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DEATH*

By KELLEY ROOS

**THE DARK
DOORWAY**

By WYATT
BLASSINGAME

**PORTRAIT OF
A KILLER**

By ARTHUR LEO
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Mystery Book Magazine

THE BEST IN NEW CRIME FICTION—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 9, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Winter, 1950

Featured Novelet

WALTZ WITH DEATH KELLEY ROOS 11

Judy and Stan Coulter were happily married until Stan started to take dancing lessons—and whirled straight into a murder charge when the corpse of a teacher bore mute testimony to grisly crime!

Other Complete Novelets

PORTRAIT OF A KILLER ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT 48

Fred Garlin was surprised to learn sleuths Rand and Winslow were luscious cover-girls—and amazed by the deadliness of their kiss!

THE DARK DOORWAY WYATT BLASSINGAME 72

When Calhoon returns from South America, fear and terror come to destroy his peace, making him a fugitive, and his wife—a corpse!

HARD GUY BURKE BILL ERIN 104

When the sailor Ken Burke threatened to kill is murdered, Ken has an airtight alibi—an alibi that leads right to the gas chamber!

Short Stories

HOW CAN YOU LOSE? D. L. CHAMPION 45

Mathematics professor Barkley had poker figured down to a science

THE KISS-OFF ROBERT TURNER 99

Could Nick use a pistol to destroy—what he wanted most in life?

SANTA CLAUS PRECINCT JOHNSTON McCULLY 132

Perhaps it was the Yuletide spirit that inspired Patrolman O'Doole

Features

GOOD CRIMES ARE COMING THE EDITOR 6

A preview of exciting cases on our calendar for the next issue

THE ARDENT MISTRESS ARDEN LEO MARR 93

An amazing true story of a conspiring Sixteenth Century murderess

Also See "A Bargain In Crime," by Sam Sleuth, on Page 131

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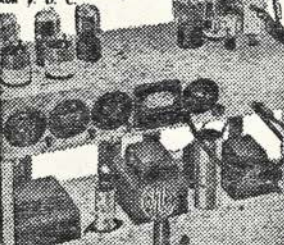
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GOOD CRIMES *are* COMING



A Preview of Cases on the Calendar for Our Next Issue

TOGETHER they compose a topflight writing team that's been creating an unusual stir in mystery circles. They're both ex-GIs and they've hit the jackpot with five successful mystery books published in swift succession and another rolling off the presses now. They write in the hard-boiled vein and their tough, two-fisted sleuth, Max Thursday, is really threatening the laurels of such old stand-bys as Mike Shayne, The Saint and Bill Crane.

What's their name?

This isn't the \$64 question and we can't promise you a home freezer, a fur coat, five cases of breakfast cereal or a television set with hot and cold running water if you answer it correctly. However, we think it an important part of every detective story fan's higher education that he get better acquainted with two of the best writers in the business today.

Who are they? Their names are Bob Wade and Bill Miller, but they collaborate under the pseudonym of Wade Miller and their combined talents have fashioned the smash mystery hits "Deadly Weapon," "Guilty Bystander," "Fatal Step" and "Uneasy Street," and while you are reading these columns a brand-new one, "The Devil on Two Sticks," will be reaching the book stores.

A Max Thursday Novel

Max Thursday, a tough guy who doesn't know the meaning of fear and

never walks around trouble when he can meet it head-on, starred in every one of those books. And readers of MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE who always get the best there is in brand-new detective fiction will be seeing Max Thursday do his stuff in still another novel—this one the latest book from the typewriters of Bob Wade and Bill Miller and its first appearance in print in any form: MURDER HAS GIRL TROUBLE, by Wade Miller.

Bill Miller is a Hoosier from Indiana while Bob Wade hails from San Diego, California. However, Miller is a Hoosier only by birth, for he has spent most of his life in California. The boys first met in high school in 1932 and it wasn't long after that they began collaborating on radio scripts, plays and broadcasts. For a time they shared editing honors on a weekly newspaper in San Diego. Later, they entered the service a day apart, Miller being shipped to the Pacific and Wade being assigned to the ETO.

