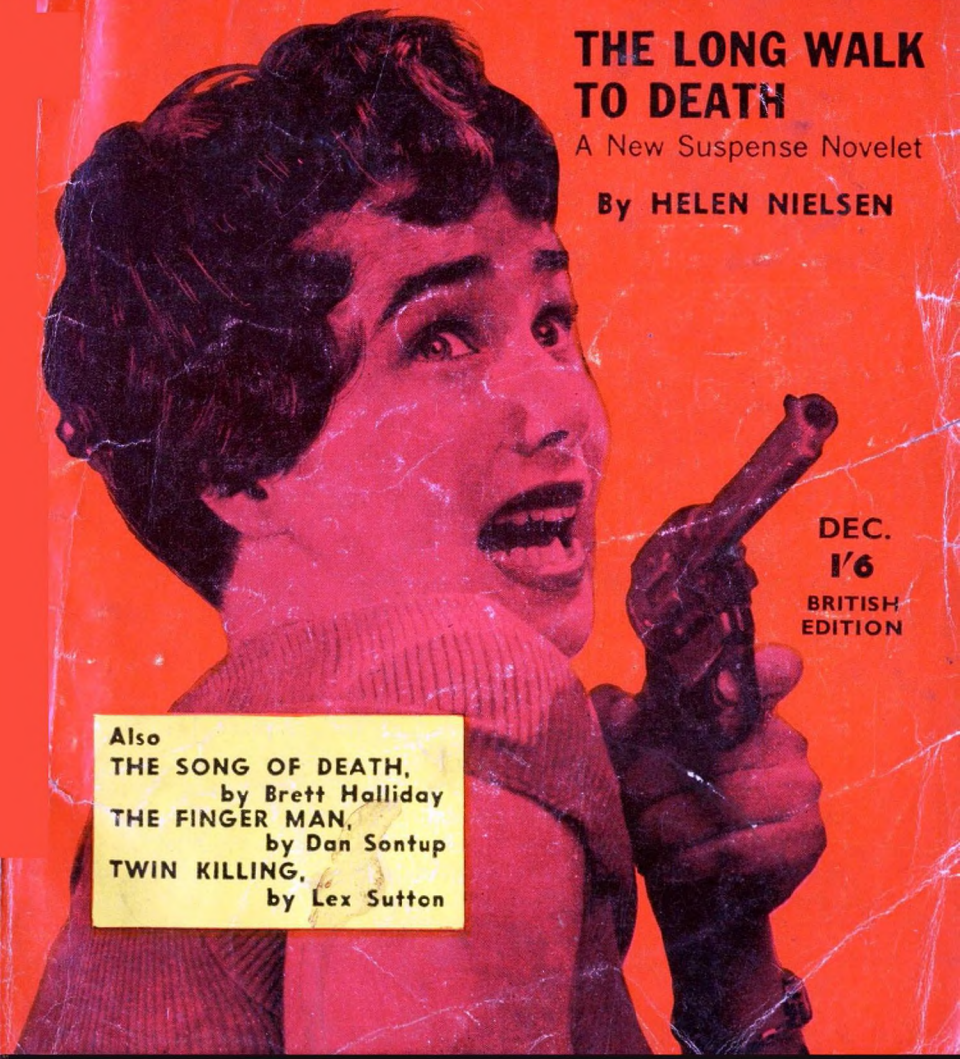
MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

All New Stories

THE LONG WALK TO DEATH

A New Suspense Novelet

By HELEN NIELSEN



DEC.
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BRITISH EDITION

Also
THE SONG OF DEATH,
by Brett Halliday
THE FINGER MAN,
by Dan Sontup
TWIN KILLING,
by Lex Sutton

The Challenge in Mystery Writing

One of the great trade secrets of successful mystery writing is the art—and it's also an applied science and a foray into experimental psychology—of making sure that your lead character remains for many pages and in a wholly convincing way on the spot. You've got to understand and sympathise with his fear, his inner agony, his uncertainty as to how far he can get with all of the cards stacked against him.

And that's precisely what Helen Nielsen has done in her exciting long novelette "The Long Walk to Death," complete in this issue. She has so successfully identified herself with the young piano player who is so pivotal to this murder yarn super-charged with suspense that you see everything that takes place through his eyes. I remember how dramatically and unforgettably John Garfield played a somewhat similar role on the screen many years ago—and how wonderfully he made you forget that he was John Garfield. He was just a tormented young piano player and his inner agony, the troubles which had been piled upon him, took precedence over all else.

I'm not at all surprised that a sagacious critic recently said of Helen Nielsen that her two latest novels had a quality of newness, aliveness, vitality and importance that should place her very securely in the front rank of mystery writers.

There's very much the same quality of intense emotional projection in Richard Deming's novelette "Scented Clues." And, of course, there's the ever-present Mike in his newest novelette "The Song of Death." That leaves you with five fine short stories to complete another issue of high entertainment.

Brett Halliday

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The Song of

THE NEW

MIKE SHAYNE NOVELETTE

By BRETT HALLIDAY

DEATH

Mike takes a milk-run assignment, playing watch-dog to a musical-comedy baritone, only to have a soft job explode in his face as an apparently harmless backstage feud becomes a feud in dead earnest!

Shayne watched Ray Barron empty the huge glass with awe. Moments before, it had been filled to overflowing with the contents of a Biscayne Bubble — four kinds of ice cream, a banana, a large hemisphere of meringue and an uncounted number of assorted fruits, syrups and other trimmings, including assorted nuts.

Strictly a brandy-and-beefsteak man himself, the redheaded detective felt his stomach do convulsive groundloops inside him. The Bubble was Barron's fourth similar monstrosity indulged in, during the sixteen hours Shayne had been with him.

Barron patted a trim waistline, wearing a cat-eats-cream expression on his dark, handsome face. An established concert and musical-comedy baritone, he was in Miami Beach, with his ex-wife and co-star, Ila Allis, in an effort to help their producer revive a revue called Have Tux, which was sagging in its pre-Broadway tryouts, through an infusion of fresh capitol.

He told Shayne, with a half-sheepish smile, "I need these crazy sweets — I burn up energy like a steam laundry, and liquor raises hob with my nose. Bear up, Mike—once the audition is over tonight, you won't have to suffer any more."

Shayne thought the baritone sounded almost smug. Barron, as if reading his thoughts, added, "You've never seen Ila do her stuff — that gal is dynamite once she steps on a stage."

"So they tell me," said the de-

tective. Ila Allis, in his opinion, was dynamite offstage as well—otherwise she could never have talked him into taking on the job of playing wet-nurse to her ex-husband. She had been utterly convincing while delivering the sales-talk that had caused the redhead to accept his role as watchdog.

The interview had taken place in a luxurious sixteen-room, white-coral and plate-glass "bungalow" on the Beach, which Larry Keene, the producer of Have Tux, had managed to borrow for the duration of his money-hunting trek to Miami. Ila, clad in denim shorts and an astonishingly brief angora sweater, had laid it out in clipped, incisive accents, between puffs of a thin Cuban cigar.

"These fat slobs want Ray out of the show and their own boy, a character called Alvin Duke, in," she told Shayne. "Ray has an ironclad contract, so their only hope is to get him to break it, or get Larry" — this, with an oblique, distrustful glance at tall, harried-looking Lawrence Keene, the producer, who was sprawled in an armchair close to the telephone—" to buy him off. But, if Ray goes, I go, and they know it now."

There was, she explained, a third alternative open to the prospective backers — force. Since his arrival in Miami Beach, twenty-fours hours earlier, her ex-husband's luggage had been briefly mislaid at the airport, and his throat pastilles replaced by a type of tablet calculated to burn his vocal chords and put him out of action for at least two weeks.

"As it happened, I borrowed them first," she said huskily. "Luckily, nothing can damage this frog-growl of mine."

Thereafter, had come a number of telephone threats, demanding that Barron withdraw from the show if he wanted his health. "I'm not going to sit idly by while my husband is injured—perhaps for life," Ila concluded. "I want you to see Ray gets out of Miami unharmed, and you can do it, Mike."

"Ex-husband — remember?" the baritone had drawled. He had depreciated the entire business as being merely a bluff, adding, "Who'd want to knock out a knocked-out character like me?"

Ila had been insistent and, as Barron remarked later, "What Ila wants, Ila gets." Larry Keene had agreed, " . . . to keep peace in the family," and Shayne had reluctantly undertaken what he was already terming an "ice-cream run." In his sixteen hours on the job, there had been no whisper of a threat. It was be-

ginning to look like the easiest fee he had ever earned, save for having to watch his charge consume such horrifying combinations as the Biscayne Bubble.

As they left the ornate ice-cream parlor, with its clientele of hungry teenagers, the only threat of trouble Shayne could detect lay in the late November weather, which was grey, a trifle raw and hinted at rain soon to come.

"Ah!" said Ray Barron, sniffing at it. "Beautiful Miami, America's winter playground. Beautiful, sunny Miami!" Then to the detective, "I'm going to have to get under a sun lamp soon, or I'll lose my Boston tan."

"You'll be lucky if you keep the lining of your stomach," said Shayne, climbing behind the wheel of his beat-up Hudson.

Shayne automatically checked the street around them for signs of trouble — the group of youths and maidens heading for the ice-cream parlor from which baritone and redhead had just come, the medium-heavy afternoon traffic, the car double-parked just behind his own sedan. He was not expecting trouble and saw no sign of it in the vicinity.

He was wrong. No sooner had he begun easing the nose of the sedan out than the double-parked car immediately in back rolled swiftly forward and clipped his mudguard. Shayne swore and reversed his car clear of the minor collision, then got out to survey the extent of the damage, which was mostly a matter of scraped paint.

"Why don't you look where you're going before you pull out on a guy?" and aggressive voice asked him. He looked up and saw a tall, heavy-set citizen standing over him.

"Why don't you sound your horn?" Shayne countered. Only then did he notice the lazy-looking, lanky individual blocking Ray Barron, who had got out of the sedan on the sidewalk side and was seeking to come around to join Shayne. He recognised a pattern of violence. In view of the threats to Barron, the actions of the two men might not be as coincidental as they looked.

Shayne said, "Hold it a moment, chum," and tried to move past the man in front of him to get closer to Barron. At that instant, he saw the lanky looking man take a swipe at the singer, who ducked the blow neatly, but leaned right into a savage uppercut that barely missed his Adam's apple.

"No, you don't," said the bulky one, and the detective found himself enveloped in a

veritable bear-hug.

Suddenly, Shayne saw red — the fact that such a simple scheme of assault might succeed, made him mad. He brought a heel down hard, twice, on one of the big man's size twelves. Shayne tore himself clear, drove his left fist low, into the man's hemispheric paunch, then delivered a whistling right hook to the side of his neck as he doubled over, knocking him, hard, against the side of his own car.

The lanky man, in the meantime, had tied up Barron and appeared to be trying to throttle him as he bent him backward over the hood of the detective's sedan. In two strides, Shayne was upon him, pulling him clear and swinging him into the path of a straight right that caught him under the arms and swung him around, pushing him against the beefier foeman, who helped his friend keep his footing.

By the time the redhead reached Ray Barron, the attackers were moving rapidly away. They pulled into their waiting car and were off before Shayne could do anything. Back in the sedan, he pulled a pad and pencil from the glove compartment and began to put down some gures.

"What e you doing?" Barron asked him.

"Taking down their license number while I remember it," Shayne told him. Then, "How's the throat? Did they . . ." He let it hang.

"They didn't do it any good," said the baritone, massaging his neck. "That character had fingers like steel claws." He cleared his throat and sounded a scale, to the interest and amusement of the small crowd that had assembled.

"It's okay," he said as Shayne cleared the parking space. "Nice work, Mike. You're something in action!"

"I'm a tramp," growled the detective. "If I'd been on my toes, they'd never have had a chance to lay a hand on you."

He boiled with cold fury as he drove Barron back to the Beach, to the "bungalow" Lawrence Keene had taken. This assault, on the open street in broad daylight, should never have been thought of, much less attempted. He'd almost let it get out of hand.

II

While Ray Barron gave his account of the attack outside the ice-cream parlor, Shayne found himself studying Ila Allis. It was the first time the detective had seen the celebrated theatrical personality in repose, for she listened intently and without interruption

Clad in a brilliantly embroidered blue mandarin jacket and the inevitable blue-denim shorts,

she was both younger and prettier than the redhead had thought her, having seen her only in more restless mood. Not until Barron had finished did she move, and then it was to turn on the tall, tired looking Lawrence Keene, who still slouched by the telephone.

"Now do you think I was crazy to have to get Shayne?" she said. Without awaiting an answer, she leapt to her feet, ran to her ex-husband, grabbed him by the shoulders and asked fiercely, "Baby — are you sure those meatballs didn't gimmick your pipes?"

Barron sang eight bars of On the Road to Mandalay in beautiful true, ringing tones by way of answer. Satisfied, Ila trained her guns on the producer and said, "Now, perhaps, you'll believe you're dealing with gangsters, you blind, two-headed worm."

Lawrence Keene, still looking as if he were about to fall asleep at any moment, lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug and said, "It wouldn't be the first time mob money backed a Broadway show, sweetheart."

"You'd let them run in this hillbilly juke-box creampuff, Val Duke, over Ray's dead body, for the sake of a few lousy grand?" she asked him in a growl and reached for a half-empty glass.

"More than a few lousy grand," said the producer of Have Tux. "We need a flat sixty thousand to open the show in Philadelphia — or don't you remember the Boston notices?"

"If Heinie Bates wants Val Duke in my part, I'll cancel," Barron said quietly. "He can't be as bad as he sounds, and I don't want the show to die."

"Don't be a double-crossing quitter, baby," said Ila sweetly. "I won't step on stage with this diaper-set's delight." Then, to Lawrence Keene, "I'll play a single in Las Vegas before I'll play with that mobbed-up mutt, Larry. Trust little Ila — she and Ray are going to slaughter the people tonight."

"I sure as hell hope so," said Keene with a sigh. He rose and crossed languidly to a huge wall-television, turned it on, adding, "This is the switch to end all switches. I've had plenty of backers want to put their girlfriends in my shows, but I've never been up against one with a pet crooner before."

Shayne took advantage of the producer's absence from the phone to call his office. When Lucy came on he checked on the mail and phone calls, then gave her the license number of the car in which the attackers had driven away that afternoon. "Get one of the boys in the

Bureau of Registry to check on it, Angel," he said.

As he hung up, Ila Allis said, "Nauseating!" For a moment, the redhead bridled angrily — until he realised that the actress was not speaking to him, but was regarding the television set with violent distaste. The other two men were watching the screen in silence.

A treacle - voiced announcer with a head like a butterball was concluding with, "And here, folks, is the man you've all been waiting for, the sensation of Paul Barkis' Club Lagoon, the champion of every juke-box south of the Mason and Dixon Line, the one and only Silver Singer from little old St. Pete . . . Alvin Duke — the kid himself!"

It was a colorcast, and there was no doubt about the silvery appearance of the tow-headed young man who ambled into view, toting a glittering silver guitar. From his cowboy boots to the handkerchief tied loosely around his neck, he coruscated like a cascade of newly minted dimes. He had a youthful, broad-boned, semi-handsome face, in which a pair of restless blue eyes darted nervously as he bowed and waved his hand in response to a shrill ovation of whistles and feminine screams.

When it subsided, he grinned and asked, "You wanna hear me sing, or you wanna make all the noise yourselves?"

This drew another ovation, after which the silver one went into his act. Shayne watched, incredulous, as the youth launched himself in a series of eerie gyrations of shoulders and hips, of crouches, leaps, twists and fragments of crude tapdance routines. All the while, Duke kept strumming his guitar and singing in a disjointed but rythmic series of growls, shouts and yodels, a rambling number about the Florida swamplands that was apparently entitled Tamiami Hoedown.

When it was finished, before he could sing another number, Lawrence Keene rose and moved to turn off the set. But Ray Barron stopped him, saying "I thought Elvis was the end — but this is really it. Don't turn it off — I want to know if this is for real."

Keene said, "Okay, if you want to punish yourselves — but I've had it. If I'd seen this character, I'd never have brought you to Florida. I'll never try to put that on Broadway."

The telephone rang, and Shayne picked it up. A feminine voice, rather flat but not unpleasant, said, "Hello — who's this? Is this Lawrence Keene's number?"

"That's right," said the de-

tective. "This is Mike Shayne."

Keene looked at the detective with upraised eyebrows, and Mike covered the mouthpiece and said, "A dame wants to talk to you." The producer motioned for Shayne to take it.

"Mr. Keene's busy," the redhead told her.

"Okay," said the unknown. "This is a — a friend of Val Duke. He asked me to call Mr. Keene. He heard about what happened downtown this afternoon and says you won't have to worry about him — he wouldn't take a part that way on a silver platter."

"Who is this?" the detective asked, on the alert.

"A friend of Val Duke," was the reply. "All I can tell you is you won't have to worry about him any more." The line went dead.

He relayed the message to Keene, who shrugged again, just as Val Duke began his second number, making conversation impossible. Shayne wandered to the small bar with which the long room was mercifully equipped and poured himself a stiff drink of Coronet brandy.

Rather to his surprise, he liked the three theatre people and felt sympathy for them. It was evident that the producer was in desperate financial straits, and that Heinie Bates, Val Duke's backer, was putting on the squeeze to get his protege into Have Tux before kicking in any money. As Larry Keene had said, it was a switch to end all switches on the time-honored chorus-girl routine.

Heinie Bates was one of the newer residents of Miami Beach, a rich, rough and tough hinterland contractor with underworld connections, who had retired to the "American Riviera" with the means and desire to indulge his hobbies — one of which seemed to be show-business.

Apparently, judging from the threats to Ray Barron and the attack of the afternoon, Heinie had not left all his tough techniques behind him when he retired and came to Florida.

In the next couple of hours Ila managed to tear her audition gown and Barron had to sew it up for her. And, at nine-thirty, Shayne found himself standing backstage, in the wings of the small theatre with which the Sans Gene room of the Beach's newest and most magnificent hotel, Sans Souci Towers, was fitted.

Sans Souci Towers was so new that it wasn't even finished. As they passed through the lobby, Shayne and his clients had threaded a passage through carpenters, plasterers and decorators, all working overtime on the chore of getting the fabulous

hostelry ready for the Christmas Eve opening. Fortunately, the Sans Gene room, where Heinie Bates had arranged the audition, was completed, though it smelled strongly of fresh paint.

The detective caught his first in-the-flesh glimpse of Heinie Bates when Heinie walked past him, following a brief introductory talk by Lawrence Keene, and made a speech to the two-hundred-plus people in the audience. He had the squat, bullish, juggernaut look of a Nikolai Khrushchev, with the quick eyes of a card-sharp, the belly of a Buddha and the thick hands and creased neck of a cement mixer.

His accents were those of the construction crew, and he greeted his guests with coarse good humor, concluding with, "I dunno much about the Broadway theatre — but I been around show business plenty. I dunno what kinda show Have Tux is— I ain't seen it yet — but Larry Keene wants my money in it. I wanta give my boy, Val Duke, a break, but Larry says no. I'm gonna let you decide for me. When Larry's boy finishes, Duke will come on and do his stuff. You let me know which boy you like best."

"The so-and-so!" Ila Allis exploded, almost in Shayne's ear. Her dark eyes blazed at Larry Keene in the dimness. "You knew about this, you double-crossing dog!"

Keene shook his head and mopped a suddenly damp brow. He managed his elegant half-shrug and said, "So you and Ray go out there and kill the people. Then this Duke character dies."

"In front of Heinie's hand-picked audience?" Ila countered with scorn. "I ought to report you to Equity, Larry."

The battle was halted by Heinie Bates leaving the stage to a volley of applause, shaking hands with himself over his head like a victorious prizefighter. "How was I?" he asked, beaming at all and sundry.

"You were —" Ila began, but Keene, looking harried, cut her off with a compliment. Further explosion was prevented by the fact that the curtain, in front of which producer and possible backer had made their speeches, slowly rose. It was time for Ila and Ray Barron to go out and get busy.

Bates moved ponderously past the detective to buttonhole a wiry little wisp of a man with dark, close-set eyes, a diagonal slit of a mouth and a spectacular nightclub pallor. "Hey, Johnny," Heinie said. "Where's Val Duke? I want him here on time."

"Don't get in an uproar, Heinie," the little man brashly

replied. "He'll be here any minute now."

"He better be," said Bates with a menacing frown.

"Relax, Heinie," the little man told him. "Since when does one of my kids do anything I didn't tell them?"

"They'd better not start now," said Bates. He turned away and vanished through the door that led to the front of the house. Moments later, he reappeared in front row centre, where he plunked himself into a chair next to a cadaverous middle-aged man with a shock of uncombed grey hair, who chewed incessantly on an unlit cigar, This man, Shayne recognised, was Paul Barkis, a local real estate operator and owner of the Lagoon Club, from which Val Duke had made his telecast earlier.

Shayne turned his attention to the performance on stage, where Ila and Ray Barron were running through their songs, dances and skits with the aid of a small group of pit musicians. Although the redhead was no drama critic, he knew and respected able professionals in any line, and both Ila and her ex-husband were brilliant entertainers. He also began to understand why the baritone needed sweets in fantastic quantity for energy. Offstage, he might seem relaxed — but, in front of the footlights, he was dynamic, pouring vitality recklessly into every move he made, every phrase he sang or spoke.

Two hours flowed by like twenty minutes while the expert pair performed their numbers singly and together. The audience, like Shayne, appeared to enjoy them hugely — except when Barron sang a solo — which was greeted by a solid wall of silence. Since the baritone had a fine voice and delightful delivery, it didn't take much in the way of deduction for the redhead to sense that the audience was fixed.

When, at last, they came off, Ila was swearing and sweating like the trouper she was. "Those flat-faced blankety-blanks!" she exploded. "I'd like to go out there and spit in their eyes. Giving you the silent treatment, baby, because that crummy crooner is the big crumb's pet. I'd like to take him by his fat neck and—"

"Any time," said the heavy-set Heinie, appearing suddenly in the wings. He gave Ila a pat on the seat that reduced her, for once, to stuttering incoherence, then swung on the little man with the night-club pallor, who had also reappeared, and said, "Where's Val Duke? Dammit, Johnny, you're his manager."

The nightclub pallor seemed to grow even ashier as the little man replied, "Honest, Heinie, I don't know. He promised he'd be here."

Out front, the audience was clapping rhythmically and calling for their crooning idol. Ray Barron, who had thus far been suffering in silence, elected to step into the breech.

"They want Val Duke?" he asked no one in particular. Not waiting for an answer, he plucked the silver lame wrap from Ila's shoulders, picked up a stick of lumber in lieu of a guitar. "They want him? They'll get him," Barron announced.

He marched onstage alone, the lame wrap draped absurdly about him, faced the audience and said, "You wanna hear me sing, or you wanna make all the noise yourselves?" Then, turning to the orchestra, "Tamiami Hoedown, if you please!"

Apparently, from having watched his rival once on television, the baritone had achieved imitative mastery of the silver one's bag of tricks. Watching him, Shayne felt that he was actually looking at and listening to Val Duke. Every voice-trick, every gyration, every gesture, was faithfully mimicked and exaggerated just enough to make it hilarious lampooning.

Shayne caught a glimpse of Paul Barkis as that hard-shelled, veteran promoter first gazed in amazement, then curled up in his chair and guffawed at the ceiling. Thus, for a moment, the detective was unaware of the reaction of the rest of the house until an angry roar of boos and shouts drowned out Barron's singing. The audience rose to its feet in outrage and the baritone stood there, defying them with an expression of total contempt.

Ila clutched Shayne's arm, crying, "The damn fool will get himself killed — do something!" She sprang toward the curtain controls to put a barrier between her ex-husband and his outraged hearers.

Shayne went into action, striding onstage to pull Barron off, just as the curtain and the audience began storming the footlights. Before the show, as a matter of routine, the redhead had gone over the layout thoroughly. Now he almost dragged the furious Barron after him through a rear door that led to an alley extending between two wings of the unfinished hotel.

"Bunch of punks!" Barron muttered in his ear. The singer was still trailing Ila's silver wrap.

They turned a corner in the passageway and came to an abrupt halt. There, on the concrete, was another larger splash of silver, marred by two splot-

ches of darker hue. It was Val Duke, and someone had put a couple of bullets through his chest. The silver singer was quite dead.

III

Chief of Police Will Gentry looked across his desk at Shayne with the long-suffering expression of a schoolmaster whose favorite, if most refractory, pupil had just committed another unpardonable breech of the rules. The big clock on the wall behind him told the redhead that it was past eight in the morning—though, by the rain-swept greyness of the skies beyond the windows, it could still have been almost night.

Gentry's voice, like his face, was tired—as was Mike Shayne. It had been a long and trying night for both of them. He said "Mike—I'm disappointed in you. I thought, by this time, you had learned to keep your nose and your clients out of trouble."

"This wasn't my doing," Shayne replied, "I didn't kill Val Duke, and I'm damn sure none of my clients did. Ila Allis and Ray Barron were on-stage when it happened."

"And this Keene?" Gentry asked quietly. "Where was he?"

Shayne shrugged wearily. "I wasn't watching him," he admitted. "But hell, Will, it stands to reason. . . ."

"Does it, Mike?" the Police Chief asked. He rubbed a hand over his eyes and shuffled a clip of papers in front of him. "I have here," he added, "a report made by Traffic Officer Patrick Garrity. It seems you and Barron were involved in a fistfight with a couple of men, unidentified, yesterday afternoon, outside the Blue Bay Ice Cream Parlor. By reading between the lines, I gather you might have held these guys for him and he could have made a proper investigation of what might have been a felonious assault."

"It was felonious, all right," the detective told him, "but we weren't the felons. My job was to look after Barron. They just got away before I could turn to them." He gave Gentry a brief account of what had happened, described the men and concluded with, "If you pick these hoods up, I hope you'll give me a chance to question them—alone."

