

By

**RICHARD DEMING**



sob. Ordinarily it would flatter me to have a beautiful woman, even a sobbing one, throw herself into my arms, but I am a little old-fashioned about intimacy with the wives of my friends. Since Anne's husband was one of my best friends, the only emotion I experienced was discomfort.

"Hey!" I said, taking her by the shoulders and pushing her away far enough to look into her face.

"Manny," she mumbled between sobs. "Oh, Manny. They killed him."

"Jerry?" I asked sharply, and when she merely continued to sob, shook her until she gasped. "Jerry's dead?"

IT SURPRISED me when Anne Thomas showed up at my apartment at one P.M., for she and her husband should have been halfway to New York by then. Their plane had been scheduled to leave at eleven.

Her performance when I opened the door surprised me even more. She fell into my arms, buried her face in my shoulder and began to

She looked up at me hopelessly, tears streaking her face. "Right in the middle of the crowd at the airport, Manny. With a silenced gun. At first I thought he had just fainted. It wasn't until some attendants carried him to the waiting room and a doctor found the wound in his back that I realized he'd been shot. Why did they do it, Manny?"

Through my anger I was wonder-

ing the same thing as I made Anne sit down and poured her a glass of brandy. For if Larry Gauman was behind the murder of Jerry Thomas, Gauman was stupider than even a hood has a right to be.

Not that there was any doubt in my mind that Larry Gauman wouldn't be glad to have Jerry Thomas dead, for Jerry had been in the process of collecting data on the national prostitution racket, and since Jerry's two previous exposé books, on gambling and narcotics respectively, had been best sellers, the syndicate's vice president in charge of brothels knew he was in for widespread publicity. But he also should have known that if anything happened to Jerry, the finger would point straight at him. Even a hood as powerful as Larry Gauman can't get away with rubbing out Pulitzer-Prize-winning authors just to avoid unfavorable publicity. Even if he evaded a murder rap, Jerry's murder at a time when the whole publishing industry and all Jerry's friends knew what he was working on would bring Gauman worse publicity than publication of the book.

Anne had downed the brandy and dabbed the tears from her face with a small handkerchief. She seemed to have gained control of herself.

"You'll hunt down his killer, won't you, Manny?" she asked. "You'll make him pay."

"Sure, Anne. I'll do what I can. But it's really a police matter."

"They won't be able to prove anything. Gauman is too big for them."

"You think Gauman had him killed?" I asked.

"Who else? He was doing this exposé on Gauman. Only this morning he told me he got the last bit of data last night."

"All right," I said. "You want to engage me to investigate Jerry's death?"

She looked surprised. "Engage you? I thought you were a friend of Jerry's. I mean, I thought you'd want to hunt down the killer in any event, and I just came to tell you what I know. I mean . . ."

When her voice trailed off, I merely continued to look at her. What she meant was that she had no intention of paying out good money to a private investigator. Not when Private Investigator Manville Moon had been such a good friend of her husband, he undoubtedly would go after the killer whether a fee was involved or not.

I suppose she couldn't help whatever it was in her upbringing that made her clutch every nickel she had with almost psychotic desperation, but it didn't make me like her very much. Even in her grief over the death of the man I knew she loved, she wasn't capable of passing up a bargain.

I had only met Anne once before, but this characteristic was so outstanding, it took only one meeting to spot it. It was the only defect apparent in an otherwise charming

bride, but it was large enough to warp my whole attitude toward her.

When Jerry Thomas had given me a ring four days before to ask me to meet him and his new bride for dinner, I was pleased for a number of reasons.

For one thing, Jerry had been a particular pal of mine back in his police reporter days, and I was glad to know that authoring two national best sellers had not made him feel that he was now too important for his old friends. For another, I hadn't seen him in the nearly three years since he had moved to New York following the phenomenal success of his first non-fiction exposé, *House Percentage*. For still another I looked forward to meeting the woman who had managed to rope such a confirmed bachelor into marriage.

When we met at the *Jefferson Lounge* that evening, I discovered Jerry had not changed an iota. The noted author Jerome Thomas was the same genial police reporter who went by the name of Jerry Thomas back when he was always a week's salary in debt for bar bills.

At first I liked Anne too. She was a beautiful brunette of about five feet four with soft blue eyes and a milk-white complexion. Except that her lips were a trifle thin and her mouth a bit too unbendingly straight, I scored her a hundred percent for looks. Initially I even liked her personality, for she seemed gay and

witty and she obviously was as much in love with Jerry as she was with her.

But by the time the evening was over, the only emotion she induced in me was depression that poor Jerry was saddled with her for life.

It started at the bar of the *Jefferson Lounge*, before we moved on to *Max's Place* for dinner. I bought a drink, then Jerry bought a drink. But on Jerry's turn he casually asked the barkeep to have one too, and the man accepted. Happening to glance at Anne just as Jerry paid the bill, I caught her examining the change with a tense expression on her face.

Becoming aware that I was watching her, she glanced at me, gave me a deprecating smile and said, "I think that's so silly. I mean buying bartenders drinks. They can have all they want free, can't they?"

That was the pattern of the evening. For old times sake Jerry wanted to dine at *Max's Place*, his favorite hangout in police reporter days, and Anne's enthusiasm over the choice obviously stemmed from Max's low prices rather than from sentiment. Even then she frowned disapprovingly over the menu prices. And when Jerry and I had an amiable argument over the check, finally matched for it and he won the privilege of paying, she looked almost sick.

Apparently Jerry was so much in love, his bride's penny-pinching escaped him entirely, for when he left a dollar bill as a tip and she

reminded him in a pleasant but strained voice that ten percent of a seven-dollar bill would be only seventy cents, he merely smiled at her cheerfully and let the bill lie.

Anne's hatred of parting with money couldn't have been necessary economy. During dinner Jerry told me his first two books had netted him so much that even after taxes he had enough stashed away to last him for life, regardless of the success of future books. Whatever it was in his wife's background that made her the way she was didn't come out in the conversation. All I learned about her was that she had been a reader for his publishing house when Jerry met her.

For Jerry's sake I did my best to like the girl, but I didn't have much success. I didn't like her any better as my friend's widow, but that didn't lessen the obligation of friendship I felt for Jerry.

Instead of making an issue over the fee, I said, "Sure, Anne. Naturally I want to find out who killed Jerry. Tell me everything you know."

What she knew was pitifully little, and except for what occurred at the airport, I already knew most of it from Jerry.

His trip to town from New York had been in search of final data for his book on the prostitution racket, specifically for proof that our top local racketeer, Larry Gauman, actually managed the vast white-slave

empire for the syndicate. The book was finished, Jerry had told me, as a matter of fact was already at his publisher's, but he needed final proof of what he had written as a protection against libel suits, for the book named names and even listed addresses and telephone numbers of the top hoods involved in the racket.

Jerry even told me what he was after was Gauman's complete payoff record for the year 1948. He said he had a deal with one of Gauman's underlings to turn the evidence over to him for five thousand dollars. The five thousand, he added, was furnished by his publisher.

Jerry explained that the informer concerned was taking no particular chance, as the record was supposed to be in indefinite storage, and there was little likelihood Gauman would ever check to see if his records from five years ago were intact. Along with the five thousand went Jerry's assurance to the informer that the payoff accounts would never be made public except in defense against libel. Since hoods such as Gauman seldom bring libel suits for fear that someone might prove statements made against them were true, the informer was merely taking a calculated risk that the theft would never come to light. Similarly the publisher's expenditure of five thousand dollars was merely in the nature of insurance against libel suits, for neither Jerry nor the publisher felt they would ever be called upon to

use the material. But in the event they were ever faced with suits which might run into hundreds of thousands, it was worth five thousand to have an ace in the hole.

Jerry had not told me who the informer was, nor any of the details he had arranged for contact. Anne was unable to tell me either, though she did know that contact arrangements had been exceedingly secret and complicated.

She knew this from what Jerry had said about being watched, she said. He had told her that since he had gained a reputation as an exposé of organized crime, he was under constant surveillance by the syndicate. Every move he made was checked in an attempt to prevent his collection of further data, and he never knew but what the person seated next to him at a show, or at a restaurant table near his, might be a syndicate spy. Any open contact he made with an informer would be equivalent to passing a death sentence on the informer. While she knew none of the details, Anne therefore did know Jerry had set up elaborate arrangements for collecting the evidence and for transferring the five thousand dollars.

What Anne was able to tell me about the actual killing was not much help either. Their plane had been announced and they were waiting at the loading ramp along with some twenty other people when Jerry suddenly collapsed. Under police questioning all those in

the crowd with Jerry and Anne denied hearing a shot, and the police had decided the killer had used a silenced gun, whose subdued pop would have been drowned out by the plane motors warming up only a few yards away.

The killer might have been one of those in the crowd waiting to board the plane, or might have been any of dozens of people who walked by about then. The police clung to the latter view, since none of the former group attempted to leave, and they assumed the killer would have gotten himself away from the area as soon as possible. After their names and addresses were taken, all witnesses including Anne had been released at twelve-thirty. Anne had looked up my address in a phone book and come straight to my apartment by taxi.

I asked Anne only one other thing: to give me a running account of every place they had been during the four days she and Jerry were in town. This involved a sizeable list of clubs, shows and spots of local interest, but only two out-of-the-way matters emerged. One was that the only place they had visited regularly, as a matter of fact the only spot they had visited more than once, was *Max's Place*, where I had dinner with them. Anne said all of their evening meals had been taken there, though at noon Jerry's taste seemed to run to more expensive restaurants.

The other out-of-the-way matter

was that the day they arrived in town and checked in at the *Jefferson*, Jerry had asked to speak to the manager and had spent some time alone with him in his office. When Anne had asked him why, he had evaded an answer.

Anne had told the police she planned to check back into the *Jefferson*, so I drove her over there. While she checked in, I asked to speak to the manager.

Thornton Child didn't look like a hotel manager. He looked like a center for the Pittsburgh Steelers. But he had a hotel manager's smile. His massive and craggy face wreathed itself in a pleasant grimace when the desk clerk ushered me into his office.

After telling him who I was and showing him my license, I said, "Mrs. Jerome Thomas tells me her husband had a long conference with you the day they arrived in town. I'm guessing that he left something in your safekeeping. Right?"

His smile remained pleasant. "Oh, you're the man I've been expecting. Yes, Mr. Thomas left a package with me."

He eyed me expectantly. I eyed him expectantly. Finally I said, "Well?"

His smile slipped a little. "I'm waiting for the correct word, Mr. Moon."

"Word?"

Now the smile was altogether gone. "If you're the proper person to receive the package, Mr. Moon, you would know the word. I'm

afraid you're not the proper person."

Pulling a chair from alongside his desk, I sat and stretched out my legs. Casually I said, "Jerome Thomas was murdered about three hours ago."

He looked amazed, but not particularly upset. Then, apparently realizing a stronger emotion than surprise might be expected of him, he made an unsuccessful attempt to appear concerned.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said politely.

I said, "Whatever you know about Thomas you're going to have to tell the police. I'm not the police, but I'm working on the case. I might be able to save you a lot of annoyance by relaying what you know to them. If you have any doubts about whether or not I'd actually relay it, check me by phone with Inspector Warren Day of Homicide."

After thinking it over a few moments, Child said, "I'm beginning to recall you, Mr. Moon. You handled a jewel theft for my predecessor here once. And if you weren't reliable, the *Jefferson* wouldn't have engaged you. Mr. Thomas left a package with me with instructions to deliver it to a man who would call for it and identify himself by the code words, 'Nineteen forty-eight.' I wouldn't have agreed to perform such an odd service for the average guest, but since Mr. Thomas was a nationally known person . . ."

Letting his voice trail off, he rose

from his chair and removed from his office safe a small flat package sealed with brown tape. He tossed it to me, and when I broke it open, I found it contained fifty one-hundred-dollar bills.

Catching the expression of consternation on his face, I said, "Don't get upset. The money isn't hot and Jerry Thomas wasn't involved in anything illegal." I tossed the package back to him. "Hang onto it until you get further instructions from the police. Meantime you better instruct your house dick to grab anyone who comes after it and offers the correct code words. The cops will want to talk to him."

After assuring the worried manager that I didn't think the hotel was in for any bad publicity, and that I would do my best to prevent the police from overrunning the place, I drove on downtown to see my old friend, Inspector Warren Day.

The chief of Homicide was in the usual sour mood he develops when he has a difficult case to crack. When I entered his office he snarled at me for not knocking first, when I sat down he snarled at me for asking him for a light, and when I told him I was looking into the Thomas murder, he snarled at me on general principles.

But as usual he came across with information. In the years I have known Warren Day I doubt that either of us has said a dozen courteous words to the other, but this

doesn't interfere with our mutual cooperation. On the numerous cases where we have come in contact, we always work beautifully as a team despite the incidental squabbling, and both of us have learned we are invariably better off if we hold nothing back from the other.

I told him everything I knew about Jerry Thomas's reason for being in town, about my session with the *Jefferson's* manager, and threw in my conclusion that the money Jerry had left with Thornton Child was obviously intended for the informer.

"I figure it like this," I said. "Jerry wanted to make sure he had the right dope before he paid over that much money. So he set up this elaborate hocus pocus to protect both himself and the informer. It would be agreeable to whoever was selling out Gauman, because he wouldn't want to come within miles of Jerry for fear some syndicate spy would guess what he was doing. I guess that the informer delivered the goods to Jerry by some similar elaborate method, Jerry looked over the stuff and then got word back where the money could be picked up and what the code words were."

"That makes sense," Day said, not even growling for a change. And he told me the 1948 payoff records of Larry Gauman had been found in Jerry's luggage.

"They seem to be authentic," he said. "I've got a call out for Gauman right now, and expect the boys to

drag him in any minute. But I don't get it. If Gauman had Thomas bumped, why didn't he arrange to grab the man's bags instead of letting records pointing straight at him fall into our hands?"

"Maybe he couldn't get to them." I suggested. "I'd assume if the passengers were ready to load, baggage was already on board."

He gave me a glum look over his glasses. "It was. But then you'd think Gauman would plan the kill at a different time. Some time when the bags were available. The guy's a rat, but he's not a dunce."

"You can explain it two ways," I said. "Maybe Gauman's gunnie got his orders mixed. That's a possibility if he used that stupid Slip Cole who follows him around. Or else Gauman didn't have anything to do with the killing."

From the doorway a smooth voice said, "The last is the correct explanation, Mr. Moon."

I turned around to see the sleek, middle-aged gangster we had been discussing being prodded into the room by Lieutenant Hannegan. With him, also being urged on by the taciturn lieutenant, was Gauman's personal bodyguard, Slip Cole.

Slip Cole was a tall, moronic-looking hood with a deadpan face, and he was just as moronic as he looked. On his own he probably would have ended in the death house long ago, for he was suspected of several gang kills, and he didn't have brains enough to plan a kill he

could get away with. But with Larry Gauman directing his moves, Slip was a dangerous man.

I don't like any hood, but I liked Slip Cole less than most. Larry Gauman ran a close second in my estimation, for I have a particular aversion for the top-bracket vermin of the underworld who ride around in Cadillacs and sneer at the common people.

The inspector said to me, "You'll have to leave, Moon. This is a private conference."

"Sure," I said agreeably. Rising, I gave Gauman the kind of stare dowagers usually reserve for footmen, then looked at Slip Cole and succumbed to the urge to be impolite he always aroused in me.

I asked, "Who'd you kill this time, you stupid jerk?"

Cole's face turned even more expressionless, if possible, and he said in a toneless voice, "Some day I'll meet you in an alley, mister."

"If you do, get your hat in your hand fast," I advised him. "Or you'll find your jawbone sticking up through the crown."

Gauman said, "Now, gentlemen . . ."

I looked at him. I didn't say anything, I let my expression say it for me. Slowly he turned red and a pinched expression grew around his eyes.

Warren Day bawled, "Get the hell out of here, Moon! Meet them both in an alley later, if you want, but get the hell out of here now."

I said, "Sure, Inspector. Air the place out before my next visit, will you?"

From Headquarters I drove over to *Max's Place* and had a little conference with Max. What he told me added the final bit of information I needed to tell me who had killed Jerry Thomas and why.

"He called me long distance about a week before he came to town," Max told me. "I hadn't heard from him in three years, but I knew him good from the old days, so when he wanted a favor, what the hell? I said sure. He said he had to get in touch with a local guy a number of times, but he had to do it in such a way no one would suspect he was in touch. He give me a telephone number I was to call the day before he hit town. He said a guy would answer, but I wasn't to ask his name. Just tell him Jerry was arriving, and give him my own telephone number. Anything the guy said, I was to pass on to Jerry when he came in the restaurant by writing it on the back of his check. He made it real plain I wasn't to say a word about it to him aloud. Just write the message on his check.

"He in turn would give me a message for the guy by writing it on a dollar bill and leaving it on the table for a tip. He'd always leave a tip anyway, he said, but there might or might not be a message on it. If there was one, I was to phone the number and pass it on."

"So what happened?" I asked.

"Well, when I called this guy, all he said was, 'George Amhurst. Thirty-third Street General Delivery.' Then he hung up. So the first night Jerry come in, I wrote that on the back of his check. You was with him that night, I remember."

"Yeah," I said. "And I remember Jerry left a dollar tip. Anything written on it?"

Max shook his head. "He never did leave a message. Let's see. That was Tuesday night. Then he was in for dinner with his wife Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. I handled his table every time myself, of course, because I didn't want any of the waiters in on the gimmick. He left a dollar bill on the table Wednesday and Thursday, but Friday he only left a quarter. Friday night about an hour after he and his wife left, this guy phoned. He wanted to know if I had a message from Jerry and I told him no. He said, 'Isn't he leaving town tomorrow?' and I said I hadn't the faintest idea. Then the guy hung up."

"Thanks, Max." I said. "You've been a big help."

There was one more little bit of evidence to gather, but I let Warren Day gather that, because the telephone company is a little bit stuffy about handing out such information to anyone but the police. I called him and asked him to find out whose name the phone was listed in that Max had called on Jerry Thomas's instruction.

I also asked him if he still

had Gauman and Cole in custody.

When he said yes, I said, "Hang onto them a little longer, even if you get writs thrown in your face. Mrs. Thomas and I will be there in twenty minutes and wrap this thing up."

It was closer to a half hour, because Anne Thomas had been lying on her bed crying, and had not only to repair her makeup, but change her wrinkled dress before she would venture out in public. As I waited in the *Jefferson's* lobby for her, I thought rather bitterly about the things that are important to some women. Even though she was a widow of only a few hours, Anne couldn't let anyone see her in a wrinkled dress.

Nevertheless we made it to Headquarters before any of Gauman's several lawyers showed up with writs of habeas corpus. Apparently word of his arrest had not yet seeped to the proper channels.

Day greeted me in a sour tone, but he didn't use any profanity because of Anne's presence. The Inspector is never entirely at ease around beautiful women.

Gauman and Slip Cole were still in his office and still under the watchful eye of Lieutenant Hanganagan, who looked like he was wishing one or both would attempt to escape so he could have an excuse for manhandling them. From the exasperated expressions on both his and Day's faces, I guessed they had gotten nowhere questioning the two.

"You can start looking pleased," I told Day. "I've got all the answers."

Instead he merely looked suspicious. "Evidence too?"

"Depends," I said. "You check that number I gave you over the phone."

The inspector nodded. "It's registered in the name of Gerald Cole. That's Slip Cole's real name."

The deadpan bodyguard didn't even seem interested in the conversation. I turned to look at Anne.

"One more bit of evidence would be helpful," I said. "Mind if I look through your purse, Anne?"

She looked at me as though she thought I had lost my mind. "Whatever for, Manny?"

Without any expression I said, "For evidence that you killed your husband."

Her eyes turned round with shocked astonishment. Maybe I should have felt sorry for her, but I couldn't. All I could think of was the senselessness of my friend's death, and how this woman was responsible for the death of a really nice guy.

"I didn't kill Jerry," Anne whispered. "I loved him."

"What's this, Moon?" Day broke in. "You accusing Mrs. Thomas of murdering her husband?"

"Not of actually holding the gun," I said. "Our moronic friend Slip Cole did the actual shooting. Mrs. Thomas furnished the motive. May I see your purse now, Anne?"

Slip Cole licked his lips and said nothing. Larry Gauman eyed his bodyguard from suddenly narrowed eyes. Anne merely looked at me without understanding, but when I merely gazed back at her bitterly, she slowly held out the purse.

Everything in it was neat, including a small packet of bills held together by a metal clip. Riffing through the bills, I removed all the ones and carefully looked them over. Keeping one, I returned the rest to her purse and handed back the purse.

"Fortunately she didn't spend it yet," I said. "Though that's not particularly surprising, because she spends only what she has to." Holding up the bill, I read aloud the penciled message on its margin. "*Jefferson Hotel*. Manager Thornton Child. Say nineteen forty-eight."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Day asked.

"It was a message to Slip Cole here. As you've probably guessed by now, Slip is the informer Jerry was dealing with. Because Jerry knew Gauman's syndicate pals were watching his every move, his contact with Cole had to be extremely careful. The intermediate was the proprietor at *Max's Place*, an old friend of Jerry's. Jerry played it so carefully, he wanted his every contact with Max to seem natural. He never spoke a word about Cole to Max or Max to him, in case some nearby diner was a syndicate spy. He didn't even want to risk someone seeing

him and Max surreptitiously exchanging notes. Max got messages to Jerry on the back of his checks, and Jerry was supposed to give them to Max on the back of dollar bills ostensibly left as tips. Only the single message Jerry left never got to Max to relay on. It was the message telling Cole where and how to pick up his payoff."

I paused long enough to look over at the deadpan killer. "Slip thought Jerry had double-crossed him and didn't intend to pay. Being the moron he is, he killed him in revenge."

"Wait a minute," Day said. "First you say Mrs. Thomas is guilty, then Slip Cole. What's with Mrs. Thomas? Did she deliberately sidetrack the message, figuring Cole would react as he did?"

"She never even heard of Cole," I said. "But she's the one who *really* killed her husband. You won't be able to charge her with it, Inspector, because there was no intent to kill. She just can't resist squeezing nickels. What happened was that Friday evening as they left their table at *Max's*, Jerry must have turned his back on her.

"Because she lifted the dollar tip he had left and dropped a quarter in its place."

As horrified understanding dawned in Anne's eyes, I said brutally, "Now, lady, you can live with yourself the rest of your life, knowing you killed Jerry in order to save seventy-five cents."

JOHNNY LIDDELL pushed open the ground-glass door that bore the legend, "Johnny Liddell, Private Investigations" and slammed it after him. His red-headed secretary sat in a railing enclosed space, stabbing listlessly at the keys of a desk typewriter, taking excessive care not to fracture the finish on her carefully shel-lacked nails.

"Hello, Pinky," he greeted her. "Anybody to see me?"

The redhead stopped jabbing at the typewriter, turned a pair of sea green eyes toward him. "Some character named Marty Sommers. I put him in the inside office. I was afraid some of our respectable clients might see him." She looked him over, sniffed. "From what the papers said I expected to see you in bits."

"Don't believe what you read in the papers. I read Buck Rogers every night but I don't believe it."

# Finish the Job

*Liddell had caught the murderer, but the job wasn't over yet. Now he had to get the men who'd ordered murder done . . .*

*A Johnny Liddell Story*

By **FRANK KANE**



The redhead pulled over a pile of papers, extracted a clipping from the morning paper. "I saved the blow-by-blow description for your scrapbook."

Liddell grunted, waved the clipping aside. "I don't have to read about it. I was there." He pushed through the railing gate, headed for the inside office.

"How about Seaway Indemnity? Do we bill them for the job?"

Liddell stopped with his hand on the knob. "Isn't it customary to wait until a job's finished before we bill?"

The redhead's eyes widened. "You mean it isn't finished? Seaway hired you to find out who killed Barney Shields. The killer is on a slab in the morgue and the gal that fingered Barney for the kill is in the ladies' section of the same. What more do you want?"

"I want the big boys who let out the kill contract. Don't forget that the pineapple that blew Lois Turner loose from her falsies was meant for me. Things like that hurt my feelings."

"I'd rather get my feelings hurt than get my head blown off," Pinky retorted. "Those boys play for keeps. Next time, you might not find a stand-in."

"Very encouraging," Liddell nodded. "Just the same, I intend to finish the job Barney Shields started out to do."

"It's your skin, if you like to wear it with holes in it." The red-

head sniffed audibly, went back to stabbing at the typewriter keys. Then, as Liddell closed his office door after him, she tore the half-finished page from the typewriter, crushed it irritably and threw it at the waste basket.

Inside the private office, a man sat in the clients' chair, puffing nervously on a butt. He looked up as Liddell walked in, grinned feebly. He was tall, gangling. His arms hung out of the sleeves of his jacket, his neck was long, heavily corded. He was deeply tanned and, as he grinned, muscles cut deep furrows in the mahogany of his skin.

Liddell walked over, jabbed a hand at him, got a firm handshake in return. "You're Marty Sommers?"

The thin man nodded. "I got word from friends you wanted to see me." He dug into his pocket, brought out a fresh cigarette, chain-lit it from the butt he held cupped in his hand. "My friends said I could trust you."

"Thanks." Liddell walked around the desk, dropped into his chair. "You read about Barney Shields being killed?"

Sommers took a deep drag on his cigarette, blew a stream of smoke at the glowing end. "He was a fink planted on the docks?"

"An insurance investigator. Worked for Seaway Indemnity. He was murdered because he knew too much. I'm taking on where he left off."

"That's a big job." The thin

man returned the butt to the corner of his mouth, looked up at Liddell. "What made you send for me?"

"I thought you might help."

"Why should I?"

Liddell shrugged, opened his bottom drawer, dug out a fifth of bourbon and two paper glasses. "Because you always fought for a decent break for the men on the docks. We're fighting the same men — the racketeers that have moved in and taken over." He poured some bourbon into each of the cups, handed one to the thin man.

"Sure. I always fought the meatballs and the goons. And what'd it get me?" He leaned forward. "You know what I got to do to make a living? I got to sell papers, hustle packages, do anything but the thing I know how to do — work the docks." He sank back in his chair. "I'm blacklisted on the docks. I could turn out to a shape-up from now to Hell freezes over, but I couldn't get a day's work. Now or ever."

Liddell took a sip of his bourbon. "They can stop you from working just like that. They take the bread out of your family's mouth, and you won't fight back?"

"Maybe I'm tired of fighting, mister. Maybe you can't buck the system. Maybe I should have been like the other boys — stuck a toothpick behind my ear to let the shape-up boss know I was willing to kick back half my pay to get a day's work." He drained his glass, crushed

it into a ball, threw it at the wastebasket. "It's a lot of maybes."

"But you came up here just the same."

"I guess I was just curious, Liddell." He shrugged. "I wouldn't be any use to anybody in a fight. They ground it out of me. They ground it out of all of us. Some of us ended up in the river, others ended up like me. The rest got the idea."

"Who's the big man behind the boys on the piers?"

"You kidding?"

Liddell shook his head. "I'm starting on this job from scratch, Sommers. The two men who could have helped me are dead." He finished his drink, set the cup back on the desk. "What do you know about an icepick artist named Denver?"

"He was sergeant at arms in the pier local," the thin man told him in a tight voice. "He used that sticker of his to make a guy think twice before asking questions. Lou Panzer asked too many questions one night and ended up on Staten Island with more holes in his chest than a pin cushion."

"Who did Denver work for?"

Sommers wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Tony Marko. He's head of the pier local. They call him the business agent." He watched while Liddell dug another cup out of the drawer, spilled some bourbon into it. "I want to help, Liddell, but I got a family I got to think of."

"I'll cover you," Liddell prom-

ised. "Help me, and maybe that family of yours can start living again." He handed over the bourbon. "Somebody's got to go up against these boys, but I can't do it blind."

Sommers bit at his lower lip, nodded. "I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"Good." Liddell added some bourbon to his cup, leaned back. "This business agent — what's his graft?"

"Short ganging. Hiring sixteen men and turning in a payroll for twenty-two. Making every man who does a day's work kick back fifteen percent out of his day's pay. Every dirty little racket you can think of."

Liddell swirled the liquor around in his cup, shook his head. "That's not what Shields stumbled on. It was something bigger. Much bigger." He sipped at his drink. "Something affecting his company, something to do with looting cargo. How about that?"

Sommers shook his head. "That's big stuff. The local wouldn't be behind that, Liddell. That would come from the big guys, not the meatballs."

"Much of it go on?"

The thin man laughed grimly. "Plenty. I've heard of whole shipments disappearing. Trucks back up and cart the stuff away. That's the big guys' personal graft."

"Barney Shields stumbled on something so big they had to kill

him to shut him up. Got any idea of what it might be?"

Sommers considered it, shook his head. "It could be anything." He stared at Liddell for a minute. "I read in the papers it was Denver that killed your friend. To me, that means the local. Denver did the dirty work for the local, not for the big guys."

"This business agent for the local. This Tony Marko. Where would I be likely to find him?"

The thin man consulted his wrist-watch. "He'll be down at the pier for the shape-up, pointing out the men who'll work. After that, he usually drops by the Harbor Cafe with one of his meatballs and waits for his kickbacks from them."

Liddell drained his cup, dropped it in the wastebasket. "I think maybe I ought to have a talk with this Tony Marko. He sounds interesting."

"Maybe I ought to go along with you and point him out."

Liddell grinned at him. "I thought you wanted to keep out of this."

"That's what I thought too, Liddell. But I just realized this is my fight more than it is yours, and for the first time it looks as though I've got a chance of winning it."

The Harbor Cafe was a grimy, brick fronted two story building set in the shadows of the Brooklyn Bridge, within smelling distance of the Fulton Fish Market. Across the slip, South Street was lined with

ships of all nations tied up at docks that ran as far as the eye could see. The interior was dim and cool.

Johnny Liddell sat at a table in the rear with Sommers, signalled to the bartender for two drinks, settled back to wait. He was on his second drink and fourth cigarette when the bartender began to whistle a popular tune.

Sommers got up. "It's Marko coming. I'd better not be sitting with you when he comes in." He scuttled to the bar with his drink, crouched over it. After a moment, two men entered, looked around.

One of them, fat, coatless, with dark halfmoons of sweat under his armpits, jabbed a thick finger at Sommers. "I told you to stay off the waterfront, didn't I?" His voice was deep, coarse. "This is your last warning. Get out."

Sommers nodded, circled around them, disappeared through the open door. The fat man's eyes roamed around the bar, stopped at Liddell. "Who's he?" he asked the bartender.

The man behind the bar shrugged. "Dropped in for a drink."

"Get him out. We got some business to do in here."

Liddell swung around in his chair, stared at the big man. Layers of fat had piled on what had once been a mass of muscle. Damp, wet hair was pasted down over his forehead. His eyes were little black discs set behind discolored mounds of flesh.

"I'll have another bourbon, bartender," Liddell said.

The fat man blew bubbles in the center of his mouth. "Throw him out, Condon," he told the man with him.

Condon was red-headed, about twenty-seven. His shoulders sloped and his arms dangled like an ape's. The scar tissue over his right eye almost closed it. It didn't strain Liddell's deductive powers to place him as a professional slugger. He swaggered over to where the private detective sat. "You heard the man. He don't want you around." His lips pulled back from the stubs of his teeth. "Do you get out or do I throw you out?"

Liddell looked up at him, calmly raised his glass to his lips, took a swallow.

The redhead knocked the glass from Liddell's hand with a swipe of his meaty hand, caught him by the shoulder, dragged him to his feet. "You want it the hard way, sucker?" He threw a ham-like fist at Liddell's head, grunted when it went over the private detective's shoulder.

Liddell brought a stiff right up from his ankle. The redhead fielded it with the pit of his stomach, went to his knees, his eyes rolling back in his head. Liddell brought his knee up, caught the redhead under the chin, snapped his head back. Condon toppled over on his back and didn't move.

"That meatball was all soft inside. How about you, fat boy?" Liddell asked softly.

The pier boss snarled at him, started toward him. His hand disap-

peared under his coat, came out with a knife. He held it low, blade slanting upward in the manner of an experienced knife fighter. "Let's see what you look like inside."

Suddenly, he froze in his tracks when he saw the .45 that had appeared in Liddell's hand. The little black eyes receded behind their discolored buttresses, he licked at his lips. The eyes fell to the muzzle of the .45. "Who are you, anyway?" he growled.

"My name's Liddell. Ever hear of me?"

The little eyes snapped up to the private detective's face. "I heard a lot about you. I know a lot of guys who'd like to meet you."

"You met me. It didn't do you much good." Liddell walked over to where the fat man stood, brought the barrel of the .45 down on his knife hand with shattering force.

Marko roared his pain, dropped the knife to the floor. He started to spew curses at Liddell, bubbles forming and bursting between his lips. Liddell brought the barrel of the gun back, slammed it across the fat man's mouth. It drove him back, knocking over a table and chair. He lay there breathing heavily, his pig-like eyes rimmed with fear. "What do you want?" The bubbles were pink-tinged now.

"A little conversation." Liddell reached down, pulled him to his feet. "We're walking out of here together. Be smart and you might get where we're going." He jabbed the

muzzle of the .45 almost to the trigger guard in the fat man's belly. "Get any ideas and I'll splash you onto the slab next to your boy Denver."

The fat man wiped his lips with the back of his hand, stared at the red smear. "Where are we going?"

"You'll find out when we get there — if you get there." Liddell nodded toward the door. "Let's go, Marko."

South Street was deserted when they walked out into the blinding sunshine. Liddell walked to the left of the fat man, almost a step behind, his right hand buried to the wrist in his pocket. "There's a blue Buick parked down the street. We're using that. You'll drive."

The fat man looked around, his shoulders drooped as the fight seeped out of him. He walked down the street to where the Buick was parked, slid in behind the wheel, Liddell beside him. The .45 bored into the fat man's side.

"Where are we going?" he breathed noisily.

"Your place."

The fat man's face gleamed wetly. "My place?"

"It'll be the last place they'll think of looking when the meatball comes to life and finds out you've been snatched. I wouldn't want us to be interrupted."

"I don't live alone. I got a shack-up deal."

"I'm broadminded." He jabbed

the gun deeper into the fat man's side, brought a gasp from the pouting lips. "I'll bet you're a real devil with the ladies. She'll leave us alone. Get the heap moving."

Marko kicked the motor to life, the big car rolled out into a thin stream of traffic, U-turned and headed for the East Side Drive. They left the drive at 63rd Street, headed east, pulled up in front of an apartment house on 65th Street.

"This is it," the fat man growled.

"What apartment?"

"Three C."

Liddell nodded. "We're going up. Remember what I told you about ending up alongside Denver. One phony move and I'll spill you all over the place."

The fat man nodded. He led the way through a revolving door, across a small lobby to an automatic elevator. They rode to the third floor, walked down a carpeted hallway to a door marked 3C.

"Knock," Liddell told him.

The fat man pounded his knuckles against the door.

Inside, they could hear the tapping of high heels crossing the floor.

"Who is it?" a woman's voice wanted to know.

"Open up," Marko growled. "It's me. Marko."

The door swung open. A tall brunette in a thin negligee that left nothing to the imagination stood framed in the doorway. Her hazel eyes jumped from Marko to Liddell. "What is it, Marko?"

The fat man put the flat of his hand against the girl's shoulder, sent her reeling into the room. "You talk too much."

Liddell followed them into the living room, kicked the door shut behind him. He pulled the .45 from his pocket, let the girl see it. "Anybody else in the place?"

The girl made an ineffectual attempt to pull the negligee around her, shook her head. The blood had drained from her face, leaving it a transparent ivory, her make-up standing out like blotches on her skin. Her fist was clenched at her throat as though she were stifling a scream that was rising there.

"No noise, baby," Liddell told her. "Nobody's going to get hurt. The fat boy and I have some business. He's going to tie you up in the bedroom until we're finished."

A faint flush of color returned to the girl's face. "You going to let him push you around like that, Marko? You're always telling me how tough you are —!"

The fat man lashed out, caught her across the cheek with the flat of his hand, knocked her backwards. For a moment, Liddell's eyes left the fat man. Marko moved with surprising speed for a man his size, pulled the girl between himself and Liddell's gun and threw her forward. The girl's body hit Liddell, knocking him momentarily off balance.

Marko was on top of him before he could get set, lashed out with

his toe at Liddell's groin, missed by inches. The private detective chopped at the fat man's shin with the barrel of the .45, drew a yelp of pain. By the time the fat man got set again, the muzzle of the gun was staring at his midsection.

"You're pushing your luck, fat boy," Liddell grinned humorlessly.

The fat man hopped on one foot, clasped his shin between his hands. "Okay. I know when I'm licked."

The girl stared at him with unconcealed contempt, her full lips drawn back from her teeth. "You won't have to tie me, mister," she told Liddell. "That fat slob didn't care if you shot me when he threw me at you. I hope you split his head open."

"I hope you get your hope, baby," Liddell told her. "Because if he doesn't open up, I'm going to open him up."

The brunette turned the full power of her eyes on Liddell, studied the heavy shoulders, the thick hair flecked with grey approvingly. The negligee had fallen open, and firm, tip-tilted breasts poked out. "I'll be in the bedroom," she told him. She turned, walked toward the bedroom door, her full, round hips working smoothly against the fragile fabric of the gown. She didn't look back as she shut the door behind her.

"Okay, tough guy. Now for the conversation." Liddell motioned the fat man to a chair, reached up, loosened his tie, opened his collar.

"I want some answers. How I get them depends on you. Make it easy on yourself."

The fat man dropped into a chair, glared up at Liddell. "You're wasting your time."

"That's what makes horse-racing, Marko — a difference of opinion. Me, I think you're going to give singing lessons." When the fat man dropped his eyes to his lap, Liddell reached over, grabbed a hand full of his hair, yanked his head up. "What did Barney Shields find that made it necessary to kill him?"

The fat man managed a smile, but his eyes were shadowed with apprehension. "You ask him. I don't know how to work an ouija board."

Liddell brought his hand back, smashed the knuckles against the fat man's mouth, spilled a stream of blood down his chin. "Keep up the funny answers, Fatso, and I'll leave you as toothless as the day you were born."

The fat man squeezed back against the cushions. "I don't know anything about Shields."

"You're a liar. It was your boy that icepicked him. Why?"

The beady little eyes glared from behind their pouches. The fat man wiped his mouth on his sleeve, refused to answer.

Liddell's hand described a short arc, knocked the fat man's head sideways. "Be as stubborn as you like, Fatso. I've got all day." He slapped the head back into position. "You'll either talk to me, or never again."

"You scare me to death," the fat man blustered.

"I didn't scare Denver to death, but it's a cinch the .45 slugs I pumped into him didn't lengthen his life." He pointed the .45 at Marko's bulging waistline. "Maybe you'd like to try one for size?"

The fat man studied Liddell's face for signs of a bluff, failed to detect any. He licked his lips, squeezed back against the cushions.

"What do you want to know?" he whined.

Liddell relaxed his pressure on the trigger. "Why was Shields killed? What did he know?"

Beads of perspiration glistened on the fat man's forehead. "He knew about the olive oil shipment due tomorrow." He swabbed at his forehead. "That fink Monti tipped him off and he was getting ready to sic the Feds on us. Nick Cardell ordered a hit."

Liddell stared at the fat man. "Nick Cardell? Where's he fit into this? He's a night club operator, a racket boy, everything else — but not a waterfront boss."

The fat man nodded his head. "He's in the Syndicate. He handles the white stuff — women and powder. He brings the powder in through our pier." He was desperately anxious to talk now; the words dribbled from his lips.

"What's that got to do with olive oil?"

The fat man shrugged. "That's how the syndicate ships the stuff in.

It's in waterproof pouches in the oil drums. They're marked so we know the right ones and we forward them up to Cardell. He handles from there." He wiped the perspiration from his quivering jowls. "Monti told the dick — I mean Shields — about twenty casks of oil disappearing every shipment. He started snooping around, started getting ideas. When that broad of his telephoned and offered to sell us his report, we bought. Cardell ordered the hit, and we set Shields up for it. That's straight."