With the ending of hostilities the boys went right back into partnership and fortunately for detective story fans they turned their talents to mystery writing. You'll find their stories entertaining, fashioned to run at a machine-gun tempo and always well plotted.

Lest our readers think we made a mistake in summing up the number of books Miller and Wade have written, we hasten to add that they wrote one book

(Continued on page 8)

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Good Crimes Are Coming

(Continued from page 6)

"Pop Goes the Queen" under their own names and minus Max Thursday. This was done in a lighter vein but it, too, was a success.

A Daring Blackmail Scheme

Now turning to their very latest effort, **MURDER HAS GIRL TROUBLE**, we warn our readers to be sure they reserve an entire evening for the story because once you make a start on it you won't find it easy to leave. It's just the kind of compelling yarn that gets under your skin.

It has murder and blackmail and an undercurrent of sinister intrigue that almost forces Thursday to buckle on a gun despite his vow never to resort to killing to win a case—a vow forced upon him by grim experience.

Thursday's introduction to one of the most daring blackmail schemes ever concocted began with his meeting a mysterious Irene Whitney in a pretentious private home in Loma Portal. The Whitney girl was in trouble. She had been gambling at the Natchez night club and had gone into debt. George Papago, the Greek who ran the place, held ten of her IOU's for a hundred dollars each. She wasn't concerned so much about gathering together the thousand dollars to pay off the debt. But what did terrify her was the fact that her IOU's apparently had gotten into the hands of someone else, for she had received a telephone call from a strange woman telling her she could have the notes back if she paid *five* thousand dollars apiece for them.

Thursday lifted his eyebrows at that. But when he pressed the Whitney girl to tell him what penalty the blackmailer had threatened her with if she didn't pay the sum asked, she refused to tell him. In fact, her features turned white with terror. Though Thursday insisted on having the information, she said

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the blackmailer's "or else" was too terrible to talk about.

What's in a Name?

It was then that Thursday hit her with some cold, harsh facts. He informed her that the house she was receiving him in was owned by a family named Johnson. He also told her that a check of the voting records revealed no Irene Whitney on the rolls and he doubted very much if that were her name.

She flushed and said, "Does it matter?"

He had the feeling that he was stepping into something ugly and black and insidious. But because he had heard that someone was going around the city buying up gambling IOU's to use them for blackmailing purposes, he decided to play along. He didn't have much use for blackmailers and he decided it would give him a great deal of pleasure to lock horns with the people behind the outfit.

After leaving the Whitney girl, Thursday did a little checking to learn what kind of a car George Papago drove and then set out to find him. His idea was to force Papago to tell him what had happened to the Whitney IOU's. He spent several hours chasing Papago from one bar to another. The Greek, too, was obviously on the hunt for someone and Thursday found himself wondering if Papago was trying to make a contact with the blackmail ring.

He finally found Papago's convertible and parked his own car in back of it. But a suspicious rookie cop who saw him examining the Papago vehicle forced him to take a stroll around the block before going into the bar.

When he returned the convertible was gone and on the front seat of his own car was Papago's green Panama hat with bloodstains inside it.

An idle checking of the block elicited the information that Papago had met a fellow with a cane in one of the swank bars. They had talked heatedly
(Continued on page 144)



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AND THEN THE BENTON GANG MET ITS MATCH...



SWOOPING DOWN ON THE SLEEPY, LITTLE TOWN OF FERNVILLE, THE NOTORIOUS "BENTON GANG" STARTS TO RAID THE LOCAL BANK



I COUNT FOUR OF 'EM, SHERIFF. BRING AN EXTRA GUN FOR ME

THE BENTON GANG! I'LL CALL THE TROOPERS, TOO!



REMINDS ME OF ANZIO! H-A-A, GOT HIM!

HERE COME THE TROOPERS!



I'LL PREPARE A STATEMENT FOR THE BANK AND JOIN YOU AT HEADQUARTERS, SHERIFF

RIGHT, MR. WHEELER. CLARK, YOU RIDE WITH ME



HOPE YOU LIKE PUBLICITY, CLARK. THERE'S ABOUT TWENTY REPORTERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS OUTSIDE

AND I'VE NEVER LOOKED MORE LIKE A BUM! CAN I CLEAN UP HERE?