The ghost of a smile appeared on Gentry's face, then faded. He said, "Mike, I don't have to tell you what a black eye this killing will give us, and the whole city, if we don't crack it fast. I'm going to ask for your co-operation . . ." he paused.

"You always had it, Will," the redhead said quietly.

"I'll argue that with you some other time," the Chief replied.

"The co-operation I want from you is a promise not to go bucketing around, fouling things up, until we break the case."

Shayne stood up, a spot of color appearing in either cheek. He said, speaking more slowly than usual so as not to betray the anger within him, "Will, you know better than to ask that — to keep me out of this case now, with a client under suspicion, you'll have to lock me up and keep me in a cell."

Chief Gentry sighed. "I'm tempted to do just that," he said. Then, slapping the papers hard on his desk, "But damn you, Mike — you know I'm not going to do it. But if you don't co-operate . . ."

"I'll try," said Shayne softened by his old friend's obvious concern, "just as I always have."

"That," said Gentry, the faint smile reappearing, "is what I'm afraid of. Well, don't get killed. And don't come running to us for help if you break a fingernail. We're going to be mighty busy."

Lawrence Keene, Ila Allis and Ray Barron had been dismissed an hour earlier and convoyed to their borrowed "bungalow" in a police car. Shayne looked at his wristwatch, saw that it was still well short of nine o'clock and drove to the modestly smart modern apartment house where Lucy Hamilton lived. Lucy, looking cool and fresh in her transparent plastic raincoat, was emerging from the doorway, enroute to the office as he pulled up.

"You look like something about to be wrapped up for a Christmas present," Shayne told her.

"I don't feel that way," she replied. Then, laying a hand on his sleeve, "Mike, isn't it awful — about Val Duke? I just heard it over my radio. They said the police were questioning you."

"You don't have to look so happy about it," said Shayne.

"But I'm not!" Lucy almost wailed. "When I think that I was angry because you only called in once yesterday,—"

"Easy," said the redhead "Honey, did you get the cha k on that license number I asked for?"

"I got it," she replied, rumaging in her handbag. "I brought it home with me, just in case you wanted it during the night."

"Good girl!" he told her.

At the next red light, he scanned the slip of typewritten paper she thrust into his hand. The car of yesterday's incident outside the ice-cream parlor was registered in the name of C. Henry ; ates at a Miami Beach address.

"C. Henry," he mused aloud. "Well, well . . ." He wondered if the C stood for Clarence.

He parked in front of the office, to find a tall, scarecrowish figure leaning against a side on the entrance, the brim of his fedora drooping mournfully in the rain. It was Tim Rourke, his occasionally drunken but able friend, Tim Rourke of the Miami Daily News. Rourke said, "They told me, at Headquarters, that you'd left, so I came over here. Got a story for me on Val Duke, or are you muzzled?"

Shayne told Lucy to get some coffee and took the reporter inside with him. "I'm not muzzled, Tim," he said. "I'm just baffled. The only motive I can find for this kid's murder lies in his singing style — and nobody's shot a crooner yet for that."

"They gotta start somewhere, Mike," said the reporter cheerfully. "Gentry give you a going over?"

"He tried," said the detective, lighting a cigarette. When Lucy came in with the coffee, he pulled the Coronet bottle out of his bottom desk drawer and laced the steaming liquid with brandy.

"Something like," said Rourke. lifting his cup in a silent toast. "Cafe Royale!"

When they had finished, the redhead, feeling considerably better than he had minutes earlier, said, "Tim, I may need your help. Gentry as good as told me the police want to break this one without any assistance from me."

"A freeze-out, huh?" said the reporter. "I'll bet Len Sturgis and the rest of Homicide is happy over that. They've played second fiddle to Michael Shayne too often of late."

"Tim," said the detective, "I want them to play second fiddle again." He went on to explain what had happened.

Rourke cocked his long, lugubrious head on one side and said, "You want to teach the freshman crooks a lesson, right? Well, you're the boy who can do it. But without police co-operation . . ."

"Tim," said the detective, "what about Val Duke's sex-life? Did he have one — and, if so, how much?" He frowned as he recalled the cryptic phone call he had taken for Larry Keene the previous afternoon, from the girl with the flat, rather pleasant voice.

The reporter said, "They're working on it back at the sheet, of course. Mind if I call in? I'm fresh on this story."

At Shayne's nod, Rourke picked up the phone and went ahead. Minutes later, he hung up and said, "Beats me how some characters let opportunity go to waste. This Duke was a hot flash — had all the dizzy dames swarming over him. Until about

three months ago, he lined them up and took his pick. Then he settled on one babe, and he seems to have stuck pretty much to her. And get this — she's a second-rate stripper who works the Scaramouche Club, another of Paul Barkis' joints. The name's a dilly, even for a stripper — Lotus Tuff, get it? She's a Scranton dame, a blonde, born Natasha Kolmowska." He spelled it out for the detective, who wrote it down.

"Thanks," said Shayne. "Address?"

Rourke gave it to him, added, "But it won't do you much good. The little lady has taken a powder and I don't mean she's powdered her nose. No one has seen her since her first show last night."

"Get a picture of her, will you, Tim?" Shayne asked. "Send it over here — Lucy will be on tap all day."

The reporter recognised dismissal and rose, saying, "Hey! What about a story?"

Shayne tugged at the lobe of his left ear. Then he shook his head and said, "Not yet, Tim. But as soon as I've got one, it's an exclusive for you."

"I guess that will have to be good enough," said the sad-faced reporter, reaching sadly for his sadder-looking hat.

Shayne next paid a brief visit to Lawrence Keene's borrowed "bungalow," where the producer and the two stars were still awake. There, he asked a question that had been troubling him increasingly since the murder of Val Duke.

"I'd like to know if the male lead in Have Tux could be a motive for murder," he said. "How much does the part stand to mean financially."

"A tough question to answer," said the producer, who had resumed his post by the telephone. "That would depend upon whether the show was a success —and right now, it looks highly doubtful that it will open on Broadway at all."

"Bushwah!" said Ila over the rim of a glass of whiskey. "You'll come up to scratch, with the scratch, Larry."

"I hope so." The producer's smile was wan.

Ray Barron, sipping a milkshake, spoke up. "Mike," he said, "if Have Tux runs a season—and that's not long these days for a hit revue — it will be a gold mine for me. In the first place, I'll get my salary, which won't be hay. Then, having a part in a Broadway success, I'll be tapped for TV roles and recording shots. I'll be able to double in cabaret work at two or three times my stage salary. And, at the end of the road, lies good old Hollywood."

"How much?" the detective asked.

The baritone shrugged. Ila Allis looked up out of her drink again and said, "A half million bucks before taxes — maybe a million, if the meathead plays it smart."

Shayne whistled—then he said, "What if the play flops?"

Ila regarded him steadily for a moment, then said, "We won't go into that, sweetheart."

Shayne got up and said, "Well, I'll be going. I see you've got a police car stationed outside."

Lawrence Keene lowered the phone, into which he had been talking in a low voice. "Don't go before I write you a check, Mike," he said.

The detective smiled at him and said, "I'm still on the job, Larry. Maybe you don't know it, but those cops are out there, as much to protect the innocent citizens of Miami from you as the other way around. I was able to clear Ila and Ray, with Chief Gentry, but I couldn't account for you, Larry. I was watching them at the time."

Lawrence Keene said, into the phone, "Call me back when you get the party, operator," and put the instrument back in its cradle. "You mean," he said, "that I'm suspected of shooting Val Duke?"

"You and a few others," said Shayne, "am I still on the payroll?"

Keene looked stunned as he said, "Sure—of course." Then, "But I never even met him."

His mood appeared hardly improved when Ila plumped herself on his lap and tousled his hair and said, "Cheer up, killer —no noose is good noose."

Ray Barron had seated himself at the piano and was striking the opening chorus of The Prisoner's Song as the detective swung toward the door. The singer called, "Hey, Mike—where you going?"

"I'm looking for a blonde," said the redhead, feeling as if he had escaped from a house at the zoo full of unusually charming but unusually zany monkeys. However, he had learned one thing — the potential value of the male lead in Larry's show was worth enough to supply motive for a whole string of murders.

His next move was to run down the wispy, ashy-faced little man who had been Val Duke's manager. There were a number of questions the redhead wished to ask Johnny Fortman — Shayne had heard him give his name to the police after the killing — including the one that was bothering him most, outside of who murdered Duke. This was the identity and whereabouts of the girl that had called him, or rather Larry Keene, the afternoon be-

fore.

It took the detective almost half an hour to discover that Johnny Fortman was at the Club Lagoon, another twenty-five minutes to get there. It was a long, low, shedlike structure, with a large parking lot alongside and an immense neon sign, at the moment unlighted, running the full length of its roof-front.

The detective avoided using the parking lot, which was empty save for a half-dozen cars — it had only one, narrow entrance, and he had no idea whether he would be leaving in leisurely fashion or in a hurry. He ambled across the street through the drizzle. The door of the club was ajar, so he poked it open and went inside.

Like every nightclub in the world Shayne had seen or heard of, The Club Lagoon, in its off-hours, was about as cheerful as an abandoned planet. Few lights were on, the band instruments were covered with protective cloths, the chairs were piled atop the tables—and there was no one in sight.

Looking around, Shayne spotted a narrow crack of light, revealing a partly open door, across the dancefloor to the right of the orchestra stand. Moving silently, he made his way across the waxed boards toward it. As he drew close, he could hear voices coming from within and paused to identify them if he could.

One he recognised without trouble as that of the little man he was seeking, the dead singer's manager. The other, a deeper, rumbling tone, he did not, at first, know, but the tenor of the conversation revealed it to be the voice of Paul Barkis, the owner.

Barkis was evidently angry. He was saying, as the redhead came within earshot, ". . . and don't play nice-guy with me, Johnny, because you aren't a nice guy—you were set to yank Duke out of here and drop him into that Broadway show, in spite of a firm verbal promise to keep him here through the holidays."

"Have a heart, Paul," the little manager pleaded. "That spot in Keene's show would have meant a million bucks to Val."

"A million bucks to you," said Barkis with a trace of sarcasm. "So what was the matter with the boy they've got in the show now? I saw him last night. He was more Duke than Vale Duke."

"All right," said Fortman. "The only trouble with Barron is that he isn't—wasn't Val Duke. Or one of my clients. Forget Val Duke, Paul—he's not here any more. I'm trying to do what I can for you. I've already been on the phone to New York. Theda Leeds is willing to come down here early

and take over the spot. You remember what a sock she was at the Imperial in fifty-four . . ."

"Yeah," said Barkis, "but I remember what a bust she was at the Cosmopolitan in fifty-five. Sauced up every night until she fell into the bass drum. I should take a chance on that dog?"

"I can get you Mark Lanion, the impressionist," said Johnny Fortman. "He killed them in Las Vegas only six months ago."

"Yeah, I know." Paul Barkis sounded tired. "And then he went on the junk. Stop playing games, Johnny. Val Duke was the only good turn you ever did me, and now he's gone. Tell me, Johnny, who did it?"

"How the hell should I know?" countered the agent. "Maybe that dumb broad of his, that Lotus. She figured to lose out once he left here. Maybe she couldn't take it and shot him."

This was an angle Shayne had not considered as yet. It also answered the questions he intended to ask. He decided, for the moment, to call enough enough and beat a retreat. But as he turned around, to tiptoe out, he all but bumped into the massive chest of the larger of the two hoodlums who had assaulted Ray Barron and himself the previous afternoon.

The crook beamed at him with the utmost amiability and said, "Fancy meeting you here, Mr. Shayne." Then, with unexpected speed for so gross a man, his arm flashed up to strike a blow. He was holding a blackjack in massive fingers.

IV

There was no time for a counter-attack. All Shayne could do was dart in, low and close, hugging the big fellow, much as the big fellow had hugged him the afternoon before.

The blackjack whirred past Shayne's red head, and the leather-covered weight glanced off his left shoulder-blade, causing the detective to grunt in pain. With all his force, he shoved his attacker back onto the waxed dance-floor, where he skidded wildly as Shayne released him, then fell with a crash that jolted every upturned chair in the big room.

Shayne heard a shout from the entrance and looked up to see the lanky man who tried to throttle Ray Barron running toward him. He turned, planning to make a run for it through the kitchen, but was stopped by the emergence of Paul Barkis and Johnny Fortman from the office. In the club-owner's right fist was a large Army .45 automatic.

"Just a minute, young man," Barkis said quietly.

Shayne could have shot his way out, but it was the last thing

he wanted to do. He halted, but did not raise his hands. Barkis motioned the lanky hood away as he advanced on the redhead, saying, "Leave him alone, Joe." Then, to the detective, "What the hell are you doing here, Shayne?"

"I wanted to ask Fortman where I could find Lotus Tuff —his office said he was here." Shayne replied frankly. "I couldn't help hearing him tell you he didn't know where she was. Then these gorillas came in — that's all."

"The so-and-so's lying in his teeth," said Fortman angrily. "He's just trying to make trouble —as usual. I've heard a lot about him. Why not have the boys give him a going over? They've got it coming to them."

"Just a minute," Barkis repeated. "Take it easy, Johnny." And, to the detective, "What's your interest in this business, now Val Duke is out of the way?"

"I'm working for Larry Keene," Shayne told him. "I want to talk to Duke's girl."

"What for?" said Fortman. "She's just a dumb broad."

"You got the number of where Keene is staying?" Barkis asked.

Shayne nodded, hesitated, then gave it to him, reflecting that Barkis could easily dig it up elsewhere.

The club-owner wrote it down, then said, "Okay, Shayne. Go look for Lotus. You might let me know if you find her. She's supposed to be working at a club of mine." He hefted the big pistol in his hand, then turned and shambled back to his office.

Shayne walked out of the Club Lagoon, feeling the eyes of the hoods upon him. As he got into his sedan and drove off, he frowned. Paul Barkis was wise in arranging to check on his assignment — the redhead wasn't worried about Keene backing him up. Johnny Fortman had been angry—but why not? He had just lost a million-dollar meal ticket.

The redhead drove aimlessly, pondering his next move. It occurred to him that the two hoods who drove one of C. Henry "Heinie" Bates' big cars could do with a checkup. He swung his car around the block and headed back for Miami Beach. There was just one more person, outside of the missing girl, he wanted to see.

Heinie Bates lived in a pink, pseudo-Moorish palazzo that looked as if it had strayed south from Palm Beach during one of the autumn hurricanes. Even in the rain, it glowed like a piece of over-elaborate lingerie, or a huge wedding cake. Shayne parked his sedan in the drive-way and hurried under the shelter of the cloister with twisted pillars

that adorned the front of the big house.

Bates answered the door himself. Clad in bright green slacks and a blue-and-white blazer, he looked like the Beast from 20,000 Fathoms en route to a garden party, on what is believed to be a proper day for such a function. But there was nothing comic about the grief in his eyes, or the hostility with which he eyed the detective.

"What the hell do you want?" he asked, growling.

"I'm looking for Lotus Tuff," said Shayne.

"So am I," said the burly retired contractor. "Why in hell do you want to talk to her?"

"Client's business," said Shayne. "Do I get inside, or do you come out in the rain?" The question was a piece of calculated insolence.

Heinie Bates looked weary. He said, "Come on in—I've been going nuts in here, all by myself." He stood aside and permitted the redhead to enter a hallway almost as long as the Club Lagoon, furnished with unbelievable lavishness and bad taste. He poured the detective a drink, took one himself, said, "You want Lotus? So do I. I even sent the boys out looking for her."

"That's another item," said Shayne, jiggling the ice in his glass. "About those boys of yours —I thought you'd retired."

"I have," said Heinie. "But you know how it is — where I come from, the contracting business is tough. I had to have a few boys. I got jobs for most of them when I quit, but Joe and Dino were more like servants. So I brought them along. They run errands, stuff like that."

"Like trying to put Ray Barron out of business yesterday afternoon, by throttling him and busting his vocal chords," said Shayne.

Hienie looked honestly surprised. "I didn't know about that," he admitted after a moment.

"There's a lot you don't know," said the redhead, taking the offensive, "or do you?"

"Whaddya mean?" Anger flashed in the little eyes, thick knuckles whitened around the glass in Bates' fist.

Shayne told him about the campaign against Ray Barron — the substitution of damaged throat pastilles, the telephone threats, the attempted assault. He concluded with, "That's why I was called in. That's why I'm in the case now, Heinie."

Bates sighed — a sound like wind whistling through a rust-caked pipe. Then he said, "Like I told you — we been in a rough business. The whole secret — whether you stay up or go down

— is getting the jobs. Nobody asks questions how you got them, as long as you do them okay. I told the boys I wanted Val to go in that show of Keene's. I guess maybe they forgot they weren't still in the contracting business."

"Whose idea was it—putting Val Duke in Larry's show?" the detective asked.

"Johnny Fortman's" was the reply. "He told me what a break it would be for the kid, and I went along." He paused, added, "Hell, Val was like a son to me — I never had a kid of my own. When Johnny brought Duke around it was like finding what I'd always missed. What a boy!" He paused, shook his head reminiscently, his little eyes suddenly bright. "I was going all the way for him, even though he was robbing me blind — you'd think he never had a penny of his own. But who minds taking a bite from his own kid?

"That silver business was my idea," Bates continued proudly. "I wanted everything to match his hair. I even bought him a silver Cadillac — fifteen gees for a car! And it went over big. Val would have killed them on Broadway, Shayne. He had it." Another pause, then, "And it would have got him clear of this strip-teaser that had him hooked. Sure, I wanted him up there. I can't get sore at the boys for laying it on, maybe, a little too hard. They was only trying to please."

Shayne put down his glass. "Thanks, Heinie," he said, rising. "You got no idea where the girl is now?"

"If I had," countered Bates, "do you think I'd be sitting around here on my fat tokus? She was the one who balled up the works. Tell you what—turn her over to me when you get her, and I'll pay you five grand."

"What makes you think I'll find her?" Shayne moved toward the door. "I never even saw the wench in my life."

"I dunno," said Heinie, and Shayne realised, from a certain vagueness about him, that the retired contractor was very drunk, either with grief or alcohol or both. "I dunno, but you look smart. You heard me — five grand."

"It's good money," the detective said cryptically. He walked to his sedan and drove back to his office through the rain.

Lucy Hamilton had gone out for lunch and some shopping. But she had left a message on Shayne's desk. It read—Call Tim. He has something for you. Shayne picked up the phone.

Twenty minutes later, the detective was seated in a projection room of radio-television station

FLDN, while the long reporter said, "This was just the bull-luck — our morgue-clerk remembered it when I asked him what he had on Lotus. She was pulled in on TV two months ago, to present some kind of award to a visiting VIP from Central America. They put it on film, and they've still got the clip."

"Thanks," said the detective. "Run it off, will you?"

It was the most routine sort of news-shot — visiting celebrity greeted by local brass — and they had used Lotus to dress it up for pretty-girl interest. Lotus was pretty enough, with broad Slavic cheekbones and slightly tilted eyes. Her figure, clad in a couple of scraps of sequined material, barely within the legal minimum, definitely had its points. Shayne found himself using a mental tape measure that ran thirty-eight, twenty-four, thirty-four . . .

But it was the voice that interested him. Lotus had only a few words to say—"On behalf of the Miami Board of Something-or-other, I want to present you with this plaque"—and she delivered the words in a sort of sing-song, like a schoolgirl who has learned them by rote. But it was the flat, not unpleasant voice that had come over the phone in Larry Keene's borrowed "bungalow" less than twenty-four hours earlier.

Shayne had the clip run through four times, to make certain—and with each runthrough he felt more certain that this was the girl. When the final showing was over, he sat slouched in his seat, frowning at the empty screen. He could hear her voice, almost as if she were still talking.

"Hello — who's this. Is this Lawrence Keene's number? . . . Okay. This is a — a friend of Val Duke. He asked me to call Mr. Keene. He heard about what happened downtown this afternoon and says you won't have to worry about him — he wouldn't take a part that way on a silver platter . . ."

A weird call, in view of what had happened later. Shayne tugged at his left earlobe and thought about the case, and, the more he thought about it, the more important the girl became. She might have been lying about her lover, trying desperately to prevent him from leaving Miami for New York — in which case, she would almost certainly have lost him. She might even have shot Duke herself, as Heinie Bates and Johnny Fortman seemed to believe — in which case, she would have plenty of reason for hiding.

On the other hand, there were, to the redhead, plenty of evi-

dences of something rotten in the backstage background of the unfortunate Duke. Heinie Bates was likable, and his grief appeared sincere — but Heinie was tough, a graduate of a tough school, and a successful graduate at that. And, in his two pet thugs, Joe and Dino, he had the perfect instruments for eleminating a double-crosser.

Heinie laughed about Val Duke scrounging money from his capacious wallet — but had he laughed when he found out about it? The redhead wondered. Heinie's temper might have flared at what he considered a betrayal, and he might have ordered the job done before he cooled off. His anger might have been increased if Lotus were telling the truth, and Val Duke had turned down the Broadway chance on account of the antics of the two hoods.

There was something very odd in the fact that the singer had scrounged money out of his backer at all. Surely, as a juke-box sensation throughout the South, and the star of a club like Paul Barkis' Lagoon, it seemed unlikely that he had been having money troubles. Shayne pondered this angle, sinking lower in his seat.

"Is this a private think, Mike?" Tim Rourke asked him. "Or can anybody get into it?"

"Sorry, Tim," said Shayne, as another possibility crossed his mind. If Lotus hadn't shot Duke, if she had been levelling over the phone, she could have good reason to hide from the murderer. In either case, Mike knew he had about as much chance of finding her as he had of plucking a twenty-carat pearl from his next bowl of oyster stew. A girl he had never seen, in a city the size of Miami . . . It was impossible, at least within any reasonable length of time. So far, he felt certain, the police had not located the stripper.

"Are you planning to spend your life in that chair?" Rourke asked him, a trifle irritably. "I could use a snack — a two-pound steak, or a couple of lobsters, or something of the sort."

"Come on," said Mike, rising and moving toward the projection room door. "This one's on me. You're going to earn it."

"What do you mean — going to earn it?" the reporter asked, following in the redhead's wake.

"Feed your face first," said the redhead, pressing the elevator button in the hall outside. "You may not eat again for a while!"

"I've got a feeling I'm going to regret ever having known you, Mike," said the tall reporter mournfully.

Shayne shook his head as they entered the lift. "I don't think

so," he said. "If this works out the way I hope it will, you're going to be in for the biggest beat of your spotty career."

"What a hell of a thing to say!" Tim replied.

V

The television news announcer finished his six o'clock news broadcast. Then added, "We just got another call from Natasha K. She's still waiting to hear from her friend at Biscayne nine-four, seven, six, three. She still says it's a matter of life-or-death. Won't someone please put Natasha out of her misery before the sponsor puts us out of ours? This is Dennis O'Flaherty, your FLDN news announcer, bringing you the latest headlines for . . ."

A programme of calypso music followed. Shayne looked out the window and saw nothing but driving November rain — but, at that, it was better than wearing out his eyes looking at the cheap flowered wallpaper of the cheap boarding-house room. He got up, poured himself a drink from the bottle of Coronet on the deal-covered table with its chipped white-porcelain bowl and pitcher.

Ila Allis, sitting sullenly in an atrocious horsehair armchair, yawned and said, "How long are you going to keep it up, Mike?"

Shayne pulled out his revolver, flipped open the cylinder, checked the cartridges, stowed it away again, said, "Until we get a bite, Ila."

"I'd give ten bucks for a malted right now," said Ray Barron, who was sitting in the room's one other chair, a straight one.

"You don't know Mike," said Tim Rourke, who was stretched out on the white-enamelled iron bed, his hands clasping the back of his head. "He has bulldog blood in him."

"His father's side, I presume," Ila put in acidly.

The redhead couldn't blame them for growing restive. It had been more than three hours since he had rigged the stakeout and played the Lotus movie clip until the actress had the stripper's voice down letter perfect. The Natasha story had been on the air since four o'clock — three broadcasts — and, so far, nothing had happened.

He said, "Still think you can play Lotus over the phone, Ila?"

"In my sleep!" She paused, added, "Hello? Yes, this is Natasha. Don't you know me by another name?" Her imitation was perfect. She added, in her own voice. "If this damfool stunt does come off, I hope the girl has something when we root her out."

"Don't worry, she's got plenty!" Tim Rourke whistled

through his teeth and made an hour glass figure with his hands.

"I'd give twenty bucks for a frosted," said Ray Barron.

The telephone rang and all restiveness, all levity, vanished from the room. For a moment, Ila steeled herself, taking a deep breath. Then her small hand picked up the telephone, and she said, in the flat, amiable tones of Lotus Tuff, "Hello?"

She waited a long moment, then put back the phone. "They hung up." She frowned. "Did I muff it?" she asked.

Shayne shook his head. "Honey, you were perfect," he said. He moved toward the door, pivoted to face a Tim Rourke who had come to like a coiled spring and was already on his feet. "Tim, you know what to do now," he said. "Call the cops before you call your paper. Then sit tight till they get here. Don't try to leave — don't let Ray or Ila leave—you don't know what kind of stakeout our friends may have outside."

"What about, you, Mike?" the baritone asked.

"I'm different," the redhead told him. "I'm expendable."

However, Shayne had no intention of being expended if he could help it. Whoever had called the false Lotus must have looked up the address of the house Mike had selected, with Tim's help, in one of the shabbier districts of the city. The call would simply have been to there.

It could have come from some joker who had heard the broadcast and decided to play games on his own. The redhead's lips tightened as he considered the possibility — it was cocktail hour, and drinks would be flowing in the resort city. But it was a chance he had to take.

Having established Lotus' presence, provided the caller or callers meant business, they would move in swiftly. It was quite possible they were already outside. Shayne went down one flight, to the ground floor, and took up a post in the front parlor, where he could watch the rain-soaked street outside, as well as the staircase. The usual inmates of the boarding house had been packed off to a double feature at the expense of the Daily News, two hours earlier.