"You yellow rat," the brunette stood in the doorway to the bedroom. She had stripped off the negligee, stood naked, her black hair cascading down over her shoulders. She was long-legged, her hips round and firm. Her breasts strained upward, pink tipped. "I've waited a long time to see someone work that meatball over, mister, but it was worth waiting to see it done right."

She walked toward him, came close. "He always bragged that no one could take me away from him." She stood in front of the fat man, stroked the palms of her hands up over her thighs, up to cup her breasts. "I've never met a man who had the nerve — before."

The fat man jumped out of his chair, glared at her. "Sell me out, and I'll —"

"You think you have an exclusive on selling out?" She looked over to Liddell. "I've waited a long time

for a real man." She held her hand out. "He thinks it's the gun that makes the difference, mister. I don't."

Liddell looked at her, grinned. "I don't either." He handed her the .45. "Besides, I promised I'd pay off for a couple of people this meatball burned down."

The fat man roared, lunged at him. Liddell sidestepped, brought his right up in a looping uppercut that split the fat man's eyebrow, knocked him back. Marko, howling with pain, lowered his head, charged again. Liddell chopped at the back of the fat neck with the side of his hand. Marko hit the floor first, lay there moaning.

Liddell stood over the quivering hulk on the floor, looked over to where the brunette stood, her finger on the trigger of the .45. As he watched, she let the gun drop to her side. "You took an awful chance, Liddell," she told him softly. "I might have been on his side all the time."

Liddell looked down at the fat man, shook his head. "It didn't figure. The only way a slob like that could hold onto a dream like you would be through fear. The minute we walked in tonight you knew he was through."

The girl stepped across the man on the floor, pressed close against Liddell. "That's why I didn't use the phone in the bedroom to get help for him." She slid her arms around Liddell's neck, melted

against him. "You promised to say goodbye before you left."

Liddell grinned. "In the bedroom," he reminded her.

The girl stood on her toes, covered his mouth with hers. He could feel the gentle tremors that shook her body as she strained against him. Her skin was warm and soft; he could smell the perfume of her body. Her lips became agitated, moved against his mouth as she moaned softly. After a moment, she stepped back, licked at her lips with the tip of her tongue.

"I'll be waiting for you."

The man on the floor started moaning his way back to consciousness. Painfully, he raised his head, glared up at them. The girl brought up the barrel of the .45, smashed it against the side of his head, knocked him back to the floor. Without looking back, she walked to the bedroom, left the door open behind her.

Liddell caught the fat man by the collar, dragged him to a chair, dumped him into it. Then he stripped off the fat man's tie, tied his wrists to the back legs of the chair.

"In case you get wanderlust, you can carry the chair with you," Liddell growled at him. He looked at the fat man for a moment, then turned, followed the girl.

Inspector Herlehy sat behind his oversized, unpainted desk in headquarters, stared at Johnny Liddell with no sign of enthusiasm. Lee

Devon of Seaway Indemnity stood at the window, stared down on the street below.

"You've got something up your sleeve, Liddell," Herlehy snorted. "You want me to keep this meatball on ice and not book him until tomorrow. It smells."

Liddell fished a cigarette from his pocket, stuck it in the corner of his mouth, touched a match to it. "I didn't have to bring Marko in, Inspector. After all, he's the guy that set me up for a kill. I could have burned him down and nobody would have blamed me for it. Instead I deliver him to you and you accuse me of pulling a fast one."

The man at the window turned, walked over to where a water-cooler was humming to itself in the corner, poured himself a drink. "I think Liddell is right, Inspector. If we announce the arrest of Marko, the Syndicate may divert that shipment of oil and we'll lack the evidence to smash the ring." He drained the cup, dropped it into the basket. "What harm can come of keeping Marko on ice until after the ship has docked and the Federal men have a chance to raid the pier?"

Herlehy raked his clenched fingers through his hair, growled. "I don't know. That's what worries me." He glared at Liddell. "It doesn't sound like this character to turn a killer in and just call it a day. He's more likely to square accounts first."

"Maybe I've turned over a new

leaf." Liddell shrugged. "Anyway, I've already turned him over to you and if you bury him in some precinct out in the sticks I can't get at him."

The inspector punished his perpetual wad of gum, shook his head. "It just doesn't seem natural." He looked over to Devon. "Your company got the dope it needs?"

Devon nodded. "We may not be able to make a case stick against some of them, but we've got enough on them to start a general clean-up down there." He looked to Liddell. "That was the job Barney Shields started out to do. Liddell finished it up for him."

Liddell pulled himself out of the chair, crushed his cigarette out in the ashtray on the inspector's desk. "I don't know if you can make a murder rap stick on Marko, Inspector. He gave the contract for the kill to Denver, but there's not much chance that he'll admit it." He rubbed his knuckles. "As a matter of fact, I had a little difficulty making him talk myself. And without corroboration, I don't think it would stand up."

"We'll take care of Marko," Herlehy assured him. He watched Liddell walk to the door, shook his head. "It still doesn't smell kosher, knowing that we can't pin a murder rap on him, knowing he did the killing and you still bringing him in." He fished a fresh piece of gum from his drawer, denuded it of its wrapper. "Maybe you have

turned over a new leaf, at that. Maybe we ought to buy him dinner tonight, Devon."

Liddell shook his head. "I've got a date. And she's prettier than you. We're going out to Nick Cardell's place and celebrate."

"Watch out for that place, Johnny," Devon warned. "I hear the wheels out there are rigged. A guy could lose his shirt out there."

"And that ain't all," Liddell grinned.

"Nick's" was an old North Shore estate that had been converted into a de luxe gambling set-up. From the outside, it gave no indication of its character, looked like any country estate that had been kept up. Shrubs, lawn and gardens were in good condition and it was only by the canopied entrance that it could be distinguished from its neighbors.

Johnny Liddell turned the rented Buick over to a uniformed attendant, followed the brunette up the broad stairs to the entrance. A man in a tuxedo stood at the door, greeted the girl, studied Liddell quizzically.

"A friend of mine, Lou," she explained. "Marko couldn't make it tonight. Is Nick around?"

The man in the tuxedo opened a door that led to a large reception hall filled with small groups of formally dressed patrons.

"Business or social?" the man in the tuxedo wanted to know.

"A message from Marko."

The man in the tuxedo nodded, walked to a phone near the door. He pressed a button on its base, waited a moment, then muttered into it. After a second, he dropped the receiver back on its hook. "He'll be with you in a few minutes. Want to wait at the bar?"

The girl looked at Liddell. He nodded. She led the way into one of the parlors that had been converted into a lounge. A bar ran the full length of the room. Liddell found a pair of barstools, signalled for the waiter, ordered two bourbons. The man behind the stick made a production out of selecting a bottle from the backbar, pouring two drinks. After he had shuffled out of earshot, the girl turned to Liddell. "You think it's smart coming out here like this, Johnny?" she asked in a low voice. "By tomorrow they'll have enough on him to put him away for a long time."

"That's just the trouble. They'll put him where I can't get at him."

The girl shuddered a little, pressed against him. "You scare me a little, Johnny. Not the way Marko used to scare me, but in a way that kind of excites me." She put her hand on his knee, turned her lips up to be kissed. "I guess I like violent men."

"You'd better stay here when I get in to see Cardell, baby," Liddell told her. "We may have to leave fast."

She shook her head. "You can't get in without me. I'm the one that has the message from Marko. Remember?"

"It might get rough," he warned.

"That's why I insist on going with you," she wrinkled her nose at him. She sipped at her glass, studied him over the rim. "Are you going to kill him?"

"He sent two men out to kill me, baby. I deserve at least one crack at him, don't I?" He looked around, made sure no one was within earshot. "No matter what the Feds get in the raid tomorrow, Cardell may be able to wiggle out of it. I want to make sure he doesn't get off completely free." He took a deep swallow out of his glass, nudged the girl as the man in the tuxedo started across the room to where they sat.

"The boss can see you now," he told the girl. "He's out back in his office. Will you follow me?"

The girl finished her drink, slid off the barstool. Her fingers sought Liddell's hand, gave it a brief squeeze. They followed the man in the tuxedo to a door set at the far end of the bar. He knocked twice, identified himself to the man on the other side. The door slid open and they stepped through into a large room equipped with roulette wheels, a crap table and a wall lined with slot machines. A low buzz of conversation spiced with the click of roulette balls flowed out at them as they entered. An-

other tuxedoed floor man nodded to them pleasantly, closed the sliding door behind them.

The brunette picked her way across the floor, circled the roulette layout, headed for a small corridor at the far end. It led to a metal door which carried the warning "Private — Employees Only." The girl knocked and, after a moment, the electric buzzer clicked.

The room beyond was large and comfortably furnished. Nick Cardell sat in an easy chair, knees crossed, fingertips touching in front of his chest. He was a big man who filled the chair to overflowing. He was conservatively tailored. Wore a red carnation in his buttonhole. His greying hair was thick, wavy. "Come in. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting." His lips peeled back from a perfect set of teeth in a grin that failed to defrost the icy blue of his eyes.

They stepped in, closed the door behind them. Liddell felt the snout of a gun jabbed into his back, froze.

"That's the smart thing to do, fellow," Cardell told him. "Get Condon in here, Al." One of the men behind Liddell went out the door, was back in a minute. The redheaded meatball who had been with Marko at the Harbor Cafe that morning walked around Liddell, nodded.

"That's the guy, Nick."

The icy blue eyes flicked at him. "Call me Cardell. That's my name."

Condon tried a smile, missed by a mile. "Okay, Mr. Cardell. No offense." He turned his eyes back to Liddell. "He took Marko out of the Harbor Cafe this morning. I ain't been able to find him since."

Cardell looked Liddell over. "You're Liddell, aren't you?" Without waiting for an answer, he turned to the girl. "Where is Marko?"

"He was home the last time I saw him."

"You're a liar," Condon snarled. "I was there just before I came out here to give Mr. Cardell the score. Nobody was there." He turned to the man in the chair. "She's working with this fink." He licked at his lips. "I could make her tell."

"Keep your hands off her, meatball," Liddell told him. The muzzle of the gun in his back bored deeper, made him wince.

"See what you can do with her, Condon," the white-haired man nodded.

Condon grinned, walked over to where the girl stood, grabbed her wrist, twisted it. "Where is Marko, baby?" A thin drool of saliva glistened at the side of his mouth, ran down to his chin. He twisted harder, brought a scream from the girl. "Where is he?" He brought his face close to hers.

Suddenly, she brought up her knee, sank it in his groin. He loosened the hold on her wrist, clasped both hands to his midsection, sank to the floor. Liddell

felt the pressure of the muzzle in his back relax for a second. He threw himself to the right, twisted and slashed out at the gun hand. The man behind him was caught flat-footed, his reflexes were too slow to squeeze the trigger. The gun went sliding across the floor. Before the man could move, Liddell was on him.

He jabbed out with the tips of his fingers, sank them in the man's adam's apple, sent him to the floor gagging and gasping for breath. Then he turned to Cardell. The white-haired man was standing at his desk, jamming his finger on a hidden button.

"He's calling for help, Liddell," the girl shouted. "Bolt that door. They can't break it down."

Liddell threw the heavy bolts on the door, turned the key. When he turned to face Cardell, the white haired man had a gun in his hand.

"It looks like the only way to get a thing done right is to do it yourself, doesn't it, Liddell?" The gun in his hand was pointed at Liddell's midsection. "You've been pretty lucky until now, but —"

"Drop the gun, Nick," the girl broke in.

The white-haired man turned startled eyes on the girl, gaped at the ridiculously toy-like .25 she held in her hand. He swung his gun, snapped a shot at her. It hit her in the shoulder, swung her half-way around. His second shot caught her squarely in the chest, slammed

her back against the wall, where she slid to the floor.

Liddell went for his .45, but almost before it had cleared leather, the white-haired man had made a break for the far wall. He turned, snapped a shot at Liddell that chewed splinters out of the wall next to his head. Liddell ducked, dropped away. The white haired man touched a hidden spring, disappeared through a sliding door. Liddell snapped a shot at the doorway, waited. When there was no answering fire, he crept over to where the girl lay. Her hand was pressed to her breast in a futile effort to stem the blood. Already, a thin stream of red was seeping through her fingers.

"Don't worry about me, Liddell. Go after him." When he tried to slide his arm around her, she shook her head. "He'll be back in a minute with his goons. Go after him." She coughed weakly, a thin stream of red ran from the corner of her mouth. She tried to talk, sagged back. After a moment, her eyes began to glaze.

Liddell swore under his breath, crept to the sliding door. It led to a small passageway. Beyond he could see the parking lot. Gun poked in front of him, he worked his way cautiously to the end of the passageway. Half a dozen cars were grouped near the entrance. One of them was the rented Buick.

He looked around, saw no sign of Cardell. Suddenly, he heard

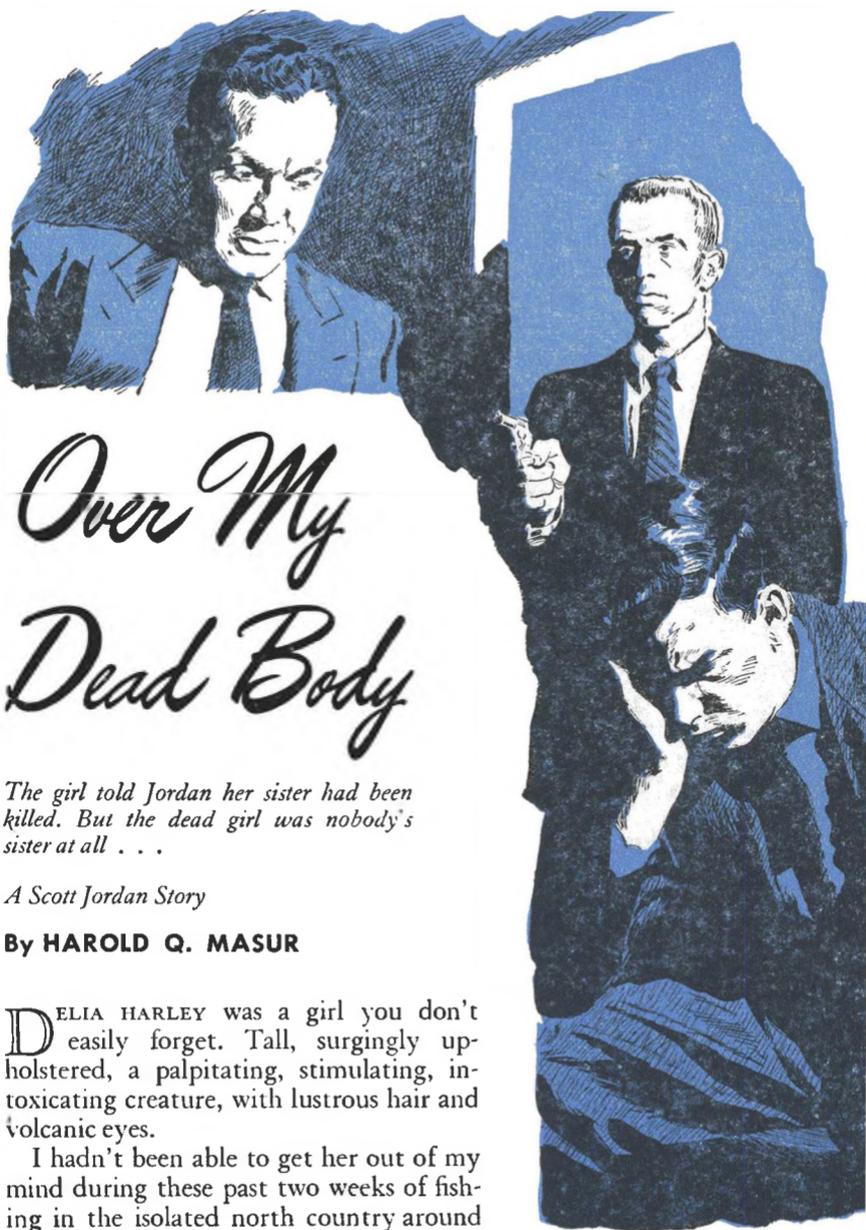
voices from the direction of the front of the club. He caught the flash of white shirt fronts in the dim light. Cardell was returning with two tuxedoed guards.

Liddell estimated his chances of making the car, then sprinted from the passageway. He had just slammed the door behind him when Cardell spotted him. The night club man raised his hand; it seemed to belch fire. A small hole appeared in the windshield.

Liddell kicked the car into life, eased it into gear as Cardell and the tuxedoed guards came charging at him, their guns blasting. Liddell flicked on the headlights, waited until Cardell was in the center of them. The night club man stood there, squeezing his trigger. The windshield fell to bits around Liddell as his foot released the clutch, jammed down on the gas. The car roared, sprang forward like a living thing.

There was a faint jar, then the road was empty in the glare of the headlights. Liddell jammed on the brakes, walked back to where the men lay in the road. Two of them were still living, but the white-haired man lay on his back, one leg folded crazily under him. His gun lay near his outstretched hand.

"You're right, Nick. If a man wants a thing done right, he's got to do it himself." Liddell turned, shouldered his way through the crowd that was pouring out of the club, and headed for a telephone.



# Over My Dead Body

*The girl told Jordan her sister had been killed. But the dead girl was nobody's sister at all . . .*

*A Scott Jordan Story*

By **HAROLD Q. MASUR**

**D**ELIA HARLEY was a girl you don't easily forget. Tall, surgingly up-holstered, a palpitating, stimulating, intoxicating creature, with lustrous hair and volcanic eyes.

I hadn't been able to get her out of my mind during these past two weeks of fishing in the isolated north country around

Manitoba. So I called on her the day I got back from my vacation.

I walked into Harley's Book Shop, full of bounce and vinegar. Mostly it was a lending library where you could also buy greeting cards, stationery, and magazines. Delia's sister, Madge, was behind the counter. There was little resemblance between the two girls. Madge was mousy and colorless. Nature seemed to have exhausted its bounty on Delia, though the girls got along fine as partners in the store.

"Hi, Madge," I said jauntily. "Where's Delia?"

She looked at me for a moment, numbly. I saw moisture floating in her eyes. Then her whole face crumpled up, squeezed into an agony of wretchedness. She bent over the counter, shoulders convulsed, weeping uncontrollably. I went over in quick rising alarm and put an arm around her. She dug her face into my chest. Sobs racked her body.

After a while the convulsions subsided and I loaned her my handkerchief. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose and looked at me bleakly. "I'm sorry, Scott. Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what? I've been away, you know that."

"Delia's dead."

I couldn't speak. I just stood there, staring mutely.

"She was murdered, Scott."

I found my voice, scarcely recognizing it. "When?"

"Last week." Madge's lips quiv-

ered. "Right here in the store. Somebody struck her on the head. The cash register was empty and the police think it was robbery. They think Delia put up a fight and the man hit her too hard."

"And you?" I said harshly. "What do you think?"

"I don't know. We often talked about it, what we'd do if a holdup man came into the store. Delia said she'd tell him to take whatever he wanted, just leave her alone. I tried to tell the police about the private detective, but they brushed it aside."

"What private detective?"

"The one Delia hired."

I took a careful breath. "Look, Madge, get yourself organized and give me the story slowly, from the beginning. What's all this about a private detective?"

She sniffed into my handkerchief and blinked back some more tears. "I—I guess you noticed that we don't resemble each other very much. There's a reason. Delia wasn't my real sister. She was adopted. I was a year old at the time and the doctor had told mother that she couldn't have any more children. They didn't want me to be an only child, so they went to the Adoption Institute and fell in love with Delia on sight."

"Did she know about the adoption?"

"Yes. After father died last year. We were present when they opened his safe deposit box and found the papers."

"How did she take it?" I asked.

"Calmly, at first. Then it began to prey on her mind. She wanted to know about her background, who her parents were. It became an obsession. A couple of weeks ago she hired this private detective and asked him to investigate."

"Go on."

"The man's name was Carson — Roy Carson. He asked Delia for quite a bit of money. He told her the adoption people keep a tight lip on that kind of information and he would probably have to bribe someone."

"And she paid him?"

"Yes. We had some of the money that Dad left us."

"All right? What happened?"

"I don't know, Scott. Shortly afterward he spoke to Delia in the store. I asked her about it, but she was touchy and evasive. I noticed that she kept growing more preoccupied and thoughtful every day."

"She never mentioned it to me."

Madge touched my arm. "But you'd only known Delia about a month."

I looked at her. How long does a man have to know a girl? I made a fist and bounced it on the counter. The substitution of one pain for another.

Madge Harley plucked at my sleeve. Her voice came out at me in desperation. "You're a lawyer, Scott. Would you try to find out? I don't think I'll ever rest until I

know the truth. And besides, I want you to handle the legal end of Delia's affairs anyway. I can pay any reasonable fee —"

"Don't worry about it."

She leaned forward impulsively and kissed me. Tears had left a salty taste on her lips. Now she backed away, blushing furiously.

"What's this?" a voice said behind me. "Have I got a rival, Madge?"

He had entered the store silently. I turned and saw a man in his middle thirties, slender and well-preserved, with thinning hair and a good-humored, scholarly face. A wry smile was in firm possession of his mouth.

"Don!" Madge's face and voice had come alive. She ran around the counter and took his arm. "I want you to meet one of Delia's friends. He's been away and just got back to town. Don Abbott, Scott Jordan."

We shook hands. When I released Abbott's palm he put it around Madge's waist. There was something warm and intimate in his manner. I noticed that Madge, with her eyes glowing, was not really plain at all. Some artfully applied makeup and a stylish frock would work wonders. Perhaps she had been submerged by Delia too long. Maybe now she would blossom. There was a touch of lightness to her voice.

"I met Don after Delia — after Delia's accident. He's been very sweet and a real help." She looked at him fondly. "But you don't have to worry any more, Don. Scott's a

lawyer and he's going to handle everything for me."

"A lawyer, eh?" He surveyed me with interest. "I think I've heard your name mentioned around town, Jordan, most favorably. Come and see me one day. Maybe I can throw something your way."

He handed me a card and I saw that he was a customer's man with a Wall Street brokerage firm. He had the personality for it. Selling securities requires talent. And it struck me that he had sold himself to Madge without wasting much time.

I thanked him and put his card in my pocket. I told Madge I'd be in touch with her and left.

My first stop was a drug store. I patronized the phone booth and called Detective-Lieutenant John Nola at I homicide. He greeted me in the brisk tone of a busy man.

"Well, well, back from your vacation, Scott? Catch any big ones?"

"A couple. How about you, Lieutenant?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the big one who killed Delia Harley."

"Big one?"

"Big to me," I said. "I used to go out with the girl, Lieutenant. I liked her. I liked her a lot."

"So-o." His voice was guarded. "Can you tell me anything about it?"

"I was out of town, Lieutenant, remember? How about a progress report?"

"Nothing, Scott. We haven't even

got a toehold. Looks like an open and shut case of armed robbery. The boys are still working on it."

"How about that private detective she hired?"

"We took him apart. Says he doesn't know a thing."

"All right," I said. "I'm handling the victim's estate. Hope you don't mind if I stick my nose in."

"Just keep it clean. And let me know what happens." I heard his intercom buzz. He said, "Sorry," and broke the connection.

I hung up and consulted the directory. Roy Carson had an office on Sixth Avenue. I took a cab and walked in on him without advance notice. He was seated behind his desk, filling out a report. His appearance surprised me. About forty, he had the scrubbed look of an undergraduate. He wore crew-cut hair and a Brooks Brothers suit. A quizzical smile seemed to be in permanent attendance on his mouth. He read my card aloud and stood energetically out of his chair. His handshake was full of enthusiasm.

"How do you, counselor? Always happy to meet a member of the legal profession. My services are always available to the boys at a discount. Have a seat. That's it, make yourself comfortable. What's on your mind? Don't tell me. Let me guess. Bet you have a client with husband trouble. Business keeps him out late every night. Only she thinks it's monkey business. A little extra-curricular homework perhaps. Well,

counselor, you've come to the right place. We're equipped to handle the case and wrap it up for you, lock, stock, and barrel. We supply witnesses, snapshots, dates, everything. You don't have to worry."

I shook my head. "My office handles very few divorces, Mr. Carson."

"Too bad," he said, not in the least perturbed. He snapped his fingers. "I know. A missing person's case. You want me to locate an heir. Well, counselor, you're looking at the man who can do the job. I have representatives in every large city from here to —"

"Relax," I cut in. "This is old business, a case you've already got."

He closed his mouth, still smiling, and looked at me politely.

"It's about Delia Harley," I said.

He blinked. "Delia Harley," he said blandly. "If I'm not being blunt, counselor, just where do you fit in?"

"I'm in charge of her estate."

"I see." Roy Carson shook his head. "Damn shame! And a hell of a waste, too. Boy, that was one fine piece of merchandise. First time I ever had a needle for a client. One look at her and I wanted to —"

"Shut up!" My fists on his desk were bone white.

He detected the warning in my voice. He could smell the storm brewing. His hand came up in a placating gesture. "All right, counselor. Don't get your wind up. I can guess how it was."

"You can't guess a goddam thing!" I said. "Just stick to facts. I came here for information. What did you tell Delia Harley the last time you saw her?"

He spread his hands in suave negation. "Not a thing. I had no information at all. I was still working on the case."

"You'd made no progress?"

He shrugged expressively. "How could I? Those people at the Adoption Institute refused to speak. I couldn't get to first base with them. I tried everything, cajolery, bribery, intimidation. Nothing worked. They threw me out. I saw Delia Harley because she kept hounding me for results. Jesus," he said, throwing his arms wide, "I hope you don't think my investigation had anything to do with her murder. The police grilled me for an hour and gave me a clean bill." He narrowed his eyes. "I'll bet that nutty sister of hers put a bug in your ear."

"Let's leave personalities out of this, huh? Tell me, have you dropped the case?"

"Since my client died, I haven't been active, if that's what you mean."

"How about the retainer?"

Carson looked at me without expression. "You want me to give it back?" Before I could answer, his face brightened. "Look, I haven't really earned it. Suppose you let me help on this new angle, the murder. I have a lot of connections in the underworld. I know a lot of stoolies.

Maybe I can get a lead on the guy who braced the joint and put the girl in cold storage."

I stared at him. His smile became a little cramped. Finally he stood up and began wearing out the carpet. "The fact is, I spent the money she gave me, counselor. I can't return it. Maybe I run off at the mouth too much. That can't be helped. It's my nature. But I still happen to be a pretty good detective. Give me a chance. Let me throw some lines out and try to get you a lead."

I took my time replying. Then I said, "All right. Keep your fee. But do something to earn it."

He was elated. He bounded over and pumped my hand. "You won't be sorry, counselor. You'll see."

He was dry-washing his palms like an Armenian rug dealer when I left his office. Out in the street I took a long breath of fresh air. I speculated on the case while I walked. It occurred to me that Delia Harley had lived her youth in comparative safety until her tragic end a week ago. That event followed on the heel of her decision to ferret out her ancestry.

So there must be a connection. And if I was right, the link could be found in the files of the Adoption Institute.

I checked the address and flushed a cab. It delivered me to the door in twenty minutes. The building was small and dignified, with a limestone front and a clean, antiseptic smell in the lobby. My shoes rang out on the

marble floor of the empty room. There was nobody behind the reception desk.

I coughed vigorously. Nobody appeared. I cleared my throat. Still nobody. I rapped on the desk. Nothing. I spotted a door against the far wall and went over and opened it. A stout woman sat behind a desk, engrossed in a pile of paper work. She looked up at me severely from a pair of stern, uncompromising eyes. Iron hair was piled in a tight knot on top of her head. A baritone voice came up out of her pneumatic bosom, demanding sharply, "Yes, young man, what is it?"

"I'd like to talk to someone in authority."

I gave her my most charming smile, but it glanced off.

"I'm in authority. You'll have to see Miss Pike for an appointment."

"I'd like to have an appointment in exactly ten seconds. Where can I find Miss Pike?"

She opened her jaws and belatedly, "Viola! *Viola!*" She waited a second, compressed her lips, manipulated her bulk upright, and lumbered to the door with an air of stern resolution. Her eyes encompassed the lobby in one swift glance and found it deserted. She let a blast of exasperation through her nostrils. "Always running out for coffee or something. That woman will simply have to go." She concentrated the full glare of her anger in my direction. "I'm sorry, young man. You'll have to wait outside."

"Madame," I said, "I —"

"Outsider!" Her tone was unchallengeable.

I went to the lobby and got settled on a hard bench. Time passed. Minutes ticked inexorably into history. I cooled my heels and heated my patience. Viola Pike and her coffee. If she usually drank this much, the plantation owners in Brazil would have nothing to worry about. I felt my innards begin to smoke from indignation. I stood up and marched angrily to the door again, spoiling for a fight. The stout woman looked up, glowering.

"You again? Young man, I thought I told you —"

"Ring off! I growled. There was muscle behind my voice and she blinked at me in surprise. "I didn't come here to warm a bench, lady. I came for a purpose. I want information and I think you can give it to me. It's about a girl. The Institute arranged for her adoption by a family named Harley about twenty-three years ago. Delia Harley was an infant at the time. I want to know her background, who her parents were."

The woman swallowed. Her adam's apple made a double round trip. "But we never give out that kind of information," she said more reasonably. "Why, I don't even know who you are."

"The name," I told her, "is Scott Jordan. I'm a lawyer. I represent the girl's estate. She was murdered last week. I know you have rules and I

agree with them. You've got to protect all the parties involved. But this girl and her foster parents are both dead."

"Then why do you need the information?"

"Because I think it has some bearing on the murder."

She digested this and pursed her lips, looking uncertain. Her eyes had a square puckered look. "Well, now, I hardly know what to say. Miss Pike is in charge of the files, but she's not here. Why don't you consult with our attorney. You can reach Mr. Jed Buchwald at his office. The number is —"

"No," I said. "I'm trying to cut corners. I don't want to start a legal wrangle." I stretched my hand for the telephone. "Maybe I'd better call the police. If necessary we'll get a court order. They can expedite matters. But I don't think the publicity is going to do the Institute any good."

That reached her. She grabbed the phone away. Apparently she had enough authority to make decisions. She pushed herself upright and approached a line of filing cabinets. "You say the name of the family was Harley? And the child's name Delia?"

"That's right."

She pulled out a drawer and started rifling through the cards, slowly at first, then more rapidly, fingers fluttering in sudden agitation. She craned her neck to look at me, face blank. "It's missing. The

card is gone. I can't understand it. No one ever violates our files."

I felt the disappointment sharply and deflated. We stared at each other. "How about Miss Pike?" I asked finally. "Would she remember?"

A miniscule smile pinched the stout woman's lips. "I doubt it. We've given away hundreds of babies and this case is twenty-three years old." She paused and a double wrinkle of concentration appeared on her forehead. Abruptly her eyes lit up. "You can ask Mrs. Kroger. She'll remember."

"Who?"

"Emily Kroger. She retired a couple of years ago and I took her job. She has a photographic memory. They say she can remember every child who passed through the Institute."

"Where can I reach her?" I asked, suddenly heartened.

I got the address, thanked her, and left.

There was pressure building up inside me now. My hunch had been right. The missing file proved it. Somebody was trying to keep the lid on Delia's real identity. The case was coming to a head. I could feel it in my bones. A break was imminent.

I found a booth and phoned Homicide. I got through to Lieutenant Nola and opened the bag for him. He listened without comment and stopped me suddenly.

"Hold it, Scott. What was the name of the woman in charge of the files?"

"Pike — Viola Pike."

I heard a sharp intake of breath. Nola seldom luxuriated in obscenity. He cursed now, briefly but eloquently. "Get yourself down here, Scott. Right away. On the double."

"Why? What happened?"

"It's cracking wide open, boy. Viola Pike was just picked up in an alley, stabbed through the heart. Better still, meet me there. Third Avenue near Twenty-fourth Street." His phone clicked off.

I stepped out of the booth, my jaw aching from tightly clenched teeth. The lieutenant would have to wait. I wanted to see Mrs. Emily Kroger. I had to reach her before somebody else did, before it was too late. The killer might have learned about her photographic memory. She was the last key to safety. So long as she lived, he was in peril, constantly threatened.

I caught a cab on the run and told the driver to step on it. He heard the urgency in my voice and jammed his foot on the pedal. We rocketed along the West Side Highway to Washington Heights, cutting in and out of traffic. He made the trip in twenty minutes under par and shaved ten years off my life, but he managed to deliver me in one piece to a tall new apartment overlooking the Hudson, for which he got a bonus.

I rang the bell and somebody's ancestor opened the door.

"Mrs. Kroger?"

"Yes." Her face was a delicate network of wrinkles, but her eyes were bright and alert.

I heaved a sigh of relief and introduced myself. "There's an important matter I'd like to discuss. May I come in, Mrs. Kroger?"

"Well, now —" her eyes twinkled — "it's been a long time since I entertained a young man. You look safe enough." She held the door wide.

We sat in her chintz-covered living room. Her fingers worked ceaselessly with a pair of embroidery needles while she listened to me talk. The needles stopped when I told her about Viola Pike. She laid them aside and leveled her eyes at me, her lips tight and sober.

"Death isn't such a terrible thing, Mr. Jordan. But no one likes to have the event accelerated unnaturally. Viola Pike was stabbed and the file is missing." She shook her head sadly and leaned back. She looked tired. Fingertips stroked her closed eyelids. "Yes, I remember Mr. and Mrs. Harley. They were lovely people. And little Delia, the prettiest infant I'd ever seen. All gone." She opened her eyes and gave me a bright, birdlike stare. "I suspect you're right. These murders are probably connected with the adoption. What do you want to know, Mr. Jordan?"

"Who were Delia's real parents?"

She was silent for a moment. "Do you remember Abigail Villard?"

"Sure. The all-American playgirl. Daughter of Floyd Villard. Millionaire broker." My mouth fell open. "You don't mean to say that Abigail was Delia's —"

"Yes, I do."

"Illegitimate?"

"Not at all. Abigail married a Frenchman she met in Europe. He was killed in an automobile accident. She had her baby and came home. But she didn't want it. She gave it to us for adoption. You know what happened to her after that."

Sure I knew. The papers gave it a big enough play. The Fabulous Screwball, they called her. Nightclubs, gambling casinos, racing cars, and a long succession of international playmates. Until it all caught up with her five years ago. She contracted pneumonia after a wild party and died in Harkness Pavilion.

Emily Kroger sighed quietly. "There was a time when Abigail felt remorse and tried to get the child back, but we refused to give her any information. That's when she took up stunt flying and tried to kill herself."

I stood up and said, "I have to leave, Mrs. Kroger. There's work to be done. But I want you to do me a favor. If your doorbell rings, ignore it. If anybody tries to get in, phone for the police. Keep your door double-locked and use the safety chain."

She nodded seriously. "I understand. Viola Pike was no more dangerous to the killer than I am."

Emily Kroger spoke out of wis-

dom and experience. She knew the score. After she let me out I waited until I heard the bolt shoot home and the rasp of the chain in its slot.

I checked my watch and saw that it was still early. This time I rode in the subway, mulling it over while we boomed along under the solid rock foundations of Manhattan. The clue, I felt, was hidden in the archives of a square, flat building on Chambers Street.

The Hall of Records houses the New York Country Surrogate's Court. I spent thirty minutes running through some dusty tomes before I found what I wanted. Then I requisitioned the last will and testament of Floyd Villard, Abigail's father.

He had left his money in a five million dollar trust, the income going to Abigail and after her death to any issue she might leave surviving her. If Abigail had no children the income went to Villard's nephew, Don Abbott.

His name jumped off the page and hit me between the eyes.

Don Abbott. The guy who seemed to be making a pitch for Madge Harley. I returned the will and bailed out of there fast. Pieces of the puzzle were still missing, but it had begun to make sense.

Even at five percent the income from old Villard's estate amounted to a quarter of a million a year. And Don Abbott was the recipient. Suddenly a threat to this magnificent windfall had materialized. Abigail

had left a daughter. Delia was her legitimate issue. Out of a clear sky she started an investigation to prove her identity. If she'd succeeded the whole thing would have blown up. Don Abbott might even have had to go to work.

Was it any wonder, then, that Delia Harley got permanently shelved?

The building was an aristocratic structure, rearing forty stories over Park Avenue. I had phoned and knew that Abbott was home. He didn't really work. His job in a brokerage firm was merely an avocation.

He greeted me curiously and took me into a living room with a huge window and a pair of foam rubber sofas facing each other over a marble coffee table. The table held an assortment of bottles, several glasses, and a siphon. Abbott's eyes were fathomless, but there was a strained look to his smile.

"Will you have a drink, Jordan?"

"No," I said. "I don't want anything from you but the truth."

He pulled his eyebrows together. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, old man."

"Then I'll make it plain. What's your angle with Madge Harley? What are you after?"

He got a cigarette into his mouth. His hand shook a little when he put a match to it. "Well, now, I'm not sure I like your manner or your tone, Jordan." But he answered: "Can't a chap be interested in a girl?"

"Not you," I said, "and not that girl. Who are you trying to kid? You're personable and rich. Madge Harley is plain and way out of your league. You're afraid of something."

"Afraid?" Anxiety broke through his self-control.

"That's right. You have reason to believe that Delia found out about Abigail and you're afraid she may have said something to Madge." He lost his smile when he heard Abigail's name. I said, "If Madge knew anything she might have to die. Or if it turned out she was entitled to part of Delia's inheritance, you might even marry her. Over my dead body, Abbott."

He slumped, hands hanging loosely between his knees. His face was damp and his lips stiff. His defenses were gone and he was deteriorating quickly. "I wouldn't have harmed her, Jordan, I swear it."

"I'm inclined to believe you. You haven't got the guts. Why didn't you go to the police after Delia was killed?"

"Because — because —" The words stuck in his throat and he couldn't get them out.

"Because you're weak. You were willing to let somebody else do the dirty work. You were satisfied to remain silent and split the loot. Do you know the penalty for obstructing justice, for suppressing evidence helpful to the solution of a homicide?"

Now he saw jail staring him in the face and he came apart at the seams.

He began to shake and he burbled at me, wanting to clear his skirts of taint. "Listen, Jordan, I'll tell you everything. I'll —"

"Shut up!" The voice behind me was harsh and brittle. "You won't tell him anything. Stand fast, Jordan! Don't move."

Roy Carson moved into sight. The Colt Banker's Special was steady in his hand, blunt and deadly, caliber .32. Its muzzle was black and unblinking. He still looked like an undergraduate, but his eyes were flat and lifeless.

I said, "He doesn't have to tell me anything, Carson. I know it all."

The smile was back on his face, but it was cold, without feeling. "What do you know?"

"I know that you got to Viola Pike and bribed her. You learned the identity of Delia's real mother. And from there it was a simple matter to get the lowdown on Villard's will. You saw an easy way to feather your nest. You approached Abbott, told him your story, offered to keep the whole thing under your hat if he came across. He was willing. He had no choice. It was that or nothing. He'd have to pay and keep paying until he died. Then Delia got into your hair. Maybe she threatened to hire another detective. Maybe you had told her too much. At any rate, she was going to make trouble and had to go. Abbott couldn't do it. But you could."

Carson bowed, with mocking urbanity. "Very interesting."

"It gets even more interesting. You figured it was all wrapped up. You had emptied the cash register and the cops thought Delia was killed during a robbery. Then I came into the picture and you were in trouble again. You knew I was going to investigate and you were in a sling, boy. You were afraid I'd get to Viola Pike and she'd crack. That would lower the boom on you, but good. So you phoned her the moment I left your office and told her to meet you. You told her it was urgent, and asked her to bring the file card with her. So she came and got a knife between her ribs. Then you destroyed the car, but it was no use, Carson. I found out about Delia anyway."

"How?"