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WITH DEATH



I dropped to my knees
beside the dead girl, reach-
ing for her wrist



CHAPTER I

Book of Death

I CAME up out of the subway at Grand Central. I hurried across Lexington Avenue and went through the great front door of the *Daily Globe* Building. I had nearly reached the double bank of elevators when I remembered that I had forgotten something, something important.

I rushed back to the newsstand. "A paper, please," I said.

"What kind, lady?"

"It doesn't matter."

The man gave me a paper. I didn't wait for my change. Quickly I walked the length of the marble plaza between the elevators. I found a spot that suited me. I leaned one shoulder back against

a novelet by

KELLEY ROOS

Judy and Stan were happily wed

but Stan took dancing lessons

and whirled into a murder rap!

The Corpse of a Slain Dancing Teacher Bears

the wall and shook out my paper. I was ready, waiting.

A car hit the main floor and its doors bounced open. I shielded my face with the paper. I was hidden but he could not get out of the elevator without my seeing him. He didn't get out of it. He was still twelve stories above me.

The clock above the street door said twenty past five. He would have finished writing his daily column by now. He would be kidding around with the other *Globe* sports writers as he got ready to leave. He would be washing up, combing his hair, fussing with the tie that I had given him for his birthday. He would be making himself as attractive as possible—but not for me.

THE first time he had come home late for dinner was because, he said, of a dental appointment. A few days later his dentist phoned to ask if it wasn't high time Mr. Stan Coulter had a little check-up.

The second time was because he wanted to see off an English light heavyweight who was sailing for home. There was, in fact, a ship leaving for England that night. I looked it up in the shipping news. It was a cattle boat.

The third time he was going to see a scalp specialist about his loose dandruff and falling hair. When Stan's hair fell he would fall with it and his dandruff, if any, was as tight as a drum.

That was the way it went. Each Wednesday there would be another, a more incredible excuse. It wasn't as if I minded. If Stan had found someone whose company he enjoyed at cocktail time more than mine it was quite all right with me.

Probably it was my fault. I had let myself get dowdy on Wednesdays, dull and unprovocative. He had found someone younger and gayer, someone beautiful and glamorous. Five years, less just two days, was a long time to be married.

Stan was bored with me.

BUT that couldn't be true. I had good reason to believe that I was still the girl for him, that he still liked our marriage. There was our Anniversary party the day after tomorrow, for instance. He was knocking himself out to make it a real celebration—dinner at Karl's, the theatre, the Rosewood Room for supper and good music.

There couldn't be another woman—there couldn't. But I had to know—had to make certain.

I had called him this afternoon at the *Globe*. I had told him that I was going over to Jersey to see a pal of mine that had danced alongside me in the chorus of a couple of musicals in the old days.

I told him I wouldn't be home till late. His delight at the news nearly made me bawl right into the phone. This Wednesday wasn't going to be any different. This Wednesday, he said, he was going to work on his Sunday column.

Each time an elevator released its passengers I prayed that Stan would not be one of them. I prayed that he had told me the truth, that tonight he would be working.

Then I saw him.

He was wearing a new necktie. His suit was newly pressed, his shoes shined. He looked wonderful. He was smiling a smile as eager as a kid's on Christmas Eve and he was in a terrific hurry. Before I could even get my feet in motion he was out of sight.

When I spotted him again he was darting through traffic on Lexington Avenue, heading uptown. I stayed on the east side of the street and ran for all I was worth. At Fiftieth I was almost abreast of him, when he turned abruptly into a large office building. I reached the lobby door just in time to see him board an elevator. He was its only passenger. Its door closed and it started up. I watched the indicator. It was at the fourteenth floor that Stan got out.

I stepped into an elevator and, after a moment, it took off. The operator looked at me inquiringly. I tried to speak and

Mute Testimony to a Kill-and-Run Murderer!

couldn't. Suddenly I wished that I were someplace else—Arabia, at the North Pole with Captain Rumsden, at the bottom of the East River.

"What floor, please?" the boy asked.

"The basement," I said.

"Huh?"

I took a deep breath, I stuck out my chin. "Fourteen, please," I said.

The first thing I saw when I stepped out of the car was a beautiful blonde.