It was three minutes later that the car came slowly by the house —a big car with some of the paint knocked off its right side. It moved past, without stopping, at a snail's pace. Shayne crossed to a side window, opened it, dropped outside and scrambled behind the seat of his sedan, which was parked in the driveway, out of sight of the street.

Joe and Dino, if it was the two hoods, had located what they believed to be Lotus-Natasha's hideout and were now on their way to report to their boss.

Shayne picked up the car, praying they weren't going to phone it in — and, to his relief, the car moved past a corner cigar store without pulling up. At a discreet distance, made even more discreet by the darkness and the rain, he followed across the causeway to Miami Beach, saw them turn right and head south as they hit the boulevard.

The redhead swore silently — he hadn't expected them to head straight for Heinie's. But their destination became increasingly less doubtful as block after block went by without a turnoff. After ten minutes, he watched the twin tail lights on the car he was chasing turn into Heinie Bates' driveway.

Shayne pulled his sedan off to the right, parked it and walked the rest of the way through the rain under the palms with which the driveway was lined. The big pink house was lit up like the proverbial Christmas tree. He paused briefly to consider his next move, was still waiting when the door opened, and the two thugs came out, wearing trenchcoats against the wet. They got into the car and sped away down the driveway.

The redhead made a sprint for the door and pushed it open before Heinie Bates could close it. The retired contractor said, "What the hell are you doing here this time, Shayne?"

From the sharpness of his gravelled voice, from his general demeanor, it was evident that he had slept off his earlier drunk and was sober. The detective pushed on inside, confronted the burly man and said, "I'm afraid the boys are going to be disappointed, Heinie."

"Whaddya ' mean?" Heinie growled.

"I mean, they won't find Lotus where they're going," Shayne told him bluntly. "They're going to walk into a flock of cops."

"What are you trying to do to me, Shayne?" Heinie asked. "Haven't I had enough trouble, without you butting in and making more?"

"I'm willing to make you a little bet," said the redhead. "I'll bet you half my fee for finding Lotus that you weren't the one that heard the FLDN broadcast this afternoon. What's more, I'll bet you aren't the one who told the boys to check on it."

"You win," sa d a voice from a door across the room. "You win them both, my fine detective friend. Now get lost and leave Heinie alone. He's had enough grief for one day."

Johnny Fortman stood there, looking hardly big enough to hold the pistol aimed steadily at the redhead's stomach.

"I usually win," said Shayne quietly. Then to the obviously bewildered Heinie Bates, "When you told me how Val Duke was chiseling you blind, today, I didn't get it. He was raking in the coin hand over fist. He simply couldn't be broke — if he was getting his share. This isn't Las Vegas — and Bradley's has been closed for years. I found out from a newspaper friend Val Duke wasn't a racetrack plunger."

"So what?" Heinie still looked bewildered.

"So your protege was chiseling because he had to," said Shayne. "Someone else was chiseling him. And the only person in a position to do that is our friend with the artillery." He nodded toward Fortman.

"I heard him talking to Paul Barkis this morning," the detective went on. "He doesn't have a decent client left to his name. Without Duke, he's washed up."

"That's why I want the broad that shot him to get hers," said Fortman, more to Bates than to the detective. Then, "How about I give this kibitzer the bum's rush?"

"Try it!" said Shayne. He added, to the retired contractor, "There's something else you don't know. Lotus called Larry Keene yesterday afternoon, while Duke was on the air. I took the call. She told me to tell Larry not to worry — that Duke knew about your boys' muscle tactics and wouldn't take a job that way on a silver platter." He turned to face Fortman, whose face looked whiter than ever.

"There's just one reason for you to kill Val Duke," he said, "and that was when you discovered he was leaving you flat, that he was refusing the Broadway job, that he had got out from under whatever you were holding over him to keep him in line while you cashed his paychecks. There's only one reason for you to want Lotus — because Val Duke gave her the evidence — whatever it is. Maybe you kept records that show the gouge you were giving him. Was that it?"

Fortman, whose eyes were blazing with anger, took two steps forward. "All right, Shayne," he said. "You asked for it."

"Johnny!" Heinie Bates' voice was disbelieving. "You mean you killed Val?"

"He was a no-good punk," said Fortman. "Hell, I made him, didn't I? He shoulda been grateful . . ."

"No, Heinie!" Shayne, who'd been keeping Fortman covered

through his raincoat pocket, did his best to stop the burly ex-contractor's lunge toward the man who had killed the youth he loved like his own son. But Bates moved so fast the redhead didn't have a chance.

"Stay back, Heinie," Fortman warned, his voice rising.

The big man kept moving in on him. "You dirty murderer." Bates said. "I'm going to take you apart with my bare—"

The loud bark of the big automatic cut him off. Heinie stopped for a moment, then went down on his knees, staring over his double chin at a smashed breastbone. Then he got to his feet, without speaking, and continued to move toward the killer.

Fortman tried to fire again, but by that time, Shayne had moved in from the flank and felled the little man with a single blow to the point of the jaw, just under his left ear. Heinie stopped and looked down at Fortman, then lifted his head slowly to Shayne.

"You should have let me do it," he said reproachfully.

"Come on, Heinie," said Mike. "We're going to get you to a couch, then I'm going to call the cops."

Heinie made a fluttering gesture of assent, then collapsed in the redhead's arms, his blood streaming over both of them . . .

When Shayne got to the "bungalow," it was past ten o'clock. Ila and Ray Barron began pressing him with questions. "Is Heinie Bates going to be okay?" . . . "Did Lotus finally show up?" . . . "What's going to happen to Fortman?"

"Hold it!" said the detective. He looked across the room to see Larry Keene sharing the sofa with Paul Barkis. Both men were looking at him.

"Me, too," said the producer. "What is happening? And what was the point of using my stars in that stakeout gag?"

"I'll answer that one first," said the redhead. "I knew I didn't stand a hound's chance of finding Lotus. If the people who knew her couldn't find her, and the cops couldn't find her, it was hopeless. And there was no sense in trying to make believe I was a strip-teaser hiding out and trying to imagine where I'd go, I simply don't have the figure for it.

"But there was one thing I could do," he went on. "I could try to smoke out the people Lotus was hiding from, always granted she didn't murder Duke and wasn't hiding from the cops — neither of which was so. I figured that, once we had them in the open, we could manage to put them away — and that would

bring Lotus out."

"Did it?" Ray Barron asked.

"She was in Police Headquarters fifteen minutes after the news of Fortman's arrest went on the air," said the detective. "She had quite a story to tell. The reason she had not dared come forward sooner was because she was afraid she didn't have enough evidence to get Johnny Fortman arrested, and, even if she did, she thought Heinie and his two gorillas might get after her. When she heard Duke was shot, she went all to pieces and lammed."

"What about Heinie?" Paul Barkis asked. "He's a pretty nice guy at heart. He was good to Val."

"Heinie's going to be okay," said Shayne. "You can't kill an iron-man like him with one slug — not even a .45. When I left him, he was talking about making it up to the girl."

"Poor Heinie!" Barkis shook his cadaverous head. "He wants only to be a father."

"He may find he has more than a daughter on his hands if he takes on Lotus," said Ila with a trace of acid.

"That's bad?" Ray Barron demanded.

"By the way," said Shayne, "he told me to tell you, Larry, he still wants to back your show, even without Val Duke: We had quite a chat before the cops got there."

"In a pig's eye!" said Barkis, rising to his feet. "Once we get our problem ironed out, Larry, I'm going to back it. I saw enough last night—I know a gold mine when it's shoved under my nose."

"What's the problem?" Shayne asked.

"He wants Ray and Ila to work Christmas week at the Club Lagoon," said the producer, frowning. "We open in New York right after New Year, and I'm going to need them there for final rehearsals."

"But I gotta have an act," said Barkis stubbornly. "You got no idea how tough it is."

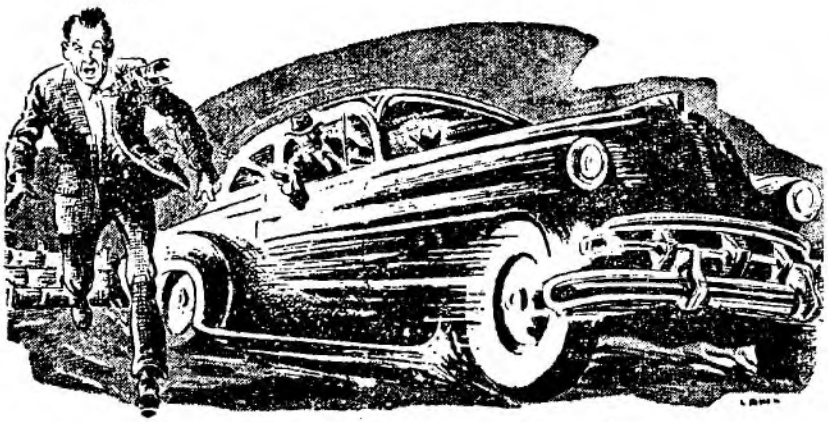
Shayne said, "Pardon a suggestion from a rank amateur, but why not rehearse in Miami, Christmas week, instead of in New York. You could make the expenses part of the deal."

Keene and Barkis looked at each other, then smiled, then began to laugh, then shook hands. "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings!" gasped Larry Keene.

"I'm not babe," said the detective, moving toward the door.

"Where are you going, sweetheart?" Ila asked.

"I'm going," said Shayne, "to find a dictionary and learn what a suckling is." He went out into the rain. END.



The Finger Man

He'd turned informer and talked. And now, after five years, he was taking a walk along Death's whistle-stop.

By DAN SONTUP

I'd never seen Harry so nervous before a kill.

He was a big man, and the little chair in the foyer of the apartment was completely hidden by his yard-wide shoulders, and the folds of fat at his waistline. He and I sat there and waited, and he just couldn't sit still.

He took out his gun, looked at it, stuck it back in his shoulder holster, put his hands in his pockets, stretched out his legs and dug his heels into the carpet, and then took his hands out of his pockets and folded his arms across his chest. He looked at me. "What's he waiting for?" he muttered. "When's he gonna call us in?"

I glanced at the closed door

of the living room at the other end of the foyer and shrugged my shoulders.

"The boss will call us when he's ready," I told him, "and not before. You know that."

Harry grunted and heaved his big bulk around until the chair squeaked under him. He looked at his watch and said, "There's not much time left. We gotta get going soon."

"Relax," I said. "We'll make it. What are you so goddam nervous about anyhow?"

He quieted down for a second and looked at me steadily. "I'm not nervous, Bob. Just anxious. Just real anxious to put one little rat where he belongs."

I started to answer him, but just then the door of the living room opened, and the boss looked out and said, "Come on in, boys."

We got up and followed him inside. He was a little runt of a guy with a completely bald head and a big wide mouth, and his name was Mortimer—but nobody dared call him that. It was either "boss" or "Morty," but never his full name. I'd once seen him spend thirty minutes slapping around one of the men who'd forgotten and had made a joke out of the name Mortimer. None of us ever forgot that.

He sat down in a big armchair that almost swallowed him up, and he waved the two of us to a couple of other chairs.

We sat down, and Morty looked us over while he raised one tiny hand and stroked his bald head. He looked at his watch, a huge, diamond-encrusted timepiece on his little wrist, and said, "Well, in just about thirty-five minutes our old friend Jim will be getting out of prison."

He looked at us and smiled with his wide mouth, and I saw Harry grin back at him. I did not feel like grinning. Morty always affected me that way.

He glanced at me and said, "Anything wrong, Bob?"

"No," I said.

"You don't look too happy about this."

"It's a job," I said.

He leaned forward in his chair, and his voice dropped almost to a whisper. "It's more than a job. Remember that, Bob. It's more than just another job. You two are going to take care of Jim."

"I know," I said.

"Do you know why you're going to take care of him?" Morty said, his voice even lower.

"He's a finger man," I said evenly. "He got caught by the cops, and he put the finger on Mike."

"And what happened to Mike, Bob? Do you remember what happened to your old boss?"

"He got the chair," I said.

Morty leaned back in his

chair. "Exactly. Mike got the chair, and Jim got seven years, and now he's getting out on parole after five. Five years, Bob. Five years for putting the finger on his boss."

He shook his head. "That's not fair," he said in a pained voice. "That's not right. So, we're going to even things up. We're going to let our friend Jim know that a finger man may get a light sentence from the cops —but that we go all the way. Right?"

I nodded.

Morty looked thoughtful. "We almost got him in prison," he said, almost to himself. "We almost got him. Our man there had the knife just inches away from his back before the guards caught him."

He sighed and straightened up in his chair and let his feet dangle a couple of inches from the floor.

"Maybe it's better this way, though," he said. "Jim is getting out today, and he thinks it's all forgotten. We've got to show him that a finger man is never forgotten. There'll always be someone to take care of him—always."

Morty seemed lost in thought, as though he'd forgotten we were there, and Harry got anxious again. "We'd better get going, boss," he said impatiently.

Morty looked at him and then smiled. "Okay, Harry," he said. "But don't be over-anxious. Make it good. I want Jim to get just one little taste of freedom. I want him to know for just about two minutes what it feels like to be a free man while he walks down that road from the prison to the bus stop on the highway. Then you get him—and get him good."

Harry nodded. "Sure, boss," he said. "Sure. We'll do it just like you said."

Morty smiled again. "Okay. Get going."

Harry and I left and got into the car outside and started the trip to the prison. It wasn't a long ride, but Harry hummed happily to himself all the way, and it was starting to get on my nerves.

We got to the quiet road outside the prison about five minutes ahead of time, and Harry parked the car far enough down the road so that the guard at the gate couldn't see us, but we could see Jim when he stepped out.

Harry set the brake and left the motor running and took out his gun and checked it. He glanced at me, and I took out my gun, looked it over, checked the action, and then sat there holding it in my lap.

Harry put his gun back in his holster and started humming again. He glanced up at the sky and said, "A real sunny morning, huh?"

I grunted.

Harry smiled. "A real nice day for a man to get out of jail. I'm gonna get a big kick out of this, Bob."

"Why?" I said.

He looked at me, and his mouth fell open. Then he snapped it shut, and glared at me for a moment before he finally spoke. "Because a rat like Jim shouldn't live. The dirty little punk had to sing to the cops just to get a light sentence. I hate his guts."

I shrugged my shoulders, and Harry glared at me again. "What's the matter with you?" he said. "Don't you want to get him, too?"

"Sure," I said. "But a killing's a killing. This one's just a bit more special than the others, that's all."

Harry started to say something, but I held up my hand and stopped him. I pointed down the road, and Harry stiffened in his seat, as we saw Jim come out of the gate and step into the road.

Harry let out the brake and put the car in gear. "You ready?" he said.

I leaned out the window far enough so that my gun arm would be clear and so that I could aim carefully and said, "Yeah. I'm ready."

We watched Jim stand in the middle of the road for a minute looking up at the sky. Then he threw his shoulders back, turned around and shook hands with the guard, and started walking down the road.

He'd walked for about one full minute when Harry finally let out the clutch and gunned the engine. The car shot forward, and I held on tightly to my gun while the wind whistled past me and tore at my face. My eyes started to tear, and I yelled, "You're going too fast!" but Harry didn't hear me.

The car kept gaining speed, swaying a bit from side to side, and I raised the gun and tried to aim. I could hardly see Jim's figure because of the wind in my eyes. I snapped off a shot, then another, and then another one after that.

Jim didn't fall. He turned around, saw the car, and started running.

"You missed!" Harry yelled. He swerved the car and headed it for Jim. He was still running, but he didn't have a chance.

We hit him with the left front fender, and his body lifted up in front of the car, and I caught a fleeting glimpse of his face and I could see the blood already starting to spurt from his mouth and nose.

Harry kept his foot down hard on the gas pedal, and we zoomed on down the road. I twisted around on the seat and looked out the rear window. Jim

was lying at the side of the road, and I could see the guard come running from the gate out into the road.

"Step on it!" I screamed at Harry.

He kept his eyes on the road and didn't answer me.

We made it to the highway, and Harry spun the wheel, and the tyres screeched as we made the turn. Once on the highway, he got the car up to seventy, and we drove a few miles before he relaxed and slowed down to an even fifty.

"What happened?" he said to me. "Why'd you miss?"

"You were going too damn fast," I told him. "I couldn't see to aim the gun."

"We got him, though," Harry said. "I hit him hard. We got him."

I glanced through the rear window again. The road was clear behind us.

"Nobody following us," I said. "We'd better get back to Morty quick and tell him about this."

Harry nodded, and took the next turn off the highway and headed back for the city.

We pulled to a quick stop in front of the apartment house, and Harry was out of the car before I could even get my door open. I hurried after him into the lobby and to the elevator, and we rode in silence up to the boss's floor.

Morty was slow to answer the bell. He pulled the door open just a bit, and when he saw us he stepped back quickly and let us in and then shut the door behind us.

"We got him," Harry said breathlessly. "Bob missed him, but I hit him with the car. We got him."

Morty didn't say anything, just stood there and stared at us while his face got red and the redness spread all over the top of his bald head.

He looked from Harry to me and then back to Harry again and then he said, "You got him, did you?"

Harry smiled and nodded, and he looked like a big shaggy dog waiting for a pat on the head.

"Do you know where Jim is now?" Morty said in a low voice.

Harry's smile faded and was replaced by a puzzled look.

"It just came over the radio on a news bulletin," Morty said. "Jim's in the prison hospital. They took him back inside." He paused a moment and then said, "He's hurt bad, but the docs say he'll live. They say he should be able to walk out of the gate again in about six weeks."

Harry's mouth opened and closed, and he tried to say something but nothing came out.

He swallowed hard and then said in a hoarse voice. "We'll

get him next time, boss. We'll get him for sure next time."

Morty's face got even redder. "There'll be no next time for you two. You're finished. I'll get someone who can do the job right."

Harry hung his head and looked down at the floor.

Morty glared at him for a moment, then said, "Where did you get rid of the car?"

Harry's jaw sagged. "It's downstairs," he said.

Morty's head snapped up, and he yelled, "The car's downstairs? In front of this building?"

Harry nodded dumbly, his face cringing.

"You damn fool!" Morty shrieked at him. "The guard gave a description of the car to the cops. He even got the first two numbers of the license. That car's hot!"

He stood up on his toes and swung back his hand and then brought it forward in a vicious slap. It caught Harry on the tip of his chin, and he ducked back quickly.

"Get out of here!" Morty yelled. "Get out of here, the two of you. Get that car away from in front of this house."

Harry stood rooted to the spot until I grabbed him by the arm and pulled him out the door and to the elevator.

The elevator seemed to crawl down, and Harry leaned back against the wall with a stunned look on his face while I looked at him and felt my throat go dry.

I rushed out from the elevator when it stopped at the lobby, and I ran out into the street with Harry puffing along behind me. I got behind the wheel this time, and I put the car in gear and pulled it away from the curb.

We drove in silence and my throat got drier and drier and deep down I knew we weren't going to make it.

We'd gone about eight blocks before they caught us.

There was no use trying to get away. One squad car came up in back of us, and another cut out of a side street in front of us while the cop on the beat came running out into the street with his gun drawn.

I jammed on the brakes and lifted my hands high in the air and waited for them to come and get us.

They tried to sweat it out of me, but they got nowhere. They kept reminding me I was a two-time loser and would get life for attempted murder and that it might go easier with me if I talked and told them who the boss was and where to find him.

I didn't talk, and they kept right at it. They didn't lay a hand on me. Just kept hammering away with the questions in the little room with the straight

chairs in it—but I kept my mouth shut.

They must have worked on me for about three hours before the door opened and a uniformed cop came in and whispered something to one of them. He smiled and nodded to the other, and they took me to my cell and left me there.

I sat there on the cot wondering when they'd come for me and try again, and then I saw them leading Harry down the corridor. I took one look at his face—and then I knew what had happened.

I jumped up and grabbed the bars and stuck my face up against them, and Harry stopped by my cell and looked at me. The cops with him stopped also, and I could see one of them smirking at me while I stared at Harry.

"You talked," I said to him. "You turned into a finger man yourself."

The smirking cop said, "That's right, buddy. Little Mortimer is being picked up right now."

I looked at Harry and swore softly, and he just stared at me.

"I had to do it, Bob," he said finally. "I had to. You should have done it, too. I'll get a light sentence this way."

I didn't say anything to him, and he said in a small voice, "I couldn't help it. I had to."

"Maybe you'll be lucky," I said. "Maybe they'll get you while you're still in jail."

He stared at me dumbly.

"Remember what Morty said. Harry," I went on relentlessly. "There'll always be someone to take care of a finger man."

I saw his big face twist up like he was going to cry, and then I let him have the rest of it. "Even if they don't, Harry, you'll be getting out someday. You'll be walking out of a prison gate just like Jim did today."

I let that sink in, and I saw Harry's knees start to buckle under him as they led him away. I got a feeling of pleasure as I watched him stumbling down the corridor. But it didn't last long when I looked at my hands gripping the bars of my cell and realised I'd be doing that for the rest of my life.

I wasn't much better off than Harry. END

THE LONG WALK

The piano keys seemed to tell Mrs. Jackson just what was in Orley's soul. When he played for her the gates of paradise opened, and her image held him entranced. And suddenly—she was holding his life in her hands.

A NEW SUSPENSE NOVELETTE

by HELEN NIELSEN

The wind never stopped blowing. It smelled of clay dust and scorched grass, and it came down across a thousand miles of prairie—howling all the way like a witch's chorus around the grave of a sinner about to die.

All sinners died sooner or later, but this one was special. This one was a woman, and the image of her burned into his mind was all that kept Orley Dillon on his feet. He would have walked barefoot through hell to get near her again—near enough to look at her the way he was going to look at her before he raised the .45 he'd taken off the jail guard and fired one shot.

One would be enough . . .

THE first time Orley saw Mavis Jackson was late one dull night at Preacher Billy's place—a sprawling cafe and bar at the crossroads about a mile below the Jackson ranch cutoff. The dining room had been a long time quiet, and not a soul was left in the row of booths across from the bar where customers sometimes took their beer, which was legal, and laced it with something extra which wasn't.

Preacher Billy—who got his name from having once operated a mission hall, and who wasn't beyond delivering an occasional sermon from behind the bar—was tallying up the day's take at the cash register. As for Orley, he had washed up the last of

TO DEATH

the dishes half an hour ago, and would have been out in his bunk in the cook's shack if it hadn't been for the old upright half-hidden behind the last booth.

The piano was a leftover from Billy's mission days—forgotten until Orley came along. Not that Orley was a professional. On the contrary, he'd hardly taken a lesson in anything in his life. But he and the piano just took naturally to one another. That's where he was when Mavis came in—idly combing his fingers over the keyboard and dreading the time Billy would finish the tally and order him to lock up and turn out the lights.

Orley stopped playing the minute he saw Mavis. At first he thought she was a tourist who didn't belong in the panhandle. Her clothes were too fine—a fur coat on a night not even chilly, and shoes that were nothing but thin straps and tall heels. The lights were on so low that he couldn't make out her face until she reached the bar. But her figure belonged on a billboard, and she smelled expensive clear across the room.

She went straight to Billy, and Billy, looking up from his work, didn't even ask for her order. He just reached down under the counter and came up with a shot glass and a bottle of something too strong for his licence. He filled the glass and the woman drank it down neat before anybody said anything.

"Thanks, Billy," she said. "I've been thinking about that drink for the last hundred miles."

"Have a nice time in the city, Mrs. Jackson?" Billy asked.

So she wasn't a tourist. Orley leaned around the corner of the upright so he could get a better look at the woman. The week he'd been working at Billy's was long enough to learn the significance of her name, and he'd never seen a rich man's wife before. She wasn't very young—thirty-five, maybe—but there was more in her face than in the faces of most women. Something that made him keep on looking and listening.

"Hilarious," she said in a dull voice. "Stockholder's meetings are always hilarious, Billy. That's why I never miss one."

"But better this time than the other times," Billy suggested. "Better than when you had to sit at the foot of the table."

"Better—?"

Orley was looking at Mavis from an angle. He could only see the side of her face and the side of her twisted smile.

"Do you know, Billy, I actually missed the old man this trip? Sam's father and I got to know each other pretty well over the years. There were times when I thought he almost approved of me. One scoundrel's respect for another, I suppose."

"Or a man's respect for the way you took over the ranch," Billy suggested.

"And made a man of his son?" Mavis wore the smile again for just an instant. Then her tone changed to a scold. "You're letting me down, Billy. Going to that meeting with Sam's proxy and the old man in his grave made me the big wheel of Jackson Enterprises. Don't you realise that? I should rate at least a short sermon after my triumphant return. Isn't there a verse in Ecclesiastes that goes: 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity . . .'?"

Her eyes were on his face.

"There is," Billy answered, "but there's another from the same source that might do better. 'Wherefore I perceive there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion; for who shall see what shall come after him?'"

Orley didn't really understand all that was being said; but Preacher Billy had a way of quoting Scripture that made it sound as if he'd just carved out the words on stone, and there was a little hole of silence after them.

"What shall come after him," Mavis echoed softly, and then her mood changed completely. Her back straightened and she tossed her head—hatless and windblown so that the light shot red fire from the careless edges.

"Okay, I've had my sermon," she announced. "What I need now is a cup of strong, black coffee. Got any left in the kitchen, Billy?"

Anybody else in the world would have been turned down. But Mavis Jackson wasn't anybody else. If Orley hadn't seen that before, he could see it when Billy answered the request by yelling for Angel, the silver-blonde waitress who was being so quiet in the dining room. He had to yell two times more before Angel appeared in the doorway, one hand fussing at her well-filled uniform and the other pushing at her mussed hair. She took the order with a silent glare and then sauntered back toward the kitchen.

"How she hates me!" Mavis said.

She didn't sound sorry about it; she sounded proud. She sounded as if there were some kind of contest between herself and Angel and she'd won. Orley felt his own mouth twisting into the same kind of smile that was on Mavis's mouth—and then the reaction stopped abruptly when she did the one thing he wasn't expecting her to do.