I smiled thinly. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Of course I didn't tell him. That was my ace-in-the-hole. With the source of danger unknown he could never be sure of safety. Time was fast running out and he had to make me talk. He moved closer, eyelids twitching, and I saw Abbott rise slowly from the sofa. Abbott was

trying to save his skin, to get back on the side of the law.

His weapon was a bottle of Bourbon and he raised it like a hammer over Carson's head. Carson saw the shadow and sensed the movement and he whirled suddenly, his finger contracting on the trigger, snapping out a single shot. It slammed Abbott off balance like a giant fist. And then Carson's legs flew out as I hit him below the knees in a football tackle. The marble coffee table caught his head and it sounded like a ripe melon. The Banker's Special slid along the carpet and I pounced on it. But the gun was superfluous. Carson was out. Finished for the day.

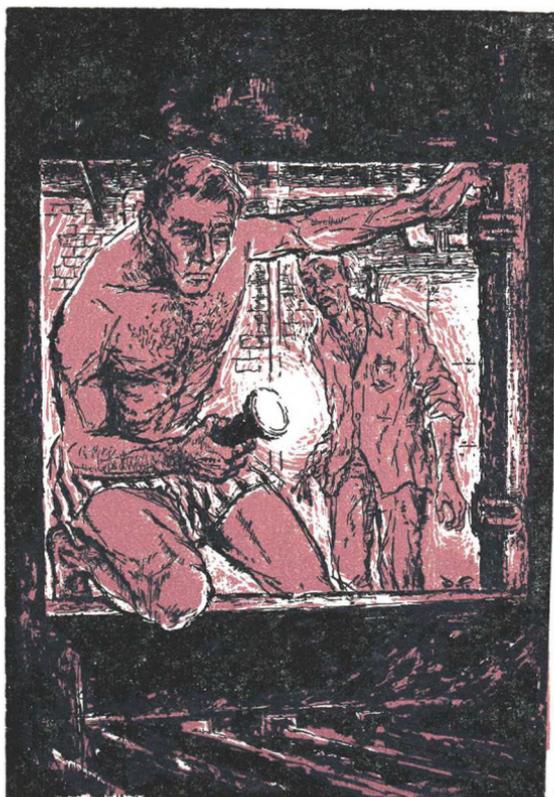
Abbot sat on the floor, blood trickling through his fingers, shoulder blade shattered, a portrait of stunned surprise.

Then I saw the Bourbon, still intact, and I picked it up and pulled the cork and siphoned off about half an inch.

I offered it to Abbott, but it changed my mind, and coupled the bottle again to my main intake.

What the hell, wasn't I entitled?





# The Wrong Touch

*Peter Chambers was always willing to take on a case. But this time his client was a widely-known killer.*

*A Peter Chambers  
Novelette*

**By HENRY KANE**

**P**ITY the poor private eye. Here is a guy that has picked himself a business that is maligned by the newspapers, laughed at by the tabloids, kidded by the movies, hoked by radio and burlesqued by television — and yet — despite the cumulative weight of such onslaught — he is expected to earn himself a legitimate livelihood in a so-called legitimate profession.

But he has learned to take that.

He has learned that every wide-eyed oaf expects a pat and instantaneous solution to the most complicated and idiotic of conundrums, that every malefactor considers him a dedicated enemy, that every mobster wants to spit in his face to see if it will change his expression, that every truculent bar-fly wants to joust with suddenly new-found muscles, and that every doll expects a pass.

He has learned to take all of that too.

What he has *not* learned to take is a gleeful public which considers him the constant man in motion, geared to operate twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year — and one such member of just such public — right now — had stabbed a finger at my doorbell and it set up a howl like a gone-crazy air raid siren let loose on a slumbrous and peaceful populace.

It was Sunday. I had gone to bed late after a rough week. It was my day off, and I had every intention to sleep through it, all the way through to Monday. Happens. Happens to the best of us, and the worst. But the best, and the worst, and those in between — they are not in a business ridiculously entitled: Private Eye. They are not subject to the whim of every crackpot who has viewed too many movies or read too many tabloids or has been influenced by too many crime stories indiscriminately spewed over the airwaves.

The door bell fractured my slumber.

I threw off the cover and marched, in outraged dudgeon, out of the bedroom and into the foyer and past the living room and on toward the entrance door — with but one purpose in mind. I would open the door, leer once and disdainfully at the face of the violator of my dreams, and, with gusto, slam the door, return

to bed, heap the pillow over my head, and let him continue to ring until his finger fell off.

I opened the door — and my delightful anticipations terminated abruptly.

The first thing I saw was the gun.

It was a large gun and it poked at my stomach directly above the band of the pants of my pajamas. I recognized it as a .45 and I recognized the grinning face above it. I said, "Patsy Gurelli."

Patsy Gurelli said, "Yeah."

"Just don't stand there," I said. "Come in. So nice to have unexpected company on a pleasant Sunday morning."

"It ain't morning," said Patsy Gurelli.

"Not morning?"

"Also you got all your lights burning. You must've gone to sleep late."

"It's Sunday, I trust. You'll grant me that?"

"Sunday, yeah. But not morning."

"What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock. In the evening."

"Well, come on in . . ."

Patsy entered the apartment and I closed the door behind him. But Patsy wouldn't lead. Patsy waited for me to lead. His grin was wider as I preceded him into the living room, turned and said: "Make yourself to home, Patsy lad."

"It's sort of catching you with your pants down. No?"

I shrugged for him. "You might call it that."

"Okay. Joke over. Can I sit down?"

"But of course. Who am I to be inhospitable to a guest, especially a guest with so persuasive a token in his large and ham-like fist?"

"Wow. Really making with the words today, ain't you, shamus?" Patsy sighed and dropped into an easy chair, the gun obvious and ominous. He was a big man with bow legs, bulk shoulders, a flat nose, a rasp voice, and long arms ending in hands like banana clumps.

I said, "All right. What's the point?"

"Point?"

"Point of this invasion. What do you want here?"

"Me? I don't want nothing. But you, you're wanted."

"By whom?"

"The boss."

"What boss? Everybody and his uncle thinks he's a boss in this town lately."

"Frank Slaughter."

I did an upraised eyebrow for Patsy. "Moving up in the world, aren't you?"

Patsy's grin turned shy. "New job."

"Frank Slaughter. How come he only sends *one* hood? That guy figures for a car-load."

"Nah," Patsy said. "That ain't fashionable no more. Frank's a big man, big operator." He came up out of the chair. "Okay, you got the news. Now let's get a move on and get out of here."

"You got a car downstairs?"

"Nope. We go by cab. Like that I can keep the heater on you all the way."

"Open and exposed, just like that?"

"Nope. Covered but ready. Just like that."

"You're getting real smart, Patsy lad. One of these days they'll promote you to lobby boy."

"That's all with the cracks, shamus. Get dressed and let's go."

"Shower first."

"Okay, but I'm sticking along with you."

I showered, under the close supervision of Patsy. I grabbed a quick bite, and dressed. Then I put the lights out in the apartment, all but the light in the foyer near the door. As I reached for the switch, Patsy was close near me, bored now, and lulled by my amiability. I swung about and my left elbow made contact with his diaphragm. He gasped, bending double, and his face came out to meet the rush of my right fist. He fell against the wall, sliding down slowly, his eyes glazed. I grabbed the gun and waited. He completed his slide to the floor and shook his head groggily, his loose lips making a soggy sound. Then sense began to flood back into his eyes.

"Wha—?" he said. "Wha—?"

"Get up."

"Wha—?" He shook his head again, once, viciously. "Now what the hell?"

"Get up, bum."

He clambered up, grimacing.

Gloomily he said, "Now why in all hell did you have to go and do that?"

"I really didn't have to."

"Then why in hell did you?"

"How would it look?"

"Look? Look? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Patsy lad, bear with me. I'm cooked up to be a pretty rough guy. It's part of my stock in trade. It's probably one of the reasons your boss wants to see me. So . . . how would it look . . . *you* with the rod, and *me* with a sad face. Would it look good?"

"Depends," Patsy said dourly, "on what you call — the point of view."

"Since I'm holding the gun right now, we'll use my point of view. You play hard guy some other time, huh, with somebody else. For now — let's go. *I'm* taking *you* to see Slaughter."

"He ain't going to like it."

"Maybe. Maybe he'll like it better."

The boys in the rackets change up top slot more frequently than the comic opera dictators in the hot-sun revolution countries. Right now Frank Slaughter was Number One. He lived in the penthouse apartment of a white-brick seven-story edifice on Lower Fifth Avenue near Washington Square. The cab pulled up in front of a fancy canopy running all the way from the wide doorway to the curb.

I said, "It's your party, Patsy. Pay the man."

Patsy paid the fare and we got out. A drowsy-faced doorman looked at us languidly as we went by him and into a spacious lobby. There was a self-service elevator in the rear and Patsy punched the button, and we got in, and out again at the seventh floor. There was but one door — one apartment to each floor. Patsy touched the doorbell lightly. Frank Slaughter opened the door.

Sadly Patsy said, "Well, I brung him."

"Hi, Chambers," Slaughter said.

"Hi."

Slaughter looked from Patsy to me and back to Patsy. Succinctly he said, "Who brought whom?"

"He jumped me," Patsy complained.

Slaughter said, "Come in, won't you?"

He ushered us into a beautifully appointed living room. It was a combination living room and study, a man's room, with all of the appurtenances, including a huge carved desk off in a far corner. I looked about, nodded in approval, said, "Nice, real nice, good decorator."

"No decorator," Slaughter said. "I did it myself."

"Well, bully for you." I drew Patsy's .45 from my pocket. "All right if I give this back to your boy now?"

Slaughter's eyes were amused. "I'll take it." I handed it to him and he brought it to Patsy. He said, "Don't tell me you pulled a gun on Mr. Chambers?"

Patsy gaped.

Slaughter came back to me, smiled sourly, said, "He should have known better than that."

"Shouldn't he, though?"

"I'll guarantee his behavior from now on."

"Thanks. Awfully. Now what's the scoop? What do you want with me?"

"Help," he said. The smile went away. He folded his hands behind him, lowered his head, and paced.

Frank Slaughter was a big man, about six feet three; and young enough, too, for his exalted if precarious station near the top of the heap of the syndicate boys. Frank Slaughter was about forty, with slick black hair parted on one side, with wide beautifully tailored shoulders, with a light muscular athletic tread, with a square strong face and narrow pale blue eyes that glinted like the reflection of water on glass.

"What kind of help," I said, "could Peter Chambers be to Frank Slaughter?"

"Plenty help, what with all of your experience."

"What's the rap, pal?"

"Murder, my friend."

Murder. Just like that. He had stopped pacing and he was smiling again, but it was a rigid show of teeth, a nervous grimace: it was a smile without joy. "Over here," he said. "Come over here." He touched my arm and led me across the room to the big desk. "Take a look, my friend. Take a good look."

I looked — and if a noisy intake of breath is a gasp — I gasped.

Sprawled behind the desk, prone on the floor, his lips slightly blue, his mouth stiffly open, Stuart Clarke gazed up at me, his eyes wide and unblinking. Stuart Clarke, young man with a reputation, the new racket-busting Assistant D.A. of New York County. Stuart Clarke, riding high and handsome, carving himself a career that figured to propel him to the capitol at Albany. Stuart Clarke, very dead, behind a desk in the penthouse apartment of a racket guy named Frank Slaughter. There was a bullet hole over his right eye, and blood was a thick brown crust over his right cheek.

"Nice?" Slaughter inquired behind me.

I wheeled. I said, "You're all alike, you guys. Sooner or later you blow. Well, you certainly blew your cork this trip."

"Listen —"

"And a guy like you that's supposed to be a smart apple. How crude can you get?"

"Listen, will you?"

"I'm all ears."

"Crazy like that, I'm not. I had nothing to do with it."

"No, huh? He committed suicide, huh? Stuart Clarke comes to your apartment and kills himself just to put you in a spot? Maybe you'd like that for your story, huh?" I snapped my fingers. "Where's the gun?"

"I don't know."

"Look, Slaughter —"

"You look, friend. That guy behind my desk is strictly a plant. Somebody's trying to hang a frame around me, with a picture of murder in the middle."

"What the hell are you trying to sell me, Slaughter? You and this guy had a real feud going. Everybody and his maiden aunt knows that."

"True enough . . ."

"The guy was cutting in on a lot of your enterprises . . . raids, arrests, and convictions."

"Small fry. Bird lime."

"Yeah, but he was moving up. And, according to the grapevine, you were arranging to move him out."

"Yes, but not like that."

"Like how, then, big shot?"

"Not by violence. Dumb like that I'm not. This was an assistant D.A. I wasn't looking to have the whole town jumping up and down on me."

"Like how, then . . . ?"

"Politically, that's how. I got a lot of drag in this town. I was working on it. He was going to get knocked off, but politically, not . . . not . . . like this. Think, Mr. Detective. I'm Frank Slaughter. Dumb I'm not. You think I'd cook up a mess like this?"

I walked away from him. I flicked a glance at Patsy, sitting now, watching us, understanding very little. I walked more, thinking. The guy was shooting reasonable arguments at me. I'm a sucker for a reasonable

argument. Frank Slaughter was talking again:

"Think, man. I've never been mixed up in a murder."

"Not a social murder," I said. "There's a difference. Hoodlum stuff, gang killings, there's plenty like that been shoveled up at your door. The unprovable kind of stuff, the killing of filth that the cops are glad to get rid of. But nothing like this, I'll admit. What I call social murder. A personal thing, outside of the inside, if you know what I mean. No," I said, "I'll admit you've never been mixed up in a murder like that."

"Then why would I start now? And like this? Think, man."

I thought. I walked around, thinking. When I faced up to him again, his hand was out, and it was holding two bills, and each was for a thousand dollars.

I said, "What's that?"

"A fee."

"Fee for what?"

"For straightening me out."

I took his money. I said, "I'll play. I'll play tick-tack-toe. If it comes out you, I keep your money, anyway."

"You got a deal."

"Okay. You got a gun?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"On me." He opened his jacket and unfurled a revolver from a belt holster. "Legal, and with a license."

"Gimme."

I looked it over. The chambers

were stuffed full. I smelled it. It hadn't been used recently. I gave it back to him. I said, "The bullet in the late Mr. Clarke wouldn't match up, would it?"

"Definitely not."

"All right, Mr. Slaughter, you're a client now. Let's have your story."

"Sure. You know I don't live here. This is just my town apartment."

"You live where?"

"Got a house up in Westport."

"Then what are you doing here? Today? Sunday?"

"I hadn't been in town the latter part of the week. I figured I'd drop in today, look over any accumulated mail, take a look around the town. I drove in. Got here about three o'clock. I lazied around, reading mail, getting things together. About four o'clock I got a phone call."

"From whom?"

"Hubbel Wayne."

"The guy that owns Club Sixty Nine?"

"That's right. We had some business to talk about. He asked if he could come over. I said okay. He said five o'clock. I said okay. Then I reminded myself about having to drop in on a couple of spots of mine. I told Hubbel to come anyway, that I might not be here, that I'd leave the door open for him. We settled it like that."

"Did you leave?"

"Yes."

"What time?"

"About four-thirty. But I had quite a list of things to do. I realized

it would take time. Maybe two, three hours. I called Hubbel back, but there was no answer. So I left him a note."

"Note? Where?"

"Right there, on the desk."

I went back to the desk. There was a pencilled scribbling on a sheet of white paper. It said, "Figure to be back at 7:30. Wait if you like."

Slaughter said: "And that's when I got back. At about seven-thirty."

"Was Hubbel Wayne here?"

"Nobody was here. Nobody — except that guy behind my desk."

That's all. That was it. There was nothing else.

I said, "What about Patsy?"

"I picked him up on my rounds, and he came back here with me. We found . . . Clarke . . . together. I sent Patsy out for you, right away. I figured I was mixed up in a mess, and I wanted expert advice, *before* I yelled copper. That's the story, Chambers, that's it, all the way."

"You get in touch with Wayne?"

"I got in touch with nobody. I sent Patsy for you, and I waited, and brother, I'm glad he got you."

Silence now. Silence, and a dead district attorney behind a desk, and an open-mouthed hoodlum resting in a chair. I said, "Looks like a frame, all right. You wouldn't be stupid enough to kill the guy in your own apartment. Any ideas?"

"And how."

"Who?"

"Wayne. Who else?"

“But why?”

“Two reasons. Wayne owes me twenty-five thousand bucks, which he can’t pay. That’s what he wanted to talk to me about. Plus he’s got a personal hatred for Clarke, something about a girl. So . . . a plant like this . . . he’s rid of Clarke . . . and he’s rid of me . . . and he saves himself twenty-five grand. Except . . .”

“Except what?”

“I want to be honest. You asked me if I had any ideas . . . and that’s my idea. But there’s one catch.”

“Yeah?”

*“I forgot to leave the door open for Hubbel Wayne.”*

“Come again, pal?”

“Come here, I’ll show you.” He took me to the door, opened it, pointed to the clicker above the lock. “This thing. If you poke it in, it leaves the door open. I forgot to poke it in. So . . . the door stayed locked from the outside.”

As he held the door open, I noticed that the knob on either side was different. The knob on the inside was of brass, the outside knob of glass. I said, “What’s with the unmatching knobs?”

“Oh,” he said, smiling. “Trouble. The outside knob went on the blink when I got back. Waiting for you, I called the super up and had him fix it, at least temporarily. The glass one is the temporary one. Boy, you guys ask questions about everything, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” I poked at the clicker. I

said, “You sure that door was locked from the outside?”

“Dead sure. Had to use my key to get in.”

“Then what happens to your big idea?”

“I don’t know. I’m trying to tell you the truth. I figure Wayne got in here, read my note, realized I wouldn’t be back for maybe two hours, used some kind of ruse to get Clarke here, knocked him off, left, and left me holding the bag. What with the grapevine carrying my threats about Clarke . . . it’s a beautiful setup.”

I closed the door and we went back. I said, “Is there any other way he could have gotten in?”

“No. There’s a fire escape. But that window’s got a wire mesh over it, and it can only be opened from the inside. I figure it for Wayne, but with you, I got to tell you the truth, and I can’t, for the life of me, figure how he got in . . . *if* he got in.”

“How many rooms in this joint?”

“Six. Two bedrooms, a guest room, living room, dining room and kitchen.”

“How’s about a look-see?”

“Sure.”

He led me through a corridor and first thing I did was bang my elbow. “Wow,” I said. “What the hell is that?” I pointed at a handle protruding from the corridor wall.

“Incinerator,” Slaughter said. “Sorry. I should have warned you. I bump myself on that all the time.”

I looked the place over, the beauti-

ful bedrooms, the wire mesh screen which led from the window of the guest room to the fire escape, the sumptuous terrace: I looked the place over quickly and carefully. I said, "No way in the world he could have gotten in, except by the front door."

"That's right."

"And you're sure it was locked?"

"I wish I wasn't."

"Puts you right back on the spot."

"I know it. But it'd be crazy to lie to you. Now where do we go from here?"

"Give me about — oh — three quarters of an hour."

"And then?"

"Call the cops."

"Cops, eh?"

"What else?"

"Nothing else, I suppose."

"Tell them the truth, tell them the entire truth, everything you told me. They'll check it, and brother, it had better check."

"It'll check." As I headed for the door, he called: "Where *you* going?"

"Hubbel Wayne. Where else?"

Club Sixty Nine was at Sixty-ninth Street and Park Avenue. It was a quiet little intimate spot known in the trade as a "cheaters' joint." A cheaters' joint is a hide-away where married men take single girls, married girls take single men, married men take married girls who are not their wives, married girls take married men who are not their husbands — that's the bulk of the

patronage. The rest was made up of people in show business, people who liked good food, people who liked a quiet and cozy atmosphere, and people who wanted a respite from extravagant floor shows, crash-bang comics and jive bands with a lot of brass. Club Sixty Nine didn't advertise, had no press agent and depended on word of mouth. It was owned by Hubbel Wayne, who doubled as maitre d' assisted by a delectable lady named Martha Lewis. I had known Martha Lewis in her pre-gracious-hostess days, a long time ago, when she had been a specialty dancer at the old Flamingo. I had never met Hubbel Wayne. I had seen him around the town, but I had never met him.

The cab dropped me at Sixty-eighth and I walked the one block to the club. I checked my hat and climbed a stool at the bar. I said, "Scotch and water," to Jerry Karas, who had been passing drinks over polished mahogany in the best clubs for the past twenty years.

"How are you, Mr. Chambers?" said Jerry Karas.

"Fine, Jerry. Swell."

"Long time no see."

"Yeah, that's the way it is."

"Mix it, Mr. Chambers?"

"Yes, please."

I sipped the drink, swung around and observed the premises. Club Sixty Nine was divided into two segments. There was the little cocktail lounge which held the bar; a small square room with pink lighting,

small black tables and slender black chairs, a check room up front, a thick gold carpet on the floor, a couple of phone booths in an alcove, and nothing else. Through a wide archway, in the rear, was the club proper. It was a large room, hushed against echo by sumptuous red velvet draperies hung on each wall. It was dim, blue light coming down from pinholes in the ceiling and rose light rising from tiny little lamps on each table. There were gold banquettes along the walls and gold-topped tables: that was the room, red and gold, with a small highly polished dance floor and soft music by Alfredo Trini and His Six Fiddlers. It was early for Club Sixty Nine. There were few patrons in the rear room. I could see Martha Lewis and Hubbel Wayne sitting together at a front table. The cocktail lounge had nobody except one whispering couple at a black table, and me at the bar.

I turned back to Jerry and said, "Who hates Stuart Clarke around here?"

"Whatzat?" said Jerry Karas.

"I'm working," I said.

"Figures," he said. "You ain't here for pleasure, alone."

"Who hates him?"

"Why?"

"This is strictly off the record, Jerry. I say it, and it's under your hat."

"What?"

"He's dead."

"Who?"

"Stuart Clarke. Murdered."

"The D.A. . . . ?" A frown wrinkled Jerry's forehead. A frown wrinkling Jerry's bland forehead is tantamount to an emotional fit of extreme frenzy in anyone else.

I took out my wallet, placed a twenty dollar bill on the bar and tapped a fingernail against it. I said, "This ain't a bribe, Jerry."

"What is it?"

"A gratuity. A tip. Anything you tell me, you'd have to tell the law anyway, and I got a hunch I'm here maybe a hop, skip and jump ahead of the law."

Jerry grinned, picked up the bill, turned, and turned back with the bottle of scotch. He poured and added water. "On the house," he said. "A guy tips like you is entitled to a drink on the house." The grin grew and I knew we had a contract.

He returned the bottle to its niche, and then he pointed a stubby thumb. I looked in the direction of the point and it went where I expected: at the table of Hubbel and Martha. "There sits," said Jerry, "a team of the best Clarke haters in the country."

"Both of them?"

"What's a team? One?"

"I'm slow on the uptake, Jerry. Sorry. Give me Hubbel Wayne first."

Jerry put an elbow on the bar and ran a finger through his hair. "Remember a chick by name Kathy Prince?"

"Girl artist?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Used to be with the ballet. A real mad chick. Used to be around the town plenty, always with a money guy."

"So?"

"Mr. Wayne goes overboard for that one, goes like he never went before. Real crazy affair, before he loses out."

"To whom?"

"Guess."

"Clarke?"

"Very good. This guy Clarke is Princeton, young, class, and a lot of gelt. He's a real humdinger with the racket busting and he's going places. Do you blame the gal?"

"How'd Wayne take it?"

"Took it lousy, but he couldn't do a thing about it. The chick blossoms out with a rock on her finger like an ad for Tiffany. With the wedding bells not too far away. Plus Clarke takes out a life policy for a hundred G's in her favor."

"Now how would you know all that?"

"Scuttlebutt, the boys in the columns call it. A bartender, he laps it up, this scuttlebutt."

"You know where she lives?"

"10 East 63rd."

"And Martha Lewis? Where does she come in on this?"

"This'll kill you."

"Kill me, pal."

"This guy must have been a sucker for a good looking chick."

"Which guy?"

"Clarke."

"How come?"

"When he first breezed into this town, he met Martha. She was doing that wriggle at the Flamingo. Guess what?"

"I'm through guessing."

"He met her, liked her, waltzed her around a while, and married her."

"Martha?"

"Yeah. That's when she dropped out of circulation. She divorced him a year ago in Reno. After that he give her the old Princeton high-class cold glare, if you know what I mean. She hates his guts."

I said, "What time does this joint open?"

"Eight o'clock. Eight to four, that's when the real money is around. Mr. Wayne is a shrewd operator."

I put another twenty on the bar. Jerry said, "Well, now, ain't you overdoing it?"

"I ain't. This one is for change. And give me a lot of quarters. I'm calling Reno."

"Reno? Ain't it a little late?"

"It's earlier there. And remember, Jerry, about keeping this under your hat."

"Depend on Jerry."

I took my change to the phone booth and put through a call to Waldo Bryant in Reno, and after depositing a good many hollow-sounding quarters, Waldo's voice piped in my ear, and I said, "How are you, Counsellor? Pete Chambers."

"Hi, Pete."

"I need a favor, Waldo."

"I owe you plenty of favors, Pete."

"I want a rundown on a divorce."

"When?"

"Soon as possible."

"It's Sunday."

"I know what day it is."

"Don't get irritable."

"You can manage it, Waldo. Sunday or any other day. You're the big shot out there. It's special."

"Who were the parties?"

"Wife, Martha Lewis. Married name, Martha Lewis Clarke. Husband's name Stuart Clarke."

"Stuart Clarke? That the assistant D.A. in your town? That the one?"

"That's the one."

"Can do, Pete. I know the eagle that handled the matter. Don't have to break down any courtroom doors. I can get copies of the papers from his office. Just what do you want?"

"The facts, period. Wire them to me, Waldo. To my home. And if I'm not there, have them slip the telegram under my door. Okay?"

"Rest easy, chum."

"Thanks, Waldo."

"Forget it."

I came out of the phone booth, winked at Jerry, went through the archway, and pulled up a chair opposite Wayne and Lewis. Martha did a quick double-take, smiled with gleaming teeth, said, "Well, what do you know, the love of my life rises up out of the dead. Where *you* been keeping yourself, beautiful?"

"Around."

"Not around here. I've been work-

ing here more than nine months, and I haven't seen you."

"I don't go for fiddles, especially."

"Not enough girls, you mean."

Back at the Flamingo, you came with the lease. Couldn't get you out of the joint till the chairs came up on the tables." She turned to Wayne. "Ever meet Peter Chambers?"

"Never had the pleasure." He talked with a little mouth, precise enunciation, almost British, and very little movement of the lips.

Martha said: "Hubbel Wayne, Peter Chambers. Mr. Wayne owns this trap."

Wayne smiled, stood up, and we shook hands. He was a slender little man, not too tall, very dapper, with elegant movements. He had a smooth narrow face, nervous brown eyes, curly brown hair grey at the temples, and a slim carefully-tended mustache over a small mouth. His hand was delicate and cold. He said, "Will you excuse me, please?"

"I'd like to talk with you, Mr. Wayne."

"Certainly, Mr. Chambers. Will it keep for a few minutes?"

"Surely."

"I'm due at the kitchen. Tiny chores, but necessary ones. I'll be back shortly."

So I was alone with Martha Lewis, which was much better than being alone with Jerry at the bar, or trailing after Wayne to the kitchen. Martha Lewis, more lovely than ever. She was a kid when I'd known

her at the Flamingo, perhaps nineteen. I'd say she was twenty-seven now, ripe and glowing, the wild youngster more restrained now, but the wildness was there, in the look of her, in every part of her. She had always been a big woman, smooth and more than amply curved. I remembered the full rippling naked thighs of the dance at the old Flamingo. The thighs were covered now, in a close-fitting sheath-like black satin dress, but her arms were exposed and her shoulders and a good deal more besides, and it was a view that was better than first row center at a top-flight musical. Martha Lewis was tall with a tight creamy skin and an hour-glass figure, big on top, narrow at the waist, and big again at the hips — smooth-big, supple-big, not fat-big. She had shiny black hair, done page-boy with bangs on her forehead, wide black smouldering eyes, high cheekbones, a thin nose with mobile nostrils, even white gleaming teeth, and a full red wet glistening mouth.

Martha Lewis said, "I always had a yen for you."

"Like hell you did."

"Really."

"Vice versa, maybe."

"If so you never let on."

"How could I? There never was a time you didn't have a boy friend."

"Got no boy friend now." Her red mouth came together like a kiss. Her right hand came up and rubbed at her left arm. Then she frowned. She said, "Is it cold in here?"

"No. Not especially."

"I've got a clammy feeling inside of me, a doom-like kind of feeling. I'm a little scared." She touched me. "Let's dance."

Dancing with Martha Lewis was dancing as dancing should be. We danced as one. Her body was part of my body, close and warm and yielding, and Martha Lewis had not despoiled the lines of the striking black satin dress by wearing any clothing underneath, which made it rugged on her dancing partner. Her lips were close to my ear and she whispered, "When I'm scared I want to be held, I even want to be loved when I'm scared. It's crazy, but it's a fact. Crazy, isn't it? Hold me, hold me tight."

I wished I could forget about Slaughter's penthouse, and the body behind his desk, and a two thousand dollar fee, and cops beginning to gather — and then I saw Hubbel Wayne coming across the floor.

"There's the boss," I said.

"Nuts."

"Where were you this afternoon, Martha?"

"Why?"

"Just asking."

"Sleeping."

"Till when?"

"Till maybe seven. Then I struggled into this French creation, made up, and came to work. What kind of dizzy questions are these?"

"Just questions."

"Are you going to stick around, Pete? I want you to."

"I can't. I've got to talk to Wayne, and then I've got to blow."

"Will you come back?"

"I wouldn't like sitting around this joint, listening to the fiddles."

"I can get out, if I want to, if you'd ask me to. Come back, will you, Pete?"

I kissed the lobe of her ear. I said, "I'll be back."

Then we broke it up. Hubbel was at the table and Martha led me to him. "I want to warn you, Hubbel," Martha said. "Mr. Chambers is a private dick."

"So I've heard," Hubbel said. "Recognized the name."

Martha squeezed my hand, said, "Remember," to me, blew us a kiss, and went away. I sat down beside Hubbel Wayne. I said, "I'm afraid I've got a little grief to throw your way, Mr. Wayne, and I'm running out of time, so I can't do it easy."

"Then do it hard."

I gave it to him right from the beginning, from the time Gurcilli shoved his finger against my door bell. I gave him the truth, every nuance, and when I was through I said, "Your play, Mr. Wayne."

He said, "What's your interest?"

"I accepted a fee from Slaughter. I'm working on a job."

His face had gone pale when I had told him about Clarke but his color was back now and so was his aplomb. The guy was smooth as custard. He smiled and said, "Would you like to work for me too?"

"Afraid I can't. Diversity of in-

terest. It's not ethical. But I'll tell you what, Mr. Wayne. This sort of thing is my racket. You play it level with me, and if you're in the clear, I'll do everything I can to keep you in the clear. If not . . ."

His brown eyes kept moving, studying my face. "All right, Mr. Chambers. You ask the questions. I'll answer them."

"Fine. Do you owe Frank Slaughter twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me about that?"

"Nothing to hide. I took a flyer on a club downtown, in the Village. A different operation from this. Fairy entertainment, that kind of stuff. Sort of insurance, business insurance. If the quiet stuff uptown begins to peter, the loud stuff downtown ought to go. Is that comprehensible?"

"Perfectly."

"I needed a hundred thousand dollars. I had seventy-five. I borrowed twenty-five from Slaughter, at a usurious rate of interest, of course. Make a long story short, the downtown idea flopped. I still owe Slaughter his money."

"You call him this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Ask to see him?"

"Yes."

"What about that business of leaving the door open?"

"That's true. We made a date for five o'clock. He told me he might be out, that he'd leave the door open for me."

"What were you going to see him about?"

"I wanted an extension of time to pay my debt."

"Then what happened?"

"I left my apartment, strolled about . . . it was a beautiful afternoon. I got to Slaughter's place at about five. I rang the bell. There was no answer. I tried the door, but the door was locked. So I left."

"Then what did you do?"

"I went to a movie in the neighborhood."

"A movie?"

"That's right. I had nothing else to do. I wanted to kill time until Slaughter returned. I called his place, intermittently, from the movie house. There was no answer. Finally, it was late enough for me to show up here. So I did."

I clasped my hands, twisting my fingers, thinking. I said, "Any proof of this stuff?"

His small mouth opened in a small smile. "There can't be much corroboration in taking a stroll and seeing a movie. Even if I could describe the picture, which I can . . . it was a second-run house, and I could have seen the picture sometime before."

"Exactly what I was thinking."

He said, "Where do we go from here, Mr. Chambers?"

"Figuratively, I don't know. Literally, I'd suggest Slaughter's place. Or would you rather have cops come here to pick you up?"

"I wouldn't rather."

He got his hat, and I got mine, and we left.

Frank Slaughter's penthouse was alive with cops. Detective-Lieutenant Louis Parker was in charge, Louis Parker, Homicide, a straight cop and an old friend. The body had been picked up and carted off. The downstairs doorman was present but Patsy Gurelli was nowhere in sight.

Parker said, "You're Hubbel Wayne?"

"Yes, sir."

Parker flicked a glance toward me. "Figured you'd deliver him."

"Thanks, Lieutenant."

Parker said, "Okay, Mr. Wayne. Let's have your story."

During Wayne's recitation, I moved to Slaughter. I said, "What happened to Patsy?"

"I had him blow before I called for cops. No use getting him mixed up in a deal of mine."

"You spill everything?"

"Spilled it just like you told me, friend."

Hubbel was finished. Parker said, "You want me to fill you in, Pete?"

"I wish you would."

"Stuart Clarke has a bachelor suite at the Waldorf. He got a call this afternoon. Right after that call, he clicked the hotel operator and told her he was going out, and that if he got any calls, to transfer them to this number . . . Frank Slaughter's number. Which means he was headed here — in answer to a phone call."

"What time did he get this call?"

"Operator doesn't know. Best she could do was late afternoon, sometime between four and six." He turned to Slaughter. "You make that call, Mr. Slaughter?"

"I did not."

"You, Mr. Wayne?"

"No, sir."

Parker waggled a finger at the doorman and the doorman came to him. Parker's finger straightened out, pointing at Wayne. "You ever see this guy?"

Hesitantly the doorman said, "Yes . . . yes, sir."

"When?"

"I . . . I ain't sure. I saw him coming in. I'd say, well, maybe five o'clock."

"All right. You've already stated that you saw Mr. Clarke come in. Now . . . which one came here first?"

The doorman closed his eyes. The doorman opened his eyes. He rubbed open hands along the sides of his trousers. He squinted, grimaced, pouted, frowned. Finally he said, "I don't know. I ain't good at these things. I don't figure time. I'm a guy opens the door and closes the door, that's all. I seen this guy, and I see the other guy, the one what's dead, but that's all, I seen them. I don't know which came first, I don't know nothing like that."

Parker was kind. "Okay. Relax. That's perfectly natural. Ain't one doorman in fifty could give me that kind of information, not unless he

was staked out for exactly that. Okay." The finger pointed at Wayne. "Did you see him leave? What time was that?"

"I didn't see him leave."

"Didn't what?"

"Didn't see him leave."

"Is there any other way out?"

"Yes, sir. Back entrance. But that's locked."

"And yet you didn't see him leave?"

"Look, Mr. Lieutenant, please. I'm a guy opens the door and closes the door. Sometimes I don't do that. Sometimes I'm opening a taxi door, or sometimes I'm running an errand, or sometimes I'm in the basement grabbing a smoke. I don't keep no tabs on everybody going inside and out. That ain't my job, sir. All I can tell you, I didn't see this guy when he leaves. Now that don't mean he didn't leave. Just means I didn't see him."

Parker's voice was still kind, but there was a scratch of impatience in his throat. "Yeah, sure, perfectly natural. Okay. The stenographer's got your stament. Now get the hell out of here and go tend to your door. Bye, fella."

The doorman left and Parker rubbed an open palm against his mouth. Then he dropped the palm and blew breath in a long sigh. He said, "Mr. Wayne, here's the picture, and a lot of it matches up. Slaughter tells us you owed him twenty-five grand. That the truth?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any paper on that?"

"No, sir. Just my word. And if I didn't pay . . . well, Mr. Slaughter would have collected."

"Okay. Also, we got our own information on a thing you had going with Clarke. Over a girl, Kathy Prince. Wanna deny that?"

"No."

"So two birds can get knocked off with one stone. You come here, and Slaughter is out. You find his note that he won't be back till seventhirty. You got time to work out a fast one. You call Clarke and have him come here. Fingerprints on the phone are smudges, so we can't prove pro or con. Clarke is the kind of daredevil youngster ain't afraid of nothing. He gets here. You plug him. Then you blow. Like that you get rid of a rival, and you put Slaughter in a spot that can save you twenty-five grand. You haven't got any kind of an alibi that can hold water, a stroll and a movie, don't mean a thing. You get rid of the gun and you're home free. Maybe you are, and maybe you're not."

"One catch," I said.

"Go ahead and say it."

"The door was locked and there is no other possible means of entrance. How'd the man get in?"

Slowly Parker said, "A . . . very . . . proper . . . question, Mr. Private Detective." The finger wagged again. "Step up, Mr. Wayne."

Wayne moved to Parker.

"Mind very much," Parker said, "if we execute a gentle frisk?"

"I don't, if it's necessary."

"It's necessary."

Parker emptied Wayne's pockets and laid each item on the desk. There was a wallet, a packet of keys, a fountain pen, an address book, a comb, a handkerchief, cigarettes, matches, and a few coins. Parker skimmed through the address book, looked into the wallet, then lifted the packet of keys and flipped open the leather cover. He went to the door, pulled it open, and began trying keys in the lock. Two keys couldn't get in, the next got in but couldn't turn the lock, and the next got in *and turned the lock*. Parker kept twisting it in the lock, the bolt shooting in and out like the metal fang of a monstrous serpent. Finally he stopped, slammed the door, twisted about and put his hands on his hips.

"That's how," he said.

Hubbel Wayne was dead white. He swayed, almost falling against me.

Parker said, "Any comment, Mr. Wayne?"

"I . . . I . . . don't understand. I . . . simply don't understand."

"Okay," Parker said. "Figures for one of you two. Either Slaughter went crazily dumb and blasted an enemy in his own apartment, or Hubbel Wayne figured out a frame and tried to belt it through. It's one or it's the other." He went to the faltering Wayne and furnished the support of a meaty hand around a shaking arm. "When'd you shoot

a gun last, Mr. Wayne? This afternoon?"

"No."

"Recently?"

"No . . . no . . . matter of fact, I've never shot a gun in my life."

"Didn't, huh?" Parker released him and Wayne leaned on me. I could feel him shudder. Parker said, "What about you, Mr. Slaughter?"

"Not recently," Slaughter said. "Maybe a couple of months ago. Target practice, up at my place in the country."

"Okay," Parker said. "At least we can put the proof to that. Willing to submit to the paraffin gauntlet test, Mr. Wayne?"

"Paraffin . . . ? Gauntlet . . . ? I don't know what it is."

"It tells us whether you shot a gun recently. Willing or not, you're going to model it, just for size." He glanced toward Slaughter. "Okay with you?"

"Always willing to please, Lieutenant."

"Okay, gentlemen, let's get a move on."

We drove downtown in two cars, sirens intermittently nagging against the traffic like a stuttering lady driver besieged by a back-seat husband.

Paraffin gauntlet test: it's a scientific operation. When a sidearm is detonated, nitrate particles, invisible to the naked eye, are blown back into the palm of the gunner. The paraffin gauntlet test has been devised to discover such particles. The

procedure involves the heating of clear white filtered paraffin, and spraying the resultant liquid over the hand of the individual who is being examined until a hardening gauntlet of about the thickness of an eighth of an inch has been built up. The heat of the paraffin causes the pores of the skin to dilate and exude whatever particles may be lodged in the palm. When the paraffin has cooled so that it has completely solidified, the cast is gently peeled from the hand. Diphenylamine, you should excuse the expression, is the chemical reagent used to detect the presence of the nitrates. This reagent is applied to the inner surface of the cast and a positive reaction is indicated by the appearance of dark blue specks. That, friends and lovers, is the paraffin gauntlet test. Class dismissed.