LIEUTENANT DAWSON

The first thing I heard was soft and dreamy music. It was more than I could stand. I turned back toward the elevators and, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Stan walking down a corridor. He opened a door and disappeared. A down car stopped in front of me and I stepped into it. Then I stepped back out again.

Gritting my teeth, I walked through the room, on into the corridor, on toward the door. I put my hand on the knob and found myself staring through a square, glassed peephole into the room beyond.

Standing in the middle of the room was Stan. His back was toward me, he was facing a tall, willowy brunette. She

had wide, inviting dark eyes, a luscious bright red mouth that was smiling at Stan. He moved nearer to her, put his arms around her.

She shook her lovely head at him and he held her closer. She freed herself and stepped back, she spoke to him with her lips and with her eyes. He held out his arms and she moved expertly into them. They swayed together and Stan stepped on her foot.

I almost cried aloud, I almost fainted. I shut my eyes and leaned my forehead against the door. Stan Coulter was taking a dancing lesson!

HE was doing all this—for me. He was learning to dance—for me. When he took me to the Rosewood Room we would not sit out the evening like a pair of bumps on a log. We would dance!

I opened my eyes and looked again. Stan and the gorgeous brunette were gliding around the room. His jaw was set with a fierce determination, his forehead was wrinkled in a scowl. He wasn't having fun, he was having a dancing lesson. He loved me.

I watched the two figures whirl across the floor, and then my heart sank within me. Stan was waltzing, he was learning to waltz! He didn't know, he couldn't know, that the number of waltzes that dance bands played was next to nil. As a favor to him I would stick around and speak to his teacher after school. I wanted his surprise for me to be perfect.

I went back to the reception room and sat in a corner. I lit a cigarette and watched the blond receptionist go about her business, assigning studios to teachers, directing prospective students to the head of the school, answering the phone, making entries in the large appointment book on her desk.

The girl mightn't have been the most efficient receptionist in town but it was a good bet that she was the most beautiful. My boy Stan certainly knew how to pick a dancing school.

The pupils for the six-o'clock period began to arrive. They were young and old, fat and lean, large and small. Dancing, it seemed, was here to stay. Suddenly there was nothing in the world I wanted to do as much as dance. I could hardly keep my feet still. Stan was still that way about me.

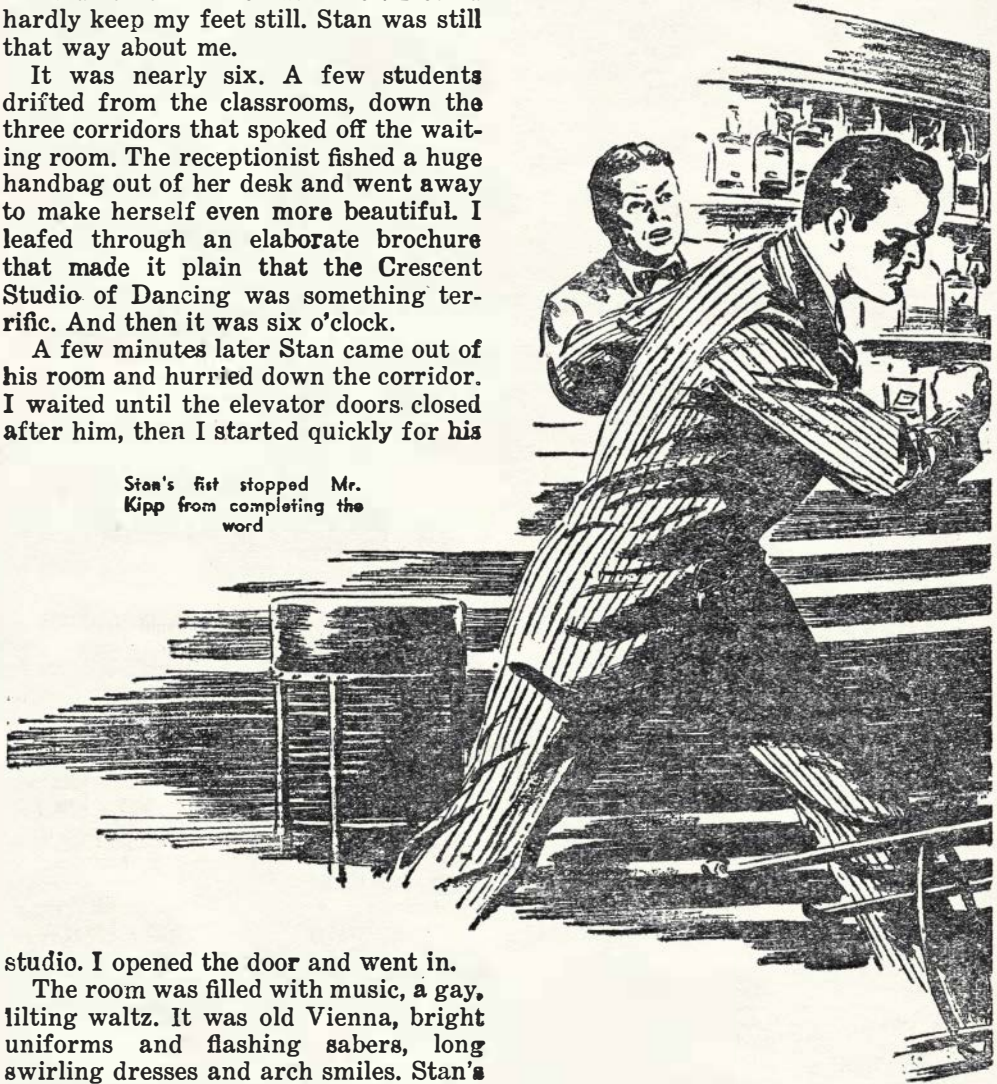
It was nearly six. A few students drifted from the classrooms, down the three corridors that spoked off the waiting room. The receptionist fished a huge handbag out of her desk and went away to make herself even more beautiful. I leafed through an elaborate brochure that made it plain that the Crescent Studio of Dancing was something terrific. And then it was six o'clock.