She must have caught some movement from the corner of her eye—something that caused her to turn around and stare at the old piano behind the far

booth. When she looked at him full-face, Orley's throat went dry. Mavis Jackson wasn't subtle about anything.

"What," she demanded of Billy, "is that?"

"Piano player," Billy answered.

"A what—?"

Orley saw Mavis come toward him. All that fur, all that elegance and expensive smell—he suddenly felt shrunken and scared. He wished he'd changed into a clean shirt.

"Why, he's just a baby!" she exclaimed. "What's his name?"

"Orley Dillon," Billy said. "Got bumped off a truck last week, so I gave him a job in the kitchen. But he likes the piano better. Some of the customers like it, too."

"Well, I'm a customer . . . "

Nobody had said anything to Orley. All of the talk was about him, as if he had no ears and no tongue of his own. But he had eyes, and now Mavis Jackson stood half-leaning against the side of the old upright with a command in her eyes. Sam Jackson's wife, who got whatever she ordered.

Orley's mind was slow, but his fingers were obedient. They started stiffly and then began to claw their way into the music, because music was the hiding place where he didn't have to be afraid. Sometimes his fingers played tunes he'd picked up from the juke box, and other times they played whatever they could find on the keyboard—ten fingers that could sound like twenty, or like only one trying to pick its way from oblivion to nowhere.

And so for a little while there was no Orley Dillon at all. That was the sweetness of the music—it washed everything away until there was nothing but the clean flow of sound . . .

"Orley Dillon."

He always needed a little time to find his way back into the world when the music stopped; but this time Mavis Jackson helped him back. She spoke his name as if it were something important that she didn't want to forget.

"How old are you, Orley?" she asked.

"Twenty," Orley said. "Almost twenty and a half."

"And where did you learn to play like that?"

"I never learned. I just picked it up."

"In only twenty years? Is there really that much pain in twenty years? I'd almost forgotten."

Sometimes a woman said strange things after she'd taken a straight whisky and nothing else. But the words didn't sound strange to Orley. It was as if this woman he'd never seen until she walked into Billy's had some marvelous way of seeing

inside him and knowing exactly how he felt.

"You've got talent," she said. "Real talent. Something should be done about it. Where are you from, Orley?"

"Around," Orley said. "My Pa has a farm back in Kansas, but I move around a lot."

"A farm." Mavis Jackson's face was close to him now, and her eyes were smiling. She seemed younger than before he'd played the piano. "Chores before sun-up, grits for breakfast, and a pallet on the floor after you've worked in the fields all day . . . No, that's not for you, Orley."

Marvelous—that was the only word Orley could think of, and it was a big word for him, too. But it was just marvelous the way she knew all about him. The music must have told her all those things. His fingers began to stray over the keys again, hoping to bring out more precious words of praise.

But then a strange thing happened. Mavis hadn't turned around, and couldn't possibly have seen the dining room door behind her. But she drew back from the piano and her whole body stiffened, as if she had already heard the words that didn't come for several seconds.

"One coffee, black, for Mrs. Jackson."

It wasn't Billy's voice, but a man's. Mavis turned slowly. When she stood away from the piano Orley could see who it was now coming toward her with a steaming cup in his hands. Clay Tyler was a big man, but easy on his feet, even in heeled boots. And his boots were fancy, the way Clay was fancy. He had black hair and dark eyes, and too many girls had told him how good-looking he was for him ever to be in doubt.

Orley's fingers were motionless on the keyboard. Clay was an intruder on a moment he didn't want to share; but he had to watch what was happening to Mavis. She was on guard—that was the only way to explain her sudden coldness.

"Billy seems to have hired quite a lot of help while I was away," she said in a tight voice.

"Not Billy," Clay corrected. "Sam Jackson."

"Sam—?"

"I understand your husband had a foreman named Kensington. He didn't think much of the way he was running the ranch."

Mavis shot a quick glance at Billy behind the bar. Billy nodded.

"Happened about a week ago," he said. "Kensington stopped by the day he left. There was some kind of trouble."

"Trouble? What trouble?"

"He didn't say. Something between him and Sam—"

"There would be!"

Orley's big moment was finished now. He knew that the instant the anger flooded Mavis Jackson's face.

"As soon as I'm off the place!" she muttered. "Kensington was a good man." And then she glared at Clay Tyler. "And now you've got his job, is that it?"

Clay Tyler smiled, still holding the coffee cup before him.

"I've got my job, ma'am," he said. "Clay Tyler at your service."

"And do you work for Billy in your spare time?"

"I finish up at the ranch before supper, ma'am. What I do afterwards is my own affair—unless you've got something extra in mind for me."

With some people it was like that—sparks and fire the first time they met. Behind Clay's shoulders the dining room door still glowed bright, and back in its silence was a sulky blonde waitress who'd taken her time answering Billy's call.

Mavis Jackson's eyes hadn't overlooked anything, and Clay Tyler's words didn't leave much unsaid. It was quiet—too quiet for a moment. And then Mavis started for the door.

"You're forgetting your coffee, Mrs. Jackson," Clay called after her. But he was talking to himself and the big echo the door made when she slammed it behind her.

That's the way it was the first time Orley saw Mavis Jackson—just pieces and parts of a woman to fit together in his mind in the days and the nights that followed. A rich man's wife who knew her way around—a woman who could be hard with a hip-swinging waitress, soft and warm with a punk kid who played piano by ear, and fire and ice with a man her husband had hired while she was away.

Clay Tyler had his own words for her right after she walked out and left him holding a cup of coffee in his hands.

"So that's Sam Jackson's wife," he'd mused aloud. "She's a lot of woman to be married to a cripple."

But Clay looked at Mavis with different eyes than Orley. To him she was just another challenge, but to Orley she was someone who had given him a dream.

"You've got talent—real talent. Something should be done about it."

Life was a big emptiness at Preacher Billy's, and words like those were enough to put all kinds of thoughts into his head. She was a rich woman, and she thought he had talent. That was how great things began for people, wasn't it? A talent had to be discovered and nursed along by someone who cared.

Orley began to play more and

more, practising little extra treatments he planned to play for her the next time she came back to Billy's.

"Get Paderewski!" Angel taunted. "Mavis Jackson throws him a compliment and he's already in Carnegie Hall! What's all this with Mavis, anyway? What's she got that I haven't—only mine hasn't been retreaded?"

The days were empty for Angel, too. She was waiting and watching that front door, but not for Mavis Jackson. Clay hadn't returned since the night he tried to take over her job on the coffee service. A situation like that made Angel nervous.

"Money," she muttered, answering her own question. "A woman can be forty years old, but if she's married to a rich lush who was too drunk to see what was dragging him to the Justice of Peace—"

Orley didn't like to listen to Angel. From her he could get all the dirt on Mavis Jackson, but he didn't believe any of it. All he believed was what she had told him and the wonderful way she could look inside his soul and understand just how he felt.

He began to put that into the music, too. A kind of hopefulness he'd never felt before. One night she'd come back and he'd play for her, and then something wonderful would begin to happen.

II

It started with an argument on the telephone. Orley overheard Angel's part of it, and he had no trouble guessing who was on the other end of the line. Clay Tyler hadn't been in for over a week. But an advertising card from the dance hall in town had reminded Angel that she had a date, and she wasn't a girl to be stood up.

"I'm sure your job keeps you busy," she said sweetly, "but I thought your evenings were your own affair. Or do you have that extra work now that the boss is home?"

The boss. A man like Clay Tyler didn't like being bossed by a woman or reminded of it. Angel knew how to insure her engagements. When the night of the dance rolled around, she was among the missing—along with all the trade Billy didn't have. It was as dull as that first night when the old man's special customer came in, and her objective was just the same.

"Where's my bottle, Billy?" she demanded. "I need it bad. Can't you see that?"

Mavis was dressed for a ball. Orley had thought she looked fine the first time he saw her, but this time she wore a full-skirted dress that didn't quite make it to her shoulders, and an expensive fur scarf dangling from her arms as if it made no difference if she lost it some-

where in the dust. She sparkled and glistened, but Orley knew that something was wrong.

"It's a bad night for that," Billy hedged. "The State Police car's been past three times already tonight."

"It's the dance—not you—they're worried about," Mavis said. "Damn it, Billy, I need a drink. You know I can't keep anything at the house where Sam might find it!"

She got her bottle then and put down two fast ones before she even began to relax.

"Sorry if I yelled at you, Billy," she said, "but I just had to come in tonight. It gets lonely at the ranch."

"You should come more often—just to talk," Billy suggested. But Mavis didn't seem ready to do much talking. She reached for the bottle again, and then hesitated at the sound of tires on the gravel outside. She tensed again. She seemed to be expecting someone.

"Here, put this away," she ordered, shoving the bottle toward Billy, and he got it out of sight just before the police officer walked in.

"Mrs. Jackson, is that your car parked outside?" he asked.

Orley didn't like to get too close to police officers—not for any personal reason, but just on general principles. But he was close enough to see the grimness in the man's blunt face, and to see the bitter smile Mavis gave him with her answer.

"Sergeant Farrel," she said, "you know damned well it is."

"You were driving it in town about half an hour ago," the officer said.

"Was I, Sergeant?"

"You know you were, Mrs. Jackson. You had a little trouble in that parking lot behind the dance hall. A couple of fenders got smashed when you pulled out."

"Really? I didn't notice—"

"Not your fenders, Mrs. Jackson. But you left that lot in an awful hurry, and you were clocked on the highway just outside town doing ninety miles an hour . . . That's pretty reckless driving. People have been known to get hurt driving at such speeds—crippled sometimes for life."

Mavis had been calm up to that moment. Now she drew in her breath as if Sergeant Farrel had hit her in the stomach.

"You would say that!" she gasped.

"I only said what's true, Mrs. Jackson."

"But you can't blame me for that! Sam was drunk that night. He pulled the wheel away from me."

Orley didn't understand what was going on. But whatever it was seemed serious to Mavis. She turned back to the bar, holding one hand over her

mouth. It was Preacher Billy who put an end to the ordeal.

"Maybe you made a mistake tonight, Sergeant," he said. "Half an hour ago, you say? You must have made a mistake. Mrs. Jackson's been here that long."

It was a lie, and Orley had never heard Billy lie. Even the sergeant looked surprised.

"The hood of her car's still warm," he protested.

"It's a big car. Takes a long time for the motor of a big car to cool. But if you don't believe me, ask Orley there. How long has Mrs. Jackson been here, Orley?"

Orley swallowed hard. "Half an hour, anyway," he said. "Maybe more."

"There, you see? You were mistaken, Sergeant. After all, what would Mrs. Jackson be doing at that fool dance?"

There was no answer to Billy's question. Sergeant Farrel looked bewildered and angry, but he had no reason to stay any longer. He went out, leaving the question dangling behind him.

Mavis slumped down on a barstool and sat with her face buried in her hands. Something wasn't for talking about, and for a time silence returned to Preacher Billy's. The old man went back to the kitchen, and then, because his fingers were wiser than his tongue, Orley went to the piano and began to play very softly.

He didn't play anything in particular—just something to fill up the silence that was sad because Mavis was sad. After a few minutes he became aware that she had left the bar and was standing beside him at the piano.

"Twenty years old," she murmured. "Do you know, Orley, I'm beginning to remember what it's like? It's dreaming. It's planning that wonderful life you're going to have, because you're not going to get caught in the filth and futility all around you. It's a sad time, in a way, because you don't know what's ahead."

Orley didn't answer. He let his fingers speak for him.

"If only it could be real," Mavis said. "If only it could come true . . ."

And Orley saw it—perfectly clear. This wasn't Preacher Billy's any more. It was a fine club with cloths on the tables and a spotlight on the piano in the centre of the floor. A grand piano with the light glittering on the polished wood, and himself — Orley Dillon — dressed in a white suit with satin lapels. The club was crowded, of course. But he never saw the crowds. He only saw Mavis sitting at the table he always reserved for her, her face shining, her eyes proud. None of the other people had faces at all. There were only

two people in the world.

"You should see your face when you play, Orley," Mavis said. "You look so kind. You look as if you'd found the love of your life and weren't ever going to lose it."

Only two people. Orley played the dream so that the music crawled up under his skin and became a part of him. He was waiting for that wonderful something to happen, feeling that this was the time at last. He couldn't see anything but the dream. He couldn't hear anything but the music until a voice that wasn't supposed to be there intruded again just as it had that first night.

"And you should see your face, Mrs. Jackson. You should see all of you as I do."

Clay Tyler again. Neither of them had heard him come in. Neither of them had heard his tyres on the gravel. But Clay was beside Mavis, tall and possessive.

"Why did you run away?" he asked. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming to the dance?"

"I didn't intend to stay," Mavis said.

"But why did you run away?"

"I didn't—"

Mavis lied. These words weren't meant for Orley's ears, but he knew she lied just as he and Billy had lied to the policeman. Clay knew it, too.

"Do you think that little blonde idiot means anything to me?" he demanded. "I only took her to the dance because she hounded me into it."

"I don't know why you're telling me this," Mavis said.

"Don't you, Mavis? *Don't you know?*"

Mavis. Orley didn't want to listen any more. Sam Jackson's wife was a lonely woman, and Clay Tyler had used her given name as if it came natural to him. His arms pulled her close, and she didn't pull away. They stood pressed together for a moment, oblivious of any living thing behind the fingers stroking the keyboard, and then they began to move together—dancing. Orley Dillon at the piano, and Clay Tyler dancing away with his dream. There were only two people in the world, but he was no longer one of them . . .

III

LIFE WAS FULL of surprises. Just when Orley was recovering from the wild dream he'd contracted of Mavis, and was beginning to watch for a likely hitch to the next town, she sent for him.

She hadn't forgotten. She had a plan, and when it was explained he found himself installed in a spacious guest house about two hundred yards behind the sprawling ranch house he saw only in passing. Everything was waiting for Orley. A huge

grand piano filled one side of the living room, and beside it all the equipment necessary for making recordings.

"I meant it when I said that you have talent, Orley," she said, "but it took a little time to know how to handle it. Now, here's the plan. I have friends in the city who might find a spot for a first class piano player if they could just hear him play. So we just cut a few records—"

Orley could hardly believe his ears—or his eyes. The night Mavis had danced off in Clay's arms should have been the finish. But now it was only the beginning. Mavis was wonderful. She helped him get settled and schooled him in the equipment. She told him to make himself at home—to take his meals in the bunkhouse—to take his time with his work. She was gracious and radiant. Orley had never seen her look so beautiful.

And it went well. In spite of the strangeness of the place, and of the piano, it was only a few days before Orley was in top form and anxious to begin. But Mavis kept a check-rein on his eagerness.

"These records have to be good—the best," she said. "We'll do them over and over until they're right. We'll work night after night. You do the playing. I'll be around. I'll tell you when we've got it."

It went well, just as she said. In the daytime Mavis was with the ranch work, but every night after dinner she'd come out to see how he was getting along. Sometimes she'd sit beside the piano while he played. Sometimes she'd wander off through the back of the cabin, or go outside on the wide porch that encircled the entire building. But always Orley worked as if his life was at stake on the outcome.

Only once did he protest. "It's getting pretty late," he said.

"Late? For an old barroom player like you?"

Mavis laughed at him with her eyes. But that wasn't what Orley had in mind.

"I was thinking about your husband up at the house," he said. "We might disturb him. The music, I mean."

And then Mavis really did laugh. "Why, Orley, I think you're embarrassed! You don't have to worry about Sam. He knows that you're here, and he knows I'm here. He doesn't have to worry as long as he hears the piano, does he?"

She winked at him, and that was the last of Orley's protests. But still he did wonder about Sam Jackson, who he never saw and who concerned Mavis so little. He even wondered about Clay Tyler until the night came when there was nothing left to wonder at any more.

He'd been practising every

night for nearly a week. Along toward midnight, he stopped and flexed his fingers.

"It's coming good tonight," he said. "I think we should try cutting one."

Only silence answered Orley. He twisted around on the bench until his eyes had covered the whole room.

Mavis was gone. He couldn't remember her leaving. But when he played she could come and go unnoticed, so he wasn't too surprised. The night was warm, and so he went to the front door and stepped out on the porch, expecting to find her there. The porch was empty, but he stood there drawing in the cool night air and gazing up at a star-powdered sky until his eyes caught on a patch of light showing cottonwoods that separated the cottage from the main house.

It was only a window, but the shadow in the window held Orley's attention. Someone was sitting there staring out at the night. Staring toward that hole in the cottonwoods that framed the guest cottage. Sam Jackson? He pondered the idea. Surely the man had better things to do than stare out of windows.

"Orley, you stopped playing."

The words came up behind Orley and pulled him back inside the house. Mavis had come in the back way. Her cheeks were flushed and she seemed to be breathing hard. He made an excuse of being tired and begged off for the night, because what he'd seen spoiled his plan of cutting a record.

He waited for Mavis to head back toward the house, and then slipped out the back way and listened and stared at the darkness. The same stars were shining in the same sky, and in the distance he could see the dim shadow of the bunkhouse. But between the shadow and Orley a tall man with an easy tread was moving off into the night.

Nothing had actually changed. Orley had come to the ranch to make records and was making them. But the set-up bothered him. He knew that Mavis was meeting Clay every night while he played, and he knew that someone was sitting in that ranch house window watching the cottage.

After a few nights of worrying, he took his chance right after supper and started out walking toward Billy's place. He wanted a chance to think things out and ask a few question of a man who knew just about everything that went on in this country.

But Billy had a run of truckers when Orley finally reached the cafe, and he had to wander back to the piano and try to make himself inconspicuous until the trade cleared out. It would have been easy if that

nosy State Trooper, Farrel, hadn't dropped by for a cup of coffee and spotted him there.

"Orley Dillon, isn't it?" he asked. "You're the kid staying at the Jackson ranch."

Orley still didn't care for policemen, but he had to answer.

"I guess you guys know everything," he said.

Farrel grinned. "We hear things. So you're going to be a piano player, is that it? An ambitious kid."

"What's wrong with ambition?" Orley asked.

"Not a thing, son. Not a thing if it's an ambition to do and not just to get. There might be a lot of getting at Jackson's ranch from what I hear. Sam Jackson's an eccentric fellow."

Orley was just getting the routine warning to keep out of trouble. He had sense enough to know that. But when Farrel mentioned Sam Jackson his curiosity got the better of him.

"I've never seen Sam Jackson," he admitted. "He was in some kind of an accident, wasn't he? What is he, a cripple?"

"A wheel-chair case," Farrel answered. "But don't let that give you ideas. Sam can get around and take care of himself."

And sit in a window and watch the guest house. Orley had one of the answers he needed for what was bothering him, but he needed more. Sergeant Farrel wasn't the man to help out with that, though. Preacher Billy—it was Preacher Billy he wanted to talk to, because there was an uneasiness building up inside of him and he had to let it out.

He edged away from Farrel and tried to get around the end of the bar. But Orley had come off without telling anyone his plans, and Mavis Jackson didn't like losing her protege. Before Orley could even reach the old man, Clay had come in the front door and stood searching the room with his eyes.

"So there you are!" he said. "What the devil are you doing back here? Mrs. Jackson's real worried."

Farrel chuckled behind him. "What's she doing, adopting the kid?"

"Why not?" Angel chimed in from the dining room doorway. "Mavis Jackson has a weakness for adopting things—all sorts of things."

Clay glared at her, but he'd come for Orley—not to trade insults with a blonde. "The truck's outside," he said. "We'd better be getting back."

Orley didn't know why he felt afraid. "I just wanted a little exercise," he said.

"Exercise!" Clay spat the word at him, and then he looked straight at Angel and spoke to her as if she had the only

pair of eyes in the room.

"The kid should have been with Mrs. Jackson and me today if he wanted exercise," he said. "We drove two hundred miles this morning just to look over a herd of cattle she's buying. Forty-five thousand dollars worth, cash on delivery. That's the kind of outfit she runs."

"My, my!" Angel said.

"Cash on delivery," Clay repeated. "That's the way Sam Jackson does business."

"Smart man," Angel answered. "Cash can't be altered or forged."

It was a crack at Mavis. Orley didn't quite understand it; but he knew that everything Angel said any more was a crack at Mavis. And then Clay did a strange thing.

"Work with smart people and smartness may rub off," he said. "But I don't want any of it on you, baby. I like you just the way you are."

And he winked at her and gave her arm a squeeze in a way that had Orley more puzzled than ever when they drove back to the ranch a few minutes later. He hadn't had a chance to talk to Preacher Billy, and the uneasiness was getting worse.

Orley wasn't a meddler. But he couldn't help worrying about Mavis, whose husband watched nightly through the gap in the cottonwoods, and whose lover didn't like to lose any of his women. Billy might have been able to advise him on what to do with this knowledge; but that was the last time Orley got away from the ranch before Sam Jackson was murdered.

IV

Billy had said it once down at the cafe: "Sometimes I think the devil comes up to study the panhandle now and then just to get fresh ideas for hell."

If that was true, hell would be a place where the winds blew oven-hot and the air was yellow with dust. It was the season when every nerve-fibre prays for rain, and now and then, just as a teaser, the sky would blacken up with storm clouds which would blow away before a single drop fell.

It was too hot to work in the daytime; but for Orley every evening was the same. When it was dark, when the wind had dropped and the wild dust settled so that the stars could take their places in the sky. Mavis would come to the cabin. She never mentioned his trip back to Billy's. It was as if he'd never gone: and Orley never mentioned the trouble that had taken him there, or the trouble that rode back with him.

He was working now. Every night working, playing, concentrating on just one thing—his piano. He kept telling himself

all that trouble backed up inside him wasn't his business at all. When Mavis left him every night and went out through the dark hall and the back door—it was none of his business where she went or what tall shadow waited for her. And when he was finally tired, and stopped playing, and went out on the front porch for a breath of air—it was none of his business what sitting figure watched from the lighted window at the ranch house. Orley Dillon was a piano player; he was nobody's keeper.

But the trouble backed up inside him found its way out through the ends of his fingers, and one night—while Mavis was putting in the time before she left him—the trouble poured out of his fingers until she seemed to feel it too.

"That's wanting music, Orley," she said. "No particular kind of wanting—just wanting." And then her eyes went far away, and her voice went looking for them. "Wanting," she repeated. "I wonder if we ever really know what we want, Orley. I don't think so. I think we just go on wanting because we're alive. When there's nothing to want any more—that's death."

"I know what I want," Orley said.

A faint smile traced about her mouth. "That's because you're so young. When we're young we know. We know everything, and we fight for what we want. All my life I've been fighting; but if I ever stopped I might have time to wonder what I was fighting for and blow out my brains."

Orley stared at her.

She hadn't been drinking. It was just the music that made her talk this way. Orley stopped playing.

"Are you unhappy, Mrs. Jackson?" he asked.

Her eyes came back from that faraway place and looked at him in a strange way. Then she laughed.

"You're a crazy kid, Orley. You play that piano as if you were playing a dirge for your last friend, and then you ask if I'm unhappy. What do you expect me to be doing—dancing on the ceiling?"

"I think you're unhappy," Orley said.

"Play the piano, Orley," she said. "That's what you're here for."

And that was as close as Orley ever came to telling her about his trouble. Just that close, and then the "no admittance" sign in her eyes cutting off all contact. So it wasn't his fault, really, what happened. She wouldn't have listened to him; and it was already too late. It was a quarter past ten, and before midnight everybody knew about the trouble.

When a storm finally breaks, it breaks fast; and it's a relief because the anxious waiting is over. There wasn't going to be any storm from the sky, but that night, after Mavis had gone out the back way and Orley was left alone, the storm broke from his fingers so that he played as he had never played before.

He didn't bother with the recording machine. That was a joke; he seemed to know that already. They'd cut a stack of records—there was no need for any more. But there was a need to play and keep playing. And Mavis was right. It was a dirge that Orley played. Something was dying that night. He didn't know what it was; but something had to die. Something had to die, and be buried, and be forgotten—but there wasn't enough time. By midnight there was no time at all.

Orley didn't hear when the front door of the cabin opened. He didn't hear, and he didn't see, but he stopped playing just the same. And it was quiet. It was like death, only, somehow, it seemed even quieter.

He raised his head and looked. He saw a man in the doorway—a man he'd never seen before. Not an old man and not a young man; but a man whose mouth was twisted with something between hatred and laughter. A man with a shock of thin blond hair dangling over his forehead, pale yellow skin, and brilliant blue eyes that went darting about the room in search of everything and nothing. A man who was big—or would have been big except for one thing. This man was a cripple.

He was propped up on crutches—God only knew how he'd walked that hundred yards—and he had to drag himself across the room. He didn't even look at Orley. He just kept moving toward the back door.

"Mrs. Jackson!"

Precious seconds passed before Orley could tear the warning from his throat. Sam Jackson was already in the hall.

"Mrs. Jackson, come back!"

Orley was afraid. He'd never been so afraid in his life. But afraid as he was, he had to go after the man. He ran to the hall. The back door was opening. The light from the living room flooded down on a white face.

"Sam—!"

Orley didn't need Mavis's shocked cry to tell him. There was only one crippled man on the Jackson ranch. One time she gasped out his name; and then the dumb silence was disturbed only by Sam Jackson's heavy breathing.

And then he laughed.

"Come in, Mavis," he said, "and bring your friend with

you. You don't have to hide your lover in the darkness any longer. Come in—both of you."

The light from the living room was no good for hiding; and Mavis's face was naked with fear. She stood like a cardboard cut-out pasted against the door.

"Come in, Clay. You don't want to leave your mistress to face her husband alone, do you? You aren't that yellow."

There was a whining sound to Sam Jackson's voice. Hatred and laughter—the two things were mixed in his voice just as they were mixed in his eyes. He pulled himself back—dragging himself, rather—into the living room again.

As if they were being pulled by a magnet, Mavis and Clay came in out of the darkness. They looked sick. They looked as sick as Orley felt inside. The way they looked made Sam Jackson laugh again.