Anyway, I had my feet up on a battered desk reading from a large tome about chemicals in police investigation, while Max Burly, the lab man, did the gauntlet job on Frank Slaughter. He came up with: "Negative on this guy," and then went to work on Hubbel Wayne. Twenty minutes later, he said:

"Positive."

Parker said, "You sure?"

"No question about it, Lieutenant. This reaction is absolutely positive."

This time Hubbel Wayne disdained the preliminaries. He fainted at the feet of Detective-lieutenant Parker. It took five minutes to bring

him to, and then Parker said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Wayne, I've got to hold you." He beckoned to two burly uniformed men, said, "Take him downstairs and book him . . . and take it easy, boys."

Slaughter said, "Am I through here?"

"Yeah," Parker said. "You too, Pete. And if either of you guys want me, I figure to be here, right here, for the rest of the night."

Outside, Slaughter said, "Can I drop you somewhere?"

"No, thanks."

He hailed a cab, got in and it pulled away, and when another cab honked a tentative horn at me, I waved him over and said, "10 East 63rd."

It was still early, a clear night with a cold white moon and a lot of stars. I sat back in the cab and munched over events, and a little bit I was sorry for Hubbel Wayne and then the cabbie said, "Okay, mister, this is it." I paid him and got out in front of a clean brownstone. In a small lobby I started to look for the name Prince in a spot allocated for bell-buttons and mail-boxes when the lobby door opened and a young couple came out. I caught the door before it closed and I said, "Excuse me, you know where Kathy Prince lives?"

The young man said, "You're right on top of it." He pointed inward. "Apartment 1. Right there. Studio apartment."

"Thanks."

The young man winked at me, grabbed his girl and they went away. I touched the doorbell of Apartment 1. I heard two-tone chimes within and the door was opened by an elderly lady wearing a hat with a feather sticking up. "I was just leaving," she said.

I said, "What?"

"What is it you wish?" she said.

"Kathy Prince."

"Who're you?"

"Did you say you were leaving?"

"Yes. I'm the maid. It's my time now. She's busy, but I'll tell her she's got a caller."

"Don't bother," I said.

"I beg your pardon?"

I flashed my patsy, quick-like, and put it away. "Leave," I said. "I'm from the police. To see Miss Prince."

"Police?" she said. "I . . . I only work here part time. I can't use no trouble, mister." Vague eyes were imploring. "I don't like to get mixed up in no . . ."

"Go home, lady. You're not mixed up in anything. Go home."

"Is it all right?"

"It's all right. Unless you insist on sticking around."

"No. I don't like no trouble with police. Never had no trouble, mister."

"Okay. You didn't see me, and I didn't see you. Now go on home."

She hesitated a moment, then: "All right, sir. Thanks. Thank you, sir."

"Bye."

She left, and I closed the door softly.

I went through a small foyer into a large, daintily-furnished, frilly living room, empty of Miss Kathy Prince. There was a wood-paneled door in the far wall and I crossed to that and opened it and what I saw popped my eyes like I'd suddenly developed a goiter.

The room was an artist's studio. Harsh white light was generated from a bank of fluorescent tubes across the ceiling. On a raised dais stood an ex-prize-fighter-turned-wrestler by name of Cornelius Flick. Mr. Flick was attired in nothing but the tightest of diminutive trunks. His chest was higher than a drunk torching for a lost lady-love, and his muscles bulged fit to bust. But that hadn't put the pressure behind my eyes. I had seen Mr. Flick before, many times, in and out of diminutive trunks.

But not Kathy Prince.

Not Kathy Price, that is, in diminutive trunks.

Miss Kathy Prince wore exactly nothing except the tiniest of tight panties frequently referred to as the Bikini type. Miss Kathy Prince was a lean long-legged blonde with tawny skin, all over. Miss Kathy Prince was slender, appropriately pointed, pink tinted, with green eyes, wild short-cut hair, and an imperious set to her head. She bore a palette in her left hand, a brush in her right, and she was doing the muscular Mr. Flick in deathless oil on a

large canvas. She slanted a glance at me and said, "Who let you in?"

"Just wandered in," I said.

Mr. Flick said, "Don't worry about that mug. He's one of them private eyesores."

"Hi, Corny," I said.

"Hi, Eyesore," Corny said. He smiled good-naturedly.

"Don't," Miss Prince admonished, "smile. Just keep it the way you were."

Corny relinquished the grin. Miss Prince dabbed. I oged.

Miss Prince said, "What do you want?"

"Me?" I said.

"You."

"My name is Peter Chambers."

"I'm thrilled." She kept painting.

"I didn't ask your name. I asked your business."

"Private detecting."

"Very funny."

"Knock it off, Miss Prince. I've got some serious business."

"Hell," she said. She flung the palette away and the brush after it. "How the hell can anybody work? You've got to be locked in a monastery to do any work."

"You?" I said. "In a monastery?"

She put her hands on her hips. She said, "What do you want?" Then she saw the way I was looking at her. She said, "Excuse me." She went to a corner, peeled a smock off the back of a chair, and put it on.

"I don't get it," I said.

Corny was still posing on the dais. "Okay, Corny," she said. "Relax."

Corny grinned and padded off the dais. "Got a cigarette, Eyesore?"

I gave him a cigarette, and lit it for him. I said, "I still don't get it."

"It's none of your business," Miss Prince said, "but I'll try to explain it. Corny is a wonderful model. But there's a certain expression I want of him, a certain tenseness of face and body, and I've found that I can achieve that best by working, well, in the particular uniform I've chosen. And if you've got any comment — I'm not interested."

"Dames," Corny said, "is nuts."

"Miss Prince," I said. "Could you tell me where you were this afternoon, between four and eight?"

"Now, look —"

"It's better to answer him," Corny said. "He's a guy always wrapped up in wacky items. He's a trouble guy."

"Could you tell me, Miss Prince?"

"At the museum, it's open late on Sundays."

"Which museum?"

"The Blender Foundation. A museum of modern art."

"Somebody with you?"

"No. I was alone. Now what's this all about?"

"One more question?"

"Yes?"

"Is it true that you're the beneficiary of a policy on the life of Stuart Clarke?"

Her eyes pushed down to green slits. "Now this is getting a little bit out of hand."

"Is it a fact, Miss Prince?"

"Yes, it's a fact, and what about it?"

"You're going to collect on that policy."

"What? What's that?"

"You're going to collect. That is, if you're not involved."

"What the *hell* are you talking about?"

Corny said, "You want I should flatten him, Miss Prince?"

"The best way," I said, "is usually the blunt way, so here goes. I'm sorry, Miss Prince, but Stuart Clarke was murdered this afternoon."

Her face turned beet red. She gulped and looked toward Corny. Corny said, "This guy ain't no joker."

"Who?" she said. "Who did it?"

"The police are holding an old friend of yours."

"Who?"

"Hubbel Wayne."

Her hand flew to her mouth. "No."

I said, "Okay, I did you a favor. I broke it to you fast and sudden. You want any more information, call Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker at Headquarters. They figure to get around to you pretty soon. This way you're prepared for it."

"Favor . . .?" she said.

Corny said, "You want I should flatten this egghead?"

"That's all," I said. "Thanks for the interview."

I started for the door. I heard Corny say, "Easy, Miss Prince. Them private eyesores, they're all

alike. They all got a head like a door-knob."

Doorknob. That sent me back to Slaughter's place.

I didn't go to the penthouse apartment. I went to the basement. I knocked on a door that had a black name-plate with white lettering. It said: SUPERINTENDENT. A large man opened the door. He had red hair and freckles and an inquiring expression. He was barefoot. He wore pale blue slacks and a matching sport shirt hanging out loosely over the slacks. I said, "May I speak with you?"

"What about?"

I showed him my badge. I said, "I'm a detective, working on a case." I left out the word private. That works most of the time. It worked this time. I said, "May I come in?"

"Sure," he said pleasantly. "Just a minute." He turned his head and called back: "Better go in the bedroom, Lenore. Got a man here wants to talk to me." There was the sound of a shuffle inside, then he faced back to me. "Having a couple of beers with the Missus. Wasn't expecting no company. Come in, Mister . . ."

"Chambers."

"My name's Wells. Come in."

He led me in to a kitchen. He said, "Like a beer?"

"No, thanks."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Chambers?"

"The papers'll have it by morning, Mr. Wells. There's been a murder."

"Murder? Where?"

"Upstairs. Mr. Slaughter's apartment."

"Yeah, yeah," he said musingly. "Fritz . . . that's the doorman outside . . . been acting like the pigeon that swallowed the canary, or the cat, or something. Been hinting about something, all swelled up and important. Said he ain't allowed to talk about it. So that's it, eh? Murder, eh? Up there by Slaughter. Well, whadyaknow . . .?"

I offered him a cigarette, lit his and mine. I blew at the match. "You fix a doorknob up there today?"

"Yeah. I did."

"When?"

"This evening." He brought an ashtray and I dumped the match. "About seven-thirty, eight o'clock."

"What was wrong with it?"

"It just wasn't there. Fell out, or something. I put in a new one, temporary."

"Where's the old one?"

"What's that?"

"The old one. The one that was in there before. You fixed the outside one, didn't you?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"The inside one is of brass."

"Correct. They're both supposed to be brass, inside and out. I put in a glass one on the outside, temporary. Sunday, you know. Ain't no hardware store open."

"Well, where's the old one?"

He scratched his head. "You know I never did think to ask. Mr. Slaughter showed me the door, said it needs a replacement, and it certainly did, being it only had one knob. I just put in the glass one, the replacement, temporary."

I rubbed out my cigarette. I said, "You got a phone?"

"Sure." He took me to it. "Right there."

I called Headquarters, asked for Louis Parker, got through to him, said, "Hi, Lieutenant. Pete Chambers."

"Hey. What you sic that gal on me for? Got her wailing all over the place."

"Gal?"

"Kathy Prince."

"Quick, she made it, eh?"

"Too quick for me. All right. What's bothering you?"

"Did you give Slaughter's place a shuffle?"

"Of course. What do you think, cops are not thorough?"

"Come up with anything strange?"

"Strange? Like what?"

"Like a doorknob."

"A *what*?"

"Doorknob."

There was silence for a moment. Then, "This a rib?"

"No."

"No doorknob."

"You give it a real shuffle?"

"Every inch of the joint."

"Okay, Lieutenant. Thanks."

"What's it about, Pete?"

"Don't know myself. Let you

know when I do. How's it with Wayne?"

"Got two lawyers down here. High-price lawyers. It's getting rough."

"Stay with it, Lieutenant."

"Thanks for the advice. I was sort of thinking of going off on a cruise to the Bahamas. But now I'm gonna re-consider . . ." He banged down his receiver.

I made it look good for Mr. Wells. I held my receiver to my ear, said, "Yes, Lieutenant, good-bye," to nobody, and hung up gently. I paced a bit, trying to sort my thoughts. I leaned back against a wall and a twinge of pain twisted at my bruised elbow. "What's with incinerators?" I blurted.

"Pardon?" said Mr. Wells.

"Incinerators," I said. "I bumped my elbow against an incinerator door in Slaughter's apartment. What's the set-up on incinerators?"

"Each apartment's got one of them shovel-doors for disposal. You dump your stuff, it goes down a shaft to the incinerator. Furnace downstairs."

"Where?"

"Basement."

"Isn't this the basement?"

"Sub-basement is where the furnace is."

"I see. When do you burn?"

"Every night. At eight o'clock."

"Done already, eh?"

"Ain't done today."

"What's special today?"

"Sunday."

“Oh.”

“I burn the stuff every day at eight o'clock. I skip Sundays.”

“Big furnace?”

“A beauty. Real beauty.”

“Let's go look at it. Let's go for a gander, Mr. Wells.”

“I'm with you, Mr. Chambers. Lemme get a pair of slippers on.”

In the sub-basement, he flicked on an unshaded white light. The furnace was a huge affair with a door at least four feet square. I began to shed my clothing as Wells watched without comment. Once he said, “It weren't Mr. Slaughter what got murdered, was it?”

“No.”

“Somebody else?”

“Yeah. In Slaughter's apartment.”

I was down to my shorts.

Wells said, “I think I get the drift.”

“I'm going into that furnace that's the drift, and poke around. That all right with you?”

“Sure. You're the law.”

The inside of a furnace is a rubble-packed mess, and it's darker than the ante room of a two-bit bordello. I poked my head out. “You got a flash, Mr. Wells?”

“Got everything down here. Got a flash, got a built-in shower, got towels, got everything.”

“Flash for the time being.”

“Coming at you.”

He brought me a flashlight and I re-entered the furnace. I became accustomed to the acrid odor of old

smoke and I crept around like an avid geologist in a newly-opened cave. Twenty minutes later, I was out of there bearing trophies. “How about a paper bag?” I inquired.

Wells furnished a brown paper bag. Into it I dropped one brass knob, a pair of expensive men's suede gloves and a white silk handkerchief.

Wells chuckled. “You look like you just came up out of a mine.”

“Can I use that built-in shower?”

“Help yourself, sir.”

Then, completely dressed and hanging on to my brown paper bag, I said, “Mr. Wells, I thank you for your co-operation. You've been of great help.” I dug into my wallet. Twenty dollars seemed the order of the day. I extracted a twenty and handed it over. “My appreciation.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I shrugged. “Expense account. One more thing, though.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Don't mention any of this to anyone. That's important.”

“You can depend on me, sir.”

Arnold Clemson was an elderly bespectacled gentleman with stooped shoulders and twinkling eyes. Arnold Clemson had been a professor of physics at Yale who had retired to open an Independent Laboratory and had made a good thing of it. Independent Laboratories have become as essential to our culture as water. There are Independent Laboratories to tell you about the lack

of harm in cigarettes, there are Independent Laboratories to tell you about the vitamins in frozen foods, there are Independent Laboratories to measure the sheerness of lingerie, there are Independent Laboratories to tell you about the efficacy of toothpastes, there are Independent Laboratories to inform you how pure the soap — in short, without Independent Laboratories we would be a percentage-less people — and what fun would there be unless we knew what soap was 97 and six tenths pure, or how high was our favorite cigarette in the non-irritating graphs, or how many people retained their upper molars who had the good sense to use a dentifrice with (or without) chlorine, or how long do you not stink after an intake of chlorophyll?

Arnold Clemson maintained his laboratory in a two-story building at 57th Street and 10th Avenue; the lower floor was the laboratory, and the upper floor was his apartment. Mr. Clemson was an early-go-to-bedder, and I shoved a thumb against the large old-fashioned push-button bell downstairs, and left it there. The clang of an interior gong sounded like a fire-alarm but I didn't let up. Finally, the door was opened by Mr. Clemson himself, fully attired, and smiling.

"All right, young man, all right." He peered over his silver-rimmed spectacles. "Peter Chambers, isn't it?"

"That's right, sir."

"Pleasure to see you, young man. Always a pleasure. You bring a fine bit of excitement into the humdrum existence of an old man. There's something I can do for you, I hope?"

"Yes, sir, there is."

"Come in, come in." He switched on a light and led me to the laboratory.

I said, "I thought you were in bed, sir."

"Not at all, not at all. Restless, this night. I was having a cup of tea, and, well, I was hoping against hope for an unusual assignment."

"I don't know how unusual this is." I opened the paper bag. "Gloves, a door knob and a handkerchief. I'd like you to give them the full treatment, and I'd like a report."

"Good, good. Police business?"

"I hope."

"When do you want your report?"

"Soon as possible. Could you have it delivered to my apartment?"

"Better than that. I'll deliver it myself. These old bones need a bit of movement." He smiled and nodded. "This is my night to howl. I thank you for stirring up this bit of excitement."

"And I thank you for accepting me as a client at this ungodly business hour. And I'm happy I found you in so cheerful a mood. You'll bill me at the office."

"I'll bill you, young man, don't worry about that."

"Got to run now. I'll be waiting at my apartment."

I had to walk across to Ninth

Avenue before I spotted a cab. I said, "Sixty-ninth and Park," and we tooled across the town and then I was checking my hat and hoisting myself up on Jerry Karas' bar stool.

"Plenty action," Jerry said.

"Yeah?"

"It's all over town."

"What?"

"About Clarke in a coffin, and Hubbel in the can."

"That's a neat, if cold-blooded, way of putting it."

"Only Hubbel ain't going to be in the can long. If you ask me, he's out already."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Where you been?"

"Busy. Let's hear about Hubbel."

"The lawyers got up there and went to work. It's Sunday, but they got a judge at home to sign a habeas corpus. Cops didn't have much to hold him."

"No?"

"No. Motive? There's plenty guys had motive. Nitrate particles? It could happen to anybody. But they got no gun, they got no witness."

"But they had a key that opened Slaughter's apartment."

"So what? You don't convict a guy for murder on the strength of a key. Anyway, you know what habeas corpus is?"

"Jerry, me lad, you never cease to amaze me. I know what habeas corpus is. Do you?"

"Sure. It's a writ, an order signed by a judge. It's a writ that gets you out of the can for a hearing before a

Criminal Courts Judge, gets you out temporary at least on a bond. Then the Judge at the hearing decides whether you stay out or go back to the can — depending on whether the cops got enough evidence to hold you pending a trial."

"Very good, Jerry boy."

"And you got to admit that right now there's enough what they call reasonable doubt to warrant this writ so that a judge can have a say on whether the cops really got enough to hold him."

"Anyway, temporarily, the writ springs him."

"He's sprung already, or he's gonna be sprung shortly. I'm only giving you what I heard. He ain't shown up here yet." He put a small square white paper doily in front of me, said, "What are you drinking? The same?"

"If you please."

Then there was a touch on my shoulder and I turned to Martha Lewis. Her wide black eyes were frightened and there was a faint shine of perspiration on her nose. Her tongue flipped out, wetting red lips. Softly she said, "You should have told me."

"Maybe. Only I didn't have the heart. I figured you'd find out soon enough."

She was very close to me. Her warm hand opened on my thigh. "I'm scared, Pete."

"Can we blow this joint?"

"Where? Where to?"

"My place."

"If you want, Pete . . ."

"I'm due there, plus I want to talk with you."

"Talk?" she said, and now the hand was rubbing at my thigh, gently.

"Can you make it, Martha?"

"Yes. I'll get the captain of waiters, I'll get Dmitri to take over for me." She smiled. "I'll go fix my face and pick you up here. Don't go 'way, detective."

I drank part of my drink, paid Jerry, and then Martha was back with a loose coat over her shoulders. I got my hat and a cab picked us up outside the door. I heard a motor start up as we pulled away. As we made a turn, a car behind us turned too. I didn't look back again. I didn't care. If we were being tailed, I didn't give the slightest whit of a damn. Anybody barging in on me could only help. So far it had been a merry-go-round.

Martha said, "I like your place. It's real cozy."

I said, "I'll take your coat."

"Sure."

She removed the coat and handed it to me. She stretched her arms up high and the striking lines of her figure brought me up short. Her smile was a small crooked pout and her expression was the pleased expression of a child but her eyes were intense and inviting. "Likee?" she said.

"Love." I began to go to a closet with the coat.

She said, "Just a minute."

She came to me, cupped my face in her warm hands, and took my lips in hers, sucking softly, her tongue moving in a long kiss. Then her hands dropped, and her eyes were narrow now and gleaming, and her nostrils tight, and she said, "I've been wanting to do that for a long time."

Lamely I said, "Somebody shoulda told me." I lifted the coat. "May I put this away now?"

"Yes. And you can make me a drink."

I hung the coat away. "Anything special?"

"Got vodka?"

"Got everything."

"Vodka martini?"

"The best."

"You talked me into it. Double."

I made the drinks in the kitchen, a double vodka martini, and a large scotch and water, and I brought them back into the living room. When she took her glass, her hand was trembling. She sipped off the top to keep it from spilling, then extended her hand, said, "To us."

"Both of us."

I nibbled at the scotch but Martha gulped half of her drink. "I'm just a little bit tight," she said. "I've been hitting gin and tonic, at the place, waiting for you to come back."

"Sit down, eh?"

She sat, near to me, on the couch. I put my drink down on the coffee table. She held on to hers, both hands around the stem of the glass,

sipping slowly, her smouldering eyes watching me, her beautiful face relaxed and composed. Then she set the glass down, empty, and she said, "We going to talk?"

"About Stuart Clarke."

"He was a son of a bitch. Period. A cold, heartless, uncompromising, unforgiving son of a bitch. Stuart Clarke. That was the whole of him, period."

The doorbell rang.

I went across and opened it. Arnold Clemson snatched his hat from his head, said, "Good evening, young man, good evening." He carried a neat little package that looked like a box of bon-bons wrapped for a gift.

"Evening, Mr. Clemson." I waved him in and closed the door behind him. "Everything in order?"

"Yes, sir, in order, that it is." Then he saw my company. "Oh. I trust I'm not intruding."

"No, sir, not at all. Now how'd we make out on our findings?"

"Findings, yes." He laid away his hat, placed the package near it, opened his jacket and withdrew an envelope. He opened that, extracted a typewritten sheet of paper, unfolded it, moved his glasses up on his nose, rumbled in his throat, commenced. "We have a brass doorknob, a pair of grey suede gloves, and a white silk handkerchief. The brass knob, now. Ordinary brass. Seems, however, said ordinary brass knob was treated with a chemical compound known as sodium hypochlorite."

"And the gloves?"

"The left glove discloses only the usual and ordinary impregnations. Not so the right glove. The right glove indicates the presence of nitrate particles."

"Nitrates, eh? What about the handkerchief?"

"There again we find evidence of sodium hypochlorite. You know what sodium hypochlorite is, young man?"

"Yes, sir."

He peered up at me, over his spectacles. "You do?"

"I was just reading one of your scientific tomes down at the lab at Police Headquarters this evening. Sodium hypochlorite is a bleaching agent commonly used in laundries. That right, sir?"

"Right as rain." He glanced at Martha and shook his head. "Our modern young men, they have the most gosh-awful fund of information."

"Don't they, though?" said Martha.

Clemson returned the sheet of paper to the envelope. "It's a challenge to me what sodium hypochlorite is doing on an ordinary brass doorknob. Do you wish me to leave this report here, young man?"

"Sleepy yet, Mr. Clemson?"

"Not a bit. Why?"

"The stuff in that little package?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, I could have the stuff and the report delivered to Police Headquarters . . ."

"You mean that's where it's going?"

"Yes."

"I'll take it for you, I'd love to. When I get together with the lab men down there, we really have ourselves a party. I don't have the time to indulge myself too frequently, but — on a night of insomnia, and when there's an errand to do . . ."

"Expensive errand-boy."

"No charge for the delivery, young man." He chuckled. "That's on the house. Anybody in particular you wanted it handed to?"

"Detective-Lieutenant Parker, with my compliments."

He chuckled again. "I may as well go the whole hog. Any message?"

"No, sir. None. It ought to keep him hopping a while."

"All right, then." He retrieved his hat, took up the package, bowed, and I led him out.

Martha Lewis said, "Quaint old guy. Who is he?"

"A world-renowned scientist."

"They all a little dizzy, those guys?"

"Quaint, perhaps. Dizzy, no."

She stood up. She said, "Time for another Martooni." She went toward the kitchen and I went with her. It is a small kitchen. There isn't much room. Suddenly, preparing the drinks, I turned, and I was body to body with Martha, and now her arms were tight around me, and mine around her, and her mouth writhed on mine, and we clung, swaying slightly.

So . . . the doorbell rang again.

"Murder," I said.

She followed me back. I opened the door to a Western Union boy. I signed for the telegram, tipped him, and closed the door.

Martha said, "Maybe you ought to get yourself a Do Not Disturb sign."

I wasn't listening. I'd ripped open the envelope and I was reading. PLAINTIFF MARTHA LEWIS CLARKE. DEFENDANT STUART CLARKE. OPEN AND SHUT. UNCONTESTED. CORESPONDENT FRANK SLAUGHTER. NO ALIMONY. DEFENDANT ORDERED TO RESUME MAIDEN NAME. ATTORNEY FOR PLAINTIFF BEN RADER. ATTORNEY FOR APPEARANCE BY DEFENDANT PAUL KLEIN. THAT'S THE FILE. ONE FAVOR LESS I OWE YOU. LOVE AND KISSES. WALDO BRYANT.

I said, "Jerry had it wrong. You didn't divorce Clarke. Clarke divorced you."

Now her eyes buttonholed to slits. "What? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Stuart Clarke. I've heard tell you had no love for him."

"Did at the beginning, but then he began to call me all kinds of names, like I was a dope, like I was an ignoramus, like what a mistake it was, his going overboard for me. Then he began neglecting me, began playing around, and then when I began playing around, bango, he had me, cheap private eyes, concealed cameras, the works. It was either I consented to a

divorce, nice and quiet, or get smeared all over the newspapers." Her eyes were open now, wide and wet. "No love for him? I hated his dirty guts."

I stuffed the telegram away. I said, "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Let's go see Slaughter."

"Why?"

"He's a client of mine. I've got a report for him." I went to the closet and got her coat and touched her elbow and we went to the door and I opened the door and the corridor was dark. It hadn't been dark when Clemson had called and it hadn't been dark when the telegram had been delivered, so somebody had just now tampered with the corridor lights, and my foyer light was on, so we were framed in the doorway. I slapped her down. I slapped her down hard and fell beside her, just as the shots came, two shots, and then the sound of running feet going away, two shots, and then her arms were around me, and she was moaning against me on the floor, her feet kicking, and one of them caught the door and slammed it shut.

"Hold me," she sobbed. "I'm scared, scared, scared. Hold me," she whispered, moaning, her legs moving convulsively. "Please hold me, please, please, hold me . . ."

I held her.

Half hour later we were at the penthouse apartment on Lower Washington Square and Frank

Slaughter opened the door for us.

"Nice to see you, kids," he said.

I said, "Drinks are in order. A lot of gin for her, and a little scotch for me."

"Nothing but the best," Slaughter said.

Martha took her gin and tonic to an easy chair and curled up with it. Slaughter dispatched a quick drink neat and chased it with soda. I sipped my highball and put it away. Slaughter said, "Hear about Wayne? He's sprung on a writ."

"I was going to tell you," I said.

"That's old stuff. What's new?"

"I've got your murderer. That's old stuff too. For you."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning you."

"You drunk?"

"I'm perfectly sober."

"Then what's with the double talk?"

"It's single talk, Slaughter, about a double frame."

"Look, friend. You either talk straight . . ."

"Straight talk? Sure. You killed Stuart Clarke, and fixed a frame to make it look like a frame on you. Like I said, a frame in reverse. Double frame."

You had to hand it to him. He stood there smiling, motionless and unflinching, but the sweat was out on his forehead like dew on an early morning dandelion. He said, "You're crazy. But as long as you've got a speech inside of you, you may as well make it."

"Thanks for the permission. Let's start with the fact that Clarke was putting a crimp in your style. Let's add that you threatened to get him, after dirty politics couldn't stop him. Let's start with that. Okay with you?"

"It's your speech, friend."

"Okay. It was a social murder, one for you to pull yourself, nothing to be trusted to your hoods, one to be pulled smart and clean. For that you need a fall guy."

"Like who?"

"Like Hubbel Wayne. He fit in with the double frame deal. He owed you twenty-five gees, and there wasn't even a note on it. So if he can put you in a spot where you get convicted of murder, he comes out from under on a debt which he can't pay, because if you're convicted of murder, you're dead. He fit. Because a guy in that position would figure to frame you. Plus, he had a personal hatred for Clarke over that Prince dame. So . . . Hubbel Wayne, perfect fall guy. How'm I doing?"

"No comment. Yet."

"You prepared every detail, and waited for the proper moment. It came, today. Wayne called you at four o'clock. You told him to come over at five. You added that you might not be here, but that he should come in and wait anyway."

His grin was sly. "Now why would I want to add that?"

"So that you'd be sure he'd turn the doorknob."

That shook him. I finally got a reaction. The smile faded and his lips were tight against his teeth. "You're smart. Too smart. Smarter than I figured you for."

"Want more?"

"I want it all. After that, maybe we talk business."

"I wouldn't bet on that if I were you. About the business."

"Let's hear, friend."

"Okay. Wayne was coming at five. You called Clarke at the Waldorf, told him you wanted him pronto, that it was important. The guy came here because he was a guy who wasn't afraid, and he was intelligent enough to know you wouldn't call a D.A. up to your apartment and bump him. It just ain't done. But you did it. He came and you bumped him. You didn't use that legal roscoe you wear in your belt holster. You used another gun."

"Correction, please. Remember the paraffin test. My hands were clean."

"I'll do it for you slow now. I'll give you a real high-class reenactment. First you put on a pair of gloves. Grey suede gloves."

"How . . .?" he choked.

"I'll come to the how when I'm ready. Grey suede gloves. You bumped him. He fell behind the desk. You threw the gloves down the incinerator. Then, immediately, you left. But you made sure that the door remained locked so that Wayne couldn't get in."

"That all?"

"No, sir, it isn't. Then you dusted the outside knob with sodium hypochlorite."

Suddenly Martha piped up in a choked voice. "But why, why would he do that?"

"Because it was part of the double frame, the frame within a frame. This bum learned somehow that sodium hypochlorite gives a positive reaction to the paraffin gauntlet test. That's a fact. Every private cop knows that, or should, and I only re-read it today in one of the books in the police lab. It's easily obtainable. Laundry workers use it. So, Wayne comes here to a locked door, gets the stuff on his hand, and now he'll have a positive reaction, while this bum who used gloves will have a negative reaction."

"Then what?" Slaughter said. "And think hard about you and me doing business, friend."

"Then the dirty work was over. Now it was mop-up. You didn't throw the gun away, that's old stuff. You went somewhere and dismantled it, like all our clever murderers do. You fling a gun away and it can be dredged up and all of a sudden it can be used against you. But dismantle it first, and throw it away, piece by piece, all over the city, and that gun is gone, brother, all gone."

"Then?" he whispered.

"Then you picked up Patsy and came back here, and lo and behold,

you find a stiff, and you send Patsy for me. Why me? I'll tell you why me. You pay the private eye two thousand bucks, and the private eye digs around, and he wraps it up for you, he perfects the frame. He gives you motive for Wayne, he gives you Wayne who'll react positive to the paraffin. He gives you Wayne with a key on him that'll open your door. It's worth two thousand bucks to have a guy hustling around for you, and maybe if you made any mistakes, the guy'll find them, and then you do business. You even made sure that I start operating after eight o'clock."

"Why? Why?"

"Because you know the furnace downstairs goes on at eight o'clock, and goodbye evidence, burnt by fire. But you slipped there."

"How?"

"Sunday."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Mr. Wells downstairs doesn't fire his furnace on Sunday."

"But . . . but . . ."

"No buts. You made your discreet inquiries, you learned the fixed hour for the furnace, but you didn't know that it was no-go for Sundays. So, guess what? Little-boy-me goes foraging in the furnace and comes up with the door knob, the gloves and the handkerchief . . . they're all down at Police Headquarters."

"Handkerchief?"

"Must I recite every step? When

you got back here with Patsy, you used the handkerchief on the knob when you opened the door. Real sly-like mopping the brow stuff, so you wouldn't wise up Patsy. Then when you sent him for me, you used the handkerchief again to get the knob off, dumped it and the handkerchief down the incinerator, and got Wells to put a new knob on."

There was a kind of reluctant admiration in his eyes. He walked away from me, pacing. I grabbed a sip from my highball and set it down. He came back to me, said, "How much do the cops know of this?"

"Not much. Yet."

Now it was satisfaction that was in his eyes. "Good. Good for business." He was very near me. "When did this . . . when did it begin to come to you?"

"When Parker found the key on Wayne. No guy who killed a guy would walk around with that kind of evidence on him. I couldn't figure how it got onto Wayne's key-pocket, but I know now."

"How much the hell *do* you know?"

"I know it all." I pointed. "There's the baby, sitting right there, hanging on to her gin and tonic. You and she were pretty friendly people, what with you being named as correspondent in the divorce between her and Clarke. So you got her, by means of threats, probably, to slip that key onto

Wayne's packet, which explains the shooting at my place tonight."

"This a new deal you're sticking me into?"

"Same deal. Social murder. One loose end. Martha Lewis slipped that key to Wayne. Martha Lewis, witness. There's no witness like a dead witness. You couldn't do it at the Sixty Nine, but you were parked out there when I took her out, tailed us, screwed the bulbs out in the wall brackets of the corridor outside my door, and bang-bang. You're a lousy shot."

The glass of gin trembled against Martha's teeth. "I thought that was you the shooting was for, not me. You. You."

I said, "You didn't have time for a dismantle job. I bet that roscoe is still on you, with two bullets discharged, and I bet when those bullets are dug out of my apartment, ballistics'll match them. I bet it's still on you, pal."

We both had the same thought at the same time. We both wanted his gun and we went for it together and like that we tangled. He kicked me hard in the groin but I hung on to him and we went down together. I had one hand hooked in his belt over the holster and the other hand was a fist that beat into his face. He wrenched loose finally, but the holster was in my hand and I flung it into a corner as he came at me again. Martha was standing in the easy chair, screaming, and then she flung the glass and it crashed

against his forehead, opening a gash, and blood came down over his eyes, blinding him as he fell against me. I kept pecking at the eyes, smashing at them, keeping him off balance, and then his chin was clear, and I crashed my knuckles against that, and it jolted his head back, but still he stood, flailing powerful fists. I stepped back and rammed one to his stomach, and the wind came out of him, and then he got everything I had, a right with all of my weight behind it, pivoting on my left foot, clean and hard on the chin again, and he shuddered a moment like a ship straining at an anchor, and then he fell with a thud.

Martha was near me, telling me: "I'm scared, scared . . ."

"You're going to have to testify against him."

"I'm scared, I tell you."

She stayed with me as I got the holster and opened it. I broke the revolver and I showed her: two bullets had been discharged. I said, "You testify, you're safe. You lock it up. With you it's a clean-cut case all the way. Any other way, he'll find you and he'll kill you."

I headed for the phone on the desk but she clung to me, impeding me. "Hold me, sweetie, please hold me, I'm scared, I'm scared to death."

It was a doctor by name Kinsey,

was it not, once compiled a scientific treatise concerning the female of the gender, and he made mention therein of the fact that many of the components of the conjugal drive are the self-same components contained in the emotion of fear, and there exists a relationship between the two. Martha Lewis was certainly a fine case in point for the learned doctor. I elbowed my way out of her grasp and I finally made it to Slaughter's desk and I sat down but Martha was in my lap. So, with my left arm around a soft and supple waist, and my mouth tremulously engaged by warm and hungry lips — my right hand dialed O for operator — and then I had to fight free, albeit with delicious exertion, to put through my call to Detective-Lieutenant Louis Parker at Police Headquarters.

**AUTHENTICATION:** It is factual that a (false) positive reaction is obtained under the paraffin test seeking nitrates in palm after the discharge of a sidearm when sodium hypochlorite (or any other bleaching agent) is present in an otherwise innocent palm.

*See:* AN INTRODUCTION TO CRIMINALISTICS by Charles E. O'Hara and James W. Osterburg (both members of the staff, Police Laboratory, New York City Police Department).



# CRIME CAVALCADE

BY VINCENT H. GADDIS

## **Turnabout**

Horace C. Turner, 23, stole \$430 from a parked truck in Alexandria, Va., and was captured after a chase by the owner and several bystanders. Turner readily admitted the theft, but then he discovered the loot was missing. Police said one of his pursuers apparently had stolen the cash and escaped during the excitement of the capture.

## **Authoritative Comment**

A charge that there is corruption among officials of the city of New Bedford, Mass., was made in July by Mayor Edward C. Peirce. The mayor made his charge from his prison cell where he is serving a four-year term for gambling conspiracy.

## **Sex Problem**

An argument about the sex of the devil led to the fatal shooting of Stanley Webb and the arrest of Benjamin Patterson, 60, on a charge of murder in Houston, Tex. After an investigation, police said that Patterson insisted that the personification of evil was female, while his victim disagreed.

## **Free Lunch**

New York City police credit William Kampf, a paroled ex-con-

vict, for pulling one of the city's zaniest holdups in years. Kampf entered a Brooklyn restaurant, pulled a gun, and forced the owner and his waiter to serve ham and eggs, free of charge, to 20 customers. A wave of Kampf's pistol forced persons present, who said they were not hungry, to swallow the food. Kampf finally took \$70 from the cash register and fled in his car. After police traced the car to Kampf's apartment and arrested him, the bandit was charged with robbery and assault.

## **Unfruitful Industry**

Officers in Des Moines, Iowa, watched a 58-year-old man painting a house by the light of the moon, and then arrested him on charges of public intoxication. They said he didn't have any paint in his bucket.

## **Lost and Found**

A resident of San Francisco, Calif., told police that it wasn't ingratitude that caused him to turn down a request for a reward when a stranger came to his home and returned a missing government bond. He said the stranger gave him the bond, which had been stolen in a robbery, and said: "I sort of hoped there'd be a little reward."

"I figured the man must have had something to do with the robbery,"

the complainant said, "since he was wearing my suede jacket, my shirt, and carrying my plastic raincoat."

### **Psychological Escape**

A French Intelligence officer, Captain Charles Lux, used psychological misdirection in successfully escaping from a military fortress in Glatz, Germany, in 1911. Lux discovered that he could pick the locks on several doors and reach the barred window of an unused cell overlooking the street. He also found that he could send secret messages out of the prison by writing them in invisible ink on the inside of envelopes. Lux wrote to his brother, and asked him to send a faked passport, some money, several small saws, and material for a rope.

The first package, which contained a dozen bath towels to be used as a rope and the passport concealed in the cover of a book, was passed on to Lux by the prison warden without suspicion. The second package, however, which would contain the saws and some gold coins, presented a problem, and Lux instructed his brother to enclose the saws and money inside a literary novel by removing the inner part of the pages. Two other books were to be included in the shipment.

The captain's trick worked as planned. When the books arrived, the warden glanced at the novel's cover and approved its delivery without examination. He instantly seized the other two books, however,

and settled down to enjoy himself. They were filled with obscene pictures and illustrations.

### **Added Advice**

In New Mexico, one of the traffic signs in use reads: "School Zone — Don't kill a child." On one of the signs, state police reported recently, someone had added in a childish scrawl: "Wait for a teacher."

### **Shirt Shift**

Police officers in command of each shift at Toledo, Ohio, receive a bulletin each week containing announcements and instructions. An item in one recent bulletin puzzled the officers. It read: "Eighteen academy-trained recruits will be assigned to initial uniform duty June 1. There will be six men to a shirt."

### **Short and Sweet**

In Mexico City a thief was running away after snatching a purse. He turned into a doorway. It was the entrance to the police station.

### **Futile Disguise**

In San Francisco, Melvin Mills escaped from police after being picked up for drunken driving. Officers went to his home and found him hanging from a coat hook in a closet. The fugitive explained that he was doing his best to resemble "a suit of clothes."

### **One of Those Nights**

Bad luck plagued a burglar in

Peoria, Ill., when he attempted to rob a loan company office. The intruder, after smashing a window, stepped through the opening and fell into a large pan of oil. When he fell, he also upset a large fire extinguisher which went off, dousing him with its spray. Oily, wet and disgusted, the burglar beat a hasty retreat through the window — too hasty, in fact, since bloodstains on the sill revealed that he cut himself on the broken glass as he made his escape.

### ***It Comes Natural***

Officials at San Francisco, Calif., county's jail No. 2 reported recently that a \$61 shortage had been discovered in the prisoner owned and operated fund for cigarettes and candy.