"Now, isn't that a picture!" he said. "Look at her, Clay. Look at the smartest woman in the state. Look at the brains behind the Jackson Enterprises! Look at the woman who thinks like a man—"

The color was coming back into Mavis's face. "Sam, you shouldn't be here! You should not be up!"

"Of course I shouldn't be up!" Sam said. "I should be back in that wheel-chair where you put me."

"That's not true, Sam! You know it's not true!"

"I should be back in that window watching you through the hole in the cottonwoods."

That was the trouble—part of it, anyway. Orley knew all along that he should have told Mavis what he'd seen. But how could he tell without getting into that other trouble too? He had to keep silent before; and he had to keep silent now. So far as everybody else was concerned, he wasn't there at all.

"Watching," Sam said, "and waiting for the inevitable. It had to happen some day, Mavis. You had to outsmart yourself. I thought you might do it with Kensington; but he was the noble type. It took someone of your own breed. The day Clay Tyler came here looking for a job, I knew I'd found the right man at last."

"You knew?" Clay gasped. "You wanted this to happen?"

There wasn't anything easy about Clay now. He was a frightened man. But the color was beginning to come back to Mavis's face.

"Sam—what are you going to do?"

And Sam smiled a twisted smile.

"Afraid, Mavis? Afraid for your life—or is it Clay's life you're afraid for? I doubt that. I really do. But you don't have to be afraid of me. You know

that. I'm not Sam Jackson senior. The old boy would have shot down any man he caught with his wife without batting an eye. But he was a strong man. I'm just a weakling, an ex-lush with a strong wife who keeps me sober and harmless and runs my business for me. I couldn't shoot down a sick dog."

Sam Jackson spoke slowly. He let her listen to the words; let them sink in. He didn't even look at Clay any more.

"No, I'm not going to shoot your lover, Mavis, and I'm not going to shoot you. I'm just going to divorce you — the way any civilised man would do. I can do it now. I have all the evidence I need."

"Evidence—" Mavis echoed.

"All the evidence I need," Sam repeated. "All these weeks —Oh, I've had you watched. I knew what was going on even before you brought this kid up here to front for you. A piano player! That was cute. That was really cute."

And then Sam took out time to laugh again; and then he stopped laughing, and his voice, when it came again, cut like a knife. "I'm divorcing you on grounds of adultery, Mavis. I'm cutting you off without a red cent!"

Nobody remembered Orley. He could watch all of the emotions on all of the faces. He could see the triumph in Sam's face; he could see the pain in Mavis's eyes; he could see the shock in Clay's.

"You can't do that!" Clay choked. "Mrs. Jackson runs this place. She built it up—"

"And I appreciate that," Sam said. "I really do. It means all the more for me when this cheap baggage gets off the place. And you can do that any time, Mavis. Right now — tonight. You can take your handsome cowboy and start travelling!"

By this time Sam had dragged himself back to the door Orley didn't know how he got out and down the steps. He couldn't see anything for a time except Mavis's face.

After a long silence, Clay spoke again. "He's just bluffing. He'll never get away with it!"

"But he will," Mavis said.

"He can't! This is your place—"

"This is Sam Jackson's place, and he's old Sam Jackson's son. He'll get away with anything he wants to get away with."

And then Mavis did a thing Orley had never expected to see her do. She broke down completely. She turned to Clay and threw both arms about his neck. "You love me!" she cried. "You do love me!"

Orley turned his face. He didn't belong here any more. That was a part of what had been dying while he played.

"Sure. Sure, I love you,"

Clay said.

"Then take me away, Clay. Like Sam said—tonight."

Begging. Mavis Jackson begging. Orley felt sick.

"Sure, honey. In a little while. Let's think this out."

"I don't want to think any more, Clay. I don't want anything—"

"Do you want to give up? Are you just going to take this?"

It was time for Orley to leave. He went over to the closet and took out his jacket. He filled up the pockets with the few things that were his. He never carried much. It was easier to get a hitch when a fellow travelled light.

"You don't have to take this," Clay persisted. "You don't have to leave here broke. Listen, Mavis. Use your head, honey. Just listen—"

Orley didn't look back or try to say goodbye. He was the only one in the cabin who had not been ordered out; but he couldn't stay any longer. Once he was outside, he began to walk fast. By the time he reached the ranch house, he was running. The lights were shining inside as if Sam Jackson was giving a party—and maybe he was. He had something to celebrate now.

Orley ran for a long time. It was only when his breath began to come like stabs from a knife that he slowed down at all. And it was only when he stopped running that he realised how scared he was.

But why? It was all over now, wasn't it? It hadn't been his trouble, and he couldn't have stopped it even if he'd told. He could feel sorry for Mavis. That was only right after what she'd tried to do for him. But he couldn't change anything, and he didn't have any reason to be scared . . . He ran these things over and over in his mind. There wasn't any reason for the way he felt now. There was nothing to dread. It was all over.

"Take me away, Clay. Like Sam said—tonight."

Orley sat upright when his mind spoke the words. Mavis—that's why he was still afraid! There were two parts to the trouble he'd borne these past weeks; and Mavis only knew about one part. There was still something hidden that had to be told.

He came to his feet and looked behind him. He'd run a long way—the ranch wasn't even in sight now—and he didn't want to go back. But Mavis Jackson was in trouble, and people in trouble didn't think straight. Maybe he couldn't explain about the rest of the trouble. But he could at least tell her so she could try to figure it out. He owed that much to someone who had believed in him and given him hope.

And so he started to walk back—more slowly than he'd come because he was tired from the running and reluctant from the dread. It wouldn't be easy to say. It might even be wrong, but surely no more wrong than leaving her clinging to a man she couldn't trust. Clay Tyler didn't love her. Maybe if she knew that, she could make things right with Sam again. Orley walked faster. Maybe if he could get there before she went away.

He could see the house now. Most of the lights had been turned out, but one was still burning. He couldn't see the cabin, of course, not until he passed the house; but Mavis couldn't have left so soon. She would at least have to pack some clothes. And so Orley headed for the house, hoping that he wouldn't have to see Sam Jackson again—or Clay Tyler. About twenty yards away something happened that made him freeze in his tracks; and then he went on again—at a dead run.

The front door was open. On hot nights everybody's front door was open—and the screen wasn't locked. Orley didn't knock. There was no time for that now. That was a shot he'd heard a few moments earlier—one shot splitting the silence. His mind was in a turmoil.

He could think of only one thing as he raced through the hall in pursuit of that light—Mavis. Mavis was in trouble, and Sam Jackson was a beast! He found the light at the end of the hall and ran into the room . . . and then he stood very still and stared at the floor.

It wasn't Mavis. That was the only thing Orley could think of at first. It wasn't Mavis. It was a big room—the same room that looked out through the cottonwoods. It was a man's room with bookshelves and a big desk, and behind the desk a wheel-chair that was tipped over—and beside the chair a body.

Orley came forward and knelt down on the floor. He didn't mean to place his hand on the gun dropped so carelessly beside the wheel-chair. But that was a thing he didn't think of until later. For a moment he could just stare at the dead face of Sam Jackson and not think anything at all except that it wasn't Mavis . . .

"Orley!"

It might have been five minutes or five seconds before the cry came. It was all the same to Orley. Still on one knee, he turned around.

"Orley—oh, my God!"

And then Mavis, clinging to the door-sill, turned her face away.

V

They didn't have to think twice about Orley Dillon. They found him beside Sam Jackson's body, with a gun in his hand

and a stupid expression on his face. At first it was just Mavis, her eyes big and one hand clamped over her mouth after that awful cry. Then it was Clay running down the hall to see what was wrong; and then, in less time than confusion could remember, it was Sergeant Farrel and a grim-faced companion in uniform. None of them had to think twice about Orley Dillon.

And none of them did.

He tried to explain about the gun.

"I touched it accidentally. I tried to wipe off my fingerprints afterwards."

Crazy. He had to be crazy to say that. Everything Orley tried to say came out wrong. And this was murder. Nothing else concerned Sergeant Farrel. Sam Jackson had a bullet in his chest. What was Orley Dillon doing here anyway?

"He's been making some records for Mrs. Jackson," Clay explained. "She was trying to help the kid get a start."

"I know that," Farrel said. "We talked about it one night at Billy's place."

Ambition. Remember, Orley? Remember what the man with a badge said about ambition?

"But he finished up tonight," Clay added. "I guess Sam got fed up with the racket. He came out to the cabin and ordered Orley to pack up and leave."

It took about ten seconds for Orley to even believe what his ears had heard. Then he screamed at Clay—

"You're a liar! He never told me to leave! He told you to leave!"

And Clay looked at him as if he'd gone right out of his mind. Innocent Clay, who didn't know what this crazy kid was talking about.

"Now why should Sam do a thing like that? He only hired me a few weeks ago. I never gave him any cause to be dissatisfied."

"You never—?"

"Sam and I have been getting along fine. Isn't that right, Mrs. Jackson?"

"Isn't that right, Mrs. Jackson?" Listen to the words and try to believe they were real. Listen and try to make anyone, especially Orley Dillon, understand. Orley was too numb, too scared.

Mavis didn't answer. She'd slumped down on one of the chairs. She had a handkerchief over her face and didn't say anything at all.

And Farrel, who was supposed to do such things, walked about the room checking up.

"There's a safe back here behind the desk," he said. "But it doesn't seem to have been tampered with. Anything in it?"

"I'd guess at least forty-five thousand." Clay said. "Sam was

planning to buy some more cattle—he always did business in cash."

And then Clay paused, remembering. "Say, we were talking about that down at Billy's when I came after Orley. He must have remembered."

"That's a lie!" Orley yelled. "I never tried to rob Mr. Jackson. I only came back because—"

"You came back?" Farrel echoed.

"After I ran off," Orley said.

"You ran off?"

It was worse than if he'd never said anything at all. Farrel had his head cocked on one side just like Preacher Billy and Clay had a peculiar twist to his mouth.

"He ran off after Sam ordered him off the place," he said. "I know. I was there."

"He ordered you off!" Orley screamed. "You and—"

But Orley didn't say it; he couldn't. Mavis's face had come up from the handkerchief, and her eyes were on him. Frightened eyes. Hurt eyes. The eyes of a child who'd been kicked around and didn't know why. He couldn't finish what he was going to say then—not in front of Farrel. Not in front of a man who thought she was just a tramp Sam Jackson had picked up in his helling days.

They didn't have to think twice when they took Orley off to jail. But Orley had to speak once more—just to Mavis as they led him through the door.

"I didn't shoot him, Mrs. Jackson. I didn't come back to steal the money, and I didn't shoot him. I only came in because I heard the shot and thought he was after you."

That's all he could say. But he had to say it so that she would know he was her friend and would be able to figure the rest of it out for herself as soon as she had time to think . . .

It was two days before Orley saw Mavis again.

Without a watch, you could not begin to tell what time it was. The wind had been rising for twenty-four hours, and at straight up noon it was like dusk—yellow, angry dusk. Outside the jail-house window, you couldn't even see across the street; and around the window, sifting through the cracks in the casing, the dust was drifting up faster than it could be swept away.

But mostly nobody bothered to sweep it away. Mostly everybody just left Orley alone. He'd answered all the questions and made all the denials. He'd told them a hundred times how it was that he hadn't shot Sam Jackson, and how it was that he'd come back to the ranch after running away. But he hadn't told them how it was that he had run away, because

he was waiting for Mavis to come.

She would figure it all out. She would come with the truth, because she'd figured out the truth—and because Orley was her friend as she was his friend.

And on the second day, at a time he couldn't tell without a watch, the guard came with the key and took Orley off to a room where the District Attorney, a pale-skinned man with clean finger-nails, sat behind a desk that wouldn't stay polished while the wind held out. Two other people were with him. One was Sergeant Farrel, wearing a gun as big as the jail guard's, and the other was Mavis.

She was dressed all in black, with a black hat and gloves, and a large black bag. Her face was pale and strained, and Orley knew that she must have come from Sam Jackson's funeral. She looked at him when he walked into the room, but she didn't smile.

"I want you to know that we appreciate your coming here today," the District Attorney was saying. "I know this has been a trying day for you, Mrs. Jackson."

Nobody invited Orley to sit down. He stood quietly with the guard at his shoulder.

"Dillon has been asking to see you. He's given us a lot of trouble."

"Orley," Mavis said, still looking at him, still not smiling, "I'm terribly sorry. I'm sorry all this has happened."

He was right then. She had figured it out. She did understand.

"I can't help but feel responsible," she went on. "I should have realised the position I was putting Orley in. I should have been more careful."

"Careful of what?" Farrel asked.

Mavis didn't look at Farrel. She looked at the District Attorney when she answered.

"I wanted to help the boy. I heard him play the piano at Billy's cafe. He was good, really good. I thought I might help him get a start in what he loved to do. But I guess the temptation was too much—particularly when Sam told him to leave."

Her voice was low and husky. It was the kind of a voice that went well with that black outfit she was wearing; and because it was low, and unexpected, Orley had to think about her words before he could understand them.

"Then that is what happened?" the District Attorney asked.

Mavis lowered her head. "Yes," she said. "Sam was—well, I guess everyone knows about my husband's temper. Not that I blame him. After the accident—"

But by that time Orley understood the words.

"No!" he cried. "It's not true!"

He tried to pull forward; but the guard's hand was a steel band around his arm. He'd screamed at Mavis; but she did not look up. He could see the muscles pulling tight in her jaw.

"He wasn't very diplomatic," she said, just as if what she was saying wasn't a pack of lies, "and Orley's very sensitive. He was probably more hurt than anything else. I don't really think he came back to shoot Sam—or to rob him."

"I didn't shoot him!" Orley cried.

"Why do you think he came back?" the District Attorney asked.

"I don't know. I really don't. But I don't think he meant to kill Sam. It was Sam's gun. He must have threatened Orley and then—" Mavis took a deep breath. Her eyes were fixed on the handbag in her lap. "I told you—he's a sensitive boy and he's been kicked around a lot."

"Most of us have been kicked around a lot," Farrel said.

It was the only sensible thing anyone had said in that room. It brought Mavis's face up, and when she looked at the sergeant, Orley saw her face for the first time. Really the first time. Not a child's face—not tired, not sad, but cruel. Hard and cruel and dangerous. "Most of us have been kicked around a lot."

It was Mavis Jackson that Farrel meant when he used those words. The heel-prints were all over her face. And Mavis Jackson wouldn't give up any of the things she'd been kicked around to get. When the chips were down—and they were way down now—it was her own skin she'd save. The devil had no friends.

And then the hardness faded as if it had been some dirt and she'd washed it away.

"I still feel responsible," she said. "I'm leaving for the coast tonight. I can't stand the ranch just now—"

"I understand," the District Attorney said.

"I'll be back in a few weeks. But I do want the boy to have a chance. I want him to have a good lawyer, and a psychiatrist—"

"You devil!" Orley yelled.

She had to look at him then. No woman could be called a devil and not look at her accuser.

"You're lying! You're lying about everything—and I tried to protect you! I didn't tell them about you and Clay Tyler! I didn't tell what really happened in that cabin!"

She must have known this would happen, because she didn't bat an eye.

"But you'll pay for it! You'll pay!"

"I think you'd better take Dillon back to his cell," the District Attorney said.

It took both of them to do it —the guard and Farrel. But even then Orley had a little time left.

"You'll find out some day what I came back to tell you. He's no good. He doesn't love you at all. It's only your money he's after—and that blonde waitress. You'll see. You'll find out!"

Orley didn't stop yelling until he was pulled back into the hall and the door slammed shut in his face; and the last thing he saw was Mavis Jackson with her jaw tight and her eyes closed as if trying to shut out his words.

A devil . . . Orley didn't want to cry. He held back until he reached his cell again; but when he was alone it all came out. The anger, the hatred, the hurt. He crawled up in the far corner of the cell cot and bit into the mattress so nobody could hear him.

Orley Dillon—killer. Crazy killer. So crazy she was going to get him one of those headshrinkers. A long time he thought about it until it began to seem true. He was crazy. He must have been crazy to trust that woman—to go with her—to protect her! He must be crazy—and he could kill . . .

He could kill Mavis Jackson. Right now, if he could only reach her . . .

After a while Orley quit sobbing and didn't need to bite the mattress any more. He stretched out and was quiet a long time just thinking, because crazy people think a lot and are clever about some things. Real clever. They think of what they want to do, and then they plan how to do it. The guard wore a gun, didn't he? And the guard heard what Mavis said about him being crazy, didn't he? And the guard would get excited and call for help if a crazy prisoner started trouble . . .

Finally Orley knew what he had to do, because a doomed man had no choice.

VI

The wind never stopped blowing. It was hot, it was dry, and it smelled of clay dust and scorched grass. Even in the darkness — and the darkness was genuine now — he could smell the grass and taste the bite of the dust. But the dust was a blessing. The dust was a curtain. Without it, he'd have taken a short walk to nowhere after he took the .45 away from that guard.

Sometimes Orley had to laugh about that. He'd duck down in the ditch when his ears picked up the sound of a motor in the darkness, and he'd hide there until the stubby yellow fingers of the headlamps were swallowed up in the night and laugh to himself about those dumb cops out searching for Orley Dillon. Dumb cops who fell for an old trick just because he'd made

them think he was having a fit. All he needed was that jail-door open and one grab for the .45. After that, it was the dust that covered his escape.

And so he didn't have a short walk; he had a long one. There was no way to calculate how long—that was the only bad thing about the dust storm. While a little daylight remained, he could find his way.

He got away from the jail and out of town without any trouble; and he found the highway all right and got headed in the right direction. But for hours now he'd just been walking—sometimes stumbling—head down against the wind and no strength at all to keep him going except the memory of his hate and the anticipation of that one, long moment he was going to give Mavis before he fired that one, quick shot.

But she was leaving for the coast. Orley understood about that. Of course she couldn't stay at the ranch—not for a while. Jackson ranch was news just now—no place for a brand new widow to shack up with her foreman. Going away would keep everything looking respectable; and when she came back it would be without anyone to threaten her fortune.

No more eyes watching through that hole in the cottonwoods; no husband to cut her off without a cent. Orley understood all about that just as if she'd laid it out for him in simple language. But he was going to find her anyway. If she'd already left by the time he reached the ranch, he'd go after her. There were other cars on the place, and nobody argued with a man who had a gun in his hand. All of these things were like spurs at his mind driving him on and on . . .

He didn't realise that he'd missed the cut-off to the ranch until Billy's neon poked through the dust and the darkness. At first it was just a red blur—then, as he came nearer, he realised what had happened. Too far. But at least he knew where he was. An extra mile or two didn't matter when a man knew where he had to go. But it was hard to come back to Billy's without at least peeking in the window. He edged closer.

Suddenly, Orley dropped to the ground. One moment there was just that red neon striping the darkness; then a pair of headlamps flashed on. A motor leaped alive and something too close for comfort roared past. They hadn't seen him.

Orley stayed flattened against the ground waiting for the sound of screaming brakes; but they hadn't seen him after all. When he was sure, he got up and went on slowly. He picked up the pale glow of the window and followed it in. Only the bar room was

lighted now and there were no other cars in the parking area. Orley thought about it for several minutes before he decided to go in.

When he walked in, it was with that gun stuck out in front of him like a poker.

"Orley," Billy said. "You damned fool!"

It was just as Orley expected —nobody in the place but the old man. It was late. It had to be late for him to have walked this far since he broke out of jail. Angel had gone, and the Chinaman was in bed.

"You damned fool!" Billy repeated. "The police are looking for you. They've been in and out of here a dozen times."

"I know," Orley said. "They just missed me outside a couple of minutes ago."

Billy looked at him strangely. He was a queer old guy. Orley hadn't expected him to be afraid of the gun. But he kept it out in front of him just the same.

"What did you do it for, Orley? Why did you bust out?"

"I never killed Sam Jackson," Orley said.

He expected an argument; but the old man didn't even look surprised. He did look troubled.

"You're not going to make anybody believe that now. Busting out of jail was just like putting a noose around your neck."

"The noose was already around my neck," Orley said. "Mavis Jackson came in today and tied it—tight. I ain't got time to talk, Billy. I want whatever you've got in that cash register, and I want it quick!"

It had to be Billy—that was the only thing Orley didn't like about it. Somebody had to pay for that trip he was going to have to make after Mavis Jackson, and it had to be Billy.

"I've got to travel," he said. "I know where I can get a car; but I'll need money for gas."

And Billy brightened a little, almost as if he approved.

"You goin' to Mexico, Orley?"

"Never mind where I'm going."

"Orley, don't be a bigger fool than you are already. I know what you're aimin' to do, and I won't let you do it! Forget about Mavis—"

"Forget that she took my life away?"

It was more than his life. Orley knew that. Orley Dillon's life wasn't worth what he was going to do now; it was nothing to lose. And Billy knew, too.

"Nobody's took your life away yet," he said, "but you'll do it yourself if you go after Mavis Jackson."

"I didn't kill Sam!" Orley yelled.

"I never thought you did. Orley, listen to me. I know how you feel. It seems like the

worst thing that can happen in life is to have your truth made out a lie; but it isn't. The worst thing is to have no truth in you—and you won't if you do this thing. You'll be just what they say you are—a killer. Only then you'll know it yourself, and it'll hurt a lot more than being made out a liar when you're not!"

It was too late for sermons. That noose around his neck was going to hurt the same whether he swung for a murder he had not done or one he had. Orley poked the gun into Billy's ribs.

"I want the money," he said.

"But she's gone, Orley. She left for the west coast late this afternoon. She stopped in on the way."

"I'll find her," Orley said. "There's only one highway for hundreds of miles. I'll find her."

"But the police—"

Even with the gun in his ribs, Billy was arguing. And more than that. He was edging toward the cash register the way Orley directed; but he had a towel in one hand and was shoving it along the counter in front of him. When he tried to pick up something in it, Orley caught the movement and jerked his arm away. And there it was—one whisky glass, empty, and the ring still wet on the bar.

One whisky glass. Tired as he was, it took a few seconds for Orley to understand.

"Mrs. Jackson," he said. "She was here! You lied to me, Billy. She didn't leave."

"She did leave, Orley."

"You're lying! That was her car I saw outside. She was heading toward the ranch."

"But she did leave, Orley. It was the dust storm—it made her come back."

If he hadn't been so tired, Orley would have laughed. Dust—the curse of the panhandle, and tonight it was his best, his only friend.

"And maybe it was more than the dust," Billy added. "She was worried, Orley. She was upset about something. She took one drink and asked for her bottle."

"She has a radio in that car," Orley said. "She knows I'm after her. She's got a reason to worry."

"No—she didn't know about your escape. I was the one who told her. She didn't even seem interested. The old man tried to take his arm. He'd forgotten about that gun, but Orley had not. "Maybe she's come back to help you, Orley. Maybe she's come back to tell the truth."

That was the trouble with old men who went around quoting Scripture: they believed in truth. They figured it was something inevitable—like heaven.

"Then I won't need the money—" Orley mused.

"Orley—don't be an idiot!"

"Idiot!" Crazy old fool. All

this time and he still didn't know. Orley gave him a look that said what a crazy old fool he was.

"Don't you get it?" he yelled. "Don't you understand? Mavis Jackson didn't come back to tell the truth—she can't. She's the one who killed Sam Jackson!"

"You don't know that," Billy protested.

"I know all right — and I know why."

"Then tell the law! Don't throw your life away!"

The law. Orley didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Old Preacher Billy standing there with a gun in his ribs talking about the law just as if he didn't know there was no law for the likes of Orley Dillon.

Orley had heard a fellow say it once: "The law is something the rich invented to protect themselves from the poor." The fellow had said it right; but there was no use arguing with Billy. Now that he knew where Mavis was, there was only one more thing to do.

"I'm going to tie you up, Billy, so you can't call the ranch and warn her I'm coming."

"Then you are guilty," Billy said.

"I never killed Sam."

"You're guilty just the same. You're guilty of something, Orley. Look inside yourself. Why is it—why is it really that you hate her so much? Maybe it isn't her you hate, Orley. Maybe it's yourself—"

Orley couldn't stand any more preaching. He didn't like to do what he did, but the old man drove him to it. He couldn't preach any more after that gun lashed out and caught him across the head. He couldn't do anything but groan while Orley tied him up.

Orley turned out all the lights before he left—even the neon—but not before he did one thing. He went over to the old upright and stood there a moment remembering. When he went back into the night again he knew why it was that he had to kill Mavis Jackson. Taking her life was nothing, as his life was nothing. The big hurt was because she'd taken away the dream . . .

It had been such a long walk. There was no time and there was no miles any longer. It might be almost morning—the sky could not tell him. It was a sky without stars, like a life without hope. Orley bent against the wind and went on lifting one foot after another, and "why?" was a word that had been dropped from the language.

The first thing he found was the pink Cadillac. By the time the wind stopped blowing it wouldn't be pink any more; it would be as silver as if someone had taken a sander to it and left it naked steel.

She hadn't bothered to run it

into the garage. It was just parked at a crazy angle in front of the house . . . and the house was dark. Dark and locked. Orley groped his way around it, looking for a loose window and wondering which room was hers. It wasn't until he got around to the back that he saw any light at all, and the light he saw wasn't in the house. It was just a dim glow off behind the cottonwoods.

One hundred yards farther. . . . Half the distance and he caught a sound above the wail of the wind. Up the porch and onto the doorstep and it was loud —the piano. Orley Dillon playing the piano! Crazy. Everything was crazy now. Far back in his mind a little warning sounded: somebody had to set a trap for him. But far back in his mind was no good to a man who had only enough strength left to do what he had to do. He opened the door and went inside—he and the wind and the dust—and then he leaned back against the door gasping for breath.

The whole cabin was bright. It seemed as if every light must be burning: the big room, the hall, what he could see of the bedroom doorway in the hall. Everything as bright as if they were holding a ball—but only one person at the ball. Mavis.