### ***Money Finds a Way***

Armon Whittington, of Hazlehurst, Miss., won't have to serve 90 days at the Copiah county penal farm after all. After receiving the sentence on a charge of possessing liquor in bone-dry Mississippi, he appealed his conviction to a higher court. Before the appeal came up, county officials decided to abandon the institution and sell the farm at

auction. Whittington was the high bidder.

### ***One Must Be Neat***

Miss Marilyn Gustofson told police in Bellingham, Wash., that the thief who broke into her apartment took \$4 in cash, opened her refrigerator and drank all her tomato juice, and finally took time out to shave, leaving her bathroom "in a mess."

### ***Victim of Impulse***

In New York City, 52-year-old Adolph A. Maier, a bus mechanic, dreamed of operating one of the vehicles he serviced. Finally he obeyed that impulse, climbed into one of the company's buses, and took off on a three-hour tour of Manhattan and the Bronx. Occasionally, he'd pick up passengers, but he disregarded completely the bus routes. Several regular bus drivers finally telephoned the office about the wayward bus that disregarded company regulations.

When police caught up with Maier, they found his fare box disclosed he'd collected \$5.50 — for 58 passengers — but he had only 25 cents in the till. He was charged with vehicle taking and grand larceny.



*"Okay," Malone said, "she was poisoned. But where — in a locked, sealed, empty room — did the poison come from?"*

*A John J. Malone Story*  
**BY CRAIG RICE**

**S**HE WAS poisoned, all right," Captain von Flanagan of Homicide growled. "Cyanide."

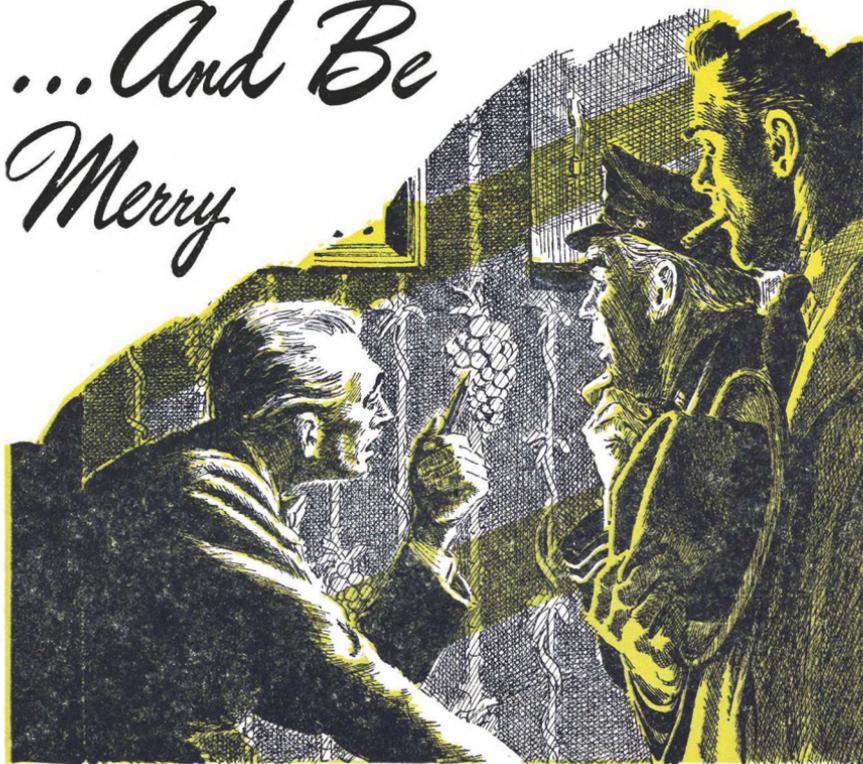
"But was it murder?" John J. Malone asked.

"It must have been," von Flanagan said. "Oh, she was a little goofy. She'd been to a psychiatrist. A Dr. Hill."

"I know him," the little Chicago lawyer said.

"You know everybody," the police officer said. He went on: "Her husband — Ernie Madison — told us that. But she didn't have a suicidal brand of goofiness, if you know what I mean. Nor any reason for suicide. And she couldn't have

*... And Be Merry*



done it if she'd wanted to. Facts are all against it."

Malone lifted a questioning eyebrow.

"There isn't a trace of cyanide in that whole apartment," von Flanagan said unhappily. "And cyanide kills you on the spot. There would have to be a glass, or something for her to have taken it in."

"So you're holding the husband on suspicion," Malone said, unwrapping a fresh cigar.

"He had all the motives," von Flanagan told him. "She had all the money, plus insurance. He was running around with another woman." He scowled. "But I don't know how long we can hold him if we can't find out how he did it."

"Not very long," the little lawyer said.

"Not one thing in that whole apartment had any trace of cyanide. We even thought of one pill put into a bottle of harmless pills. No dice. She was alone in the apartment when she died, and the door was bolted. But somehow, that poison was given to her. How?"

Malone stood up, stretched, relit his cigar, and said, "Let's go talk to Dr. Hill. I'm not sure why, but I've got a hunch."

The eminent, white-haired psychiatrist listened gravely to the problem. At last he nodded. "I may be able to help you," he said slowly. "I suggest we go up and have a look at that apartment."

It was a pleasant, well-furnished

and spotlessly neat apartment on Chicago's north side. Von Flanagan led the way to the room where the body of Alma Madison had been found. It was the dinette, a cheerful little room with brightly painted furniture and gay wall-paper patterned with tropical fruit in glowing colors.

The doctor went straight to the wall-paper, examined it closely, then called to the police officer and the lawyer. He pointed out several dampish spots on the wall, scattered on a huge cluster of grapes.

"Don't touch it," he warned, "there may be more. But there's your cyanide. And I think if you'll take me downtown and let me talk to your suspect, I'll be able to get a confession for you."

Later the three men sat talking it over, with the help of beer and cigars.

"He put the cyanide on the wall-paper, knowing she'd get it on her fingers and lick it off," von Flanagan mused. "But how did you know?"

The doctor smiled. "He came with her when she consulted me, and sat just outside where he could hear every word. It was late in the day and there was no one else in the office, not even my secretary. Only he and I knew what she said."

"But what did she say?" Malone demanded.

"She had a simple obsession. She said, 'Doctor, I've come to you because I'm mad about eating grapes.

I'm crazy about eating grapes.' I questioned her at great length. She was an intelligent young woman, and there was obviously nothing else the matter with her."

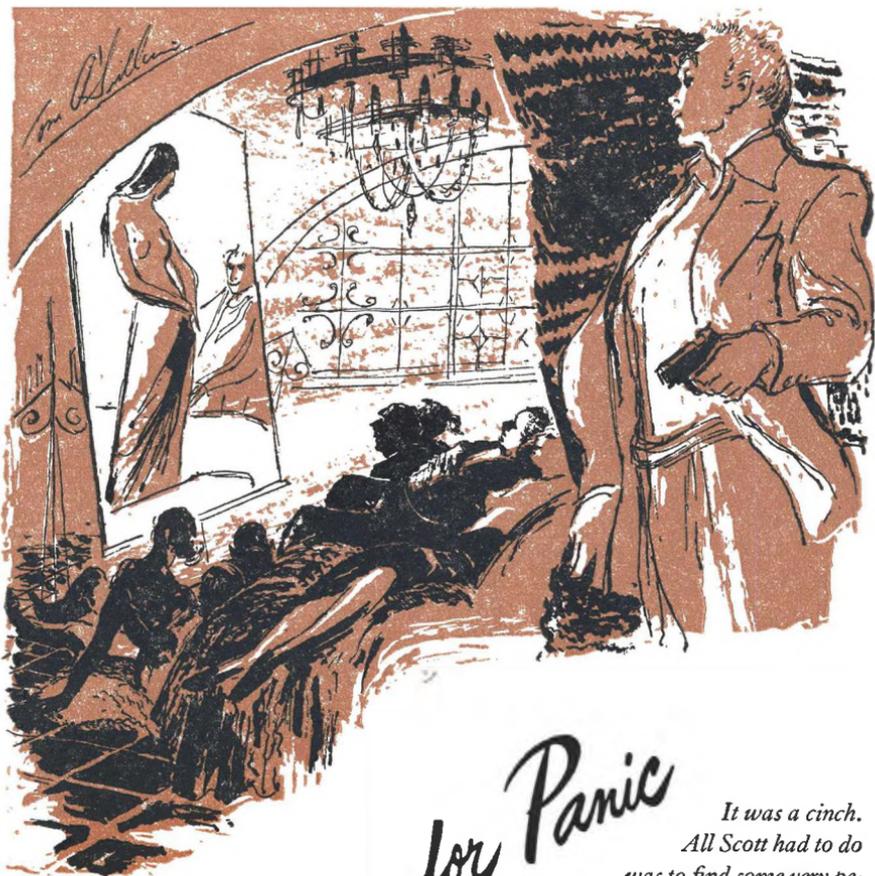
The doctor shook his silvery head and sighed deeply. "I did my best to reassure her. I told her that all over the world there were millions of people who loved to eat grapes,

who were mad about eating grapes, she had nothing to worry about, I said."

"Well?" Malone said.

"She smiled at me. She said, 'Doctor, I know all that. I know there are millions of people who are crazy about eating grapes. But you see, Doctor, I like to eat them off the wall-paper.'"





## Pattern for Panic

*It was a cinch.  
All Scott had to do  
was to find some very pe-  
culiar movies — without let-  
ting anybody know what he was doing.*

*A Full-Length Shell Scott Novel*

**By RICHARD S. PRATHER**

I RESTED what seemed to be left of my head against the comparatively cool steel door of my cell and cursed Mexico, Mexico City jails, Mexico City cops, and a sad old

horse's behind named Shell Scott — me. This was one hell of a spot for a Los Angeles private detective. My hair is nearly white and usually sticks up in the air about an inch; now it

seemed likely that the cops had pounded it into my skull. I felt again to make sure I still had it. It was there, among my bumps.

There is very little to be said for jails in any part of the world, but the charitable thing to say about Mexican jails is that they leave much to be desired. What I actually desired was out, but from all the signs this might be my home from now on. I couldn't even explain that I wanted a lawyer, or a writ, or a gun, because I talked in English and everybody listened in Spanish.

I cursed everything some more, and about the time I got around to one particular cop, he came walking back to the cell block. He grinned in at me through my open steel window, and in the dim light I could see the empty space in his mouth where I had knocked out two of his teeth. Even with all his teeth he'd been no prize; tall and thin with slightly protruding eyes, the skin too tight over his cheekbones, and an expression that said more plainly than words that this boy was not bright.

"Hello, you stupe," I said. "I hope you swallowed those teeth and they bite hell out of you. I hope you get the Tourist Disease and bleed to death. Come a little closer. I like to hit cops." He couldn't understand English, so it was O.K.

"Gringo bastard," he said. "You keep it up, I kill you."

I blinked. "How come nobody speaks English till now? And where the hell is that slick-looking bastard

who started the whole thing? And how about letting me use the phone?"

I had one hand curled around the edge of my little window, and he swung a long wooden billy in a short arc and cracked it against my knuckles. I stepped back from the cell door and said, "Friend, I won't be in here forever."

He moved in closer, grinning. "Yes," he said, "you be here forever. I make sure." He wiggled his billy at me and walked back down the corridor leading to the front office.

There was something damned screwy about this mess. I should have known that not even 206 pounds of ex-Marine was a match for seven cops and one civilian — but those other six cops had shown up in an awful hurry. I thought about Amador Montalba, wondering if he even knew I was in the can. Amador Montalba, licensed Mexico City guide, good friend, fun — and a guy with more angles than a geometry professor. He could get you a date — with a man, woman, both, or neither — find a roulette wheel, expensive nightclubs or dim dives, dirty movies or clean food, and so on and on.

Three months back I'd gone from Los Angeles to Acapulco, Mexico on a case, after which I'd come here to Mexico City to relax. I'd met Amador at the Hotel del Prado, and we'd had a few drinks in the Bar Nicté-Ha. He was half a foot shorter

than my six-two, with a round young face and a black mustache over gleaming white teeth, and a bland, honest, dissipated expression. With a highball in his hand he looked a little like a fallen cherub. We'd hit several spots in town since then, simply because we enjoyed each other's company.

Earlier this Saturday night I'd had dinner with three people from the States who were my only good friends here except for Amador. They were Doctor Jerrold Buffington, his lovely daughter, Susan, and a tasty dish named Monique Durand. After that dinner, trouble had started and I'd been hauled to jail; but just before I was shoved back to my cell, Monique had trotted in, and I'd yelled at her to phone Amador Montalba, who was in the book. There wasn't a thing I could do now but wait, so I lay down on my cot and let some little bugs bite me.

Half an hour later, at seven P.M., Amador stopped outside my cell and looked in at me shaking his head back and forth and making a clucking sound with his tongue. His black mustache wiggled as he smiled, entirely too happily, it seemed to me.

"*Muy* funny," Amador said. "I laugh, *ja, ja*. You on the wrong side, ain't you?"

"Pal," I said, "in spite of your perverted sense of humor, I'm glad to see you. Monique called you, huh?"

"Some gal phoned me and yelped you were in the *carcel*. I figure I have to see this." He grinned at me.

I shook his hand through the window while a cop watched us. Amador was a real nice guy — at least from my point of view. Some might say his morals needed patching, but I figured he was just more uninhibited than most of us.

I said, "What the hell they got me charged with?"

"Just about everything. What happened?"

I told him and he frowned, then said, "You had to knock out his teeth? You know who he is? This is Emilio, the Captain of Police. No matter who is wrong, the Captain is right. I can't do nothing for you. Maybe the president could, but not me."

I swore. Uneasiness stirred inside me as I thought of my conversation with Doctor Buffington at dinner, and the funny business before the fight started. "Do me a favor, Amador," I said. "Call the Hotel del Prado and see if Doctor Buffington and his daughter are there. Tell them what happened to me, huh?"

"Sure," he said. "*Momentito*." It took him about five minutes. He looked sort of funny when he came back.

"You get them?" I asked.

"Got the girl. This Susan — that's her name?" I nodded. Her name was Susan, but she was called Buff, which fit her better: the doctor's daughter was a doll. Amador went on, "She was about to go off in many directions all excited. She doesn't know where the doctor is, said he hadn't

showed up. Wanted to know if you were all right, and if her dad was with you."

I didn't like that at all. Finally I said, "I've got to get out of this stinking jail. Hell, man, don't you know somebody — a lawyer can spring me, can't he? Get me a lawyer."

"Not tonight. Maybe not for many nights. That is straight from Captain Emilio — and don't tell me he can't do it. He dislikes you. I don't know anybody else with enough pull . . ." He stopped. "Wait a minute. Maybe I do." He grabbed the right half of his mustache and played with it, squinting. "There's half a chance," he said after a minute of silence. "I know you over a month, but you never told me — you a good detective?"

"Pretty good. What's that got to do with it?"

"Got plenty, I think. Could you find a sexy movie, a real dirty movie film, here in Mexico City?"

"Sure, I'll hire a guide and tell him I want to see dirty movies. What the —"

He lifted a hand. "I'm serious. And I mean one reel, one specific film, of one specific woman."

"How do I know? Hell, I don't even speak the language."

He shrugged. "So you don't want out."

"O.K.," I said. "Get me clear of this trap and I'll find the missing link. You really serious?"

"*Si*. It's a gamble, but maybe it

works. This gal has got the pull, but maybe she won't go for it. Well, I go see the Countess." He turned on his heel and started to leave.

"Hey," I yelled. He stopped and I said, "*What* gal? Countess? You feel okay? This *is* the jail, isn't it?"

He grinned. "It is the jail, all right. But I get you out — maybe." He squinted at me. "Hey, you know, this Countess, she's what you call a classy vegetable."

"Tomato?"

"*Si*. She's a tomato. You will observe." He curved his hands through the air and whistled through his teeth. He said, "She's the gal in the movie." Then he walked out.

I reached up and felt my head. Maybe I'd been hit harder than I thought. I stopped trying to figure it out and flopped on the cot thinking how pleasant life had seemed a couple hours ago and how dismal it appeared at the moment. How the hell had I got from the charming lounge of the Hotel Monte Cassino to this most uncharming clink?

I think the evening started turning sour somewhere around the time Doctor Buffington and I began discussing dead apes. I thought about that, wondering occasionally if Amador had, in some peculiar fashion, flipped.

2.

It had been about five P.M. then, and there was enough pulchritude at our table in the Monte Cassino

Lounge so that my eyes shouldn't have wandered. Buff sat opposite me next to her father, the doc, and Monique was close on my right — though I'd rather have had Buff there. Either of the gals had plenty to occupy all a man's attention, but they were sitting still and I happened to see this cigarette girl in motion, which is an entirely inadequate word for the way she walked.

Apparently instead of hip joints she had ball bearings, and she oozed past the table calling softly, "Cigarettes? *Cigarros*? Cigarettes?" in a voice that could sell hashish. Her upper half was a staggering affair in a loose and extremely low-cut something which vaguely resembled a blouse. She was carrying a cigarette tray in front of her, and it seemed like a good thing, just in case.

Monique pinched my leg. "Ah," I said, "Hello. I think I'm out of cigarettes. Anybody want cigarettes? Monique? Buff? Doctor? Pack of Belmonts?"

Buff rested her chin in a cupped palm and leaned forward, a strand of blonde hair dropping over one gray eye. "Shell," she said, "you pay attention." She was smiling.

Monique had her tongue stuck into one cheek, her left eyebrow raised. I couldn't help contrasting the two gals. Buff was fair, soft, a young nineteen, mischievous. White skin and ash-gray eyes with a twinkle in them; long blonde, almost cobwebby hair and a bright red mouth with laughter always behind

it. She wasn't really beautiful, just fresh and healthy and happy-looking.

Monique, though, was different. In a way, I thought of Buff as "light," and Monique as "dark." It was more than Monique's feather-cut black hair and dark green eyes. It was a darkness and quietness and a kind of smoldering tension inside her. It was the direct glance of her half-lidded eyes, the droop of a heavy lower lip, the scarlet color of those bruised-looking lips. She was warmth, heat, fire. She just plain looked hotter than hell.

Monique had come to Mexico with the Buffingtons, and though I knew she and Buff had known each other less than two months, they already acted like sisters. I'd met them a week ago at the Del Prado where we all were staying; since then I'd been with them most of the time — and the main reason was Buff. I'm a bachelor who can usually take the gals or leave them, but Buff was getting under my skin, for sure. She made me think of Spring, of young things swelling with life and growing, maybe because she was so young and full of life herself. But she was mature, a woman with poise and wit — and shaped like a censor's prayer. She made me think, once in a while, of fireplaces, long lazy conversations, home-cooked meals.

Doctor Buffington, short and thin, with a wrinkled face and a stubby goatee that made him look older than his fifty years, was a research worker, investigating polio, at the

Southwest Medical Institute near my stamping grounds, Los Angeles. His wife had died six years back, of polio, and he had transferred all his love for her to their only child, Buff, and to his work. He and I had just been arguing pleasantly over high-balls.

Doctor Buffington was well known in the States not only as a man of science, but as an ardent pacifist and isolationist. He was combining his vacation here with the chance to address a meeting of the International Legion for Peace, the ILP. This afternoon he'd delivered that address and Buff, Monique, and I had been in the audience. After the talks there'd been a typical Communist demonstration, the Reds carrying signs and shouting that Russia was for peace, and condemning the "imperialists" and "capitalist exploiters." Doctor Buffington was a brilliant man, but blind to many things going on outside his lab, including the activities of Communists all over the world — and that was what we'd been arguing about.

"Doc," I said, "it was a fine speech, but we just don't see with the same eyes. You talked today about the stupidity of war logically enough, but if you want people to believe you, most of the time you can forget logic. Belief isn't logical, it's chemical and emotional, and it's *emotion* you've got to bang on. You've got to make the dogs salivate, Doc, and don't forget that Pavlov was a Russian."

Doctor Buffington yanked on his goatee. "Always you talk about the Russians. Shell, as if the word were an expletive. As long as there is such complete lack of understanding among peoples, there will be war."

"How understanding can you get? Start with the little ones: Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia. Add the Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Romanians, Bulgarians. Throw in most of the Chinese and a pile of Koreans and East-Germans. Not to mention the Commies everywhere in the States, in Iran, Egypt, here in Mexico, hell, every place you can name. I wouldn't be surprised if the slobs were on the dark side of the moon. You can't play footsie with Commies, Doc; they take the foot."

His reply was interrupted. "Cigarettes? *Cigarros?*"

I turned my head. And there she was, it was, they were — the Mexican cigarette girl. She was bent way over, leaning toward me over the tray of cigarettes, and it looked as if she were going to go up in smokes.

"Cigarettes?"

I've got to tell you. She had a physique no red-blooded man would ever forget if he saw it, and she was doing her best to help me remember, and her best got better every second. And it was later than she thought. She was wearing a really laughable blouse; one giggle and it would be gone.

"Yes," I said. "Naturally."

She cleverly stayed bent over

while she made change, and when I got back to normal the conversation had died and dinner was on the table. The doctor held forth about his work and I looked around, spotted a big good-looking Mexican man ogling our table. It was worth ogling, and it seemed silly for me to be sitting with two such delightful dolls and talking to Doc about dead apes. The way they'd died interested me, though.

The doc's big hope in his polio research was that he'd find the serum or "Elixir X" which might save hundreds of thousands of lives. A little over two months back he'd shot some new gook into experimental chimpanzees and their movements became jerky, disoriented; they blundered around their cages, banging into the bars, then fell, twitched a bit, and died. He'd followed up on that particular serum and found out what was wrong. I couldn't understand all his explanation about dendrites, and synapses becoming inoperable, and the nervous system rotting away, but what it boiled down to, as far as I was concerned, was that the synapse is apparently like a bridge the mental impulse has to cross — and the bridges were out; consequently the brain couldn't transmit orders to any affected part of the body.

"Screwy," I said. "This nerve gook knocked off the chimps?"

"They actually died of suffocation, couldn't breathe. But they'd have died from any one of a number of other complications."

I thought a minute. "The stuff sounds a little like the nerve gases you hear about as possible weapons."

"Somewhat. But this was more deadly than anything else I've heard of. What's in your mind occurred to me, of course. I learned enough about it to guess that it would make an unbelievably horrible weapon, relatively simple to produce." He frowned. "As a matter of fact I was twice approached by men from the Army. Some of my colleagues knew about my experiments, of course, and apparently word got around. One man, a colonel, came all the way from the Army Chemical Corps medical laboratory at Edgewood, Maryland, where nerve-gas experiments are conducted, and suggested that I return with him." He sighed. "I told both men I had destroyed everything, could not reproduce my experiments. I had destroyed it all by then, formula, notes, all of it."

Buff broke in. "Not till he got a whiff of the stuff, though. Nearly killed him."

The doctor shrugged. "I was careless. Didn't realize at first how quickly the liquid became gas at normal temperatures. Fortunately I breathed the barest trace, but I had a bad time of it for a few hours. Cold skin, cold sweat — I felt like a walking corpse. Fast heartbeat and shortness of breath. And a panicky feeling out of all proportion to the danger, even though I could do nothing to counteract the effects."

I said, "Doc, that gives me the

creeps. Maybe you destroyed your notes, but the dope must still be in your brain. It would drive me nuts carrying that around."

He said soberly, "That's true. But I told the Army men what I tell you now, Shell. My life is devoted to saving lives; I refuse to let my brain father such a monster."

I shook my head, looked around, and noticed the same guy who'd been ogling us earlier. He was a regular Latin slicker with black wavy hair and thick black mustache, barrel-chested and rough-looking. Sort of a Latin-Hemingway type. He'd been gone for a while, but he was back again, alone at the next table. He was staring at Buff, rather insolently, I thought. Suddenly he got up and came to our table. He leaned over Buff.

"Hi, baby," he said thickly. "I'll buy you a drink, baby." He sounded drunk. Buff turned her head away, grimacing. "Let's have fun," he said. "Lot's of fun. You and —"

"Beat it," I said. "Vanish. Take a walk."

He turned his head slowly toward me and said, "You want to know what you can do to yourself. I'll tell you."

It seemed more than a bit peculiar for a guy to barge up to a table full of strangers and start throwing his weight around, but the thought barely brushed my mind. "My slimy friend," I said quietly, "get yourself the hell away from here. Go sit down and have a drink. Somewhere else."

He said something in Spanish, then turned back to Buff, put a hand on her shoulder. I stood up. There is an exposed nerve underneath the armpit. Squeeze it with a little pressure and it hurts like the slice of a hot knife. I grabbed the slicker around his biceps and dug four fingers into that nerve with plenty of pressure, and he jumped half an inch, squeaking.

I turned him around and made him look at me. "Get this straight," I said. "Now, and fast. Stop annoying the lady; beat it; or I'll shred you all over Monte Cassino."

I let go of his arm and he walked a few feet away, then stopped. I went over to him. He said, "I'll see you outside," pointed toward the door and went out through it. I walked back to the table and sat down.

"Thanks, Shell," Buff said.

"For nothing."

"Shell," Montique asked, "why was he pointing to the door?" I looked at her. I didn't say anything. She let it ride.

I began to calm down, then the fool came back inside, talked briefly to the cigarette girl and gave her something. She nodded and looked toward our table, glanced at her watch. He left. The conversation at our table staggered along for a few minutes, then the cigarette girl walked up. She had a note in her hand. She stopped by me and said, "The man you were talking to asked me to give this to the blonde lady."

I took the folded paper, thanked her, and she went away. I looked at the note. It was to Buff, and it was filth. She was to meet him outside; he had to talk with her, the note said. It said that and a lot more. I'd got myself halfway calmed down for nothing; the gripe came back all at once. I burned the note in an ashtray, stood up, and went out the door.

Rain fell steadily, and it was nearly dark. But I could see him, leaning against the side of the building. He straightened up when he saw me, grinning, not seeming surprised to see me instead of Buff. I didn't even stop to think about it.

I stepped toward him and he didn't hesitate a second, just moved in close, his left fist driving at me in a straight, professional jab. I jerked my head and felt his knuckles slam across my ear, then I buried my left in his gut, and as he bent in the middle I sliced the edge of my right palm over his kidney. I started to swing again and finish him off, when something thudded into my shoulder. My left arm suddenly felt paralyzed. For a moment I didn't realize that the blow had come from behind me, but when I did I spun around with my right arm already swinging. I got just a glimpse of him — a tall guy, with a club like a night-stick raised over his head — and then my fist landed against his mouth.

He went back on his fanny, not out but close to it, shook his head, spat out a couple of teeth and man-

aged to get up. I hit him good, on the point of the chin, and he was out when he went down this time. I finally saw his uniform. A cop. And then all the cops in the world were charging at me waving guns and clubs, and yelling things. Maybe it was only half a dozen or so, but it looked like the whole Mexican Police Force, and then they were clubbing me vigorously and it was all over except for a number of bumps on my head.

3.

I sat up on the cot and looked around my goddamned cell. The more I thought about this deal, the madder I got. At least Monique had phoned Amador — who was still out on his silly errand about a Countess and naughty pictures of some kind. Half an hour after he'd left me, when I was beginning to think he must have returned to his opium den, he came back to my cell.

"Hello, Countess," I said. I was in a nasty mood.

"She's here; up at the desk now." Amador grinned in through my window. "She's not really a Countess, I just call her that because she looks to me like a Countess ought to look. She's really the General's wife. You know General Lopez?"

I started getting interested. "I know of him. Guess everybody in Mexico does." A brigadier general in the Mexican Army, he was always getting his name in the papers, con-

stantly warning all who would listen, or read, of the Communist threat to the world's free peoples, and advocating everything from jail to murder for Mexico's open, and underground, Commies.

Amador said, "General Lopez, he's a busy man, spends about four nights a week away from home. Supposed to be business, but many times he goes to party things. So, sometimes his wife goes out too. One night I meet her — and she's got that hungry look at me, see? I spend most of the night with her and she gives me a thousand pesos." He grinned. "What she boils down to is she has me arrange for other guys — dates, you know — to be with her the same way. Guys in different circles. Comprehend?"

"I'm beginning to."

He frowned. "What happens is, I meet her to a lemon. This lemon takes her to his place and that's all there is to it, she thinks. Only it isn't. The guy got a movie of all of it. Sometimes maybe you can fake the little snapshot pictures, but this movie is no fake, that's for sure. The General sees this he will chew off his chin, that's also for sure."

"You mean *that's* the item I'm supposed to find?"

"*Si*. And, listen, I tell Senora Lopez you are the best damn *Norte-americano* detective in the whole hemisphere. According to me you are practically the whole U. S. A. F. B. I. You are so intelligent you find anything at all with no trouble."

"Like a cop's teeth."

"Exactly." He grinned, glanced at his watch, and took off.

I was thinking that this was sure a peculiar way to get sprung from the hoosegow, when a cop unlocked the cell door to let in Amador again — and my potential client. Senora Lopez was the same height as Amador, slim enough, and shapely. Her eyes were large and dark, with extremely long black lashes, her mouth wide with a look of moist warmth. She had a subdued, exotic beauty, a faintly Slavic appearance. She wore a black suit, and from what I could see, she was a classy vegetable. As the jailer locked the door again she stepped toward me.

"You are Mr. Scott, the famous detective?"

"Fam — yes, ma'am." I motioned toward the cot.

She sank gracefully upon it, patted a spot near her and said, "Sit down, please." Her voice was throaty, but soft. I sat beside her and she said quietly, "Señor Montalba has told you of my . . . difficulty. If you will help me, I shall arrange for your release." Then she explained her "difficulty."

She had been mailed four photographic enlargements and a film strip of ten frames, all depicting a scene with which she was more than somewhat familiar. She was advised by phone that the original film would be hers for fifty thousand pesos — or it would be shown to her husband. She paid, and received the reel of

film by mail. Then the process was repeated. She paid again. Today she had received a third phone call, but had balked at submitting to further extortion. The man had said, in that case, she could learn the next development from the newspapers in the morning — or from her husband. He had hung up even as she started to weaken and agree to the latest demand.

We spent a few more minutes in the cell and she told me the fifty thousand pesos she was to have paid the blackmailers would be mine if I could help her; I said I'd do what I could. Then she went out to the desk to pull strings.

Amador said, "Is — uh — a funny thing, Shell. The General plays around some, but he is one jealous General. You know, is O.K. for him, but not for the lady. He'll do anything his wife asks him, just about, but once he sees that picture he's not gonna do anything except hit her over the head. So you better find this movie with enormous haste."

"I don't follow you exactly."

"The Countess hasn't got much pull. But the General has an abundance. And it's the General that's gonna get you out."

I said, "Huh?"

"Yes," said Amador. "If you get out. She's phoning him now. The General won't know *why* she wants you out, that is apparent. If he did, no telling. He's got one terrible temper. Might shoot the both of you." He laughed.

"What the hell you laughing at? That's not funny."

"Is very funny. What I mean, you better find the thing before he sees it — or you be back in here very quickly."

I nodded, dumbly. Then a cop unlocked my cell and I was free to leave; Señora Lopez had got the proper strings pulled.

The cop was my friend, Toothless — Captain Emilio. He said, very damned angrily, "You will be back," and kept wiggling his club while he glowered at my teeth. I knew what would happen to my chops if I wound up back in Emilio's clink.

I got my stuff back at the desk, and as Amador, Señora Lopez, and I headed for the door, somebody said, "Shell . . . Shell."

Monique was getting up from a chair against the wall. Her sensual face looked tired and drawn as she walked toward me.

"Monique, honey," I said. "You been here all the time? Ever since you phoned Amador?"

"Yes, Shell, is everything all right?"

"You sweet kid," I told her. "I thought you'd left."

"I was worried," she said simply. "Can you leave?"

"Yeah. I'll tell you about it in a minute."

Amador took me aside. "Take me twenty minutes to drive the Countess home and get to my place. You come quick, and I show you the blackmail stuff. You got to work

rapidly. From what she says, it looks like the General sees this film tonight — and he goes tonight to one of his party things, pretty wild. I learn from the Countess he goes to one of his meetings, and I learn from other people it is no business there except monkey. Could happen at this monkey-business party.”

“Slow down,” I said. “Where is this wild party?”

“I dunno yet. I don’t even know how to find out. Hell, you’re supposed to find out.” He left with the Countess.

I watched them go, feeling as if the walls were closing in on me, then Monique and I left and flagged a *libre*. In the cab, driving up the wide Paseo de la Reforma toward Avenida Juarez and the Del Prado, I told Monique the story, leaving out the part about General Lopez and his wife.

She said, “But how did you wiggle out, Shell?”

“I’ve got pull.” I grinned at her. “Incidentally, thanks for phoning Amador. I’d still be in the stir if you hadn’t. Probably gumming my food. Hey, how about the doc?”

“What about him? What do you mean?”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t know. Amador phoned Buff, and she said Doc hadn’t shown up yet.”

She frowned. “That’s funny. When you didn’t come back right away at the Casino, I went out just as the police dumped you in a car. I almost died. I got a cab as

soon as I could and came to the jail. I don’t know what Buff and her dad did.”

“Well, Doc’s probably with Buff by now.”

At the Del Prado we took an elevator to the fourth floor and I left Monique at her room, then went up to six and into my own room. After cleaning up, I strapped on my .38 Colt Special and spring shoulder holster, then went down to four again and to Buff’s room which adjoined the doctor’s.

Buff opened the door almost immediately, took my hand and pulled me inside. The blonde hair was tangled and she’d eaten most of her lipstick off. “Shell,” she said. “I’m so glad to see you. For God’s sake tell me what’s going on.”

“I got in a beef with that mustachioed slob and wound up in the clink temporarily. Where’s the doc?”

Her gray eyes widened and her mouth went a little more slack. “Isn’t he with you? Wasn’t he with you? Shell . . .”

Her voice was rising, and I broke in, “Wait a minute. Don’t get excited. I haven’t seen him, but there’s nothing to worry about. I thought he’d be here with you by now.”

She swallowed and walked to a divan against the wall. I said, “What happened after I left you at Monte Cassino?”

“Monique went out to see what happened. Finally Dad walked over to the front window and looked out, then told me to get a cab and go

home, there was some kind of trouble — but he said he'd come here as soon as he made sure everything was all right."

"Don't get all worked up over nothing," I said. "He might still be trying to add up the check. He got stuck with it."

She didn't smile. And this was a new Buff to me; she was always smiling, laughing, bubbling over with fun and mischief. I hated to see her like this, because she was sweet and fun and lovely. I'd been getting my emotions more tangled up with Buff over the last few days than I liked to admit.

Unsmiling, she said, "He hasn't even called me. He's maybe had an accident, Shell, maybe he's hurt. I've phoned Monte Cassino, even the hospitals, but he's not . . . anywhere."

I forced a laugh. "He's probably on his way here now." I couldn't quite, believe it, though. It seemed damned strange that the last time I'd seen Doctor Buffington was just before the fishy deal that had put me into jail. And it was obvious that, without the lucky combination of Amador and his Countess, I'd still be in. I looked at my watch; eight-thirty P.M.

"Buff, honey," I said. "I've got to take off for a while. I'm sure your dad will show up pretty soon."

She looked puzzled. "Leave? Surely you're not going anywhere now, are you, Shell? When maybe dad's hurt, maybe dying?"

"Now, wait a shake. There's no reason yet to think anything's wrong. I've got to leave — something I have to do that might keep me out of jail. I couldn't do much in a cell."

"Shell, I want you to stay," she said soberly. "I'm scared. Really. And . . . I'd just like your company. Please."

"Honey, believe me, I can't stay. I'll get back as soon as I can. Hell, I'd just like being with you, you know that."

"I thought I did." Her voice was distant.

"You don't understand, honey . . ." I let it trail off. She wasn't listening. When I went out she was sitting on the divan, looking after me, reproach and disappointment in her eyes.

While Amador phoned, trying to find out where the General's party — Amador called it an orgy — was to take place, I thought about what he'd just told me. I'd learned that Señora Lopez was Russian born. That explained her Slavic appearance and also helped me understand the General's violent anti-Communist activities. Solely because of her nationality and the General's importance, there had been some ugly unfounded rumors about her when she and the General were married nine years before. Shortly after that the anti-Communist phase of the General's life began.

Amador had assured me that the

General was without doubt the outstanding enemy of the Communist conspiracy in Mexico, long a highly damaging thorn in their sides; lately he had been giving the Commies all kinds of hell. From that grew a hunch. Pornographic pix for blackmail, or any kind of gimmick for blackmail, is an old Communist trick. As a matter of fact, every dirty, depraved, and vicious trick I can think of is an old Communist trick. It was only a hunch, but better than nothing.

I called Buff. She was sick with worry; Doc still hadn't phoned. I said I'd be with her as soon as I could, then hung up, uneasy. Doc was almost too solicitous of Buff; he'd have phoned her — if he could. I knew something was wrong, but I tried to ignore the feeling, sat down as Amador dialed again.

I took another look at the eighty-ten enlargements and film strip the Countess had turned over to Amador for what help they might give me. They helped one way: there was a clear shot of the man's mug. Heavy-jowled, big-nosed, mustached — practically all the people down here except women are mustached — and with a huge pile of black hair, much disarranged. That was all, except, of course, a certainty that if General Lopez ever lamped these items he would go tearing off into space like a comet. One enlargement showed the Countess facing away from the camera, black hair piled on her head with a wide spar-

ling comb stuck into it, her hands just pulling a white blouse down from her shoulders. The guy, in a dark robe, was only partially visible at the left of the picture. The rest, and the film strip, were what you might expect.

"I got it!" Amador said suddenly. He hung up and gave it to me fast: "It's a real orgy. Lopez will be there, and a General Fernandez. Couple of big *políticos* — six men altogether, but I don't know the other names. There's some movies first, then a show with the guy I just talked to — a party boy — and two vegetables."

"Tomatoes. Wait a minute. Movies first? You didn't miss that, did you? That could be the —"

"Hell no, I didn't miss it. Listen, there's not much time. Party starts at ten in a place on Calle Edison." He gave me the number. "Everybody else has to be out by ten so these guys have the place to themselves — *nobody* in after ten."

I stood up. It was already ninety-three. I thanked Amador, went out and was just shutting the door when he yelled, "Hey, I forgot almost. This place, it's a bordello."

The driver of my *libre* slowed as we passed the brightly-lighted jai-alai building, the Fronton Mexico, lined with parked cars that had brought fans to the games going on inside. Two blocks past it I spotted the address I wanted, got out in front of two stories of cement and stone and marble. Little balconies projected from wide windows open

on the second floor. I walked to the huge carved-wood door and knocked. I was nervous. Maybe this was all in the line of duty, but I couldn't help feeling a little odd. I hadn't been in a bordello for years.

4.

A tired old man let me in. I knew I was now in the house where General Lopez and his bigshot friends would soon be for their erotic party, and that movies were to be shown. Because it seemed definite that Lopez was to learn of his wife's indiscretion tonight, it seemed probable he'd learn it here. In any event, I meant to stick close to him in case somebody tried to slip him some prints or a reel of film.

A gray-haired lady took a hundred pesos from me, and left. In thirty seconds a cute little gal came in: mine. She was about five feet tall, dressed in a snug-fitting green housecoat and high-heeled pumps. She had black hair and dark eyes and red lips, and more dangerous curves than the road to Acapulco.

She grabbed my hands and pulled me after her, smiling and winking and chattering away like crazy. Naturally I didn't have the foggiest idea what she was saying. In her room she walked past me while I hunted around in my head for Spanish words meaning movies. Then I turned toward the bed.

She had the green housecoat off and was facing me in high heels,

white pants and brassiere, her hands behind her back.

"Ah, ah," I said. "Whoops, no, no."

She nodded, winked, and took off her brassiere.

"Oh, no!" I said. "You don't understand." I spoke very slowly. "I do not wish to — I mean, *yo no deseeo . . .*" I stopped. I couldn't think of the next word. "*Por favor, yo deseeo —*"

She laughed, giggled, wiggled, and took off her pants.

"No! I want to see the pictures," I shouted. "The pictures, *peliculas*. Pictures. You don't, ah, hell, pictures . . ."

Well, the next few minutes were sheer hell. She spoke no English, and by the time I made myself understood — by putting an imaginary camera to my eye and making clicking noises while I aimed all over — she was dancing around me bobbing and winking and quivering, but quivering no more than I was.

Finally she understood, gave me a sad look, then led me out of her room, up a stairway, and down a hall. She pointed to a door, shook her head, and left. I made sure the room was empty, went in and shut the door. It was one minute till ten.

The first thing I saw was the projector, but before I went to it I looked the room over. Huge, colorful pillows were scattered over the black-carpeted floor, and on my left was a couch where customers

could sit and watch pictures projected onto a screen against the far wall. Black draperies covered the outer wall and the open windows I'd seen from the street; they hung loosely six inches or so from the wall on an iron rod. Behind the projector on my right, the entire wall was a mirror.

I went to the projector. A rubber-covered cord ran from its base, down along the carpet to the front wall and under the drapes. One film was already threaded in place, ready to go. Three cans of film were stacked on the projector stand. I picked up the top can, but before I could open it to check the film, I heard noise outside the door. As voices boomed almost in the room I shoved the can back with the others, then looked for a place to hide. My eye caught the black drapes hanging out from the wall and I jumped to the end nearest me, slid behind it as I heard the door open.

I could hear two men's voices, then a chuckle. I looked down to make sure my shoes didn't stick out beyond the drape. They didn't, but my body made a perceptible bulge in the heavy cloth. The projector's cord touched my shoes, and my left shoulder was six inches from the wall-mirror. I pressed my face against the glass and pulled the drapes an inch away from it. I could see the projector, but not into the room. Footsteps slithered over the rug nearby and I held my

breath. A man's arm came into my line of vision. In his hand there was another shiny round tin. A film case. I saw the arm move; the hand placed the can on top of the three others. In the moment before it disappeared from my sight I noticed a wide, red scar on the back of the hand, extending up out of sight under the dark sleeve of his coat.

I took a chance and moved the drape farther from my face; I wanted a look at that guy. But other men were just coming through the open door, and I pulled my head back, held still as conversation and laughter grew louder inside the room. Then slowly I inched away from the mirror until, by holding the drape three or four inches from the glass and looking at the reflection in it, I could see clearly into the room.

There were six men present now, two of them in light-colored suits. I couldn't see if one of the four men in dark suits had a scar on his hand, but I got a look at all the faces. Amador had described General Lopez as a husky, six-three man, clean-shaven and with gray hair. He was easy to pick out because there were only two men without mustaches, and one of them was an inch under six feet, a slim pleasant-faced guy with a wide full-lipped mouth and long sideburns; he was talking to the General.

Two girls came in, both wearing only black, frilly step-ins and bras,

and high-heeled pumps. The clean-shaven man with Lopez grabbed one of the girls by the arm and jerked her to him. A rough guy. He talked to her, patted her fanny, then pinched her viciously. She squealed in pain and jumped; the man laughed loudly as the girl hurried away, rubbing her cheek.

Other girls entered the room; they and the men sprawled on the couch and cushions. In a few minutes a tall babe with no clothes on got up and walked to the projector, turned it on, then padded to the wall and flicked off the overhead lights. The projector whirred; pictures formed and moved on the screen.

Nobody would be looking my way now, so I pulled the drape from my face, turned and stepped on the projector cord with my left foot and put my right foot beneath it; if I saw anything that looked like the Countess, that cord was coming out fast. It seemed likely some hell would pop when and if I went into my play, so I grabbed my .38, held it loosely while I watched.

This film, though, was obviously not the one I was after. I kept thinking about the tin case I'd seen in the scarred hand. I was worried about that one. The film ended and the tall nudist moved to the projector, her body gleaming palely in the dim illumination. She took the filled spool off, then picked up the top can from the four on the stand —

the one that had been put there after I entered this room. She threaded the film through the projector, flipped the switch and walked away.

I gripped the revolver tight and felt my throat get dryer as movement danced upon the screen.

It started so suddenly that I was caught off guard. The first scene flashed upon the screen was identical with one of the stills I had seen at Amador's; the woman with her back to the camera, black hair high-piled and with a sparkling comb in it, the man in a dark robe stepping toward her.

As in the enlargements, the Countess was just sliding the blouse from her shoulders, but then she dropped it to the floor, placed both hands at the top of her skirt, began to slide it from her hips, turning slightly to the side; in another second her profile would be visible — and finally I moved. I kicked hard with my right foot, slamming it into the cord and jerking the plug from the wall.

The room was immediately pitch black, absolutely silent as I stepped forward. I shoved my gun back in its holster as I reached the projector, used both hands to jerk the film from behind the lens and out of the feeding mechanism — and rapid Spanish swelled at the far end of the room. I spun the top reel around, jerked it from the machine and stepped toward the windows. Somebody bumped into me and yelled.

A cigarette lighter sparked, then flared. The man near me shouted and grabbed for me.

I held onto the reel with one hand, drove my other fist into the guy's belly and swung it in an uppercut as he bent over. He fell to the floor, then yelled again. I jumped to the drapes, yanked at them. Light showed through the open windows. I heard the guy on the floor crawling toward me, felt his hand on my leg. I kicked backward, felt a jar as my foot hit him, then I jumped out onto the balcony and threw one leg over the rail as lights blazed in the room behind me.

I went over the side, hung for a moment by one hand, and dropped to the grass, stumbled, kept my feet and started to run. From the window above me a gun cracked and I heard the slug thud into the grass. I ran like hell, a drizzle of rain peppering my face. As I ran down the street I wound the loose film around the reel, dropped it into my coat pocket. After two blocks I stopped at the rear wall of the Fronton Palace. Feet splatted on the sidewalk. I looked back as headlights flared on a car in front of the house; it slewed around on the wet pavement and roared down Calle Edison toward me. I could see the running man angling across the street, getting closer.

I ran around the wall of the building sprinting with all my strength. Tires squealed shrilly as the car

turned the corner behind me; its lights fell on me as I reached the Fronton Palace and ran up the steps. A car door slammed outside and I threw ten pesos at the ticket girl, grabbed the pale blue slip and shoved it at the ticket-taker as I rushed past him.

I hurried through milling men and women, then burst into the Fronton court itself. Noise slammed against my ears as if it were something solid, with that faintly hollow sound like men yelling in a gymnasium or indoor swimming pool. The court was on my right, with high green walls at each end, much like two huge handball courts back to back. Between it and the spectators was a heavy wire screen, and on my left were ascending rows of seats filled with over a thousand screaming jai-alai fans. Tennis balls carrying money and betting slips were flying through the air.

I spotted an empty spot seven rows up, plowed through shouting men and women, and plunked down in the seat. I turned to look back at the spot where I'd entered just as a man came inside. Long sideburns, no mustache: the bastard who liked to pinch. He was looking over the crowd, his face not pleasant now, but contorted and angry — and bruised. Apparently he was also the guy I'd slugged and kicked in the face. I turned toward the game out front, watching him from the corner of my eye.

Another guy came through the

entrance and spoke to Sideburns, who reached under his coat. Eight to five he had a gun under there — and better odds that he was the one who'd shot at me. He started walking along the pathway down in front of the seats, looking up at the cutomers, including me. He couldn't have got a good look at me before, but my goddamn stand-up white hair would have been like a beacon in those headlights.

Down on the court the white *pelota* was whizzing back and forth, smacking the front wall and rebounding to be caught by one of the four players. The scoreboard showed the two-man "Red" team leading the "Blues;" the game was nearly over. A Blue man leaped high into the air, caught the hurtling ball in the curved basket-like *cesta* strapped to his hand and wrist, then twisted his body as he came down and hurled the ball against the front wall.

And, suddenly, I realized that almost everybody around me was yelling and screeching while I sat here with my finger up my nose.

I yelled, "Come on, Blues!" then swore. The long-sideburned slob heard the American voice and glanced in my direction. I waved my arms, yelled, "*Azul! Azul!*" and let out a wild Comanche yell. Everybody was yelling, people around me were on their feet, some jumping up and down.

I got to my feet and jumped up and down. "*Azul! Azul!*"

That sonofabitch was looking straight at me now. I waved at one of the white-coated, red-capped bookies. As he shouted the 100-to-60 odds I yelled "*Azul!*" and fished sixty pesos from wallet, waved the bills. The bookie scribbled on a betting slip, tucked it into the hole in one of the tennis balls and threw it to me. I caught it, took out the slip and shoved the money inside, tossed the ball back. I yelled "*Azul!*" some more.

Sideburns stared at me, at the men and women around me, then walked slowly along the pathway looking at every face. I wiped my forehead, surprised to find it wet with perspiration. The ball hit the side wall as a Blue leaped for it, missed it. Everybody yelled. The game was over.

I left my seat and headed for the bar. I made it, had two drinks. Nobody bothered me. When the place started emptying and I didn't see any familiar faces, I went out and caught a cab.

The film was in my coat pocket when Señora Lopez answered my ring. She stood straight and tall inside the door, light behind her tracing the mature curves of her body. When she saw me she didn't break out in a rash of excited questions. "Mr. Scott," she said. "Come in, please."

I went inside. She was wearing a dark gray silk dress; the faint scent of perfume brushed my nostrils as I passed her.

She asked me, "Did you . . . have any success?"

"Yes, Señora. At least for now." I took the film out of my pocket and handed it to her.

She seemed startled. Then she said, "I thank you, Mr. Scott, I thank you so very much. I really find it difficult to believe . . . how did you get this? Where? Do you know who —"

I interrupted. "I'd rather not say, if you don't mind. At least not yet, Countess. Probably —"

"Countess?"

"I'm sorry. That slipped out."

She smiled. "It is what Amador calls me. I like it." Facing me, the light fell on her face, and her large dark eyes seemed the only features in shadow, the extremely long black lashes darker smudges. She took my hand and led me down a carpeted hallway. Her hand was warm in mine; she squeezed it tightly.

She turned on the lights as we went into a large room, one of four or five that lined the hall. Heavy wooden furniture filled the room, a big maroon couch sat on our right. There was a small bar against the far wall.

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

I thought about Buff and the doctor, and worry nagged at me. "I'd better leave, Señora — Countess." She smiled. "There are other things I have to do tonight." I looked for a phone but I didn't see one.

"But I must know more. What . . . what can I expect tomorrow — or the next day? You will have a drink and tell me."

I agreed to have one, and sat down on the couch. I'd already had several and could feel their warm glow inside me. She handed me a tall drink of rum and bottled Tehuacan mineral water, then began moving around behind the couch. She said, "Mr. Scott, do you think this will end it, my difficulty?"

"Frankly, no. There must be other copies. I don't know where, or even who has them. We may come out all right."

"Did you . . ." She hesitated. "Did you see, I mean —"

"Uh, no." I gulped some more of the drink. "No, Countess."

"Then how can you be sure this is the one?"

"I, uh . . ." I had some more rum. I couldn't very well tell the Countess I'd snatched it from under her husband's nose in a whorehouse. "I'm pretty sure, yes, pretty sure."

"I must be . . . positive, Mr. Scott."

There was something about the way she said it, a sort of purring softness, that made the hairs on my neck stand up and wiggle. I looked around at the second projector I'd seen this evening. I finished my drink.

She said, "I purchased this after the first film was delivered to me. I had to know what, exactly, the man had to . . . blackmail me."

"Yes," I said. "I see. That was smart."

"So it will be easy to tell if this is the right one."

I got up. "Yep. Sure will. Well, so long, Countess. I—"

"Please sit down, Mr. Scott. Please. Just for a moment."

I did. Just for a moment. She leaned over the back of the couch, put her hand on my shoulder, and said softly, "A little moment. If you have made a mistake, then you must rectify that mistake, is it not so? You will still have much to do tonight if this is the wrong one. Is this not true?"

"Yes," I said. "I guess so. It sounds very logical."

She leaned closer and smiled. "And tell me. Mr. Scott. Tell me with truth. Wouldn't you like to see it?"

I automatically sucked in my breath and it made a funny whistling sound. "Well," I said. "Well . . ."

"Be honest." Her mouth was parted, the moist lips gleaming, in a half smile. The dark eyes looked directly into mine. Softly, "Wouldn't you?" Ever so softly, "Truthfully, wouldn't you?"

I said, "Well, I suppose so. Can't say I'd mind. No, can't say that."

Her smiling red lips curved even more. "Let me fix us another drink, Mr. Scott."

"Look, you better start calling me Shell."

She walked around the couch, hips moving smoothly under the

silk of her dress. She mixed the drinks swiftly, her back to me. It was almost the same pose I remembered, except that she wore a gray dress now, and there was no comb in her upswept hair. Her waist was small, hips swelling from it in a smooth line that curved down into her long legs. I was wishing she'd hurry with that drink. My throat was parched.

She carried the drinks over, stood close in front of me as she gave me the highball. "Here, Shell."

I took it. I drank it. The couch faced a bare white wall, and the projector behind the couch would cast the pictures on it twenty feet from me. From us. She turned out the lights, then started the projector. The machine whirred and she walked to the front of the couch and sat down at its end.

My shoulder was partially blocking the beam of light, so I moved to my right. "No, Shell," she said. "Here, sit by me."

I moved over, and to keep out of the beam of light, I had to sit pressed close against her. My arm was between us, so I put it behind her on the back of the couch. She reached up with her left hand and pulled my arm around her shoulders.

Holding my hand, she said, "Is this not better, Shell?"

"Yeah."

On the wall, the scene was part of what I had watched earlier. The Countess had dropped her blouse to the floor, her hands were

sliding the skirt from swelling hips. Then she stopped, turned toward the man in the dark robe, apparently said something to him. He went out. She slipped the skirt off, stepped out of it, stood for a moment in brief stepins and brassiere, her fingers at the brassiere's clasp. She pulled it from her shoulders, slid the stepins from her hips, then, completely naked, picked up all the clothing and walked out of sight. In seconds she was back. She sat on the bed, facing the camera, took the comb from her hair and let the black mass of it tumble down over her shoulders.

On the couch the Countess squeezed my hand, then pressed my palm tight against her shoulder. Her long, soft leg was mashed against mine. "It is the one," she said.

"Uh-huh. Well, now that we now, maybe —"

She turned toward me, a cool finger covering my lips. "Shhh." Her voice was soft. She moved against me, slipped lower on the couch, her head against my shoulder. "Is it so bad?"

"No. Not — well, no."

"Then quiet, Shell. Quiet."

She sighed, moved slightly, pulled my hand farther over her shoulders. My fingertips touched the swelling softness of her breast, felt the heat of her body. Her fingers gently squeezed my wrist, and pulled my hand down to cup a full warm mound. She strained her body for-

ward, pressing the soft, silk-covered flesh into my palm. She wasn't wearing a brassiere.

Then she leaned back, pulling my arms around her. On the wall, the man returned. A minute passed in silence. The Countess turned to face me. In the dim light I saw her hands go to her shoulders, fumble there, and like a shadow the gray dress moved down over her shoulders, was still for a moment; slowly the shadow melted from the globes of her breasts and gathered in the darkness at her waist.

Her hands took mine and pressed them against her flesh, and then her lips were on mine, hot and moist, writhing, clinging wetly, devouring my mouth. She moved her body slowly from side to side, crushing her breast in my palm, her tongue sliding along my lips and into my mouth, caressing my tongue, searching. She pulled her mouth from mine and arched her back, bending away from me. Her hands snaked around my neck and pulled my head down to her breast.

I thought I heard a bang. A kind of slamming sound. The film clicked through the projector, slapped as the end came free, and white light flashed against the wall. The room became brighter. I'd forgotten the projector. I wondered what I'd heard, or thought I'd heard.

The Countess was breathing audibly, her breasts heaving. She said, "Did you hear something?"

"What?"

"Something slamming? In the house?"

"I thought I did."

"It must have been the door. Oh, God."

"The door?"

"Yes. Oh, God."

"Huh?"

"My husband is home."

"Hus-hus-husband?"

And then I heard the footsteps pounding down the hall, enormous, perfectly fantastic footsteps, like King Kong striding smack at us, clump, clump, clump.

"Oh, God," I said. And I thought: Scott, you *fool* you!

5.

The Countess was getting back into her dress one hell of a lot faster than she'd gotten out of it. I was sitting there with my mouth open. King Kong was getting closer.

The footsteps really couldn't have been so very loud, but at that moment it seemed they were right inside my head. They stopped outside the door. I fumbled on the floor for my glass. At least, then I might say cheerily, "Ah, hello, old sport; just having a spot of rum." But then the clumping started again and the monster moved on down the hall. I heard, very clearly, a door open and close nearby.

"You sure that was your husband?"

"Yes. He walks heavily."

Walks heavily, I thought. Jesus, he must have been out there jumping up and down. I was in a hell of a shape. I could hear the General moving around in the next room. Thin walls, very thin. Well, that settled that.

"Ah, Countess," I said. "Sweet," I cleared my throat. It felt as if it had grown together. "Well, guess I'll run along."

"Damn," she said, and then there was an odd noise from the next room. The Countess swung her head around as I straightened up. It sounded like scuffling, banging around, then there was a hoarse shout. Right after that there was a soft thump, like somebody falling.

The Countess started toward the door, but I passed her on a run, yanking out my .38, jerked open the door and ran down the hall to the next door, slammed it open and jumped inside. The bright light partially blinded me for a moment, but I saw two men near a big desk, the General seated in a chair, slumped loosely, his head hanging forward, and the other man holding the General up by the collar, a big automatic in his right hand. The automatic was pointed at the General's temple.

The guy swung around, flipping his automatic toward us and letting go of the General's coat. All I had to do was pull the trigger and plug him but when I saw his face it jarred me enough to freeze my index finger for a second.

The General slowly toppled to the floor.

It was just blind luck that the man didn't kill me then. He fired twice, both bullets smacking into the wall near me, then broke and ran toward wide picture windows partly open on my left. I snapped a shot at him and missed as he leaped toward the window and burst through it in a shower of splintered glass.

I went out right after him, making a lovely target with the light behind me, and dropped flat on the ground. I heard him running, sprinted toward the sound as a car motor roared nearby. Tires squealed as the car left in a hurry, the sound fading.

I stopped running. And now that the action was over I wondered about that face I'd recognized, wondered what the hell *his* being here meant. And I couldn't make any sense out of it, because the guy who had just got away was also the slob who'd started me on my way to the can — my pal, the Latin Hemingway.

I went inside, closed the window drapes, then felt the General's pulse; it was strong. As I stood up I saw a note on his desk. It was in Spanish, so I handed it to Señora Lopez.

She frowned, read it aloud. "Nana, you will know, and understand, why I must do this. Forgive me as I forgive you." She said, "It is signed Toro. My name is Nastia; my husband calls me Nana.

And I often call him Toro. I don't understand."

Right then the General moaned, mumbled something. In a few more minutes he was O. K., sitting in the chair holding his head. Finally he let go of his head and said in a booming voice, "I am all right now." He looked at me, then at his wife. "Who is this man?"

I had a bad minute there, but his wife smoothed things out. She explained rapidly, almost as though she'd planned it, that she had been worried about the General because of threats against his life and had hired me to learn who had made the threats. She'd kept this from him because she didn't wish him to worry.

"Mr. Scott," the General said, "the man from the jail?" He looked puzzled, but he added, "That was sweet, my dear."

I told him what had happened, then got his story. Color was back in his face now, and except for wincing once in a while he seemed normal. His gray hair was mussed, but his dark eyes were clear and steady under shaggy brows, his big jaw firm.

He stiffly expressed his gratitude to me, then said, "I had just come in and was seated at my desk. Apparently the man came in the window behind me. I thought I heard a noise, and turned. I saw him almost upon me with something in his hand. We struggled, then he hit me."

I took the note from the Countess and handed it to him. "General, if you don't object to my questions —"

"Be assured I do not. It seems I owe you my life."

"You owe me nothing. But why did you write that note?"

He looked it over, blinked, and shook his head. "*Chihuahua!* What is this? This I did not write. This I have never seen."

"Who would want to murder you?"

He shrugged. "Many people. I have received threats against my life often these last years — as my wife must have told you. But nothing like this has happened." He paused. "Do you know of my work, my public battle with the Communist filth?"

"A little. Enough so that I think highly of it."

"Then there is your answer. I sincerely believe, Mr. Scott, that there is no man in Mexico the Communists would rather see dead. Tonight they have tried to kill me."

"Isn't that jumping to a conclusion?"

"Not at all. There have been others, many others. Accidents, heart attacks — several of those, Mr. Scott. Who is to say why a young man dies suddenly of a heart attack? There have been obvious murders, and several dead of the snakes. I thought I had become too well known, too powerful, to be murdered."

"You were right to think that." I pointed to the note in his hand. "You were going to commit suicide."

He stared at the note, nibbling on his lip. Finally he nodded. "It would seem so. But this is crude. Who would believe it? I have everything to live for; no reason to die."

The General was wrong. It wasn't crude, but diabolical and clever. The General, present at an erotic party with five powerful, important friends, sees a movie of Señora Lopez with another man. He is crushed, horribly embarrassed. So he goes home, writes a note to his "Nana" and puts a bullet into his brain. The five others sympathize, shrug their shoulders. Case closed.

This wasn't a simple extortion case. It looked as though that film was primarily part of a plan to get rid of the General. If it *had* been shown on Edison Street, and if I hadn't been here playing games with the General's wife, neither she nor I nor anybody else would have known that suicide note wasn't exactly what it seemed to be.

"General Lopez," I said, "While I accept the fact that Communists might kill you, or anyone else who seriously threatened their activities, perhaps it wouldn't be wise to assume that this was a Communist plan. Possibly it was someone else —"

He interrupted. "No, Mr. Scott. This time it was the Communist

filth. I am sure. I told you that I saw the man."

That really jarred me. "You know him?"

"Indeed. His name is Rafael Belchardo. He is a fanatical Communist. One of the worst of the worst."

"Are you positive?"

"Absolutely. It is well known — he is a hard-core revolutionary for many years. Of course, he is only a tool, he thinks with another's mind, like all of them, but his finger pulls the trigger."

I hardly heard the rest of what he was saying; my mind was jumping from one frightening conclusion to the next.

He was saying, "So it is not Belchardo; really; it is Señor Culebra, this man who hides behind the name of a serpent. He is the man who tries to kill me, because he is the worst of them all in Mexico — and I am his most troublesome enemy."

"Culebra? Who is he?"

The General shrugged. "I do not know, nor even how to learn." His face got almost cruel. "But if I could find him, I would kill him. Myself I would kill him." He became quiet.

I thought about the suicide angle. If this had been a Commie plan to knock off the General, then both ends of the deal, the film and the kill end, must have been set up before the party. Since Belchardo had gone through with the

kill attempt, he must not have known the film hadn't been shown. It followed that the film must have been brought to the party by another Communist in on the deal — the guy with the scarred hand. Then one of the six men I had seen there was a Communist. But the thing filling my mind now was the fact that Belchardo, the Commie who had tried to kill the General, was also the man who had started the beef at Monte Cassino which put me in jail.

There was a dial phone on the General's desk. I asked him, "O. K. if I use your phone? I'd like to call downtown."

"Certainly, Mr. Scott."

I dialed the Prado and got Buff's room. The phone rang a dozen times without any answer. I let it ring several times more, fear crawling in my stomach, then called the doctor's room and finally the desk. I had them both paged and there wasn't any answer. I hung up, the fear growing. The crazy idea was running around in my mind that what had happened to the four of us at Monte Cassino was somehow related to the attempt to murder the General — Belchardo tied the two things together.

"General." I said, "there's something I've got to do. I'll have to leave."

"I would send you in my car, but the servants are not here at this hour. Would you like a drink before you leave?"

"No, thanks, General."

He stood up, holding his lapel with his left hand and stuck out his right "Then goodnight, Mr. Scott. And thank you."

I shook his hand. I don't know why I hadn't noticed before. On his left hand, running from the knuckles clear up his wrist, was a wide, red scar.

6.

I stared at that scar for seconds, confused, then said, "I will have that drink, if I may. I . . . I'll have to wait for a *libre*." The Countess went out when I mumbled I'd have rum. After phoning a cab and saying I'd pay much extra for speed, I said to the General, "I'd like to talk to you alone for a while."

He nodded, and I hunted for the right words. "I think this mess is even more important than it appears, terribly important to me, and to many others. I want you to tell me where you were tonight before this happened, who you saw, everything you did."

"I don't see what —" He jerked, looked at me queerly.

The next few minutes were damned ticklish, but I impressed the General with the importance of his answers and he gave them to me. He also gave me some very fishy looks. After making sure we were alone, he said, the party had been arranged by one Villamantes,

a wealthy import-export dealer. Also present were a General Fernandez, both the president and the vice-president of a large union — and the *Jefe de Policía*, the Chief of Police. Yes, there were movies, one of which was brought to the party. And the General himself had placed it alongside the projector.

He said, "This film was given me after we arrived. I was told it would be of particular interest to me. But it was not seen. This —" another fishy look — "ah, man, he stole it."

"Who gave that film to you, General?"

"Why, my friend Villamantes."

"He isn't your friend. He is a Communist who would enjoy reading about your death."

The General stared. "That cannot be true. He is my friend."

"Who fought in the darkness with . . . with this man?"

"Señor Villamantes."

"Who shot at the man?"

"Señor Villamantes."

"Who chased him?"

"The *jefe de Policía* and Señor Villamantes." The General frowned and said, "Mr. Scott, I have answered your questions. Now, what is this film? Why did it cause so much disturbance?"

"It wasn't the film." This wouldn't do at all.

"But it was stolen. This was verified by its absence from the machine. It is strange, this —"

"Nothing to do with it," I said

rapidly, and tried to jolt his mind off in another direction with questions. I learned what I could about Villamantes from him. Even the General, didn't know much. He was supposed to have won a million pesos in the National Lottery a few years back, invested it wisely and made a pile, which he'd sunk into his successful import-export business.

I said, "Obviously that note is a forgery, so who would know of the nicknames you and your wife have for each other?"

"I can think of no one. We rarely use them, unless alone."

"How about your servants?"

"I trust them. Two have been with me for many years, the cook and chauffeur. The maid not yet a year, but I trust her."

"You trust Villamantes, too."

"Well . . ." He paused. "I cannot yet accept what you tell me."

"Somebody tried to kill you."

He nodded. I learned some more about the so-called Culebra character whom nobody seemed to know except by reputation. He was supposed to have a headquarters called simply *El Centro* — The Center — somewhere near Mexico City. It was as nebulous as the man. There were a number of conflicting rumors about both the man and the place, but the theme of death and cruelty and torture ran through them all. This headquarters, so the story went, was the physical center of the Communist conspiracy in Mex-

ico. The General told me, with that cruel look again on his face, that if he knew where it was he would take Army men, troops who were friendly to him, and loyal, and march upon it, destroy it completely.

"Because of its great importance," he said, "I would level it to the ground. And I would execute them all, kill them."

"Troops and executions. Sounds like war, General."

"But of course," he said quietly. "Of course it is war."

I lit a cigarette, then asked him, "General, you said something about men dying from the snakes, and this Culebra hiding behind the name of a serpent. What's all that?"

"His name, Culebra, means snake in my language. It was given him by those who know of him because at his headquarters, so it is said, he keeps deadly snakes, rattle-snakes."

My flesh crawled. Some things I enjoy and some I don't enjoy. There is absolutely no question about my feeling for snakes: I do *not* enjoy snakes. I said, "Is the guy actually nuts enough to keep snakes around? He crazy?"

"Perhaps he is a little crazy, too, but this part is not crazy. It is said that he takes a twisted pleasure from the ugly things, but the important fact is that, of the men who have opposed Culebra, or attempted to betray him, some have been found in the hills, dead from

the bites of rattlesnakes. It is another accident, no? And who is to say the man was not accidentally bitten? If *Culebra* is crazy, he is also clever.”

I swallowed. I don't like even talking about snakes. “That just another story, General?”

“I have seen the dead men, Mr. Scott, with the two little fang punctures in legs or arms. And perhaps others have not been found, and only their bones lie now against the ground.”

We were quiet until I heard the *libre* honk outside. I got up, thanked him, and went out. The Countess met me and showed me to the door. I told her, “Don't let him out of your sight. Don't let anybody get a chance to slip him a copy of that film or any prints from it. If he lamps that, everything blows up. And he's damned curious already.”

I left her standing in the doorway and hopped into the waiting *libre*. “Hotel del Prado,” I told the driver. “See if you can hit a couple hundred kilometers an hour.”

At the hotel, I went straight up to Buff's room. I knocked, and the door swung inward. It didn't have to mean anything. I went inside. In two minutes I knew. Buff was gone. A couple chairs were tipped over. There was blood on the floor.

Half an hour later, at the desk, I got the story: Señorita Buffington, she became ill. Of the ABC Hospital, the ambulance it came. On the stretcher the men took her. No, the desk had not called the ambulance;

the call must have gone from the room.

Only I checked and there was no record of such a call. I phoned the hospital and they'd never heard of any Buffingtons. And that did it. I didn't know where to turn or what to do; all I knew was that Buff was gone. It wasn't just the doctor now; it was both of them. And I felt sure that whoever had taken Buff had also snatched the doc. I thought of Buff's gray eyes filled with reproach, her red lips pleading as she said, “Shell, I want you to stay . . . I'm scared . . . Please.” I told myself I couldn't have known this would happen — but it didn't help.

It was one-thirty in the morning and I was tired. I went into the Montenegro Bar and had a double. It warmed my stomach, mixed with the rest of the rum down there. It also was apparently the one-too-many. So I had another. I was steadying the wobbling bar when I thought of something that damn near sobered me: Monique! Sweet Christ, how had I forgotten Monique?

I'd been so busy charging around that I hadn't thought something might have happened to her, too. Maybe they'd got Monique, whoever they were. I aimed out of the bar, made it to the elevator. I went to four, then down to Monique's room and knocked. No answer. I knocked again, tried the door. Locked. The door wobbled slightly

in front of me. I felt horrible. Everybody gone, everybody kidnaped, maybe everybody dead.

Fifty pesos later a bellhop unlocked the door for me and left. I went inside. The room was dark, but light showed under a door on my left. I could hear water running. I stood in the darkness, looking at the crack of light and listening to water running in the bathroom. The room wobbled a little. Poor Monique. Everybody gone and dead. She was in there, I knew. In there dead. Lying in the tub with her hot green eyes staring and the sensual red lips slack. The classic "accident." I walked toward the door, stopped in front of it. I hated to open it. Monique, who had been so alive, with so much fire and passion in her eyes and smile and lips and hormone-packed body. Dead. Everybody dead. I felt terrible.

I pushed open the door and walked in.

And there she was. Monique. Dead. Soaping her left arm, lovely body glistening . . . soaping. Soaping? She was *not* dead.

Monique looked at me, startled, possibly by the way my chin was hanging down. Then she said, "Why, Shell. You naughty."

"Well," I said. "What do you know? I thought you were dead."

She held a washrag up in front of her. Or rather some of her. It was a little bit of a washrag. She smiled. "Don't you ever knock

when you walk into bathrooms?"

"I thought you were dead," I said, perhaps a bit stupidly.

"What are you talking about? You can see I'm not dead. Why would you think I was? You'd better get out of here."

"Yeah, sure. Just wanted to be sure you were all right."

She was still smiling. "Don't I look all right? Go on."

I backed out, shut the door, and turned on the living room lights. I started pulling myself together. At least I was getting back more confidence in myself as a detective. I had found out that Monique was not dead.

She came into the living room smiling, a towel wrapped around her, feather-cut hair in black ringlets. I said, "All hell has busted loose. Doc's still gone — and now Buff is too."

The smile slowly faded from her face. "What do you mean?"

I told her what I'd learned. She didn't have any more idea what had happened than I did, and a couple more minutes of talk added nothing new except that the towel she was wearing was not conducive to straight thinking. It wasn't on straight.

"Get some clothes on," I said. "You're getting out of here."

"Why?"

"Why? Use your noodle. Both Buff and her dad have been grabbed off by somebody; you've been with them all the time, came to Mexico

with them, you're their friend. Maybe you're the next one. How the hell do I know? I'm not even sure what's going on yet — but we'd both better get out and hide."

She nodded. "Maybe you're right." She frowned. "Golly, now I'm getting scared. You wait here; I'll get dressed." She turned and went into the bedroom. That damn towel still wasn't on straight.

We caught a cab in front of the hotel. Heading down the Reforma I watched the road behind us. Monique said she was scared silly and needed a drink. After some argument, we got a bottle and some mineral water, had sloppy highballs, and I looked out the rear window some more.

A black car that had pulled out from the curb as we left the Del Prado had, oddly enough, wound up behind us after we'd stopped for liquor. And a black car was behind us now. Our driver spoke English, and I had him swing around a couple blocks then back into the Reforma. After that, I was sure.

"Driver," I said, "keep going ahead toward Chapultepec Park. When I tell you, shove your accelerator down and drive like hell straight into the park." I tossed him a handful of pesos.

Then I turned to Monique. "Baby, we've got a tail. I don't know who, or how many guys, or why, but a car's following us."

"Shell, please." Her voice was strained. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." A block from the park I told the driver to step on it and the cab leaped forward.

"Oh, Shell!" Monique squealed. "I'm scared. I'm sick."

"Shut up and take off your shoes. In the park I'll have the driver stop fast, dump us, and go on. If we're lucky, that tail won't notice. And then, Monique, we light out."

We ripped into the park's darkness with a good lead on the car behind us. I saw its lights go out. I told the driver what to do and as we rounded a curve deep in the park I said, "Now!"

He slammed on the brakes and the car swerved, slowed. "Out!" I yelled at Monique. "Don't wait till it's stopped."

She swung the door open and jumped, with me right behind her. As the driver gunned his motor I started to run and almost stepped on Monique, flat on her face. I yanked her up and gave her a shove, then ran after her. We were just too slow. I heard brakes squealing and didn't even have to look back.

I was running like a fiend when I heard a car door slam. I looked over my shoulder and saw the glare from two flashlights, bobbing after us. I also ran into a tree.

I should have known. The goddamn park is full of trees. I was flat on my back with lights going around in my head.

Monique had stopped. "Shell! What happened?"

"Don't ask stupid questions. Just run like hell. And look out for the damn trees."

Fifty yards farther I grabbed her arm. We could hear them running but couldn't see them. A flashlight winked on, was sprayed around, and went off. It was close. I cocked my gun.

"Shell, don't," Monique squealed. "We'll get killed!"

"You go on."

"No, I'm scared. Please, Shell." Her voice was trembling.

I swore, started trotting. I knew we must be near the lake, and in half a minute we came to its edge. Boats were drawn up on the shore. At Chapultepec Lake there are always boats; the people here are fruit for boats. I went along the edge of the lake until I spotted a canoe pulled up on shore.

"Come on, kid," I said. "Get into that thing."

She didn't argue. She walked by me and went *clink*. That was peculiar, I thought. "Hey," I said. "What was that noise?"

"What noise?"

I let it go. Those damn flashlights were right behind us. She sat at the far end of the canoe, facing me, and I shoved the canoe into the water, gave it a big push and jumped in. We almost capsized right at the start. I had seen better canoes. I found the paddle and headed for the middle of the lake.

Monique went *clink*.

"What the hell are you doing?"

I scooted forward. I could see the dim moon glow glimmering on Monique. No, it was gleaming on something in her hands. Bottles. "You didn't run nineteen miles with those damn bottles, did you? *Did* you?"

"These?" *Clink*. "I didn't even think about them. I just ran. When you're running, you don't think about bottles."

"Yeah. I guess you're right." I paddled. Finally we got close to the middle of the lake and just coasted.

"What do we do now?" Monique whispered.

"I don't know," I whispered back. "Don't know where those guys are. Might even be in a boat on the lake by now."

"Oh, Lord." She tilted the bottle and it gurgled. She scooted toward me; I met her halfway. We passed the bottle back and forth a few times. Finally Monique gave me the bottle and it was empty. I threw it and the mix bottle away, feeling no pain.

"How you feel?" I asked her.

"Wonderful. Feel me."

"Uh, Monique," I said. "Don't sit like that." I looked around the shore. I couldn't see any lights. I could see very damn little of anything. The moon was fairly bright, and I looked back at Monique. I squinted at Monique. "Don't sit like that," I said. "For God's sake, don't sit like that."

"How else am I going to sit?"

"Just don't ask me, see? If you knew what I've been through tonight — just don't, that's all."

"What you think this is, a yacht? I've got to get comfortable." She wiggled around. "Ah-h, there, that's better."

"The hell you say. That's worse. That is — oh, God, that's horrible. Hey, listen, Monique. I've known guys to go clear off their trolley from less than this. I've been through hell tonight. Hell. You're asking for it. Listen. God dammit. Pretty quick I'm going to jump in the water. Have a heart. Monique. You doing this on purpose?"

She laughed. "Uh-huh. Shell, you could at least kiss me. You never have. But you've looked at me like you wanted to kiss me. Kiss me."

"Ugh. Look, will you *stop* sitting like that? And if I try kissing you this goddamn boat will turn over."

"Oh, silly." She slid forward and got her knees under her, leaned close to me; her mouth covered mine. and it was like kissing a blowtorch. Her lips left my mouth and caressed my neck. "Mmmm, Shell," she said. Minutes went by. "Mmm." She whispered in my ear.

"Don't be silly," I said. "It sounds impossible."

"Well, it's not. Put your foot there."

"Oh, now, look. I can't do that. I'll turn the boat over."

"No you won't."

I said for the last time, "O. K., but don't blame me if I turn this stupid boat over."

"You won't."

"I will."

"Shut up. Now, put your foot there."

I put my foot there. I moved maybe three inches and the boat turned over. As the water closed over my fat head I remember thinking: I knew it; I just knew it.

I was pretty well looped from all those drinks, anyway, and I couldn't get oriented for a few seconds. I was paddling around but I wasn't sure where I was going. Pretty quick my hand scraped bottom, though, and I got my directions straight and shot up to the surface. It wasn't much of a shot.

Monique was standing there about a yard away with a very sad expression on her face, and her hands on her hips. I guess they were on her hips; they were out of sight under the water, which only came up to her chest.

"Now you've done it," she said.

"Now I've done it? I did it? Listen, whose idea —"

"And what did you think you were doing down there? The water was swirling around like crazy."

"I was swimming up."

"Oh, goodness. Up. It's only four feet deep here."

"O.K., I was fighting an octopus. What you think I was doing? Down there laughing?"

She sighed. "Damn! Oh, damn!" Then she moved up close to me and whispered to me again.

"Hell, no," I said. "This . . . dampened my spirits."

"Don't be like that. What can you lose?"

"Baby, the way my luck is running, I *know* what I'd lose. My luck is so stinking a fish would bite me. I wouldn't be surprised if they've got barracuda in this foul lake." I stopped. "Listen, woman," I said. "I think we're losing our minds. I think we'd better get out of here."

She wasn't speaking to me.

We started slopping out. Slop, slop, we went, and finally we made it. Nobody shot at us. We walked to a road and caught a cab. The driver charged us extra for dripping.

Monique came out of the shower. "You can use it now," she said a bit frigidly. She was in a towel again.

I went in. This wasn't much of a hotel, but at least we had a shower. I used it, then went back into the one room, also wearing a towel. "Clothes are still wet," I explained.

Monique was sitting on the bed. She glared at me. "You weren't going to put them on, were you? You weren't going to run out on me! You're not going to get away with it!"

"Don't get hysterical, I—"

"You got me in the bathtub!" she shouted. "You got me in the

boat! You got me in the lake—and you never *got* me!"

I grinned at her. "Relax, honey. I'm not going anywhere."

"You serious?"

"Sure, I'm serious."

She looked at me for a while, her face softening. She raised a dark eyebrow; her tongue started to rove around inside her cheek. Then she smiled slowly, her fingers fumbled at the towel and she pulled it from her body, dropped it to the floor.