She sat all alone at the table that held the recording machine; but now it held something else. One glass and what was left of the bottle she'd picked up at Billy's. Just one glass and her hand clamped around it as if she feared it might get away. She didn't move or look up until the record ended and there was no more sound but the whisper of the needle on the rim.

"Orley," she said. "I was just thinking of you, Orley."

She was drunk. Her eyes had a glazed look; they didn't even seem to see the gun in his hand.

"I'm glad you're here, Orley. Now you can play for me."

It had been such a long walk; at the end of it there should have been a moment of triumph. He wanted to see the fear in her face. He came toward her, shoving the gun out in front of him.

"The records are fine; but it's better when you play, Orley. When you play I can see that look you have—so kind, so sweet—"

He didn't look kind and sweet now. Drunk as she was, she could see that.

"You're angry," she said. "You don't have to be. Everything's all right now."

"Sam Jackson is dead," Orley said.

She didn't seem to hear.

"If you play, we can make some more records—"

"You killed him," Orley said.

She heard that all right. She couldn't pretend any longer.

"No, Orley. I didn't—"

It was almost a whisper.

"You lied to the D.A.! You lied to Farrel!"

"Yes." She had to take another drink after that one word. It was a hard word. "Yes," she said again, "I lied, Orley. But I didn't want to. You don't understand—"

"I understand that you killed Sam Jackson!"

"No—!"

"You or Clay Tyler!"

And that was it. It was all over her face in an instant. All that was left in that bottle wouldn't wipe it off now. Clay Tyler. Yes, it made sense when Orley thought about it. Without money Mavis was no good to him, and there was only one way for her to keep the money. For the first time Orley pulled the gun away from her face. For the first time he turned toward the hall and that lighted bedroom door.

"It was an accident," Mavis cried. "That's what he told me, Orley. He was only going to get the money in the safe—it was mine, too. Mine by rights, Orley!"

She caught him at the hall door.

"I wanted to tell the truth. I wanted to tell, but I couldn't. I was lonely, Orley. Can't you understand? I was so lonely . . . !"

The gun in Orley's hand was for vengeance. He pushed her aside. Clay Tyler. The gun in Orley's hand was for Clay Tyler He went to the bedroom doorway. Everything was light; nothing hidden, nothing could be hidden now.

And then the music came up behind him—loud. Orley Dillon at the piano. Orley Dillon playing a dirge for lost souls. And the room in front came up bright—so bright that nothing could ever be hidden again. The gun on the floor—empty. He didn't have to look at it to know. All he had to look at were the bullet-riddled bodies on the bed.

"You'll find out some day what I came back to tell you. He's no good. He doesn't love you at all. It's only your money he's after—and that blonde waitress. You'll see. You'll find out!"

Orley was sick. The gun in his hand was for vengeance; but he was sick of vengeance now. He hadn't known it would be this way—so bright and so ugly. He hadn't known, when he shouted those words at the jail house, that she would learn the truth so soon; and Clay—surely Clay and Angel hadn't known she would come back through the storm to be sure.

It had been a long walk to nowhere; but nowhere could be the best place to go if it set you free.

Orley stumbled back into the big room. The piano was

pounding holes in the walls. He threw the gun down on the table and grabbed the record off the machine. He smashed it in a thousand pieces—the record and the dream.

"Orley—no! Don't torture me!"

It was a cry that came up from the depths of whatever it was Mavis used for a soul. A cry as if breaking the record had broken her body.

"No—no!" she said. "Don't look at me like that, Orley. It's all right. Everything's all right now. I called the police and told them everything. Play for me, Orley. Play for me and look kind just once more. That's all I ever really wanted—just for someone to look kind at me."

She clawed at his arm—drunk. Crazy drunk and blood all over her soul. He pushed her aside and ran out. The wind was still blowing and the air was full of dust; but it was air. It was freedom. It was life.

Orley ran all the way to the cottonwoods before he remembered the .45 he'd left on the table; and he only remembered it then because of the sound that came from the cabin behind him. A shot. One shot fired by a woman who had finally stopped wanting. One shot . . . that would echo forever in his brain.

He didn't go back. He'd known all the time that one shot would be enough. END.

A New Short Story By

LEX SUTTON

A tough-minded financier, a patient assassin, a woman who feels herself scorned — these are the explosive ingredients, distilled slowly through minor incidents, that make for ever-mounting suspense, to detonate in a

Twin Killing

FROM where she was sitting, beside Curt Direnzo's magnificent Regency desk, Anita could see the black convertible. It stood close to the kerb, half a block uptown, on the Central Park side of Fifth Avenue, as it had stood every afternoon for three days.

It wasn't the car that worried her—after all, it was just another expensive black convertible, agleam with chromuim fittings, in a city crammed bumper to bumper with similar models. Harry Phelps' telephoned threats, coupled to the slim male figure, in the dark suit and light grey fedora, that lounged alongside it, smoking a cigarette. Something about the man, about the way he lifted his arm to take another drag, the way he turned his whole torso with his head to look at the house, bothered her intensely.

It was familiar, frighteningly familiar, and Anita wasn't sure why. Watching the man, she felt terror. She would have given half a week's salary for a good look at his face. Without foundation, she didn't dare voice the fear that gnawed at her each time she noticed the car parked so innocently against the opposite curve.

"Anita!" Curt Direnzo's voice was sharp, pulling her back to her job. "I said to sign it 'with warmest regards'."

Looking down at her pad, Anita saw the fish-hooks that told her she already had it. "Gotcha, boss," she told him.

Direnzo passed a well-manicured hand over his deceptively soft dark eyes, then said, "I guess that will take care of the worm until I finish pulling the rug out from under him." An expression of sheer malicious delight spread over his tired, handsome face, and he added, thoughtfully, "I'd pay half a million to see Harry Phelps' face when he finds out I've left him holding a bale of

flit."

"Better make it half a buck," said Anita cynically.

Curt Direnzo sighed, and he said, with mock-wistfulness, "No man is a hero to his own secretary."

Anita gathered up her shorthand pad and rose, shaking down her skirt with an ex-stripper's expert motion. "Don't worry, boss," she told him. "You're still Li'l Abner to me. It's just that I know you too damn well where half a million's concerned."

He looked at her with narrow-eyed speculation that caused a flutter in her diaphragm, then said, "One of these days, babe, I'm going to take time out to prove you only think you know me."

"That," said Anita, "will be the day. Anything else, boss?"

"Yeah." When Curt Direnzo forgot to be careful, traces of gutteral undercut the hard-won gentility of his normal accents. "I want you to get reservations on the Queen, day after tomorrow —for London." He ran a hand over his face again, added, "Better make them adjoining—no, make it a suite. In Monica Harvey's name. And I want them delivered here by tomorrow afternoon."

"Okay — will do," she said quietly. As she left her employer's room, one of the telephones rang on the big Regency desk, and his voice followed her into the outer office. "No soap, Rooney. Delivery tomorrow or the deal's dead. I've already given you an extra week. You knew the score when you signed the contract." A brief pause, then, "Of course, it's foolproof —I don't pay my lawyers to draw up deals jerks like you can wriggle out of. Put up or take a bath."

Jules was in the outer office, silently dusting the bronze statue of Hecuba atop the filing cabinet. From the rear, Jules was the perfect manservant of English drawing room comedy. But when he turned around, he revealed the flattened nose, the crushed cheek-bone, the eyelid scar tissue of a veteran middleweight pug.

He grinned at Anita, displaying two gold teeth, and said, in a high, husky voice, "Take it easy —you'll work yourself to death. We wouldn't want that."

"Not me," said Anita, rolling paper and carbons into her typewriter. "Tell Cook he forgot to put lemon in the Hollandaise."

Jules looked surprised. "But I had some—it was perfect."

"Sure it was," Anita paused to light a cigarette. "Tell him anyway. It will keep him from getting bored."

"I'd rather tangle with Marciano," said Jules. He finished his dusting chore with a final lick, and moved on.

Looking after him, Anita reflected sombrely on the fact that the big Fifth Avenue mansion that served Curt Direnzo both as home and office seemed to suffer from a split personality — like Jules and every one else in it, including herself. The house was a mansion, all right—almost a museum. It was also a fortress and place of business, wherein Direnzo conducted financial piracy within the law.

Jules was a good butler and servant—but he was also a bodyguard and watchman when the special night-cop was off-duty. Cook was a dream chef — who had learned his job in Paris during the war, while serving as messcook for an MP outfit. Anita herself was a thoroughly efficient secretary — if she weren't, she wouldn't have been able to hold the job for almost three years. She was also an alley cat who had fought her way out of the slums via the honky-tonks and burlesque houses until Curt picked her up from a dress-model shop.

Curt Drienzo? Anita flicked ashes into the tray by her elbow and wondered why she had had to fall in love with him. She knew Curt about as well as any woman could who had never slept with him, a lot better than most of them that had. Curt was death on women — he devoured them like a spider, then threw them away juiceless husks. She had seen a long parade of them come and go—a gorgeous Colombian coffee heiress, an English marchioness, a contralto from the Met, an unending quick succession of models, Hollywood starlets and divorcees.

These didn't bother her—but Monica Harvey did. Unlike the rest of the nylon brigade, she seemed to be moving in for keeps. Monica might not be up to the tape-measure loveliness standards of the others but, in her way, she was almost a match for Curt. A sexy, witty, shrewdly amusing way that had taken her from a woman's fashion desk to a job as home-feature editor for a major TV network in five years.

Curt, she thought unhappily, had been known to take trips with some of the others, but always by air, so that he could fly back to his desk and his telephones to resume the chase of the not-so-elusive dollar the moment the madness had passed. But five days in a stateroom suite on the Queen with Monica . . . Anita felt a little sick as she dialled the travel bureau and made the arrangements. Then

she got up and walked to the window and looked out.

The car was still there — the black convertible—and the slim man in the dark suit and light fedora still leaned against it, smoking. As she watched, seeking the source of her fear, he removed his hat, briefly, to mop his brow, and she got a good look at his face for the first time.

A lean, saturnine face, with deep-set eyes, a narrow forehead and a mouth that resembled a diagonal gash. Anita felt weakness in her knees and stomach, a stiffening of the trimly cut hair at the nape of her neck. That face belonged to Joe Sackett, and Joe Sackett belonged to a hideous past she had long since put behind her. The mere sight of him brought back the squalor, the stench, the terror of the tenement block existence that had been hers for the first sixteen years of her life, until her father had died and set her free.

Joe Sackett was the neighborhood terror, the block bully, the brutal tyrant who held small boys and larger girls and puny shopkeepers in a state of chronic fear. His was a ruthlessness beside which Curt Direnzo's paled, backed by a savage cruelty that knew laughter only at the tortured antics of its bruised and broken victims. Joe Sackett was nightmare stuff — living nightmare stuff.

Anita recalled all too vividly an evening when he had trapped her on the way back from the drugstore. She shuddered and seemed again to feel the too-ardoit manipulations of his remorseless fingers, the laughing eyes that derided her anguish, the thin, twisted lips that mocked her revulsion from his touch.

Nor was the memory alone the cause of her fearful reprise. Joe Sackett, like herself, had risen above their joint environment. Joe Sackett was no longer a slum-block bully. Joe Sackett was a dark star of the underworld, at mention of whose name even powerful racket-chiefs blanched. Joe Sackett had risen to be a king among triggermen, an assassin highly paid and never convicted. Joe Sackett was death!

And Joe Sackett was watching Curt Direnzo's house. Even while she looked, she saw him flick away his cigarette with indolent grace and get back slowly into the car. She was snapped out of of the spell he had unwittingly cast over her only by the sudden shrill of the telephone on her green-blottered desk.

It was Harry Phelps, the bluff, big-bellied oil promoter Curt was in the process of swindling, the man to whom he had dictated his last letter. Phelps was angry. He said, "I'm calling you, babe, be-

cause that overdressed rat you work for won't talk to me. Tell him I'm hep to his jive and I'm not going to roll over and play dead. Tell him that this time he's not going to get away with it."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Phelps," she said. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"In a pig's eye you don't!" said Phelps. "Just tell that weasel I'm onto his play and he'd better get onto himself. Tell him I'm playing for keeps, not for kicks."

He hung up before she could answer him. Anita went back to the window and peered out. Joe Sackett was still in the black convertible. She could make out his hands, resting on the wheel. Slowly, wondering what to do, she returned to her desk and got to work.

Curt emerged a few minutes later. Anita told him of Harry Phelps' threat and hesitated, wondering how to warn him about Joe Sackett being outside — after all, she could be wrong. Direnzo didn't give her time. "Listen, honey," he said, "if I scared easy — if I scared at all—I'd have died of fright years ago. What's more, I wouldn't be cutting Harry Phelps if I didn't know he was planning to slice my throat. It's sheer self-defence and he can't do a thing."

She knew he was lying, she longed to tell him about Joe Sackett, but she couldn't afford to risk ridicule — not with Monica Harvey in the picture. She set her lips, typed "With warmest regards" at the foot of the letter to Phelps, plucked it out of the typewriter and gave it to Direnzo to sign. "I'll have the others on your desk in an hour," she promised.

"Let them go for tonight," he told her amiably. "Tomorrow will be okay. It's too damned swell an evening to work overtime, honey. Beat it and have a ball. And don't worry about Phelps."

Anita left by the side door. She mailed the letter to Harry Phelps at the box on the corner, then crossed Fifth Avenue in the twilight and took up a post under a tree by the Central Park wall where she could watch Joe Sackett. In the gathering dusk, she could be sure he was still in the black convertible only by the lighted end of his cigarette as he raised and lowered it from his thin lips. She felt coldness creep through her, although the evening was warm.

A taxi pulled to a halt in front of Curt's mansion, and her coldness became ice as she watched Monica Harvey emerge, making it obvious why Curt had shooed her out early. Monica was not a beauty—her features were too irregular, her figure too thin for

beauty. But she had great style and the manner of beauty. Even a half-block away, in the dimness, Anita imagined she could see the sardonic humor that sparkled in the slightly-tilted blue-grey eyes.

Trebly wealthy — by inheritance by alimony, by her own achievement — Monica was a match for Curt Direnzo, Anita thought miserably. But could a tiger and a leopardess share the same cage without tearing each other to pieces? She saw the brick turrets of the old arsenal, converted to a zoo, rising above the Park tree-tops. Of course they could, she thought miserably. With dragging steps, she recrossed Fifth Avenue and waited for the uptown bus . . .

Anita did not see her employer until the following afternoon. He was already out when she arrived in the morning. She completed her typing and answered the phone, pausing occasionally to go to the window and look for the black convertible. It did not appear, and she began to wonder, in the bright sunlight, if she hadn't been putting two and two together and getting seven.

Jules brought her lunch on a tray, as usual. She was already halfway through her veal cutlet, nature, when Harry Phelps called again. "Did you tell your boss what I told you?" he asked. When she said she had, he added, "I got his letter this morning. Is that his last word?"

"I'm sorry—I have no idea," Anita replied.

"Then tell the rat he's in real trouble—he won't hear from me again. I'm leaving it up to him. I'm giving him till tonight—then I'll be taking steps." The reply was ominous.

"I'll give him the message," she said, but Phelps had hung up.

Anita could not finish her lunch. Jules looked disturbed when he came to get the tray, but she didn't explain. If she told Jules about Joe Sackett, maybe . . . But if she told Jules, it would get back to Curt, and she'd never hear the last of it. She went to the bathroom and drank bicarbonate of soda. When she got back to her desk, the telephone was ringing again. Monica Harvey said, "Hello, Anita, are the reservations there yet—the ones for the Queen?"

Anita looked at the envelope, which had arrived by special messenger that morning. "Yes, they're here," she said.

"Magnificent!" said the hated voice, the lazy, well-bred, hated voice. "It's going to be the most wonderful trip. I oughtn't to tell you this, darling, but I know you're one hundred per cent. discreet. Curt says so—it's going to be like a honeymoon. Tell Curt

I'll be by later on, will you—as soon as I get my passports all fixed."

"I'll tell him," Anita said dully. She hung up and went to the window — and the dark convertible was back. As a mother may tell identical twin infants apart, so Anita could have picked that particular car out of a parking lot full of similar models and paint jobs.

Curt came in a little after four. He spotted the tickets on her desk, opened the envelope, studied the reservations. "Good girl!" he told Anita approvingly. "A perfect setup. Monica will love it."

"She called," said Anita. "She'll be by later."

"Great!" said Curt. "Typing all finished?"

"All finished," said Anita. "They're on your desk." Then, as he moved toward his own office, "There's something else, boss. Mr. Phelps called this noon. He's pretty sore about your letter."

"Anger," said Curt Direnzo, "is a fine release for the adrenals. Do him good."

"I just thought you ought to know," said Anita. "He sounded —well, threatening. Oughtn't you to take steps?"

"Hah!" He was derisive. "Can you imagine what they'd say about me downtown if I let them know I was scared? Things like that get around, honey." He bent over her desk, peered into her eyes said, "You're crying!"

"I am not!" She averted her head, reached for a handkerchief. She longed to warn him about Joe Sackett but could not endure the thought of his laughing at her.

He said, "Maybe you ought to take a trip, Anita—your nerves are shot. Maybe you ought to go in place of Monica."

"Maybe I ought to," she said stoutly, meeting his mocking dark eyes with her tear-filled ones.

"I'm afraid you wouldn't enjoy it much," he told her. Before she could make any reply, he had vanished into his office.

Moments later, he asked her to call Monica. She dialled the number, but Monica was not in. "She's not expected till after five," a secretary informed her in her nasal tones. Anita asked her to have her boss call Curt Direnzo the moment she came in.

There were a few changes to make in yesterday's letters. then fresh dictation. At its conclusion, Curt said. "Better finish it all up tonight. I'm leaving in a few minutes, but I'll sign them when I get in. The Queen sails at nine tomorrow morning, and I've got to get there."

"Sure," said Anita, "Monica would never forgive you." She

gathered up her gear and returned to the outer office. Before settling down to work, she again peered out the window. The convertible was still at the kerb, but there was no one behind the wheel. Then she made out Joe Sackett's lean form, back under the trees. He was talking to another man, a man in a cab driver's cap. Even as she looked, the cabby turned away and walked toward her, crossed the Avenue and vanished behind the angle of the window sill, presumably to enter a cab parked below Direnzo's mansion, facing uptown.

Anita's slum training told her this was a pattern for action, impending, ugly. She took a grip on herself and turned away from the window. Ridicule or not, it was time to warn Curt. But, before she had taken two steps, the telephone rang.

It was Monica's secretary. Anita informed Curt via the monitor board, then put the call through at his request. She could hear Monica's sexy, cultured accents, then Curt's deeper tones. In spite of the terror that held her in its grip, she felt savage curiosity. She supposed she ought to be glad that Curt was sailing on the morrow—at least, it would carry him beyond the range of Harry Phelps and his hoodlums. But to have him sail with Monica Harvey . . .

Anita picked up the phone and listened. Monica was talking. ". . . and, darling, the whole five days going over, I'm not going to leave the stateroom — not once. It's going to be a great big wonderful ball. I've got it coming to me, darling."

"You," said Curt, chuckling, "can say that again, honey!"

Anita hung up—feeling sick. She had lived through Curt's ruthless and shady deals, lived through the coffee heiress, the marchioness, the diva, the starlets, the models, the divorcees. She had endured them because within her had lain the hope, a near-certainty that, someday, Curt would look at her and be aware not only that she was a woman—and an attractive one —but that she was loyalty and friendship as well, rolled up in a Jay Thorpe dress she could not really afford, even at the salary he paid her.

Now hope was dead, gone with the afternoon sun which had just vanished behind the stage-setting of the twin sykscrapers across the Park. Only loneliness and the acid cup of jealousy remained. Five days with Monica on a trans-Atlantic liner . . . The fierce anger of the gutter girl rose to the surface and took control.

Curt came out, looked at her

oddly and said, "I wasn't kidding you, honey. You ought to take a trip. You look lower than a snake's belly."

He was gone. Anita, stunned, rose from her desk to warn him, to stop him. When she reached the hall door, the elevator grille was already sliding shut. Monica's voice drummed in her inner ear. ". . . a great, big, wonderful ball. I've got it coming to me, darling." And Curt's, "You can say that again, honey!"

Honey! It was no longer a term of endearment — it was a term of betrayal.

Anita ran to the window, with some idea of shouting at Curt and giving the alarm. But, again, she was too late. Curt was just entering a cab that had obligingly pulled up for him. As it drove off, she saw the black convertible make a U-turn and follow.

Anita went back to her desk and tried to make her numbed faculties function. Twice, she extended her hand to call the police — twice she withdrew it. What could she tell them? If she called, to get action she'd have to name Joe Sackett. If she named Joe, sooner or later Joe would hear about it. Sooner or later, Joe or some of his friends would come calling on her. She sat there, praying she'd awaken.

How long she remained there, Anita had no idea. When Monica came breezing in, it was already dusk. Monica said, "Anita, do you work in the dark?"

Still numb, Anita flipped the lights and handed Monica the tickets. Monica said, "These are perfect, darling—thanks." And, with disappointment, "I did hope Curt would be back by now. I wanted him to meet Chuck before the bon voyage party tomorrow. There's always such a mob nobody has a chance to talk." Then, turning and beckoning, "Come in, Chuck darling, I want you to meet Curt's girl Friday and every other day of the week."

Then she was nestling herself against a tall, lean long man with crisp black curls and a cleft chin and wise-cherub eyes. She cooed, "This is what I'm sailing to Europe with tomorrow. Isn't it a beautiful slice of male, darling?"

Chuck, it appeared, was inured to such treatment. He grinned at Anita, revealing twin dimples, then squeezed Monica and said, "I didn't do too badly either. Right, Anita?"

"You'll make a lovely quartet," said Anita, wondering where the words had come from. She hung on until they were gone in an aura of only slightly meretricious romance, then fled to the bathroom and threw up. All she

could think, if Curt had only told her, if she had only understood, if . . .

She knew, as surely as she was being sick, that she had sent the man she loved to his death—or had allowed the man she loved to go to his death — out of false jealousy. Too many people had taken too much for granted. Her stomach empty, she staggered to the window and looked out again —and her heart took its first upward leap in more than twenty-four hours.

The convertible was back, discernible in the street-light lit dusk. She saw the gleam of a cigarette end rise and fall behind the wheel. She found herself on her knees, resting her forehead on the sill, sobbing and laughing like a mad woman.

All at once she realised she was starving. She had eaten only half a lunch and had lost that. Repairing her make-up, she promised herself a large sirloin, steak at a good restaurant, let the calories fall where they might.

Curt was not off to London with Monica — Chuck was handling that chore—and Joe Sackett had not been after him. She began to wonder if it really was Joe after all, as she bade Jules good night and slipped through the big iron-and-bullet-proof-glass front doors.

But she hadn't imagined Joe. She knew this the moment he slipped his arm through hers, the moment his mocking, too-familiar voice sounded in her ear, saying "Come on, Anita — you didn't think I was going to let you run loose, did you? After seeing you spot me from across the Avenue yesterday. That was careless, kid. You musta been thinking of something else."

Even then, facing destruction, her concern was for Curt first. She said fiercely, "What have you done with him?"

"Don't you worry about your boss. He's been all taken care of." His reassurance was mockery. He bowed her almost politely into the convertible, adding, "Not quite like the old days, hey, Annie?"

She said, her teeth suddenly chattering, "You can't get away with it, Joe. You'll get caught."

He put the car in gear. "Who's gonna blow the whistle?" he asked. "Not you, Annie—and not your boss. He isn't talking at all. He must have a thousand characters wanting to knock him off. And the character that hired us is in too deep to sing. No, Annie, it's a clean double-header —a twin killing."

For some reason, Anita began to think about the steak she had promised herself and was never going to eat. She felt terribly empty. END.

SCENTED CLUES

By RICHARD DEMING

Foolish wives should never keep records of their—foolishness

IN one sense the situation was routine. After ten years as a homicide team, there wasn't anything unusual about Sam London and me standing side by side looking down at a body in a morgue drawer. Together, we'd probably looked at a thousand; and at least a couple of dozen of them had been as shapely as this woman.

The thing that made this time different was that we were looking at the body of Marge.

The nightgown, the morgue attendant showed us, was transparent as glass. I think the sight of that nightgown upset Sam as much as Marge's death.

It's a hell of a thing to discover your wife was wearing a thing like that in a tourist cabin with another man, when you were on night duty and thought she was home.

I hardly looked at the nightgown. I couldn't take my eyes off Marge. If Sam London was my best man friend, Marge has been the woman I thought more of than any other in the world. Light and gay and full of laughter, she'd been living evidence even to a confirmed bachelor like me, that marriage did not necessarily have to be a humdrum affair.

Last night she was a living, breathing, warm-fleshed woman, I thought dully. Now, according to the metal tag on a chain around her neck, she was just Number 7.

Sam had never been very emotional. His face was blank and his complexion an unhealthy white, but he had full control of himself. I didn't. I'd been all right up to the time we looked at the body, but for some reason the black bruises on that soft throat sent me into a mild state of shock.

Maybe that's what helped Sam hang on to his own control of himself. He knew how much I thought of Marge, and even under the stress of his own grief he was able to offer me support.

Taking hold of my arm, he pulled me away from the drawer. When we got out in the hall, he let go of my arm. I just stopped still. His gaze dropped to my left hand and his eyes widened.

In a sort of stupor I looked down. The remnants of my best pipe were in my clenched fist. I opened it and the shattered bowl fell to the floor.

"I guess we better talk to the coroner's physician now, Sully," Sam suggested.

I said kind of vaguely, "Yeah. Sure."

I managed to get into motion then. I imagine I moved more or less like an automaton, but at least I moved. I even opened the door labelled Coroner's Physician ahead of Sam.

Doc Kingsley jumped up when we came in, and embarrassedly started to gush sympathy.

Sam interrupted by saying without inflection, "Give me the dope, Doc. All of it."

Kingsley looked a little flustered. "I haven't had time for anything but a preliminary examination yet, Sam. Anyway, don't you think you ought to settle down a little before we talk about it?"

"No. I want it now."

The coroner's physician studied Sam's white face dubiously. Then he said in a reluctant voice, "She wasn't just strangled, Sam. Her throat is literally crushed. You want to look for somebody unusually powerful."

Sam asked, "How long?"

Kingsley shrugged. "Eight hours. Give or take an hour. Say between eleven p.m. and one a.m. And that's only a guess. Might be another hour off either way."

I found my own voice then. "When can we—when can you release the body?"

The coroner's physician gave me a peculiar look, perhaps thinking the question should have come from Sam instead of me. "I'll be through by noon tomorrow. You can have the undertaker pick her up any time after that."

Sam phoned an undertaker from Kingsley's office.

By the time we got out of the Coroner's Court Building I had conquered my numbness enough to move naturally. By tacit agreement Sam and I walked up the street to Police Headquarters.

There were only two men in room 405. Our new boss, Lieutenant Knudson, and his first assistant, Sergeant Jim Baldwin. The moment we walked in the room both of them started throwing sympathy, but Sam cut them off just as he had the coroner's physician.

"Sully and I want the case," he said to Knudson.

The lieutenant frowned. "You know that's no good, London. You take a few days leave. I'm putting Baldy on it."

He meant it in a nice way. And assigning his top man meant there wouldn't be just a routine investigation. If Sam had thought about it, he would have known Lieutenant Knudson intended to nail Marge's killer even if he had to assign all eleven of his men to the case. But Sam wasn't in a reasonable mood.

He said, "The hell with Baldy. We want it."

Ordinarily that would have gotten him blistered good, because even though we practice a kind of loose discipline in Homicide, corporals don't tell the lieutenant what to do. But

the situation wasn't ordinary. On top of the dead woman being the wife of one of his men, Knudson didn't know any of us too well and was still feeling his way in his new job. Though he'd been a lieutenant for some years, he'd only been on Homicide for three days. He'd been moved over from the check-and-liquor squad to replace Lieutenant Murphy when our former boss was made a captain and bounced upstairs.

Baldwin just shrugged at Sam's remark.

Lieutenant Knudson looked pained. In a reasonable tone he said, "In addition to everything else, you and Sully have been up all night. You ought to get some sleep."

Sam said coldly, "Sully can sleep. If you won't give me the case, I'll poke around on my own time."

The lieutenant looked from me to Sam irritably. Finally he said, "Nuts. Take the damn thing."

It was only coincidence that Sam and I didn't know about Marge's murder until her body came into the morgue; for we'd been on the night homicide trick at the time she died. Three of us were on: Corporal Sam London, Detective Second-Grade Carl Moseby and Detective First-Grade Tom Sullivan, the last one being me.

We don't enjoy the luxury of clerical help in Homicide, so unless there's an emergency calling everyone on duty away from 405 at once, at least one man is supposed to stand by to answer the phone. Sam and I usually work as a team on day duty, but on the night trick rarely more than one man at a time goes out on a call. Some nights are so dead, all we do is play three-handed pinochle, but other times we hop all night. Monday had been one of the latter.

Sam was out on a hit-and-run, and I was on an attempted suicide, when the call about Marge came in about two a.m. Moseby told the switchboard to take calls for Homicide and went out on that one before either Sam or I got back.

The call had come from the proprietor of the Cozy Rest Motel out on 66, where Marge's body was found. According to Moseby's report, the proprietor discovered her because the killer left the light on and neglected to shut the cabin door. The proprietor was returning to his office, after showing a late check-in party to a cabin, and walked right past Marge's door. Glancing in, he saw her sprawled across the bed with her head hanging off one side, and stopped to take a better look.

The motel proprietor's story was all in Moseby's report, but we drove out to see him anyway. He was a round, cheerful man

named Herbert Coombs.

"I told that other detective everything I knew," he said.

"Sure," Sam said. "Just go over it once more though, will you?"

Coombs shrugged agreeably. "Well, they checked in about eleven, this guy and the babe. Didn't have no luggage except a small bag. Registered as Mr. and Mrs. George Hunt of Kansas City. The guy paid in advance, of course. I always collect in advance. I put them in Cabin Three."

We looked at the registration card, but it didn't mean anything. The name obviously was phoney, and while the license number was listed, it didn't lead anywhere. It was the license of Marge's 1950 Chevrolet, and it still stood next to the cabin, waiting for Sam to drive it home.

The small bag Herbert Coombs mentioned didn't lead anywhere either. We'd seen it at the morgue, and Sam identified it as belonging to Marge. It contained nothing but toilet articles, and had probably also contained the seductive nightgown when she checked into Cabin Three.

"The guy?" Sam asked in a husky voice. "What'd he look like?"

"Big. Nearly as big as your friend here." The proprietor nodded at me. "About thirty, thirty-five, I guess. Six two, maybe. Two hundred pounds at a rough guess. Black hair. Didn't notice what color eyes, but he had a heavy suntan." He paused, thinking, then added, "Well dressed. Brown sport coat and tan slacks. No hat."

We looked over Cabin Three then. We'd already seen its interior from photographs taken by Moseby while Marge's body was still across the bed. Now it didn't tell us any more than the photographs had.

It was a nice cabin, pine-panelled, furnished with modern furniture in good condition and with a coin-operated television set. The bath was glittering porcelain and imitation tile.

I examined the scratches on the bedroom window sill which I had previously noted in one of Moseby's pictures. The window was shut now, but it had been open in the photograph.

"Looks to me like the guy left by this window," I offered. "Seems funny he'd do that with the door wide open."

The fat motel proprietor said, "Maybe he'd just killed her and he seen me coming."

I shook my head. "He could just have closed the door until you got by."

"Not if he was rattled," Sam said. "You know how screwy a killer can act when he's in a panic."

There wasn't a bit of evidence in the cabin of Marge's lover's

presence.

Sam summarised aloud what little we knew, apparently partly for my benefit and partly to organise his own thoughts. "She and this—this lover of hers arrived in Marge's car around eleven. At two she was dead, which conforms to the coroner's physician's guess. The guy must have killed her in a rage, then panicked and took off across country on foot. If he wasn't in a panic, why didn't he take the car and abandon it in town?"

"Maybe he didn't have a driver's license," Herbert Coombs suggested brightly.

Both Sam and I looked at him coldly. I imagine he was puzzled, because of course he didn't know our relationship to the dead woman and it probably never occurred to him we'd ever heard of her until after she was dead. His expression indicated he thought he'd said something pretty funny, but it turned uncertain when neither of us smiled.

I asked Sam, "Where do we go from here?"

"Home," he said. "My home, that is."

He drove Marge's Chevvie, and I followed in my car. Sam's house was down on the South Side at 5312 South 37th Street. A neat, six-room frame house with a six-thousand-dollar mortgage on it. Sam drove around the alley way to put the car in the garage while I parked in front. I met him at the back porch.

Inside, Sam led the way upstairs to his and Marge's bedroom. It was a large, airy room with twin beds, a chiffonier and a woman's dressing table with a huge round mirror.

A little of the numbness I had felt at the morgue returned when I saw the dressing table; for only the previous evening I had stood in the doorway watching Marge brush out her long black hair. I'd been there for dinner, Sam and I were getting ready to go on duty, and I was waiting for Sam to strap on his Detective Special. Marge followed us upstairs, brushed past me in the doorway and seated herself at the dressing table. In my mind I could see her there now, the brush sweeping downward through that mass of black hair and her eyes laughing at me in the mirror when she saw I was watching her.

I wrenched my mind back to the present. A little unsteadily I asked. "What do we want here?"

"Evidence of who her lover was," Sam said without inflection.

He pulled open one of the dressing table drawers.

I said, "She kept letters in the top left drawer."

Sam glanced at me sharply. "How do you know?"

For some reason my remark seemed to have upset him. For a moment I examined his face curiously. Then I said, "I think you mentioned it once. Or maybe Marge told me. Anyway, that's where she kept them."

He tried the top left drawer but it was locked.

"Damn," he said. "Her purse is down at the morgue."

I pulled out my key case which contained, in addition to regular keys, a couple of Yale masters, a skeleton and three different sized picklocks. "Step aside," I said.

He looked at me, but he did not step aside. Instead, he pulled a similar case from his pocket and went to work on the drawer himself. He had it open within thirty seconds.

The drawer was crammed with letters, notes, old party invitations and similar stuff. At the back, tied with pink ribbon, was a thick stack of envelopes all addressed in the same hand.

"Old love letters from me," Sam said without emotion, tossing them over on the bed.

Quickly he went through the other material, tossing on the bed party invitations, wedding announcements and other trivia bearing on Marge's death. When he finished he still had a sizeable stack of letters in various handwritings, plus a small black address book. Dividing the letters, he handed me half.

It took us nearly an hour to go through the lot, and I grew sicker by the minute. Some of which obviously could have no the letters were innocuous, from relatives and female friends, but more than half were love letters.

I had adjusted myself to the knowledge that Marge must have had a lover, because you could not place any other interpretation on her checking into a tourist cabin with a man when her husband thought she was home in bed. But it was a shock to learn there had been more than one.

As nearly as we could determine, there had been at least three men; a George, a Henry and an Al. And apparently Marge had been one of those people who got a vicarious kick from writing. The letters were full of reminiscences of what had occurred in the past, and anticipation of what would occur at future meetings. If only one of her boy friends had inclined toward this writing, we might have assumed it was his own idea. But with all three following the same tactics, we could only conclude Marge must have deliberately induced this response by writing similar letters herself.

There were no return addresses on any of the letters and no indication in any of them as to what George's, Henry's and Al's last names had been.

His face as white as it had been at the morgue, Sam said, "I wonder how many more there were who didn't write?"

I think my own face must have been as white as Sam's. To me Marge had always seemed as fresh and clean as a Spring breeze. It was like getting a blow in the solar plexus to discover that beneath that gay and laughing exterior she'd been a crazy little tramp.

Without looking at Sam I said, "Try the address book."

The book contained about two dozen names, addresses and phone numbers, some of men and some of women. There were two George's, but one was Sam's brother in Detroit. The other was a George Blaylock on Lindell Avenue and his name had been scratched through. The only Henry, a Henry O'Connor on Virginia Street, had been scratched through also.

But there was an Al Woodward in the 3700 block of Bates whom neither Sam nor I had ever heard of before.

"Your name's in here, Sully," Sam remarked.

"Yeah," I said. "So's your brother George's. I guess they aren't all boy friends."

We decided the most promising place to start was with Al Woodward. He lived in a first floor corner apartment of a multi-family apartment house nearly a block long. We hardly expected to find him at home at eleven in the morning, but were agreeably surprised when he came to the door.

Neither Sam nor I said anything for a few minutes, merely looking him over silently. He was tall, about six feet two, weighed probably two hundred pounds, had black hair and a deep suntan. He looked at us puzzledly when we didn't speak.

Finally Sam's face broke into a wolfish grin. "This is the first time in years we ever hit the jackpot first crack, Sully." To the man he said, "You Al Woodward?"

Warily the man nodded.

"Police officers, Woodward. Like to have a talk with you."

Woodward's expression became even more wary. "Private cops?" he asked.

Sam shoved his badge within an inch of Woodward's nose. The man's eyes widened. Then he stepped aside and said politely, "Come in, gentlemen."

The apartment was small, apparently only three rooms, but was well furnished. He led us into a comfortable front room and asked us to sit.

Sam looked over the man's sport shirt and slacks. "Don't you work?" he asked.

"Sure. Baldwin Sales. We're closed for inventory this week. What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"Tell us about last night,"

Sam said bluntly. "About being at the Cozy Rest Motel in Cabin Three with a woman named Margery London."

Woodward looked startled, but not particularly upset. "Me? What you talking about?"

"Can it," Sam said in a flat voice. "If you want to make it tough, we'll run you out there and have the motel manager identify you. He described you to a T."

"Oh?" The man thought a minute, then shrugged. "I suppose he could identify me at that." He looked us both over curiously. "I don't get this. Since when have the cops taken over compiling divorce evidence?"

The ease with which he'd gotten Woodward to admit he'd been the man with Marge seemed to surprise Sam. For a moment he just stared at him with the muscles in his cheek working.

Woodward said, "Or is adultery a criminal offence? I'm not much up on the law. Jane sicked you on me, I suppose."

Sam said harshly, "I don't know what you're babbling about, Woodward, but the charge is murder."

Woodward's wary arrogance fell away at once. His face noticeably paled.

"It's—it's what?"

Sam's face had grown a little pinched and I didn't like the way his right fist was clenching and unclenching.

I put in, "Suppose you tell us the whole story, Woodward."

He looked at me wide-eyed. "Who—was it Marge?"

"Marge," I agreed.

"But—but who?"

"You, we think," I told him. "Got a counter theory?"

"Listen," he said. "I didn't kill her. It must have been that private dick. I didn't even know she was dead until now."

"Tell us about it," I suggested.

He didn't need any urging. Faced with a possible murder charge, he spilled everything. He said he had been meeting Marge for some months, in the daytime when her husband worked days and at night when he was on the night trick. Initially he had met her at a tavern, and the night they met they ended up in a tourist cabin.

"I guess she was a tramp, but she was sure a beautiful tramp," he said.

Woodward said that the previous night Marge had picked him up at a tavern by previous arrangement at nine o'clock. They had a few drinks in the tavern, then drove out to the Cozy Rest Motel, arriving about eleven. About one a.m. they were ready to go home. Woodward said that he was, anyway—but Marge was in no hurry.

"She was just dawdling," he

said. "I kept fussing at her to get going, but she just grinned at me, trying to get me mad. She was kind of a tease. Then somebody put a key in the door and started fumbling with it. I thought it was the private dick my wife set on me."

He explained he was separated from his wife and knew she had hired a private detective to get divorce evidence. He said that was the reason he asked us if we were private cops when Sam announced we were police officers. His first assumption was that we had been sent by his wife in an attempt to bluff some kind of admission from him that he had been with Marge last night.

"When I heard the key in the door, I expected the door to fly open and a flash bulb to go off. So I ducked out the bathroom window."

"And just left Marge there to face it alone?" I asked.

"She was better off alone," he said reasonably. "If I'd stayed, she'd have been dragged into a divorce mess. But a picture of her alone wouldn't have meant anything. She had her car to get home in. I was the guy stranded. I had to walk three-quarters of a mile to a filling station before I could phone for a taxi."

I don't know what Sam's thoughts had been while Woodward had been making his statement. But I think reading those letters from three different men must have had much the same effect on Sam they had on me. We were both drained of emotion. There wasn't enough emotion left in us to hate Woodward. All I could feel for the man was a kind of impersonal dislike, and I suspect Sam's attitude toward him was much the same as mine.

When Woodward finished his story, Sam said wearily, "All right, mister. Let's go downtown."

I don't know when it was Sam decided he wanted to turn the rest of the investigation over to Baldwin, whom the lieutenant had wanted to assign in the first place. Probably it had been in the back of his mind ever since we read those letters. At any rate, he was no longer consumed by a desire for vengeance by the time we got Woodward to Headquarters. His attitude seemed to be the same as mine. He wanted to get his report over with, drop the case and get away for a few days' leave.

After booking Woodward on suspicion of homicide, he made a full and detailed report to Lieutenant Knudson of everything we had done. Sam was gifted with a thing psychologists call "total recall," and his account took the lieutenant step-by-step over every action we had taken and every word Herbert

Coombs and Al Woodward had said to us, plus the words we had said to each other.

When he finished, he laid Marge's love letters and the little black book on the lieutenant's desk.

"You were right, Lieutenant," he said. "It's no good to be on a case when the victim was someone close to you. I think Baldy ought to take over from here. That offer of a few days' leave still open?"

"Sure, London. Of course."

I said, "Marge meant an awful lot to me too, Lieutenant. I'm just as upset about this as Sam."

The lieutenant examined me curiously. Then he shrugged. "All right, if you want it that way. Take three days."

"And Baldy will take over the case?" Sam asked.

Knudson shook his head. "I assigned him another since this morning. I'll take it myself."

Then, before we left, he wanted us to brief him on the other cases we had the previous night. Both were written up and the case folders properly marked, but you can't get everything on paper. We always give an oral briefing too when we turn over to someone else a case that's still open.

Sam said, "Mine's mainly a matter of lab work and phoning repair garages. I got a headlight ring, some broken glass and a photograph of the skid marks showing a blurred tyre tread. A witness says it was a green Ford, but didn't catch the license. The victim's a Mrs. Mabel Bloch, and she was still in critical condition at City Hospital at seven this morning. I haven't checked since."

"This hit-and-run was down your way, wasn't it?" the lieutenant asked.

"Virginia and Meremac. A mile or a mile and a half from my house."

When I finished my report on the attempted suicide I'd gone out on, Knudson said, "There's a record that the call-in party phoned back forty-five minutes after his first call to complain nobody'd showed up. What took you so long?"

"The damn fool who called in was excited," I explained. "He said 2700 South Grand, and it was 2700 North. By the time I called in to verify the address and found I was fifty-four blocks in the wrong direction, the guy had phoned back again and given the right address."

Lieutenant Knudson just grunted.

Most of our three-day leave was consumed with funeral preparations and with the actual funeral, which took place the morning of the third day. The afternoon of that day and that evening we spent at Sam's house, just the two of us, get-

ting quietly drunk.

Neither of us even mentioned Marge.

When we reported back to work on Friday we were on the day trick. Lieutenant Knudson looked at us a little peculiarly when we came in, then said he wanted to talk to us and shooed the rest of the squad out of the room.

When we were seated either side of his desk, he opened a file folder and said a trifle stiffly, "As I told you men I intended, I handled Mrs. London's case myself. I've talked to a lot of people in the last three days and collected a lot of information, some useful and some useless. The case is still open, but I've developed a theory I want to discuss with you. It's such a touchy theory I haven't mentioned it even to Sergeant Baldwin, because I wanted to talk it over with you two men first."

The lieutenant cleared his throat. "First let me outline the action I've taken so far. After you left the other day I questioned Al Woodward for over an hour, and I became convinced he was telling a straight story. Nevertheless I did everything possible to check it. From his wife I got the name of the private dick who's been tailing him—a guy named Nelson with an office over on Olive. Nelson swore he wasn't following Woodward that particular night and came up with an alibi witness who could account for his movements up till two a.m."

Knudson paused to refresh his memory from the typed record in the file folder. "The tavern where Mrs. London met Woodward is at Grand and Gravois. The bartender remembers them being there and states they seemed to get along all right. No sign of an argument."

All this time the head of the Homicide Squad had been speaking with his eyes directed downward at the case file. Now he suddenly looked up and fixed his gaze on me.

"It occurred to me that if Woodward was telling the truth, the probability was Mrs. London was murdered by a jealous former lover who followed them to the motel. So I had the two men whose names had been scratched through in the address book dragged in. They turned out to be the George and Henry who had written those other letters, but one claimed he hadn't seen Mrs. London in six months and the other said he hadn't seen her in over a year. On top of that both had unshakeable alibis for the time she was killed."

Something in the lieutenant's steady gaze began to make me uneasy.

"I still felt it was a sound theory though," he went on. "There could have been other

boy friends who didn't write letters. So I checked every name in the address book. A lot of them I eliminated at once—a hairdresser, a dentist, people like that. A George London in Detroit who I assumed was a relative. And the women listed. I didn't even bother to check them. Finally I reduced the list to the names of four men. Three of them turned out to be friends of both Mrs. London and Sam. Young married couples they went around with. The fourth was you, Sullivan."

I looked at him blankly. "So?"

"So I remembered what you said the other day about being as upset as Sam over his wife's death. And in his oral report Sam mentioned you knew the drawer where Mrs. London kept letters. Seemed to me pretty intimate knowledge to have about another man's wife, even when you spent as much time with them as you seem to have.

"Then too, you carry a set of master keys and picklocks, like everybody on Homicide. You wouldn't have had any trouble opening that drawer on some previous occasion and looking over those letters. Maybe, at the same time—recovering your own. You wouldn't have had any trouble opening that motel cabin.

"You were gone from here on a simple attempted suicide case from ten thirty until after two. With a pretty corny excuse for taking so long. On top of that you're an awfully powerful guy. And Mrs. London was killed by somebody powerful. Got anything to say?"

My face had gradually been turning beet red as the lieutenant spoke. When he stopped it took me a minute to find my voice, and when I did it came out in a low growl.

"You just accusing me of murder?" I asked.

He looked at me without understanding. "What?"

"At the risk of being insubordinate, you're a stupid jerk, Lieutenant. If you'd bothered to discuss your brilliant theory with anyone at all on the squad, you'd have learned something I thought you already knew, but apparently don't. Marge was my sister."

His jaw dropped. "Your sister! You mean Sam is your brother-in-law?"

"That would naturally follow," Sam said dryly.

It took the lieutenant fifteen minutes to apologise. I don't think I've ever seen a man so upset.

Actually there was no reason he should have known Marge was my sister though. He'd only been in charge of Homicide three days when she died, and he barely knew the squad members, let alone their various re-

latives. I had assumed he knew it, because everybody else on the squad knew it.

But while the lieutenant was doing his apologising, I was doing some theorising of my own based on the information he had given us.

When he finally ran down, I said, "Maybe your jealousy theory will hold after all, Lieutenant. There's another guy who had the same motive you attributed to me, and he carries a set of keys too. And he was also out on a case alone at the time of the murder. You say this tavern where Marge and Woodward met was at Grand and Gravois?"

Lieutenant Knudson's gaze had swung to Sam, who was staring at me oddly. The lieutenant nodded.

Without looking at Sam, I said, "That hit-and-run was at Virginia and Meremac. He'd have to drive right past the corner of Grand and Gravois to get there. Suppose he spotted Marge's car as he went by?"

I turned to look at Sam then and saw his jaw muscles bunching and relaxing again in spasmodic rhythm.

"Well, Sam?" I asked softly.

"I drove straight to Virginia and Meremac."

"Sure," I agreed. "You left here at ten, a half hour before I left on my case. How long does a hit-and-run take? Fifteen, twenty minutes, maybe? You'd have been coming back just about a quarter of eleven, which must have been just about when Marge and Woodward came out of the tavern. I don't think you wanted to be assigned to this case for revenge, Sam. I think you wanted to make sure you had the investigation under control.

"And as soon as you tabbed a likely suspect, you dropped it. What happened, Sam? You spot Marge and Woodward coming out of that tavern, or just see them in Marge's car and decide to follow?"

For a moment he stared at me, his cheek muscles still working. Then he said, "I spotted her licence," and shot his hand toward his hip.

I cleared the lieutenant's desk in a head-first dive which carried me, Sam and Sam's chair halfway across the room. Sam never pulled his gun. He changed his mind about pulling it in favour of trying to tear my hands from his throat.

The lieutenant was beating at my back and yelling for me to let go. Sam's eyes were popping from his head and his mouth gaped open like that of a dying fish. His heels were just beginning to beat a death tattoo on the floor when the red mist cleared from my eyes.

Abruptly, I released my grip

and stood up.

I stood looking down at my ex-best friend. For minutes he simply lay there gasping for breath, his colour gradually fading from purple to a sickly white. He offered no resistance when the lieutenant relieved him of his gun and snapped on a pair of cuffs.

Finally Sam managed to rise to a seated position. In a painful rasp, he whispered, "She wasn't worth killing, Sully. She was a lousy tramp."

She was, of course. But she was still my sister. I jerked him to his feet and slapped him the rest of the way across the room. END

Soft, White Body

By C. L. SWEENEY JR.

Night after night she played decoy for a killer. Night after night she walked the haunted last half-mile alone. And then death struck at her . . .

BRADY stopped just inside the door, letting it swing quickly shut behind him. He took in the room and its contents with a swift, practised sweep of his cool grey eyes. It was a typical neighborhood bar and grill, pine-panelled, dimly lit, and intimate, with a bar running down one side, and a row of booths down the other. A cluster of tables stood at the far end.

He saw her at once. She was at the furthest table, where she had been told to meet him. Her coat was thrown back over her chair, and she looked small and trim and very much alone in her new white nurse's uniform. Small, trim, alone—a little frightened, too, Brady thought. Like the white pigeon they had tethered out in the field, one day when he was a boy on the farm —a decoy to lure a hawk within gun range.

The hawk had swooped, and the guns had blazed, and the hawk had screamed and fallen. But it had been too late—too late to save the decoy, too late to stop the cruel talons from raking and piercing the soft, white body. Brady still remembered how the pigeon had looked, crumpled and stained and broken at his feet. He looked at the girl. He hoped it wouldn't be too late, this time.

He caught himself and shrugged, trying to dislodge the picture from his mind, telling himself that this wasn't the same thing at all. This girl was not an innocent decoy. She was merely a cop getting paid for a job, the same as he was. When you joined the Department, you accepted chances like this as part of your job. Nobody made you join—nobody even asked you. You joined because you wanted to join, and you took what they gave you and hoped for the best.

Man or woman, he told himself, there wasn't any difference. You asked for it, you got it. There wasn't any difference. He told himself that, knowing all the time that there was, somehow, a difference, knowing that there was something within him that rebelled against using a girl as bait for a sex-hungry killer, knowing that he would never have asked for her if there had been any possible alternative.

He thrust his big hands deeper into the pockets of his gabardine raincoat and walked to her. It was the mid-afternoon lull, and the place was almost deserted. Two young men with crew-cuts, probably interns from the hospital in the next block, were sipping beer and talking quietly at the bar. Behind it, the bartender was busily polishing glasses in anticipation of the suppertime rush. That was all.

Brady nodded to them briefly, without speaking, and moved on to the table where the girl sat rummaging in her handbag, for the moment completely unaware that he was standing in front of her.

He thought, looking down at her, studying her, *She's only a kid.* She looked more like a college girl than a new graduate of the police academy. Why, he wondered, did they have to send this one? Couldn't they have sent a brawny one, a tough one, one who looked like she might have a chance of taking care of herself?