"Well," she said, "this is better."

She was right. It was a hell of a lot better than the lake.

7.

I woke up suddenly, cold perspiration on my body, the sheet clammy beneath me. Sunlight streamed through the open window. Half awake, half asleep, I still could see shadowy figures moving in the nightmare, fantastic and unreal, unearthly, as nightmare figures are.

I had been looking into a sterile, gleaming laboratory filled with curved retorts and huge glass breakers and flickering Bunsen burners, and great vats filled with a slimy molasses-like brew, a bubbling lava with tenuous, misty threads wriggling from its surface and floating through the air like writhing worms. Shaggy misshapen apes reeled about the white and gleaming room, moving jerkily. The disembodied head of General Lopez hung in the

steaming air, a jagged hole gaping from one bloody side, the gray brain hanging Daliesque from it to the floor.

Doctor Buffington stood, twice as tall as life, in the laboratory's center, bending down to peer at first one and then another of the apes, examine the pendant brain, stare at the bubbling vats. Buff lay silently in the corner of the room, her face bloodless, her eyes the solid white of boiled eggs. The apes moved jerkily, crashed into tables, overturning them as glass shattered noiselessly in the silence of my dream. The apes fell, one by one, and rolled and shuddered, then lay still, their bodies melting into black putrescence. The boiling vats melted to the floor, slimy lava pouring endlessly. The gray brain twitched and writhed, pulsed slowly like a feeding snake.

I sat up in bed, rubbed a hand across my cold forehead, and shuddered. Monique stirred beside me. I got up and dressed, checked my .38, then told Monique I'd see her later and left.

How closely tied together the General's "suicide" and the kidnaping of Buff and the doctor were, I didn't know. But I felt sure both were the work of the same man or group—and that man or group was Communist. The parts were too interwoven for coincidence; and there was also Belchardo's part in both.

I had wondered why the doctor

might have been kidnaped, taken forcibly and held against his will. I thought of my dream. I remembered the doctor saying, "I refuse to let my brain father such a monster." The memory of that nightmare clung to me, like a stain upon my thoughts, and I found myself becoming filled with an urgency to find the doctor—and Buff; a need to hurry.

There were only four people who might be leads to them. Belchardo. Captain Emilio, Villamantes; and possibly the cigarette girl who had talked with Belchardo at Monte Cassino. I bought a suit, trench coat, and watch, then had breakfast and phoned the Del Prado, but learned nothing new. I called the Countess. She told me another film had arrived by messenger, but she'd received and destroyed it; and Captain Emilio had phoned to learn if I was still "protected." She put the General on but he couldn't tell me any more about Culebra or the so-called Center, except that the Center did exist, somewhere. I got Villamantes' office address from him and hung up.

Neither Belchardo nor Emilio was in the phone book, so I called Amador. After briefing him on what had occurred last night I said, "So I need a check on this screwy cop, but if I go down there he might shoot me and claim I attacked him again."

"Yeah. I think he like those teeth. But I see what you mean,

besides. You think he is in it, huh?"

"It's the only way this mess makes sense. Any way you can check and see if there's anything else fishy about him?"

"Hell, I go nose around at the jail. I didn't hit him."

"But you helped spring me. He might not like you."

"What can he do? All the other cops down there, I know good. Where I see you?"

"How about your apartment?" It was eleven now. "Say noon?"

"*Esta bien*. I see you." We hung up.

In the Hotel Monte Cassino I got the cigarette girl's address — and name, Sarita — and at eleven-thirty knocked on her door. She'd been asleep, so she talked to me from under the covers of her bed, which was enjoyable if not enlightening. She claimed she didn't know the man who had given her the note at Monte Cassino, and that she'd merely done what he'd asked: handed the note to me — at exactly six o'clock.

The only exciting development occurred when I intimated that she might be lying, whereupon she forgot to hold up the covers, bounced straight up in bed, spitting words at me and continuing to bounce. It was wonderful. It took me a while to calm her down, but when I left we were friends again. She said if she saw Belchardo again she'd tell me.

As I started to leave she said, "How do you call yourself?"

"I call myself Shell Scott, Sarita."

She gave me a big juicy smile, and the covers drooped. Not as much as before. Enough. I left anyway.

I got no smiles at Villamantes' office. A couple of sallow babes with faces like prunes biting lemons were there — but no Villamantes. He was "on vacation," they told me. No, they had no idea where he was or when he'd return. Back on the street and in a cab I glanced up toward the office window. Two sallow faces stared down at me.

It was already after noon and I was a few minutes late for the meeting with Amador. I hoped he'd done some good; Emilio was the last lead. I paid the driver and got out on Zaragoza, then went inside the building, wiggled a finger at the middle-aged gal behind the desk, and trotted up the cement steps. Amador's apartment was up one flight, down the hall and around the corner. I reached the top of the stairs and turned to my left, started walking down the long hallway.

I saw him come around the corner at the hall's far end, fifty feet away. At first I wasn't sure it was Amador, then I got closer and recognized him. There was something a little funny about him, though. He stood for a moment a few feet from the corner, one hand outstretched and pressed

against the wall, then he swung one foot forward and brought his left hand up against his chest. He took another step, stumbled and almost fell.

I ran toward him. "Amador!" I yelled. "What's wrong?"

He had stopped and was standing in the middle of the hallway, both hands pushed out in front of him like those of a blind man finding himself suddenly in a strange place. His hands twitched, jerked a little. I reached him and stopped in front of him, fright making my heart beat faster. There was a lumpy gash at the side of his head, a little trickle of blood congealing there.

"Amador! My God, man, what's wrong with you?"

There was an expression on his face that I had never seen on anyone else's face before; fear, panic, a gagged but screaming horror like a scream that shrieked only in his brain, echoing, crescendoing there behind his staring eyes. His mouth was open and his eyes were stretched so wide that they seemed enormous in his head, staring, staring, staring. His hands pawed at my coat, flapped loosely against me, and breath hissed from his mouth; there were noises in his throat as if he were gagging. His knees buckled and he started to fall.

I grabbed him, tried to hold him up as he went to one knee, his body twitching, shaking, jerking in my hands. His head rolled loosely to the side, hung like a dead weight

against his shoulder, and he rolled the staring eyes up toward me.

"Amador," I said, "Christ, Amador." I eased him down to the floor, laid him on his back and loosened his tie and belt. His knees came up from the floor and flopped down again; his hands slapped once together; there was a last faint rasping sound in his throat. He didn't move again.

I ran back to the stairway, shouted down it, "Get an ambulance. Quick. Understand?"

"*Sí*. What is it?"

"Quickly, quickly. A man is dying."

Her startled gasp followed me as I ran back down the hall. But Amador wasn't dying. He was dead. He had no pulse, no breath. I knew it was my imagination, but it seemed that already his flesh had begun to lose its living warmth, to cool, grow cold and clammy. And his eyes still stared, as now they would always stare, even after his lids were closed. I think the worst of it all was looking at his eyes, knowing they would forever stare against his closed lids, stare even as those lids rotted and fell away within his grave, until the eyes themselves were gone and only empty sockets stared in his eternal darkness.

Now I would never really remember him as the nice, smiling guy who had said, *She is one classy vegetable, you will observe . . . no matter who is wrong, the Captain is*

*right* . . . Whenever I thought of Amador I would remember his eyes, the look that I had seen there. It had been like *seeing* a scream that shrieked of panic and strangeness and knowledge of death.

I thought of the gash on his head, and straightened up, a chill prickling my spine. I reached under my coat and pulled out my gun, then walked to the corner and around it. The door to his apartment stood open.

I went in, looked through all the rooms, but I was alone here now. In the front room again, I saw a chair tipped over on its side; near it on the carpet there was a small, dark spot. I got down on my knees, looked at it, touched it. It was blood. This must be where Amador had fallen. But he hadn't got that gash from falling; he'd been hit, his head cut, and then had fallen here on the carpet. A few inches from the spot of blood, something glittered in the light. I bent closer, looked at it. It was glass. Little slivered pieces of glass, some powdery, some with curving sections, as if it might once have been a small tube, or tiny vial.

I felt a little dizzy all of a sudden. I got to my feet, shook my head. The dizziness went away, then came back again. My skin felt cold and I could feel perspiration clammy on my forehead. I squeezed my eyes shut, opened them, wiped my hand across my forehead and looked at the moisture on my fingers. My

little finger trembled nervously, independently of the others, as if a tick were there, the muscles making it twitch erratically.

The dizziness swept over me again and I could feel my heart pounding rapidly, the blood tattoo hammering at my temples. What was wrong with me? What was happening? Fright grew inside me, swelled and coursed like coldness over my skin, clutched at my throat and made it difficult to breathe. I looked at the tiny bits of glittering glass on the floor, backed away from them until my back was against the wall, my hands pressed flat upon the plaster behind me.

I shook my head again. I was acting crazy, getting panicky, letting my imagination run away with me and give me imaginary symptoms that I shouldn't have. It was the strangeness of this, of watching Amador die, seeing that frozen scream in his eyes and the contortions of his face. It was that and my dream, my nightmare, and listening to the doctor tell me crazy things, crazy things that he had felt, the shortness of breath and coldness of the skin, panic, faintness and dizziness; that and the death of shaggy apes, staggering and falling, suffocating and dying, and their bodies melting into black putrescence.

I couldn't think. I couldn't remember now what was dream and what was true. And, unreasoning,

I felt the panic grow in me. I slid along the wall and reached the door, went out and walked around the corner. My body was cold, like coldness seeping from my flesh down into my bones. I stopped as I saw Amador again. He lay quietly, arms loose at his sides, mouth hanging open, his head still almost touching his shoulder. Revulsion rippled in my stomach, slid in my throat. I went by him and down the hall, wanting to run, fighting to keep myself from running.

I heard voices when I reached the top of the stairs, and I looked down them feeling the dizziness growing, mounting, as if to make me fall and plunge down the cement steps. Below me, at the desk, I could see men, police. A siren moaned outside. And then I recognized the policeman at the desk: Emilio. Captain Emilio.

He turned and started up the steps and I whirled around and ran the length of the hall. I didn't even stop to think. I just wanted to get away from him, not let him see me. I ran down the back stairs and out of the building, leaned against the rough wall for a minute, my heart pounding, breath short, dizziness still with me. I told myself that it was because of my running, and my fright. But my legs were weak. The back of my legs seemed almost liquid.

I flagged a *libre*. Out front I saw police cars and an ambulance from the American British Cowdray Hos-

pital. Then I saw white-coated men bring out the body, covered with a sheet. A small crowd had gathered. Policemen came out and climbed into their cars, then they and the ambulance drove away.

"Follow the ambulance," I told the driver.

I thought I knew now what had been wrong with Amador, what had killed him, what was wrong with me. But I had to be sure.

I waited at the corridor's end, hospital smell, heavy in my nostrils. I could see Captain Emilio sitting in a chair tilted back against the wall down near the visitor's desk. An hour ago the ambulance had come here to the ABC Hospital — and so had Emilio, alone in his police car. He had spoken to the doctor then sat down in the chair. The doctor was now in a room twenty feet from me with what was left of Amador, and I wanted to talk to him. I wanted it bad. The door opened behind me and I turned to see the doctor come out.

I walked up to him. "Doctor. Pardon me."

"Yes?" He was a short man wearing a stained medical gown.

"Amador was a friend of mine. He's the man you've just —"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. It was too late when the ambulance got there."

"Why the policeman, Doctor? The Captain in the hall."

He was peering at my face. "You don't look well yourself. Are you all right?"

"I'm O.K. Why the cop? Hope you don't mind my asking."

"No, I suppose it's all right. He's anxious to get a written report. I've just been doing an autopsy."

"Something funny about this one?"

"Yes . . . it's out of my line; I'll have to call in some help."

"If you can tell me, if you will, I'd like to know what you found."

I'd spoken with more fervor than I realized. The doctor seemed startled and peered at me again, then he said, "Frankly, I'm not sure what I've found. Something has happened to some tissue and nerve pathways. I'm not sure just what; have to check further. Some nerve parts have been destroyed."

"I see," I said slowly. "Doctor. What, precisely, was the cause of death?"

"It's complicated by many factors, of course, but death was actually caused by suffocation." He paused. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Just a little dizzy. There's . . . nothing you can do."

He shrugged and walked away. I leaned against the wall. Well, I'd found out. I knew what Doctor Buffington was doing now, even if I didn't know where or all of the why. I knew what had killed Amador and what was wrong with me. I remembered again Doctor Buffing-

ton talking to me that night — only last night in Monte Cassino. I thought of my dream.

It was clear now, patent, plain, and almost too horrible to seem real or even frightening. The good doctor had fathered his monster. I looked at my hand, tried to stop it from shaking.

## 8.

I waited partially hidden behind a tree fifteen feet from Captain Emilio's parked car, my hand on the .38 in my trench-coat pocket. Sweat was icy on my face and body; my clothes felt damp and sticky against my skin.

He came out of the side gate of the hospital, pushing his thumb up into the space where his two front teeth used to be. I looked around, then walked toward him with the gun in my fist. Preoccupied with getting out his keys and opening the car door, he didn't notice me. I stopped a yard from him.

"*Bastardo!*" I said.

He swung around, face flushing, then like an ice-cream face melting his features went slack. His lips moved but he didn't say anything. I pushed him into the back of his car and climbed in behind him, then took his gun. I asked him a lot of fast questions and got a lot of silence. Dizziness swept over me again. I knew I couldn't waste more time — and Emilio was asking for

it. So I grabbed his heavy .45 automatic by its barrel, told him to shut his eyes, and sapped him between them.

I drove the car to a deserted spot, parked, then hopped in back with Emilio. I broke out one of his teeth and fished it from his open mouth, then waited for him to come to. It took about ten minutes. In the meantime I used the belts from his pants and my trench coat to bind his hands and feet. I searched him, got the doctor's medical report and another paper, a report apparently made out by Emilio and signed "Guillermo." When I finished, I was drenched with perspiration. My shirt was wet through and I felt weak, nauseous.

He moaned; his eyes opened, and focused.

I let him whine at me for a minute, then I said, "Shut up, Emilio, I have something for you." I held my hand down where he could see it and let him look at his tooth.

He didn't seem to understand at first so I held the tooth right in front of his eyes. "Recognize it, *bastardo*? It is a tooth. Actually, it is more than just a tooth. It is your very own tooth. That makes three. We have twenty-nine to go."

He burst into a torrent of Spanish. I let it subside and said, "I'm in no hurry. It will take a long time to get twenty-nine teeth. On what tooth would you like to start answering my questions?"

He was sticking his tongue into the now very wide space at the front of his mouth. I grabbed his .45 by the grip and held the heavy barrel over his face. He squirmed, rolled his head from side to side, lips pressed together, grunting. I let the barrel fall against his lips.

"Please. *Madre de Dios*; have mercy."

"Start talking, Emilio."

He licked blood from his lips, his eyes frantic. There was silence for a full minute. I suddenly grabbed the gun by the barrel and raised it over his face.

"I will speak! I tell you. Mercy —"

"O.K. And I make you a promise. For every lie you tell me, you get more guns to play with. Start it."

"What do you wish?"

"For a beginning, you are a Communist, are you not, Emilio?"

He hesitated. "Sí." The air whistled over his tongue.

"Where is Doctor Buffington? And his daughter?"

"I do not know." He added rapidly, "Do not hit me, Señor! I speak the truth — but all I know is that you were with them last night, and were to be removed so there would be less chance for trouble to occur. I was instructed by Belchardo." He kept his eye on the gun and told me a little more. Emilio was to club me and haul me to the can when Belchardo started the beef. Emilio had arranged for the presence of other

police by phoning them shortly before — which explained why Belchardo had cautioned Sarita to deliver the note to me at exactly six P.M.

“And Amador?”

“I knew there would be a death, a strange one. I did not know who. I was to investigate and get the medical report.”

“Emilio, this is very important. Who is the man called Culebra and where is his Center, his headquarters?”

“I swear I do not know.”

I wiggled the gun.

“It is truth!” He almost screamed.

“I know of both, but that is all. Culebra is the name for the most important of us in Mexico, he is the closest to Moscow, has been much honored. This I know — but no more. Nor where El Centro is. I . . . do not even wish to know.”

“Explain that further, Emilio.”

“It is where we are sometimes taken if we succumb to the chauvinistic lies of the capitalist warmongers.”

I blinked and asked him twice more what he was talking about, but both times he said exactly the same thing. I asked him a question; I rang the bell; and the dog salivated.

“The medical report, your report on the death of Amador.” I tapped him with his .45. “Where does that go?”

“I deliver it at five o'clock to another.”

“To whom?”

“I do not know. Only that it is at Los Turcos.”

I knew the place, a dark, exotic nightclub on Diagonal San Antonio. Emilio continued to talk freely now that he was started. In one of the back rooms at Turcos he was to meet the other courier; he didn't know who it would be, but the reports would identify Emilio. It was four-thirty now and time I got going. I sapped Emilio hard enough so he'd stay on ice for a while, locked him in the car and threw the keys away. It was just beginning to rain.

I parted the drapes hanging from the low entrance to Los Turcos, bent over and went inside. I stopped inside the main room of the club, the Arabian room, letting my eyes get accustomed to the dimness. Turcos is straight out of the Arabian Nights, filled with small booths, veiling like the cloth of harem pajamas covering their entrances. Low hassocks sit on the floor around foot-high tables in the small rooms and it seems they need only a water pipe or *hookah* to make them actually a part of the land of minarets and spires, muezzins and prayer rugs. Four other rooms complete the club — The Egyptian, Kasbah, Moro, and the Persian Room. The Persian Room was the one I wanted.

I stooped and squeezed through the narrow entrance into the Moro Room, empty now. Beyond a low

pointed archway on my left was the Persian Room. Someone would be in there, waiting for me in a small booth like these here, hidden behind the concealing drapery. A folded newspaper with Emilio's two reports inside it, was under my arm. I could feel my heart thudding, whether as part of the dizziness and faint constant fear that was still with me, or from anticipation, I didn't know. I walked ahead, went through the archway. It was darker here.

The room was long, narrow, with the little booths beginning near me on my right and extending to the wall ahead of me. The fifth booth, Emilio had told me. The draperies were parted before all the booths — except at one of them, the fifth. Behind its gauzy curtain the light of a candle flickered.

If the person behind that veil was a stranger, one who had never seen me, I'd probably be all right. If it was somebody who knew me, or what I looked like, there could be trouble. I put my right hand in my coat pocket with the gun, and walked toward the fifth booth.

I had to bend over to step inside. I parted the drapes with my left hand, stepped through into the cramped space and let the drape fall behind me.

For a moment I was too startled to speak, then the exclamation burst from my lips.

"My God," I said.

I suppose I should have known it would be Monique.

I was stunned temporarily, staring at her less than two feet from me. I could reach with my fingers and touch the sensual lips I had kissed last night, lips that had whispered tender and savage words to me in the darkness.

She didn't speak, an expression compounded of amazement and fear on her beautiful face, a face made even more lovely by the candle's soft light. And as I looked at her, with my throat drying and a hollowness swelling in my stomach, I wondered why I hadn't thought of this before. I remembered that she had met the Buffingtons two months ago — only a short time after the doctor's deadly experiments; that she had been with them constantly, knew of their every movement. Even last night when we'd left the Prado, she could have — she must have — phoned, from her bedroom, the men who had followed us.

She pressed one hand against her throat and said like an automaton, "I didn't . . . I didn't expect . . ."

I tried to think. If Monique of all people could have been a Communist without my knowledge, she might, at least while shocked by my sudden appearance, believe the same of me. While a normal man might never believe that next-door-neighbor Joe is a Red or spy or saboteur — which is part of the Communist strength — Communists themselves are conditioned to deceit and dis-

sembling, undercover agents, the ritual of Communism, the passwords and shadowed meeting places. I might bull it through — unless she knew she was to have met Emilio. There wasn't much choice now; I had to try.

I said, "I didn't think it would be you, either, Monique."

She drew a shaky breath. "I . . . hardly knew what to think. Did you, I mean, have you —"

"Yeah. I've got it." I thought I knew what she'd started to say. I handed her the folded newspaper and took a chance. "It seems the doctor is cooperating."

She had removed Emilio's reports, was reading them in the light from the candle. "Yes," she said, eyes skimming over the medical report. She looked at the other paper, then opened her purse and started to put them in it. I caught her wrist.

"I'll keep them."

She frowned. "But they were to be delivered to me."

"I know. But they go to Culebra." I took them from her.

"Yes, but . . ."

"We're to take them to him at the Center."

I tried not to hold my breath. Her eyes narrowed, then she shrugged. "There is no difference," she said.

I followed Monique outside. Rain was steady now, big drops splatting heavily on the sidewalk. I pulled my trench coat around me, holding it together with my hands.

Monique waved, said, "There's

one; run," and darted into the street as a *libre*, a new brown Nash, slowed and stopped. I jumped inside the car after her, leaned back against the seat — and kept my mouth shut. I didn't have any idea where to tell the driver to go. I breathed easier when Monique leaned forward and said, "To the Reforma. I'll tell you where then."

We turned left off Diagonal San Antonio into San Juan de Letran and headed toward town. Rain drummed on the top of the cab and the tires hissed on the street. I talked about last night, about the rain, about everything except Doctor Buffington, and Communism, and "Red hysteria."

Finally I stopped talking. The way I felt made thoughts move sluggishly in my mind, but something else was bothering me something I had forgotten. We were far from the city now and the countryside was becoming more dense, more covered with greenery, but there were no signs of civilization, not even the small villages of mud-and-stone huts since the last one, Tlaxpacin, we had passed a few minutes ago. My uneasiness grew, fed on itself.

I thought back. Our conversation, then leaving . . . Leaving Los Turcos. The idea skittered in my mind, wavered. I concentrated on it. The Center was secret. A Communist going there would hardly hail a cab, any cab, to take her to the place. Yet Monique had flagged the *libre* which had come by almost as soon as we

stepped out of the entrance, and run to it as I followed. I glanced toward the front of the car, my eyes falling on the rear-view mirror. The driver's eyes looked back at me, straight at me, widened slightly, as an involuntary shudder rippled down my spine.

I looked at Monique again as lightning hissed like a million snakes no more than a hundred yards away, crackled in the air as it struck the earth and the thunderous, snapping rumble roared in my ears. I jumped, startled. The car was climbing, laboring up the slanting road. I was shaky, nervous. It seemed that when fright started building in me it grew of its own accord. I could feel tension rising inside me, writhing in my belly, tension that wanted to swell into my throat and rip from my lips. I put my right hand on the gun in my pocket, slipped my finger through the trigger guard.

We crested the top of the grade, started down, and from the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a gray building to the right, perhaps a mile from us. It was only a blur, the short flash of something looming there in the murk of gathering darkness, nearly obscured by the mistily falling rain.

Then Monique spoke beside me. I jerked my head around toward her, too quickly, too suddenly for the simple words she spoke, my nerves jangling.

"I'd like a cigarette, Shell."

She was smiling, the smile a caricature painted in red on her white

face. Weakness licked at my arm and legs. She kept smiling. Something was going to happen. It wasn't thought, or a hunch, but knowledge. I could feel it building, growing, getting closer. I looked at the rear-view mirror. Nothing. His eyes weren't staring back at me; he peered through the windshield as the wipers swished back and forth, and clicked, and clicked. I shook my head, let go the gun, pulled out cigarettes and transferred them to my left hand, started to put my right hand back into my pocket. The steady, fixed smile was still on Monique's lips.

And then it happened, suddenly, as Monique raised her left hand and touched the driver's shoulder, happened so quickly that for a moment the world was spinning in my brain.

The driver slammed on the brakes and the car slowed and swerved as tires caught at the road. I was thrown against the front seat, unable to reach my gun. And then Monique threw herself against me, her hands clutching, slicing across my face and gouging at my eyes, her lips still pulled away from her white teeth in a parody of that smile.

The car stopped as I smashed my fist against Monique's jaw, knocking her away from me. The driver spun in his seat, a gun in his hand swinging toward me. I shoved my hands toward the gun, felt the jar and pain as the metal hit them, grabbed the gun and twisted it, and then Monique was clawing me again, her

fingers clutching at my arm. As the driver raised up in the seat, facing me, I lunged toward him, shoved him backward. The gun slipped from my grasp as he fell against the steering wheel, the horn braying for a moment, and then the gun clattered as it dropped to the floorboards in front.

I swung my elbow into Monique's belly and she gagged, bent over. The driver pawed for the gun. I got my fingers in his coat and jerked him toward me, sliced the edge of my right palm along his jaw, a glancing blow. I spun him partly around, my right hand held high and spread open, blood thundering in my head. He turned toward me, his hands digging for my throat, and I swung at his face. My palm sliced his nose and red squirted from it over his mouth as the thin bones crumpled. But I'd struck too low to kill. He was stunned, sagging momentarily — and his face was a foot from mine, the bare, unprotected bridge of his nose suspended before my eyes. I swung my open hand toward it, felt it strike and his body tug against my fingers. I dropped him, dead, upon the seat.

Monique was trying to straighten up, her mouth smeared and twisted, eyes fixed on me. I grabbed her throat and slapped her across the face, then back, again, and again. "You bitch. I ought to kill you."

I felt hollow, sick inside, as if my guts had been jerked from my body. "My God, Monique, why?"

She stared at me, her face frozen. "Why?" I said again. "I liked you, Monique, I liked to be with you. You were — hell, I don't know. It was good to touch your skin, talk to you, kiss you. Like last night. You can't be two people, that had to be you."

"You wouldn't understand."

I didn't answer for a moment. "Maybe I wouldn't, Monique. I guess I didn't fool you for a minute, did I?"

She shook her head. "Not for a minute."

And that was all she would say. I couldn't bring myself to treat her as I had Captain Emilio, but I *had* to make her talk. I thought, for a minute, of her beauty, her warmth and fire; maybe there was another way.

I drove off the road, then hidden by trees from cars which might pass by, I stripped her naked and stripped the dead man naked, and bound them both together. As darkness thickened and rain whispered on the leaves above us, I talked to Monique for a long time, softly, brutally, the urgency and need to find Doctor Buffington and his daughter growing in me. I told Monique what she would feel as the night turned black and the dead man's body grew cold and clammy, stiffened against her own. I told her how the sounds about her in the night would become twisted in her mind — and how long, and terrible, this night would be.

When I rose as if to leave she screamed with such revulsion and near hysteria that I felt unclean, almost sorry for what I had done to her. But when I untied her from the dead man she spoke freely. Finally I had it all.

And when I did know all of it, I stopped feeling quite so sorry for Monique.

10.

When Doctor Buffington had accidentally stumbled on what I now thought of as his nerve gas, there hadn't at first seemed any need for secrecy. Consequently, most of the others at the Southwest Medical Institute understood vaguely what was going on; most of them considered the episode merely another failure. But at the Institute, as at most other places where important or secret work is conducted, a handful of Communists also were employed, and the captive Communist mind is different from the free mind. The Communists there, one of them at least, saw the Doctor's failure as, perhaps, a success — in that it had killed. Killed horribly.

That one, a Doctor Philip Cranston, was a Communist of long standing, and group captain of a five-member Communist club in the L. A. area. He kept an eye on Buffington's experiments, coming to see in them as they progressed, a potential military weapon of the utmost efficiency — and the visits by Army

men who talked with Buffington increased Cranston's interest. If the doctor's discovery should turn out to be suitable as a weapon, that weapon, naturally, should be shared with the "peace-loving" Soviet Union. He passed the word along to his superior and was instructed to steal or copy the doctor's pertinent notes and records — but then Buffington destroyed all his notes and abandoned that line of research.

The plan to kidnap Doctor Buffington started then, two months ago. Monique was assigned to cultivate the doc and Buff, worm into their confidence. She'd learned Buffington was soon to make his address in Mexico City, and Mexico had seemed perfect for his abduction; he would be in a strange land, alone, without friends; he would simply disappear. So the Commies began equipping a suitable laboratory at the Center, following Cranston's pertinent suggestions. Saturday night they'd grabbed Doc outside Monte Cassino — and later grabbed Buff — and taken them to the Center, where they both were now being held.

The Center was the gray building I'd glimpsed before the driver and Monique had jumped me. And Culebra was there — Antonio Villamantes. Monique knew what was going on now, had even talked to Villamantes this afternoon before going to Los Turcos. Doctor Buffington was being forced to work in the lab by the threat of torture or death

not only for himself, but for Buff. I'd seen the evidence of his successor: Amador.

Monique hadn't known Amador was dead until she read the reports I gave her at Turcos, but she had known how he was to be killed, how it must have happened. A Commie working for Villamantes was to sap Amador, carefully crush a tiny vial of the doc's liquid on the floor near his head, then run. It was crude, yet clever enough. The murderer would be far away when Emilio visited the body, then got the medical report he was to have passed on to Monique. And it had worked; Amador was dead.

At this point Villamantes' chief interest was in learning if the stuff would efficiently kill, not an ape but a man; if it appeared the gas was really effective, a potential weapon that the Russians could mass-produce, the doctor would eventually disappear completely — somewhere in Russia, like so many others before him. I knew, from Doctor Buffington himself, that the gas would make a terrible weapon, a monster.

I asked Monique, "Why Amador? Why him?"

"It didn't have to be Amador; it might have been Lopez, or . . . another. But he got you out of jail and that caused trouble for us. I had to phone him, or you might have learned I hadn't and become suspicious, but I didn't think he could help you. When you got out, we knew you must be working for

Lopez' wife, and of course we knew why. That was important to us, so you had to be . . . removed."

That last explained why the boys had tailed us last night. I said, "Then you recognized Señor Lopez at the jail?"

"Of course."

I learned how the Center was set up, where the doctor and Buff were. An armed guard stayed in the yard outside Buff's room; another patrolled the grounds, which were enclosed by a ten-foot stone wall. About twenty men were out there now.

I thought of something. "When were you supposed to deliver this stuff — the medical report — to Villamantes?"

"By seven tonight, at the latest."

I checked my watch. "What if you're not there by then?"

"He's . . . crazy sometimes. He'd know something was wrong. God knows what he'd do. He might do anything."

"It's after seven."

She started to laugh, suddenly.

I stood up, my stomach knotting. I didn't know what I could do by myself. If I could get in touch with the General, get his help — but he was too far from here. It would take too long to reach him. There seemed little I could do alone, but I knew I had to try something. I bound Monique's arms and legs again, then hoisted the dead man to my shoulders, dumped him fifty feet away. In the Nash's trunk I found a

length of fine wire, twisted one end of it into a noose, then climbed behind the wheel. Monique called after me as I drove toward the Center.

At a rutted dirt road I turned off the highway, tore up the reports Villamantes was to have received, and tossed them out into the drizzling rain, then drove without lights. The dizziness, the cold perspiration, seemed less constant now, but I still felt weak and there was a feeling of hopelessness inside me. The car swerved in muddy ruts lighted once in a while by lightning. I knew I must be getting close, and I slowed the car's speed even more — and then I saw it, saw the Center.

It was at first only a dark mass below me at the end of the narrow road, perhaps a hundred yards away, then lightning trembled momentarily, like glowing nerves in the sky, and for that fraction of a moment I saw the building clearly before darkness fell upon it again. I crouched at the hollow of the earth beneath me, squat, ugly, a great gray pile of stone encircled by the high square wall. It made me think of Manderlay, the House of Usher, haunting, brooding, gray and ghost-like in the cold, drizzling rain, like El Greco's View of Toledo or a tomb erected over a buried giant.

I drove forward another fifty yards, then turned around in the road and parked. I took out the car's back seat and carried it with me as I walked, feet squishing and

slipping in the mud. The head man's .45 and my own .38 were in my coat pockets, and I carried the wire noose in one hand. I reached the wall, towering four feet above my head. A great wooden gate, closed, was in the wall at the dirt road's end. I walked to my left another twenty yards and stopped. Buff's room should be inside here, across the grounds, the guards somewhere nearby.

I leaned the car seat against the wall and when I stood upon its highest part my hands easily reached the surface of the wall. I jumped up, pulling with my hands and arms, fell across the wall's top, then drew my feet up, swung them forward, and dropped inside, sprawling full length in the mud.

I hugged the ground, peering toward the Center, and waited for the next flash of lightning. In a few seconds it came. I saw two figures, one on the left twenty yards away walking to my right, the other leaning against the building's vine-covered wall straight ahead of me. Near him, above his head, light glimmered faintly from a covered window. There, behind that window, Buff should be. I started crawling forward, a going to my right, flattened against the mud as lightning flared again when I had covered half the distance, then started crawling once more. A cigarette glowed in the guard's cupped hand. The end of the wire noose was wrapped around my wrist, the coat sleeve protecting my skin. I reached the side of the

building; the glowing cigarette arced through the air and died in the rain.

I could see the shadowy bulk of him nearby as I got my feet under me and stood up, pressed against the thick vines covering the building's rough stone. I raised the noose in my right hand, and moved toward him, swiftly, carefully, holding my breath and staring at the barely visible outline of his face. Time seemed to stop as the arc of wire descended over his head; I felt it brush his skin.

"*Que*—" he started to gasp, but the gasp died as I jerked my right arm backward, the noose tightening around his neck and cutting off his breath. He lunged away from me, the wire jerking around my wrist, and as I pulled it toward me he fell. I slammed my foot against his head, pulled upward with both hands tugging at the wire, and there was no sound except a grunting noise that rasped from my throat, the drizzle of the rain, and the soft sound of his heels and hands beating at the mud. Then the only sound was the rain's soft whisper.

I knew the other man would soon come past. I felt the vines against the wall, touched one as thick as my arm, then unwound the noose's end from my wrist, stooped and lifted the dead guard, straining to hold him up as his legs dangled uselessly beneath him. I held him with one of his arms over my shoulder, while I used all my strength to loop the wire around the vine above my head, twist it, pull the man higher

and twist the wire again, until finally he hung there against the wall, knees sagging slightly, his head bent awkwardly to one side.

A shadow moved in the darkness; a man came around the corner of the building and walked toward me. I pulled the revolver from my pocket, crowded my body behind the dead guard, and wound my fingers in his hair, twisting his head erect. Miles away, lightning pulsed momentarily and the glow spilled across the yard, fell briefly on the walking man and upon us against the wall. The guard trudged slowly by and I let out my breath.

The vines held my weight as I climbed the few feet to the window. The two halves of the window met in the middle, thick wood bisecting the small panes crisscrossed with metal ribs. I grasped the vines tightly with both hands and kicked at the wooden sills, kicked again as the window gave and the glass splintered, then I stepped through, brushing the curtains apart, and stood inside the room.

## II.

For a moment I thought the room was empty; then I saw Buff standing in the corner, her back against the intersection of the walls, mouth stretched wide.

She stared at me, not speaking. Then she walked forward, still staring, unbelieving. "Shell?" she said softly, "Shell?"

She walked to me, and then without her expression changing, tears spilled from her eyes and slid down her cheeks. She pressed against me, threw her arms around me.

"Honey," I said. "Snap out of it; we haven't much time."

She drew away from me. "What — how did you —"

"Forget that. What's going on here? Where's your dad?"

She shook her head. "It's been awful."

"Damn it," I said sharply, "pull yourself together. There's a dead man, a guard, right outside here. If he's spotted we'll never get out. Now, where's the doctor? Can I get to him?"

"No. He'd be where they make him work, clear in the center of this place; they've taken me there to . . . to make him —"

I broke in, "Then we're leaving, trying to anyway."

"I can't leave dad —"

"You're leaving if I have to slug you. We probably won't make it now. Use your head!"

She bit her lip, stared at me, then nodded finally.

I said, "If we make it out of here, we'll get help, come back. That's all we can do now. Get over to the window."

I turned off the lights, made sure the automatic was ready to fire, then went out through the window and dropped to the ground. Buff jumped down beside me, stumbled, and a man's voice shouted something in

Spanish, a few feet on the left. I shoved Buff back against the wall, dropping to one knee and bringing the .45 around as a flashlight beam fell on my face.

There wasn't any help for it now; I snapped a shot at the light and the .45 roared and bucked in my hand. The light wavered, a gun cracked and flame licked toward me. I fired twice more and heard the hammer-blow of slugs slamming into flesh. The flashlight fell to the mud.

I yelled at Buff. "Run! Straight to the wall."

She raced by me. Suddenly lights blazed from the building, flooding the grounds. I turned and ran; Buff was almost at the wall. Her white face swung around as I ran up alongside her. I said, "Bend over, baby. I've got to step on you to get up to the top of the wall. Stoop over, brace yourself—and for Christ's sake don't fall on your face."

She bent over without question, hands braced against the wall. I planted my right foot above Buff's shapely bottom and jumped. I grabbed at the wall's top and strained to haul myself up as Buff's body dropped from beneath my foot.

A gun cracked and I heard the bullet sing through the air near my head as I pulled myself to the wall's top, twisted, bringing up the automatic. I could see Buff flat in the mud below me, just struggling up — and two men running toward us. I snapped a quick shot at the first

running man and he tried to stop, his feet skidding. The other dove to the ground.

I stretched my left hand down toward Buff. "Grab it. Hurry." She jumped, hands clutching at my coat sleeve. I grabbed her wrist. A shot blazed from my left and I saw a man kneeling there, fired twice at him as Buff strained against my arm.

I got a knee under me, straightened up with the muscles protesting in my back, arm quivering. One of her legs slid over the wall and I jerked roughly, brutally, as a gun cracked and the bullet chipped stone between us. But that last pull sent Buff tumbling outside. I fired the last shot from the .45, then shoved myself backward, landed on my feet.

I yanked Buff up; we stumbled to the road and I gave her a push. "Up the road, Buff. Fifty yards. Car there. Run, baby." Then I turned and stood fifteen yards from the big gate, the cocked .38 in my fist. Buff had a start of only a few seconds when the gate cracked and light from inside spilled through it. When I saw the first movement inside I aimed carefully, squeezed the trigger twice. A man slumped as other blurred figures moved near him. Hardly aiming, I emptied the gun, then turned and ran.

Buff was in the car when I reached it. I climbed inside and got the hell out of there. By the time we reached the main road, Buff was babbling. Finally she calmed down, though, scooted over next to me and started

telling me a lot of pleasant things about how sweet and brave I was, and how wonderful, and I told her it hadn't been anything much, just suicidal.

When we were almost at the little village I'd passed through earlier, I said, "Listen, Buff. All hell is probably twirling around back there at the Center. Those guys may even pull up stakes and go somewhere else, so there isn't much time. Can you manage if I dump you in this burg up ahead?"

"Yes. What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure, yet. Mainly try to get somebody out here with help. I know a general who'd jump at the chance — ugh."

A stinking thought had struck me. I would have a dandy time enlisting the General's aid if I phoned him and he roared, "I'll kill you, I'll kill you." And if he'd glommed that movie he might not be near a phone; he might be screeching through the hills, or out in the darkness beating his wife.

At the edge of the little village of Tlaxpacin, I left the highway and drove a hundred yards on a dirt road, then parked. A few feet off to our right was a small hut made of mud bricks and pieces of boards and limbs. The roof was of grass.

We got out and walked to the little one-room house. There was a tallow candle burning inside, and an old lady with a face like wrinkled brown clay was sitting on a homemade stool weaving some pieces of

straw together. A naked little boy sat on the packed-earth floor, and a black, curly-haired pig ran squealing out the door as we walked up.

In a few minutes, with the help of Buff's Spanish-class conversation, we'd arranged for her to stay here for a while. Then I said so long to Buff, and turned back to the car.

"She'll wait." She ran up to me and said a little breathlessly; "Where are you going now?"

"Phone. Then keep an eye on the Center." They wouldn't be sitting still back there. If they left, or hauled the doc away, I wanted to be in a spot where I could see them go, maybe tail them. Some spot not too close. Some spot like a balloon, say.