He cleared his throat.

The sound startled her, and she looked up and saw him standing there watching her, saw the close-cropped black hair with just a shading of grey at the temples, saw the steady eyes and the firm lines of lips and jaw, saw the tightness of the gabardine coat across the broad shoulders. Joe Brady, the tough cop, the Iron Lieuten-

ant. Only somehow, he didn't look as cold and hard as his reputation had painted him. He was much younger than she had imagined him, boyish almost, still in his early thirties.

"Miss Collins?" he said, keeping his hands in his pockets, not shifting his eyes from her. She nodded. He pulled up the chair beside her and sat down. "I'm Lieutenant Brady, Homicide."

"Yes," she told him. "They said you'd meet me here."

"You've been briefed on this? You know what you're supposed to do?" he asked her.

He was being tough now, she thought. He was not wasting any time with preliminaries. All right, if that was the way he wanted it.

"I'm to report to the hospital with the four o'clock shift of nurses," she recited flatly, tonelessly, "and leave with them when they go off duty at midnight. I'm to catch the twelve-twenty Elmwood Road bus, and ride to the end of the line. I'm to get off there, and walk a half mile to Mrs. Harvey's house. She has a spare room which she rents to nurses, and I'm to stay there. I'm to report to the hospital again, the next afternoon. I'm to do this every day until I'm officially relieved."

Brady put his big hands flat on the table and leaned forward a little. "Anything else?"

"Yes," she said, fighting to keep her voice steady, to stifle any betraying hint of nervousness. "You're in charge of the case, and I'm to report anything suspicious directly to you. If anyone tries to pick me up, I'm to let them, go along with them. I'm to obtain all the information from them I can."

She paused and took a deep breath. "I'm to use the gun in my handbag if necessary."

And if you get the chance, Brady told himself grimly. If you get the chance . . .

The bartender appeared and took the order for two bottles of beer, and brought them back and set them on the table. Brady filled the glasses and lifted his.

"Cheers!" he said over the top of the glass, as though he meant it, and she smiled for the first time, and they both drank. Brady set his glass down carefully and watched the little train of bubbles rising in it.

"You know why you're doing this?" he asked abruptly, keeping his eyes down.

"I believe so," she said, puzzled.

She thinks she knows. Brady looked up at her, saw the soft auburn hair framing the small oval face, the bridge of freckles across the pert nose, the red warmth of the lips. The other one, the nurse whose place she was taking, might have looked like that once, might once have

been young and pretty, and gay and alive.

But not when Brady saw her —not with her swollen tongue clenched between her teeth, not with the bluish sheen on her grotesquely puffed lips and skin, not with the angry red marks of suffocating pressure still visible on her throat. Not with the soiled white uniform ripped away, not with her wide eyes still staring with sightless pain and horror at the open sky.

Brady saw it all, in an instant, and his voice was suddenly cutting, whiplike, lashing out at her, trying to sting her into a realisation of what she was doing before it was too late.

"You think you know why you're doing this," he said. "You think you know. Well, that's not enough. I want you to know exactly. I want you to know that you're taking the place of a nurse who was raped and strangled, just six weeks ago. You're going to work where she did, and sleep where she did. You're going to take the same bus, and get off at the same place, and walk the same half mile. If we're lucky, sooner or later the same guy is going to try it again." He paused, took a deep breath.

He's trying to frighten me, she thought resentfully, not understanding. He thinks I'm too young, too new. He's afraid I'll panic, lose my nerve, somehow tip the killer off before they can get to him. He thinks Joe Brady is the only tough cop in the Department.

She set her lips. "I understand all of that perfectly, Lieutenant," she said calmly, precisely.

Brady went on, as though he had not heard her. "We're going to give you all the protection we can, but that's not going to be much. We don't dare throw away any extra men or cars into the neighborhood, and take the chance of scaring him away. We want everything just the way it was then, nothing different. It's more country than city out there and normally pretty quiet, so we've only had one patrol car assigned to the area. That's the way we're going to leave it.

"The Elmwood bus reaches the end of the line about a quarter to one, and we're going to allow you fifteen minutes to walk to Mrs. Harvey's house. As soon as you get there, go up to your room, turn on the light and pull down the shade. The cop in the car, the one who has the patrol out there, will be watching for it. If he sees it, he'll know that everything is all right. If he doesn't . . ."

He reached inside his coat, pulled out a packet of cigarettes, offered her one. She shook her head, and he lit one for himself and watched the smoke curl

around the dim light over the table.

"I'm trying to be frank about this thing." he said to her then. "I want you to know just what your chances are, and I want you to know that they're not too good. We'll have ten cars waiting on the fringe of the area, in case that light doesn't come on and the patrol car sends in an alarm. But there's always the chance he could slip by us. We will catch him sooner or later, but it's a matter of time, a matter of whether we can get to you soon enough."

He thought of the pigeon, the stained and broken decoy. "You understand?" he asked her, almost savagely, wanting to be sure.

"Yes, Lieutenant," she said sharply. "I told you before—I understand perfectly."

"All right," he said, and the harshness was all at once gone from his voice, and there were only resignation and weariness left. "Stall him, give us as much time as you can, keep the gun where you can use it—and don't wait too long."

He drained his glass, moved to get up, then stopped. "I want you to know something else," he said. "I want you to know we wouldn't ask you—or anyone else—to do this if we had anything else to go on. But we haven't—not a clue, not a tip, nothing!

"We checked every man with a record in the county. She didn't have any boyfriends; she was not the kind of girl who would let herself be picked up. It rained that night—hard—and we couldn't even lift a tyre-print. We haven't got a thing, but we have got to get him before he can do it again. Our only chance is to offer him bait. It's not a pretty way to do it, not a method I'm proud of, but it's the only way that's left."

He stood up, suddenly, without giving her time to reply, knowing that it was settled, that it was too late for explanations, that he was only making it worse for her.

"Good luck," he said and held out his hand to her. She took it, and her own was small and fragile in his. He held it for a moment, as though reluctant to let it go. "I don't think I even know your first name," he said.

"Janet," she told him.

"Good luck, Janet," he said, and then he was rapidly walking away from her, not looking back. The door opened and closed and he was gone.

After he had gone, she sat alone at the table and tried to finish her beer, but it was flat and tasteless in her mouth. She looked at her watch—three-thirty. She lit a cigarette and finished it, then put on her coat and went out onto the street and walked to the hospital in the

next block. She reported to the supervisor whose name she had been given and was shown to a small room that had been set aside for her.

She spent the next eight hours there, reading the long outdated magazines with which the room had been supplied. Once or twice she tried to nap but she found herself unable to relax. She drank endless cups of coffee from a perculator that the supervisor had given her, and watched as the hands of the wall clock dragged slowly around.

At midnight, she left with the other nurses, walked a block and stood on the corner, and waited for the Elmwood Road bus. It was almost empty when she boarded it, at precisely 12:20, and by the time it reached the loop at the end of the line she was the only passenger.

She said goodnight to the driver, and then she was alone on the edge of the road, watching the receding lights of the bus on its way back to the city. There was a streetlight, the last on Elmwood Road, and she glanced at her watch—12:45. She looked up the road.

There were no cars, no houses, no lights, just the road running off into darkness—just the road and the woods and the night sounds and the darkness, and nothing more. Nothing more that she could be sure of —nothing more for the next half-mile, for the next fifteen minutes, for the longest half-mile and the longest fifteen minutes in the world.

She began to walk, at first counting off the steps and the minutes. Then, realising that she was frightened, she tried to tell herself that there was nothing to be afraid of, forced herself to rehearse the details of what she would say, what she would do, where she would put the handbag with the gun. Twice cars passed her, and each time she tensed, feeling alone and naked under the glare of their lights. But each time they passed without slowing and the covering of darkness folded back over her.

She had almost reached Mrs. Harvey's when she saw the blue car for the first time. It came around the bend behind her, moving more slowly than the others, pinning her under its lights, holding here there. She could see Mrs. Harvey's house only a hundred yards ahead.

She wanted to scream, wanted to run, but she forced herself to continue walking, holding her eyes straight ahead as the car crept up beside her, not looking until it was past, and the driver had gunned the motor, and the car had begun to accelerate.

She stopped then and tried to make out the license plate, but the light beneath it had been burned out or broken. She could

see nothing but the twin red tail-lights as the car sped off up the road.

She walked faster, almost running the last few yards to the house. When she reached the safety of the door she stood there for a moment, breathing hard, trembling, feeling limp and empty and exhausted, feeling as though the last few drops of strength and emotion had been wrung out of her.

Suddenly, she remembered and looked at her watch. It was two minutes of one. The patrol car, the lighted window, the shade—hastily she fumbled in her bag for the key she had been given and found it and let herself in. She ran up the hall stairs to the front bedroom and flicked on the light, then hurried to the front window and lowered the shade.

She looked at her watch again —one. Mrs. Harvey would be in bed, and she would not see her until morning. Nervously she undressed and went into the adjoining bath and stood under the shower, letting the warm spray massage the tension out of her tired body.

Coming back into the bedroom, she looked at the drawn shade. It was pleasantly comforting to know that somewhere outside a patrol car had also seen it—comforting to know that if she had not been there to draw it, the alarm would have gone crackling out into the police radios, and that, within a matter of minutes, patrol cars would have been converging from every direction.

When they came, she knew they would be in time. Brady had only been testing her, trying to frighten her. She got into bed and felt the sheets cool and clean against her body. Brady would not let them be late. Within a matter of minutes she was asleep.

The next day was the same, and the next and the next and the next, and then a week had gone by, then two weeks. One day was like another, one night the same as the night before. Always the darkness, always the fight against the choking fear, always the sickening tension as the lights of a car approached, always the trembling relaxation as they passed.

And always the blue car—it was there every night, sometimes coming from one direction, sometimes from the other, never stopping but always there, always seeming to be stalking, watching, waiting. Once or twice, she had seen the stop-lights flash on momentarily after it had passed her, as though the driver had suddenly decided to stop. But then he would again change his mind, and the motor would roar and the car be gone.

She had made no contact with Brady. On several different occasions, she had considered reporting the activity of the blue car to him, but had then decided against it. There was nothing really tangible to report, nothing really suspicious, only a feeling. She was afraid that he would think she was becoming jumpy at nothing, losing her nerve. From time to time, the patrol car would pass her on the road, and she would feel a reassuring comfort from its brief presence. But then it would be gone, and the darkness and the fear would return to take its place.

It did not happen until Wednesday of the third week. It was raining hard that night when the bus left her standing there alone in the road, a steady drenching downpour that plastered stray wisps of hair against her face, that trickled, wet and cold, inside the collar of her coat, that soaked her flat white shoes and cotton stockings, that left her sodden and miserable before she had gone a hundred yards.

She had walked no further than that when the blue car came up from behind her abruptly, unexpectedly, as though it had been lying in wait near the bus-loop. She felt herself held in its lights for what seemed to be an eternity, heard the faint hiss of its tyres as it crept up on her, remembered that Brady had said that it had rained that other night, on that other nurse.

The familiar, paralysing fear returned, but, through it, she found herself almost wishing that the blue car would stop tonight, would get it over with, anything that would give her the chance to return to being a woman again, not just a piece of bait in the jaws of a human rattrap.

Then, suddenly, the lights of an approaching car were sweeping around the bend of the road ahead, and the tires of the blue car spun furiously against the wet macadam, and then it was by her and gone. She stopped and stood there and watched the lights of the oncoming car. When she saw the distinctive signal flasher on the roof and the bold, orange lettering Police on the door of the black Chevvy, she almost sobbed with the quick release of tension.

The patrol car drew abreast of her, slowed, and then made a complete U-turn. It came back and stopped beside her. The window rolled down, and the face inside, faintly illuminated by the dash lights, was young and good-looking and grinning beneath the jauntily-worn uniform cap.

He leaned across the seat toward her. "Pretty wet to be out

walking around tonight," he said. "Better hop in and let me drive you home."

Brady must have sent him, she thought. He hadn't said so, but perhaps he was only playing the game, as she was. Anyway, they had said that if anyone offered her a ride, she was to take it. Not anyone except a cop—anyone.

"Come on out of the rain," he said to her, coaxing, impatient.

She felt the rain soaking through the shoulders of her coat. Inside the car, it was warm and dry and inviting.

"All right," she said and got into the car and closed the door and rolled the window up. She settled herself in the corner of the seat, loosening her wet coat, placing the handbag in her lap, and immediately felt pleasantly relaxed and grateful.

She looked across at him and started to smile, intending to thank him for watching for the shade in the window, to thank him for the unspoken reassurance he had given her on the nights when he had passed her on the road. But, when she looked at him, she was all at once aware of something in his eyes as they studied her, of something in his expression, of something in his manner that made her unaccountably uneasy. She hesitated then, said nothing.

He grinned and put the car in gear. "That's what I like about you nurses," he said. "Nothing bashful, no big argument when you're asked if you want to go for a ride." The car began to crawl along the road.

She stared at him. Nurses—that's what I like about you nurses, he had said. Not policewomen—nurses! Didn't he know? Was he still playing the game, or didn't he know?

The car had picked up speed, and he was driving with one hand on the wheel, one hand loose on the seat between them, looking straight ahead. The car rounded the bend, and she saw the lights of Mrs. Harvey's house ahead.

"There!" she said eagerly, pointing. "That's where I live."

The car did not slacken speed. Instead, his hand moved across the seat and her muscles tightened as she felt it press against the thin cotton uniform, against the smooth warmth of her thigh, caressing, promising.

"Come on," he said smiling, tauntingly. "You know you don't want to go home yet. Who are you trying to kid? You know you nurses like a good time."

She recoiled from him, trying to press herself further back into the corner, realising at last, with dull horror, who he was, understanding what was happening to her.

"Please," she heard herself saying. "Please let me out!"

Then they had passed the house, and the road behind them was cold and dark and empty, and he was laughing at her, thinking that she was only being coy, not understanding the suffocating flood of terror that was welling up in her, numbing her mind and body.

Suddenly, he braked the car hard and swung it to the right, and the lights were on the brush-choked entrance to an unused wood road. Then the branches were slapping against the car, and then they were through, and the car had stopped, and the branches were a screen behind them.

She had her hand on the door handle when they stopped. She tried to open it, tried to escape, but he was too quick for her. He caught her coat and pulled her roughly to him. Before, when she had gone over it a thousand times in her mind, when she had told herself exactly what she would do, she had planned to go along with him at first, to tease, to stall, as Brady had advised.

But now there would be no alarm, nothing to stall for, no way for Brady and the others to know until it was too late. So she fought silently, desperately, trying to bite, trying to scratch. But the weight of him pinned her arms, and forced her body backward against the seat.

She reached for the handbag, but he saw the motion and knocked it from her hand, and she heard it clatter to the floor. Then his lips were cutting cruelly into hers. She managed to pull an arm free and tried to reach his eye with her thumb, as she had been taught. But relentlessly he grasped her wrist and wrenched it down.

"You—!" he said breathlessly, savagely.

One hand clamped itself brutally on her throat, cutting off her breathing, while the other was tearing at her clothes. She tried to fight back, but her head was beginning to swim, and colored lights were flashing before her eyes. She felt the strength drain out of her, knew that she was losing consciousness.

She felt herself slowly falling, sinking through a stifling purple cloud—and then in the far distance, as if in another world she could hear him curse, could hear a car door opening and slamming, could hear the slap of running feet against the wet turf, the angry bark of a shot, the urgent wail of sirens. Then the fog was slowly breaking away, and she was aware that she had been released from his pressing weight, that she was alone in the car.

She made herself open her

eyes, slowly, and it was no longer dark. Everything was alive with light, and then she remembered and looked for him, and saw that his head was sagging against the open door of the car. He held his hand to his shoulder, and his arm hung limply, and he was no longer young and confident, but old and beaten.

Then someone shoved him roughly aside, and Brady, the tough cop, was there, his broad shoulders filling the car door. "Janet!" he said, seeing her not moving, seeing the white face, the torn clothes. "Janet, are you all right? Did he . . . ?" His voice was taut, and there was no toughness in his eyes, only softness and anxiety.

She looked at him. "No," she said, "you weren't too late. I'm all right."

Now that it was all over, now that she had done what he had asked her to do, now that she could go back to being a woman again, she put her hands to her face and began to cry, not caring that he was watching her.

Brady took off his gabardine coat and put it around her, and when the sobs had subsided, he wiped her face gently with his handkerchief and carried her to his car, as though she were only a little girl.

They were almost back into the city before he spoke. "I'm sorry," he said then, "but it was the only way we could get him. He had to be the one, someone that the girl trusted, someone that wasn't likely to be checked on."

She looked at him but did not answer.

"That's why we had to have a girl right out of the school, someone he wouldn't know," he went on. "I couldn't tell you, because we were afraid, if you knew, you might unconsciously do or say something that would tip him off."

He doesn't have to explain, she thought. But he wants me to know, wants me to understand.

"I don't want you to think we weren't playing fair with you," he said, "or that we weren't backing you up." He indicated the two-way radio under the dash. "After I passed him on the road tonight, I parked in Mrs. Harvey's yard and sent out a coded alarm on another frequency. When he passed the house, I kept behind him, slow, with my lights out."

"He wasn't watching for the window-shade then?" she asked.

"No," he said briefly, "I was. He didn't know anything about it."

She thought of him out there every night, watching over her, protecting her, and it made her

feel good inside.

"Janet, you're the one who did the job. You're the one who's in line for the citation." He looked at her then, and grinned. "I thought it might look kind of nice, hanging in the kitchen."

She stared up at him, startled, at first not understanding. Then she smiled and moved closer to him and put her head against his big shoulder. A citation, she thought dreamily, something to show her boys when they were old enough to understand. Her boys—cold and tough on the outside, but soft and gentle on the inside, like their father. END

A Story of Perfect Crime by

THEODORE L. THOMAS

Would you like to loot a store in perfect safety? Would you like to lift diamonds from a jeweller's tray and walk away? Would you like to rob a bank? If so, you may find Mr. Thomas' story a help—to the electric chair.

The Man Nobody Saw

"CARE to tell me about it, son?"

"Tell you about it!" He took the three paces to the other end of the cell, his slippers making a scuffing noise on the concrete floor. He turned to face the other man. "Tell you about it," he said again. He laughed bitterly, ran both hands over his shaven head and added, "Don't you read the papers?"

"No, son, I don't. All I know is what the warden told me, and he didn't say much. Anyway, we have a little time left"—he glanced at his watch—"about half an hour, and I thought you might feel better talking to me about it. But that's up to you. I don't want to prod you or make a nuisance of myself."

The younger man walked over and sat down alongside the older man on the edge of the narrow cot. He stared at the concrete floor and, slowly, the tension eased out of him. He shook his head and put a hand against his forehead and pushed it down over his face.

He took a deep gulping breath, then blew it out and said, "Yes. I think I will. Somebody ought to know."

He turned to the older man and said, "When you look at me, tell me what you see."

The older man nodded and said, "I see a fellow human being."

"No—no. I don't mean that. I mean, what kind of impression does my appearance make on you?"

"Well, that's hard to say, son. you look like many another clean-cut young fellow. Is that what you mean?"

"No, it isn't. I guess there's no use now. The trouble is, I look different to you now that you know that I'm going to be—uh—I mean, what's going to happen in a few minutes." He laughed bitterly and pulled his feet in under him.

The older man looked at him quietly and said nothing.

"Let me explain. Look at what's left of my hair—an average brown. The forehead—neither lofty nor sloping. The eyes—a medium blue. The nose, the mouth—average size and shape. The chin—neither jutting nor receding. Look at the rest of me—average height, medium build. Put all these things together, and you have more of an average man than you know—not a distinctive feature anywhere."

He got up and stepped to the bars and continued to speak softly, "My voice is neither high nor low. My posture is not erect nor slouched. When I walk, I don't make a lot of noise, and I do not walk silently as to attract attention."

He turned and said, "And that's not all. My tastes, my thoughts, my every action is the same way. I like medium steaks, four-minute eggs, grey-and-brown suits, white shirts, moderate ties. I never get excited about anything, and I never get depressed."

He stepped in front of the older man and said, "Add that up, and you realise what you have?"

The older man shook his head.

"You have a perfect nonentity." He sat down again. "I can spend an entire evening in a room full of people, talking to them, playing games with them, being one of the crowd. Next morning, not one of them will even remember that I was there, let alone remember my name."

He fell silent, staring at the concrete floor. Then he said, "All my life it's been like that. In school, my teachers never knew who I was. In college, it was the same thing all over again. I never had a single professor who knew I was alive. I never made friends either.

"For one thing I didn't have time—I had to study very, very hard to get grades that were just a little above passing. Then, too, none of the other fellows were even the slightest bit interested in me or anything I did or said. I wasn't even asked to join a fraternity. I'll bet there wasn't a man in my graduating class that remembered me the day after graduation."

He got up and took the three paces to the other end of the cell, his hands balled into fists. He turned and leaned his back against the concrete wall and put his hands behind him.

He said, "Then the trouble really started. There were plenty of jobs, but I couldn't get one. Time after time, I interviewed a man for a job. Each time I would watch his eyes glaze over as I told him about my qualifications. I don't think any of them heard half of what I had

to say.

"They wouldn't hire a man that left no impression on them whatsoever. They might hire a man they didn't like, but they would never hire a man they could hardly tell was sitting in front of them. Then I took the first step that finally put me here."

He took his hands from behind him and folded them across his chest. "I knew so well what my trouble was. So I tried to think of a line of work where a man nobody noticed would be useful. I thought of a lot of things during that period. But most of all I thought of stealing things.

"I knew, for sure, that I'd make the best shoplifter that ever lived. But I didn't like the idea, so I tried to take the next logical step. I tried to join the police department. Failing that, I tried to get a job with a private detective agency. I knew I could follow people for months, and they'd never know I was there. Well, it didn't work—no one wanted me."

He put his hands behind him again. "I tell you, every man on this earth has something different about him, a large nose, a scar, a cold eye, a good or bad complexion, an annoying laugh, a manner of speaking. I have nothing. After Marion turned me down, I gave up and decided not to fight it any more. I began to steal."

"Marion?" interrupted the older man. "Who's Marion?"

"Just a girl—not a very pretty girl. But she's the only girl I ever cared for. I'd have a few dates in college. The same thing happened there. I was used to calling up a girl I'd dated the week before and have her ask, 'Who?' when I gave her my name. I thought Marion was different. She wasn't. Anyhow I began stealing things from stores. I certainly was successful at that."

He walked over and sat down again. "If you read the papers you'd have been able to follow my story. The papers made a joke of it at first. They called me 'the man nobody saw'.

A lot of clerks at jewellery counters did a lot of sweating trying to explain missing jewellery. Some of them had a vague rememberance of a man at the counter before the jewellery disappeared, but they couldn't describe him.

"They couldn't even be certain that a man had really been there. Some of those clerks got locked up until the police realised that the dozens of robberies were all part of the same plan. That's when the man nobody saw really came into prominence. So I changed my mode of operation."

He leaned back and stared up at the concrete ceiling. "I

discovered that a part—a large part—of this business of never being noticed was my mental attitude. My looks were very important, but my state of mind was important too. As I accumulated money, I got a little cocky. My outlook must have changed. One day, as I stood in a line for movie tickets, the man behind me spoke to me about the weather."

He turned his head and looked at the older man and said, "That sort of thing probably happens to you every day. But no one had ever opened a conversation with me before. I was stunned. It could mean only one thing—I was losing my anonymity. I got almost panic stricken. I went home and tried to reason out what had happened.

"It didn't take long to realise that I was more sure of myself than I had ever been—that's the little thing that drew attention. So I set about to try and get myself back to the way I'd been. Can you imagine that? For years I tried to break out of the mold I had been cast in. Once out, I tried to get back in."

The older man nodded and said, "I'm afraid that's true of a lot of us."

"Yes? Well, anyhow I made it. In fact, having proved to myself how important my outlook was, I set about to cultivate it. I became more successful than ever. You would not believe the things I could do. I could walk into a busy store and help myself to valuables almost as though the store were empty.

"I could wander into places where the public wasn't supposed to be. Guards and watchmen would nod at me vaguely and let me be. Sometimes, a guard would order me away, but then he'd promptly forget about it. The man nobody saw became the prime target for the entire police force, but they didn't have a chance.

"I stole money wherever there was money. I found I could hang around banks and watch how they handled their cash. After a few days of studying their system I could be at the right spot at the right time and pick up some large sums.

"Well, then I got greedy—I decided to make plans for several big hauls. That was when I decided to carry a gun, just to scare people in case I got caught."

He arose and stretched his hands in front of him, then sat down again.

The older man said, "I see. The rest is pretty obvious, I guess."

The younger man looked at him and said, "You think so? Well, I don't. I knew fate had it in for me after it made me the way I was but I never knew how far it could go."

He fell silent, staring at the

smooth floor. He ran both hands over his shaven head and said, softly, "I was in Bleiden's store at the end of the day. They had gathered up several trays of diamonds and put them on a secluded table near the vault. I walked over to it and was putting diamonds in my pockets just as I had done with other things many times before.

"I ignored my surroundings, as I always did, to get the proper frame of mind. Then, without the slightest warning someone walked into me and grabbed me by the shoulders. I spun around and stared right into the face of a middle-aged man."

He jumped to his feet and began to pace back and forth in the tiny cell, his split trouser leg flapping as he walked.

"I'll never forget his eyes. They looked into me, right down to the marrow. There I was with diamonds in my hands and pockets. This man, staring at my face, ended me forever. I was caught cold. I could see prison. After prison I could see a hopeless life, no job, no wife, nothing. I knew I would never again be able to earn a living, stealing or otherwise. I lost my head. I pulled my gun out and shot him, just once. Before I could recover my wits they were on me. That's why I'm here."

The older man nodded and said, "I understand." A door clanged down the hall, and footsteps approached the cell.

The younger man stopped in front of the older man and said, "No. You don't understand. I was still the man nobody saw. The man I killed was stone blind." END

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