"There . . . aren't any right words, Shell. For saying how I feel. But I can't tell you how much, how awfully much —"

"Don't spill over, honey. Doc's still back there. Don't worry, I'll come galloping over the hill on a swaybacked horse —"

"Idiot," she said softly. Then her arms went around my neck and she lifted her face up to mine and her lips caressed my lips, clung with perfumed softness on my mouth. She kissed me gently, for a long time, and it was sweet and good and a little sad, and then her fingertips glided across my cheeks as her mouth left mine. She turned and went back into the hut.

The Nash was being gassed, in Tlaxpacin's only Pemex station,

while I waited for the telephone to ring. I'd phoned the General, but it was taking time to complete the call. There was one hell of a lot of noise, guys banging on things, yelling back and forth. I was keyed up, tense still, but the dizziness and fear and all the rest of it seemed to have left me. I hoped it was for good. I remembered the doc had said he'd suffered for only a few hours, and he'd been O.K. since then.

But there was something troubling me, a feeling that I'd forgotten something. I looked at the *libre* out front, attendants moving around it. I was sure, though, that nobody had seen the Nash clearly enough to later identify it as the one I'd been charging around in. But there was something — the phone rang.

I grabbed it. After some clanking sounds a feminine voice said, "*Bueno?*"

"Hello. Who is this?"

"This is Carmelina. I am the maid."

The maid. What the hell had I heard about her? The General had said he trusted his servants, I remembered; but the maid had been with him less than a year. I couldn't help thinking there was a chance she was more than just a maid. She told me the General and his wife weren't home; she didn't know where to reach them. I swore to myself. The longer I thought about it, the more likely it seemed that Villamantes would have planted somebody next to the General. Finally I

told her I absolutely had to get in touch with General Lopez and asked her to try to locate him. I told her I'd call back, then hung up.

Ten minutes went by like an hour. When I called again the same voice answered. I said, "Did you find the General?"

"No, Señor, I am sorry. I called many places."

That did it. I'd already been away from the Center too long; I'd have to take a chance and trust Carmelina.

"I want you to take a message for the General. Keep phoning until you reach him, then give him the message. All right? I will give you a thousand pesos when I see you."

"*Si, si, si*, I tell him very good."

"Write this down: Villamantes is Culebra. The Center is five kilometers past Tlaxpacin, and right on dirt road. Villamantes and twenty others there. Come *pronto*. Bring the whole Mexican Army. That's it; sign it Shell Scott."

She said she'd got it and I had her read it back to me, then told her goodbye. She said rapidly, "But wait. I read the note again, make sure it is right."

"You already —" I stopped as that idea teetering on the edge of my brain fell into place. It was the god-damn *libre*. Monique and her now-dead Commie pal must have planned to go to the Center *in* that car; it might even be kept at the Center, and many there would know its color, license, everything. And Villamantes must have known Monique

was coming out in that *particular* car; there'd be men looking for that Nash right now.

The maid had just started to read the note again. I hung up and ran to the Nash, threw some pesos at an attendant, and wheeled out of the station.

I slammed on the brakes at the edge of the street to let a big truck zoom by, then put the gears in low and eased forward. That damned maid. I was thinking. She'd sure seemed to be trying to keep me on the line. It didn't fit with the car angle.

A few blocks ahead, the truck had pulled into a cross street, was backing out to turn around. Maybe the maid was just conscientious, wanted to be sure. I was jittery. The truck was on the way back toward me now, picking up speed. It occurred to me that actually I wouldn't have to go down that dirt road to the Center; it was the only road in or out of the place, so I could hide somewhere off the main road and watch its exit. I wanted to stay as far from that evil-looking spot as I could.

I pulled to the right a little. The big truck was over petty far toward the center of the road, maybe thirty yards away now, burning up the highway. His lights blinded me. I pulled over almost to the muddy shoulder, but the bastard was still edging onto the wrong side. My heart started pounding as I squinted at the blinding headlights.

That goddamn fool was either drunk or — I yanked the wheel hard to the right, those huge headlights growing in front of me as the truck loomed bigger, closer, obviously trying to hit me. My car went off the road and its front wheels slid in mud as the roar of the truck's motor swelled in my ears and lights blazed in my face, seeming only inches away. I let go of the wheel, jumped for the far side of the car as everything dissolved in the crash and scream of metal and a flash of light, and the world tilted crazily in roaring bedlam. And then there was wrenching pain, and swirling, brilliant light before the sudden blackness.

12.

I came to before we drove through the wide wooden gates, but wasn't fully conscious until the men had dragged me across the muddy grounds and through the front door of the Center. My head throbbed continually and the blaze of light as we went inside hurt my eyes, sent shooting pains lancing through my skull.

My hands were tied with rope behind me, but my legs were free. Inside, one of the men shoved me forward, sent me stumbling into an enormous, high-ceilinged room, that must have occupied nearly one fourth of the entire building. There were three doors in the far wall, two of them close together on my right.

The men hauled me toward the nearest one, stopped before it and knocked.

And I was meeting Villamantes again. He looked out, saw me, and his wide lips curved slightly in a smile. He nodded to the two men, then said to me, in excellent English, "I've been anxious about you, Mr. Scott. I've been looking forward with much anticipation to . . . talking with you."

I'll bet he had. I didn't say anything.

"Bring him in." He spoke curtly to the two men, then stepped aside. They shoved me from the back, tripping me at the same time, and I plunged forward on my face. It's difficult to get on your feet with your hands tied behind you, but I managed it, muscles aching. Villamantes was watching me with interest. It was the same face, clean-shaven, with long sideburns and thick black hair. He was dressed in a black suit, neatly pressed.

He said, "You know what I wish to learn, Mr. Scott. So tell me now. I would prefer that you speak freely. You understand."

I understood. I'd said nearly the same words to Emilio, to Monique. Whatever I got, I'd asked for it. I said, "There's not much I can tell you."

"Where is the girl, the Buffington girl? The lovely Monique? Tell me more about your interest in Fronton. Oh, there is much, Mr. Scott. So begin."

The only question that really worried me was the one about Buff. There was one thing I couldn't, wouldn't, tell this sadistic bastard; I knew what would happen to her if I did.

"Fronton, I can tell you. But that's all." I looked around the room, seeing it for the first time, a queer fright starting in me, at what I saw, things a normal man, a sane man, wouldn't have around.

A couple of them were pictures on the stone walls. One, a nude woman on a cross, her mouth stretched wide, spikes in her hands and feet and the red marks of knife wounds in her body, one breast slashed nearly off and hanging down on her stomach, blood streaming from it and a dozen other wounds. The other one at first looked like one of those surrealistic idiocies, but then I saw the detail, saw what it was: scores of tiny figures, dismembered, arms and legs and thighs and heads and breasts and bits of bloody flesh, all thrown together like those Polish corpses buried by the Russians in Katyn Forest. It made my insides crawl to look at it.

And then I saw the snakes, the rattlesnakes of which General Lopez had spoken. They were on the desk next to a dial phone that looked out of place here, on a box about three feet wide and deep, and half that high. It was like an aquarium, with polished wooden sides and one glass face, but inside the box, curling and writhing behind the glass like eels

or maggots, were the ugly snakes, a dozen or more of them. I shut my eyes involuntarily, a chill running up and down my spine like snake scales crawling there.

Villamantes chuckled. "You don't like my pets, Mr. Scott? They have killed eleven men. It is not a nice way to die." He caressed the case with a white hand. The guy was mad, insane. Normal, maybe, in most ways, with sanity in his appearance and his voice, but still insane. His voice got sharper. "Now perhaps you'll tell me. Quickly, Mr. Scott. Where is the girl? This Buff?"

I swallowed and said, "I thought you had her."

Villamantes glanced at the two men who were still behind my back. "You don't have to stay. You may leave Mr. Scott alone with me." He smiled at me. "You see? I am not so bad." Then he looked again at the men and spoke to them in Spanish. They hit me from behind before I even started to turn.

When I came to I heard Villamantes' voice. He kept asking me about Buff. About all the rest of it. But I didn't say anything, and I kept on not saying anything. Finally he stopped asking me questions and once again spoke to his men in Spanish.

The next half hour, or however long it took them, was a blurred and ugly, pain-filled fragment of time. After the beginning I was never fully conscious. I was aware enough

to feel the hurt, and hear the questions, speak, but never in possession of all my senses. I remember once, after a wrenching pain in my left shoulder, yelling and cursing Villamantes, cursing his pleasant, interested face hanging in the air above me.

I was in the big room I'd first entered. I wasn't bound; even if I could have got to my feet I probably couldn't have walked to the front door. And several men were near. A few men in business suits contrasted oddly with the slow-moving, dark skinned, blank-faced *Indios*, their bare feet silent on the floor as they walked past, like Zombies, their faces expressionless.

Villamantes kept saying at intervals that I could rest now, there would be no more questioning for a while — and at first I believed him, let my hopes rise. But always it was a lie, and my spirits would plunge even lower than before, my depression deepening. It was like his telling me in the beginning that the men would leave me alone with him, then having them beat me, raising my spirits and then dashing them lower than before until I expected nothing more and was grateful for the slightest concession or respite. It was an old Pavlovian trick, a Russian technique, as effective in torture as in truce talks.

In a momentary pause I tried to gather my strength, knowing I couldn't last much longer. Villamantes nodded, and it all began

once more; I felt pain in my left shoulder again, felt fire sear my hand and arm. I was naked except for my shorts and I felt pain writhe over my body, and finally I made them stop, asked him to make them stop while I told him everything.

I talked, but I kept one thought in my swimming brain: That I didn't know where Buff was, that I couldn't tell him where she was even if I wanted to, because I didn't know. All the time I talked in a wonderful relief from pain, I repeated that thought over and over to myself. But I told him all the rest: Amador, Emilio, Monique and the driver. But I said that the truck had hit me then. I had never seen the Center before I was brought here. And almost as much as the thought of Buff, I kept the thought of that note I'd phoned to General Lopez out of my mind. I didn't tell Villamantes of that either; it was the only hope I had to cling to.

Villamantes never touched me, only watched, but his men finally overdid it and I fell into blackness. When I came out of it I saw Monique with Villamantes, talking to him. Captain Emilio, his head huge and white from the bandage around it, squatted near me. I saw a heavy-jowled man, a man with a thick shock of black hair, and it took me a long time to realize it was the man I'd seen in the Countess' movie. Monique and Villamantes continued to talk, looking occasionally at me.

I remember that Doctor Buffing-

ton was brought through the room, two men pulling him. He struggled, shouted something at Villamantes. And a while after that Monique walked over to me, bent down with her face near mine and smiled. She still looked lovely, and even now I couldn't hate her. I couldn't even understand her, and maybe that was part of it. If I ever understood her completely, I might hate her.

She said, "Villamantes is disappointed, Shell. He says you're very strong — and foolish. Buff knows what our purpose is here at the Center; he'll stop at nothing to get her back. And he knows, of course, that you took Buff from here." She paused, then said, "You don't know you that there are snakes here at the Center? They're his pets, like other men have dogs for pets."

I felt a shiver in my belly, in my groin. This was a different kind of torture, not pain, but an anguish of the brain. I remembered General Lopez telling me of dead men found lying on the ground, the two little punctures in their skin, venom in their blood.

Villamantes had gone into his office; now he came out carrying something in his hands. I almost vomited when I saw it. I'd been afraid to believe that I had guessed what Monique meant. It was the glass-walled box, snakes moving inside it. Villamantes thrust the box at my face and I shrank back, clenching my eyes shut, my blood like ice in my veins. I couldn't help it. Villa-

mantes laughed, the first time I'd heard him laugh.

"Now you'll tell us where the girl is. That is the last thing, Mr. Scott. Then you can rest."

"I told you I don't know." My voice was shaking.

"Can you stand up?"

"I think so." I got up, pain jumping in my body. Villamantes walked by his office and beyond it to another door. He opened it as men pushed me forward. Inside, steps led down into darkness.

"This was once a church, this building, Mr. Scott. Beneath us is what you might call a tomb, a catacomb, where long ago dead priests and holy men were placed when they had died. Their mummies still are there. It is a most unpleasant place, cold and damp. But fine for snakes." He laughed again.

They took me down the steps. Darkness was black, almost palpable below, and the air was chill and moist. Someone brought a lantern and in its red glow I could see the silent, dried brown figures that lined the wall: mummies with skin like parchment, brown bony hands folded and faces blank and withered. The men held me, bound my hands and feet, and placed me on my back upon the damp earth. Then all left but Villamantes: Culebra.

In the light from the lantern on the ground, his face looked distorted, the shadows slanting upward above his cheeks and between his eyes. He left and came back with the glass-

faced box. I could see writhing movement in its shadows. He held the box near my face and shook it as the hissing, rattling sound grew in my ears and mind. One snake struck at the glass, fangs clicking against it, and twin streams of orange-colored venom slid slowly down inside the glass like tiny snakes themselves.

"Spare yourself this, Mr. Scott," he said. "Observe." He put his hand at the top of the box, pulled gently, and the glass wall slid upwards a quarter of an inch. I shouted at him to stop, as panic leaped in my mind. "Observe," he said. "How simple to release the snakes here all around you. One man placed here went mad before he died. So tell me now where the girl is, and you will be spared this."

I think I'd have told him then, except that I couldn't believe he would kill me until he knew he had all that he wanted from me. I couldn't believe he'd actually go through with it, couldn't believe that he would leave those ghastly things free in this tomblike place to slither into corners and wait for any other who might come down here. I shook my head.

He stared at me solemnly, then turned the flame of the lantern out. The last thing I saw before complete darkness fell was light glimmering on the glass face of the box.

I heard him moving in the blackness for what seemed an eternity. I strained my ears and, finally, I heard

the sound I'd feared to hear, close by me. It was the sliding as of wood rubbing, as if he were lifting that glass wall of the box to let the evil things crawl forth upon the ground. I heard his footsteps rapid on the steps, then light flashed briefly as he opened the door above me and slammed it shut — and something stirred, moved near me, before blackness smothered me again.

I held my body motionless, my mind frozen. I told myself that this was only mental torture, that he was only trying to soften me up and make me talk; I told myself that this was only my imagination filling me with imagined fears.

But I heard, or thought I heard, the soft, slithering sound of snakes crawling, gliding nearer me over the cold ground, feeling for the warmth of my body. Time lost all meaning as I strained my ears, tried to peer motionless through the darkness, my eyes the only part of me that moved. I thought I heard that sound again and I couldn't stop the ripple of movement on my spine, the horror growing in me until I wanted to shout, to scream.

And then I felt a touch, a faint, cold touch upon my skin.

I held my breath . . . and then I knew. I felt the touch again, felt the thing crawl upon my skin, the slow, ugly, sinuous movement of a snake that glided upon me. My mind screamed inside my skull and I felt it must be screaming there like that horror I had seen in Amador's

dying eyes — then there was another ugly crawling thing upon my naked flesh, and then another and another as I bit my lips and tasted blood to keep myself from shouting, screaming, sobbing. Horror grew and gripped my mind until even the blackness all around me writhed and boiled as cold seeped deeper into my bones. Perspiration, cold, rancid sweat oozed from my body like poison, the nauseous touch of the snakes bodies mingling with it until I felt fouled and forever unclean. I almost wanted to roll upon them, and end the nightmare, but always there was the last slim precious clinging to life that man holds tight while he is sane. While he is sane . . . the thought danced crazily in my mind, and I felt that my mind itself was slipping into a slime like that which covered my skin.

I could see again that vision from my dream, my nightmare, the great, ugly brain pulsing, and it seemed as if that vision roiled my brain, and that my brain moved, pulsed, as that great snake had pulsed.

I lay for minutes or hours, my thoughts frozen, crystallized in horror, and then suddenly light flashed against my eyes, blinded me. I couldn't move or think. As if still in a nightmare, I saw the light float closer, held in his hand, Villamantes' hand, and then my hands and feet were free and other hands dragged me to my feet and pulled me forward. My bare foot pressed against something that squirmed beneath

it and I leaped toward the light, crying out, horror still gripping me.

In the big room, faces were a blur around me; Villamantes' lips were moving as he spoke softly to me: Buff, the girl. Or did I want his pets to crawl on me again? The thought of Buff, of General Lopez, of writhing snakes, twisted together in my brain. I remembered General Lopez, remembered that he would soon be here, and believed it true as I spoke to Villamantes' pleasant face, my voice thin and shaking.

"Tlaxpacin. The road this side. A hundred yards, a hut. She's there."

I saw him turn, speak, saw others leave the room. It was movement without significance. It didn't yet mean anything to me. Someone put a chair behind me and I sat down. There was movement all around me, and finally, after long minutes, I separated the blurs into individual figures. Monique and Villamantes were together. Others walked around the big room. The door to the place below where I had been was closed; near it on the floor I saw the ugly cage, snakes writhing behind the glass, two thin threads of venom still glistening on its inner side. Fright, again, was my only emotion for a while, then slowly it was replaced by disbelief and wonder.

I had heard Villamantes slide the glass door up, release the snakes. And there could be no doubt that snakes had crawled upon me, on my stomach and my hands. But these were still inside the box, not slither-

ing in the darkness down below.

Villamantes walked toward me. "How are you now, Mr. Scott?"

"The snakes," I said. "I thought—"

"My pets are still below," he said. "And they were real enough. But harmless things." He turned, walked to the door and went down the steps. He came back in a moment with a black thing wriggling and writhing in his hand. "You see?" he said. Then he flipped his arm forward, threw the snake at me.

I yelled and jumped, without thinking, sprawled from the chair and landed on my hands and knees, pain shooting through my wrenched shoulder. Villamantes laughed gleefully as the snake wriggled away over the floor. I got to my feet, shame and anger mingling in me. The thought that I had told them where Buff was twisted in me as Villamantes stepped closer.

"You were difficult," he said. "I almost believed you would never tell us. But we are through with you now, Mr. Scott."

I knew what that meant. I had nothing else to tell him, so there wasn't any reason to keep me alive. I thought again of General Lopez. At least there was a chance, a chance that he'd get here in time. There was at least that one last hope.

Villamantes was watching me. He said, "You know of course how we found you, don't you?"

I remembered the car, the truck. "I think so."

"It was the car, of course. When Monique and her driver failed to arrive with Emilio's reports, the logical deduction was not difficult. I reasoned that whoever had upset my plans might be driving the car.

He smiled. "But how did it happen that we found you near the service station in Tlaxpacin? There was much noise there, Señor. The sound of pumps, men shouting, asking and answering questions. Or so the General's maid told me when she phoned. Your General is not coming, Mr. Scott."

13.

For a moment I wouldn't let myself believe him. Then I realized it must be true. I felt washed out, empty.

I swore at Villamantes, hopeless anger started to bubble in me. A lot of times I'd wanted to kill men, but that had always been in sudden passion, fighting, or when others had been trying to kill me. Now, though, simply standing here and looking at Villamantes, I wanted to kill him, murder him. The time I'd spent below had drained my mind, but each minute had rested my muscles more, let strength return to my body.

I looked around. There were at least ten men in the big room, most of them armed. Even Villamantes had a gun under his coat; he was several feet from me. On my left a man stood near the open door to

Villamantes' office, a gun dangling in his hand. Near me, against the wall, the snakes moved silently behind their wall of glass.

I held my breath, my mind swinging slowly from one thought to the next. I knew I couldn't get out of here, much less completely away. But my mind was racing faster, grabbing desperately at every tiny hope.

I turned to Villamantes and started swearing filthily at him. I called him mad, insane, depraved. I called him a woman, a stupid man. And while I talked I put my hands in front of me, pain flickering through my sprained left arm and shoulder. I pressed my hands together, wincing as torn muscles pulled in my flesh. I'd have to chance it anyway.

I said, "Villamantes, you slimy son of a bitch, nobody but a crazy man would have stuck me down there with those snakes."

"It was effective." His face showed a growing anger. He hadn't seemed to mind before when I had dully sworn at him, but I'd pulled out all the stops this time and he wasn't enjoying it.

"Yeah," I said. "It worked, because I was so damned afraid of the things. But it backfired, too. I'm not afraid of them now. Not even the real ones." I pointed at the box three yards away from the floor. "I'm a snake charmer from here on in," I said. "I eat the things. I bite off their heads." I made the

first step then, and every nerve in my body jumped and jangled. I stepped toward the box and kept the words squirting out. "I can kiss the goddamn ugly things —"

That was at my second step and Villamantes woke up. He shouted and leaped toward me. I jumped forward, bent toward the box and got my right hand curled around its edge, the inside of my left palm pressing the other corner as pain screamed up my arm. I squeezed my hands together, Villamantes yelling as he rushed toward me, and I whirled, swung upward, swinging the box around with all my strength.

I heard a shot crack out somewhere in the room and then all I could see was Villamantes' contorted face a yard from me and I kept spinning, shoved the box squarely at him and heard him scream as it crashed, splintering into his face.

I whirled, sprinted toward the man near the open door to Villamantes' office. He was staring past me, his mouth open, but in that instant he jumped backward, flipping up his gun, he fired once, the bullet burning across my hip, then I crashed into him, my right hand grabbing, fingers curling around the barrel of the gun. I twisted the barrel, drove my knee between his legs and jumped past him clutching the gun, as two shots cracked in quick succession behind me.

I jumped through the open office

door, whirled and caught a brief glimpse of the big room, snakes squirming on the floor and men running, then slammed the door with my gun-weighted fist, banged the bolt home. I jumped to the dial phone, jerked the phone from the receiver and let it clatter on the desk top while I dialed General Lopez' number. A weight crashed against the door. I put the receiver to my ear, holding the automatic in my right hand. There was another bang at the door and I fired twice through the wood. Somebody yelled outside.

The phone buzzed in my ear. I was sweating. Then there was a voice. A man's voice. "*Bueno?*"

It sounded like something from another world, that casual, "*Bueno?*" I shouted, "General Lopez?"

"*Si. Ay, my ear, it —*"

"Shut up. This is Scott, Shell Scott. I'm at the Center."

"The Center? What is —"

"Jesus Christ, shut up and listen. I'm five kilometers past Tlaxpacin, dirt road to the right leads to the Center. Culebra is here. Villamantes." There was another bang at the door; it moved inward perceptibly. I slammed a shot through it and the General chattered in my ear. "For God's sake," I yelled, "get out here. Bring a cannon, anything. Ten-foot wall around the place. Wooden gate. You understand?"

"*Si, but —*"

"Listen, it took me nearly an

hour to get here. But coming fast you can make it in half that, even less. These bastards are gonna kill everybody —"

"But I must get help."

"Get anybody, but hurry."

His voice got brisk. "*Si, I understand. I come.*"

I said, "General, there is a girl in Tlaxpacin. She's — General!" The line was dead; the wires had been cut. Villamantes must have remembered this phone in here.

I checked the automatic, took out the magazine. Two cartridges in it, one in the barrel chamber. Three shots left. I shoved the desk against the door and waited.

I checked my watch but it was broken. This was the third time I'd looked at it, nervously, forgetting it was useless. I had to guess at the time that had passed since I'd phoned the General. Ten minutes. Maybe more. Another minute went by; I could hear noise out in the big room, occasional shouts and rapid Spanish.

Suddenly there was a loud crack and splinters flew from the inside of the thick wooden door. Three more shots slammed through the wood as I ran to the side of the room where I'd be protected behind the stone wall. The bolt jumped, ringing, as another shot banged outside. They were shooting hell out of the bolt, ripping it off. A dozen shots in rapid succession finished the bolt, left ragged holes in the wood around it.

I raised the automatic, slid along the wall till I stood close to the spot where the door would open. I'd get three of the bastards. There was a crash and the door slid halfway open, halted by the desk. A brown face appeared in the doorway a foot from my gun and I pulled the trigger. The face jerked back as if somebody behind the man had yanked on a rope around his neck. His face disappeared, a hole in it under one eye.

There was quiet outside, then noise swelled. The words were Spanish, but I recognized Villamantes' voice shouting. Then it got quiet for what seemed a long time. Something funny was going on out there. It was completely silent. I didn't get it and I didn't like it.

I heard them coming, slowly, and I jammed my teeth together, raised the automatic. I heard them right outside the door and my finger tightened on the trigger. Then I saw movement, pulled the gun toward it as blonde hair appeared in the space in front of me. I saw a frightened face, filled with pain, and the red lips pulled back from her teeth. I recognized Buff's twisted face as the gun roared and bucked in my hand.

14.

It was reflex, pure instinctive, unthinking reaction that jerked at my hand a fraction of a second before the gun roared. Buff slumped

in the doorway and for an awful moment I thought I'd killed her. But I'd jerked the gun away in time. She had been released by whoever pushed her forward, and when she fainted she slumped momentarily, then was dragged back out of sight.

I stared blankly at the partly open door as Villamantes said smoothly. "It is your choice, Mr. Scott. My men are a bit afraid of your weapon. Throw the gun out, then step outside, and the girl will live."

I knew none of us would live very long anyway. But I had only one slug left in the gun. I hesitated. Then I heard Buff scream. "All right!" I yelled. "Stop it, Villamantes."

"The gun."

I threw it out the doorway.

"Come out, Mr. Scott."

I slid the desk back, kicked the door open. I heard Villamantes rattle something in Spanish. Then he said in English, "Quickly, Mr. Scott," and I stepped out into the big room.

I saw Villamantes near a man holding Buff, other men with guns pointed at me, two men lying nearby in pools of blood, some dead snakes on the floor. Nobody was shooting at me, but I didn't know why they weren't.

Villamantes told me with a question. "Whom did you phone?"

I said, "What the hell are you talking about? I've had a lot of time to phone people, haven't I?"

His face flushed and he nodded at the man holding Buff; the guy twisted her arm behind her. Her mouth opened. "O.K.," I said. "I'll watch my tongue. But I didn't phone anybody."

"I don't think I believe you."

I shrugged. Villamantes barked orders and men started scurrying around. In a minute one man brought the doc in from somewhere. When he saw Buff he jumped toward her, but the guy yanked him back.

Villamantes said to me, "I think to be safe we will leave for a while. All of us but you, Mr. Scott."

I didn't like that. I wanted to go with them. I wanted very badly to go with them. Men were running now, some carrying boxes outside. A man walked to Villamantes with a sheaf of papers. He took them and put them in the inside pocket of his coat.

Doctor Buffington was with his guard a few feet away from me. He said dully, "That is my work . . . my work. That is what he forced me to do for him. I should have made them kill me."

The guard shoved him forward. Villamantes shouted more instructions to the men. Then he turned toward me and took the gun from under his coat. He didn't say anything dramatic, just pointed the gun at me. He didn't want to talk to me, he wanted to shoot me. The gun was pointed at my belly almost before I could tense my muscles, but even as I started to

jump, Buff screamed as she jerked free of the man's hands holding her and dived toward Villamantes.

I jumped toward him as he whirled and slashed his gun across the top of her blonde head. She crumpled, fell to the floor. And then, at one of the few times I hadn't been thinking about General Lopex, all kinds of hell broke loose. There was a steady rattle of gunfire outside, a hell of a booming roar followed by what sounded like machine guns or automatic rifles.

Villamantes knew what that meant as well as I did, and as soon as the first rattle of guns reached us he turned and started to run toward the door leading below. I ran after him, then flopped to the floor as he whirled in the doorway and fired twice, the bullets singing over my head. Then he was gone.

I got up, feeling the weakness and pain in my body, then ran to the door, jumped through it onto the steps and slammed the door behind me so I wouldn't be outlined in the light. But there was no shot at me, nothing.

I went down the stairs, stumbled and fell, then rolled frantically in case Villamantes fired at the first sound, brushing against something cold and wiggling on the earthen floor. I crashed into the mummified bodies of the holy men, felt the powdered dust of death in my nostrils. But there was no other sound. I stayed motionless on one knee, listening, trying to hear him

breathing, but there was nothing. Lightning flashed outside and flickered momentarily, faintly, here on the dried brown faces, but I didn't see Villamantes.

Lightning . . . the thought picked at my brain. I shouldn't have been able to see it here, down underneath the building. But then it flashed outside again, and a hundred feet ahead of me, down the mummy-lined corridor, it splashed on the earthen floor. I ran down the corridor and felt wet air against my face, saw the lighter square ahead of and above me, and then I followed up dirt steps where Villamantes must have gone.

The wall was behind me now, and beyond it noise still bubbled, and I heard the crack of gunfire. I turned and ran into blackness, rain falling heavily, beating against my face. A minute dragged by, and then another. I stopped, not knowing which way to go. And, too, I realized that I'd run unthinking after him, without a weapon, and with the muscles of one arm torn and crippled. But I couldn't go back; he'd soon be gone for good if he wasn't already gone. A great sheet of lightning hurtled from sky to earth, almost upon me, followed immediately by the sharp crackling roar of almost deafening sound. And in the sudden blinding flash, even as it seemed that the earth itself quaked beneath my feet, I saw him.

He had fallen and was struggling

erect no more than twenty yards away from me. I ran toward him and he must have heard my feet pounding through the mud because flame spat at me in the darkness and a bullet snapped past me through the air. I lunged at the flash as he fired again at the sounds I made, and then I crashed against him, swinging my open right hand like a cleaver toward his face.

My hand thudded against his upraised arm and then we fell in the mud, sliding, his body beneath me at first, then slipping away. I clutched at him, felt his clothing in my hand and jerked him to me, slashing with my right hand for his nose, his throat. His palm smacked against my wrist and his fingers clamped around it with a grip of desperation. The gun thudded against my shoulder and I threw up my arm, grabbed his bicep in my fingers as we rolled in the mud, then slid my hand down to his forearm, trying to keep the barrel of his gun away from me.

The gun cracked and a bullet raked my side. I squirmed, pulling him on top of me, then shoving him over me and against the ground, his fingers still tight around my right wrist, my left hand on his arm that held the gun. I inched my hand down further and he jerked his arm, nearly ripped it from my grasp.

For a long moment we lay almost motionless, straining with our arms, neither able to gain an advantage.

He was on his back and I sprawled half on top of him, my chin upon his chest. He was strong, and I could feel the strength draining from me. The beating, torture, all the rest of it had sapped my strength and it was ebbing from me. I couldn't jerk my wrist from the strong grip in which he held it. I squeezed my fingers tight around the arm that held the gun, but slowly I felt him forcing it toward me, bringing the muzzle around to bear on my chest. I strained my every muscle, felt veins standing out on my forehead from the effort, and for a moment I held his arm rigid. But then it moved again; I felt the weakness growing in my arm, the torn muscles agonized as he forced the gun toward me.

Both of us were grunting and snarling like animals, and that is what we were then. The nearness of death, its sharp edge, sliced away the layer that was human, and we were animals rolling in the slime of earth. One thought possessed my mind, that I must kill him. It was the only thought that existed; it was my world, my brain.

I felt his arm force mine back further, his muscles like stone under my fingers, and I knew the gun must be almost against my side, ready in seconds to blast death into me. That he would get away, that he would take with him a horror almost past believing, that he would live even after all the cruel and evil things that he had done, meant

nothing to me now. And even the awful fear of losing life, of dying here in the mud, was only a small part of what I felt. The thought that I must kill him swelled so large that there was room for nothing else inside me.

Lightning flashed above us and I saw his contorted, unhuman face close to my own, his head thrown back with the intensity of his effort, the lips peeled wide and his naked throat inches from me. From somewhere out of the darkness in my mind, I remembered a conversation with a friend, a soldier: in a Korean foxhole with a Red Chinese, struggling for his life like this and on the edge of death, he had ripped the enemy's throat with his teeth, killed him, and lived.

The lightning flared again and I saw the white throat, the corded neck of Villamantes. From somewhere came an extra breath of strength and I inched higher on his body, straining my arms to hold the gun away, and then I felt his skin against my lips, and then, with horror, his flesh upon my teeth.

I heard his cry, but it was like an imagined sound for it was mingled with the pulse of his life, and it seemed the rain was red blood gushing in a horrid stream and falling from the sky upon me, covering my body and mixing with the mud beneath us and around us until we were drowning in a great, thick lake of blood. My mind was empty except for that one thought,

of red rain steadily falling, and then finally even that thought grew dim and there was stillness all around me.

I crawled on my hands and knees away from him and sprawled on my face, then rolled over on my back and let the rain beat against my flesh, against my mouth. It seemed, still, that the rain was blood, a great warm flood falling from the black sky and drenching me with liquid redness. My brain was stunned with shock, and nausea gurgled in my stomach. I felt, insanelly, as if I were inside the walls of an enormous beating heart, the blood hissing and rumbling through the arteries, pouring from the veins, the great pump booming in my ears and the raw red walls swelling and then closing in toward me, only to swell again to the booming, booming, pounding in my ears.

And, finally, after a long time, my mind was blank, squeezed dry of any thought or memory or sensation, and there was only the sound, or absence of sound, a strange half deafness with silence beating in it; the sound a man must hear when he awakens buried in his coffin underneath the ground. And, a long time after that, I heard the rain again, felt it cool upon my naked skin, cool, not warm and thick as it had been before.

I got to my knees, weak and trembling still, and stayed like that for minutes more. I rubbed mud

against my mouth, ground it against my lips, then caught rain in my hands and slapped it against my face. And finally I got to my feet, walked back to Villamantes.

I searched him, took everything from his pockets, then stood up. Lightning flashed and I saw him for the last time, on his back in the mud, rain beating on his face and on the torn, ripped redness of his throat. I left him there, walked back toward the Center. The sound of guns had stopped. It was finished, over.

15.

Now it was Wednesday afternoon, too early for the rain to start. The sky was beginning to darken, but sunlight still filtered through the gathering clouds.

We were at the Mexico City Municipal Airport — Buff, Doctor Buffington and me. We had two minutes before their plane took off, headed for L. A., Hollywood, the Sunset Strip, home. I'd follow them later, on another plane, but it was better that we didn't leave together; whatever we might have talked about there'd have been something else in our minds.

The doctor shook my hand. "I think we've said it all, Shell. No sense going over it again. You know how we feel."

"Sure, Doc. See you in L. A."

He squeezed my hand a moment longer, then released it. He hesi-

tated. "You remember our talk at Monte Cassino. I'm . . . I won't be making any more speeches." He grinned wryly as loudspeakers again announced the flight for Los Angeles.

Buff had been standing quietly alongside us. She said, "Be with you in a minute, Dad." He took the hint, walked away.

She turned to me. "'Bye, Shell."  
"So long, honey."

"You will see us again, won't you? Soon?"

She looked lovely. Gray suit that matched her eyes, blonde hair smooth, lips red and tempting. She still looked tired, not quite herself. But it wouldn't be long; she'd look like Spring again.

"Pretty soon," I said. "We've got a date."

She smiled, put her arms around my neck. "I'll be careful of your arm," she said. I had the arm in a sling, but it was almost well, I didn't really need the sling any more.

"Don't worry about it." I grinned at her and slipped my arm from the black cloth.

She pulled herself against me, lifted her lips and pressed them gently against mine. There weren't words for it, not for the caress and melting of her lips, the fulfillment and the promise, the wonderful softness and clinging and warmth. It was like a first kiss, or a last kiss, as if she were saying *I love you*, with silent lips.

Then she was running across the field away from me; there was the tiny wave of a hand and she was gone. I watched the plane until I couldn't see it any longer. I felt suddenly lonely, washed out, even old and tired.

I sat in the Monte Cassino drinking my third highball. I didn't even know why I'd come here, except perhaps because the four of us had been having fun that night until everything started falling apart. Even fun with Monique, I remembered. And she was dead now. Monique, Villamantes, Emilio, the heavy-jowled lover, and most of the others who had been at the Center when the General arrived that night, blew up the gate and charged inside. He'd had only eight other men with him, but they'd carried submachine guns, rifles. When it was all over, two of the General's men were dead and only seven of the twenty-odd at the Center were left alive. Monique wasn't one of them.

I guess it was lucky that Villamantes had knocked Buff unconscious, because when Lopez and his men started shooting everything in sight, she'd been on the floor, the doc beside her, holding her in his arms. I'd been practically out on my feet, my brain drugged, when I'd walked back inside, but I'd stayed on my feet long enough to help mop things up.

Doctor Buffington destroyed the papers I'd taken from Villamantes,

destroyed all traces of his work. In Villamantes' desk I found the films of the Countess and her now-dead lover, six reels of film in shiny tin cans. I burned them. The Countess was grateful, when I phoned her, even asked me to tell her all about it over a highball. But I had seen General Lopez in action, with a submachine gun, so I asked her, instead, to please mail that fifty-thousand-peso check to me.

All the odds and ends were cleaned up. The general had handled most of it: Belchardo; the maid, Carmelina — who naturally had been the one who gave Villamantes the nicknames "Nana" and "Toro" to be used in the General's suicide note — the tag ends. There was nothing left.

I finished my drink, feeling mean, tried to push the black thoughts out of my mind. It was night outside, rain falling softly through the darkness. I felt lousy.

"Cigarettes? *Cigarros?* Cigarettes?"

"Hell, no, I've got —" I raised my head suddenly, almost spilling my drink, and there they were, in front of me. They looked like the same ones; I was sure they were the same ones. I didn't feel so lousy. Hell, I felt pretty good. I looked up.

"Well, Sarita," I said.

"You wish cigarettes?"

"Cigarettes? Yes. Sure. Stoop over here so I can see them."

Her smile broadened. She stooped.

I said, "I'll have one of these and one of those and one of those —"

She interrupted, laughing softly. "Did you really wish cigarettes?"

"Not really. I, uh, I'm still suspicious of you. What I really want is to ask you some more questions."

"Like last time?"

"Sure."

"But last time I was in bed."

"What the hell you think I want to ask you?"

She chuckled. Then she frowned. "The arm. What is it wrong with?"

I got sly. "Why, the arm," I said slyly, "is broken. I am harmless — I mean, helpless."

She nodded. "I see. From a man with one arm I can fear nothing."

"When do you get off?"

She shrugged. "Oh, anytime now."

"Well, let's go."

She looked at me. "Is serious?"

"Is serious as hell."

"*Momentito.*"

She was gone for a minute, then came back without her cigarette tray, a black coat tossed over her shoulders.

I dropped money for my bill on the table, got up, groaning a little. We walked to the door. As we went outside she said, smiling, "What is it you wish to ask me?"

"Oh-h . . . things."

"Well," she said, "no matter what, I do not worry about a man with a broken arm."

I laughed as we walked down the street. The rain had stopped.

# Contributors to the Anniversary Issue



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*\*Veteran MANHUNT readers will realize that we're sworn not to give away "Macdonald's" real, and very famous name. Any competent physician, however, will recognize him from the picture above.*

## IN THIS ISSUE:

### FIRST

*Manhunt's* First Anniversary Issue — sixteen more pages, stories by your favorite writers, about your favorite detective characters — including:

### FIGHT

*Pattern for Panic*, a full-length Shell Scott novel by RICHARD S. PRATHER, in which Scott is mixed up with a trio of beautiful women, several guns, a Mexican jail and some very unusual film. And Frank Kane's *Finish the Job*, a sequel to last month's fast-moving *The Icepick Artists*, starring Johnny Liddell in a desperate search for the brains behind the waterfront murders.

### FRAME

*The Wrong Touch* by HENRY KANE features private richard Peter Chambers, working to clear a known killer of murder, and *Guilt-Edged Blonde* shows JOHN ROSS MACDONALD'S Lew Archer working on a case, even after his client is killed. . . . *And Be Merry* stars lawyer-detective John J. Malone in a mystifying locked-room murder which only Malone's creator, CRAIG RICE, could have invented.

### FRIGHT

HAROLD Q. MASUR brings Scott Jordan back to *Manhunt* in *Over My Dead Body*, the story of the corpse who was nobody's sister, and therefore was killed. *The Six-Bit Fee* takes RICHARD DEMING'S Manville Moon into a dangerous job, with a client who refuses to pay anything to anybody.

### FULL

All that — plus a top-notch feature by VINCENT H. GADDIS — really makes for a full issue of murder, mayhem and surprise. *Manhunt's* second year starts out even better than its first!