A few minutes later Stan came out of his room and hurried down the corridor. I waited until the elevator doors closed after him, then I started quickly for his

Stan's fist stopped Mr. Kipp from completing the word

her hand were curled around a square of white cardboard, the arm extended almost as if she were handing the paper to me. I took it from her.

I looked at it and turned it over. On



studio. I opened the door and went in.

The room was filled with music, a gay, tilting waltz. It was old Vienna, bright uniforms and flashing sabers, long swirling dresses and arch smiles. Stan's teacher had not turned off the music. She lay still, as still as death, sprawled grotesquely on the smooth, shining floor. In her back, just below her left shoulder, was a small round hole. Her white blouse was slowly turning crimson.

I dropped to my knees beside her, reaching for her wrist. The fingers of

each side a penciled face laughed up at me, the mouth warm and wide, the eyes dark and laughing. The girl who lay on the floor had looked like that. Now the mouth was twisted in a grimace, now the eyes were glassy with the surprise of sudden death.

I stumbled to my feet and started out of the room. Her murderer was someplace near, very near. There had only been a minute's time since Stan had left the room and I had entered it. There

him. It had not opened or closed again until I had turned the knob.

I forced myself to turn around, to find the other entrance through which the murderer had come, through which he



had been only a minute for the murderer to slip in through the door and—

My legs stopped moving and I stood facing the door, afraid to open it, afraid to turn from it. I had watched that door from the reception room. I had seen Stan come through it, close it behind

had made his escape. Four mirrored walls, shining, solid, met my eyes. There was only one means of entrance to this room—the door behind me, the door that Stan had been the last to use.

Then I was standing in the empty reception room, grasping the edge of the desk for support. The waltzing music was still ringing in my ears, the dead girl's eyes still staring into mine. Beneath me the big desk seemed to roll, the telephones, the stacks of papers, the open register.

It was seeing the name in black and white that snapped me out of it. The letters swam, then straightened themselves out. Stanley Coulter, they said, 6:30-6:00, Anita Farrell, Studio K. It

was there in front of me, on the records—the name of Anita Farrell's last pupil, the name of Anita Farrell's murderer.

I reached for the book. My fingers still clutched the cardboard square that I had taken from the teacher's hand. I tucked it between two pages and closed the book. I slipped it under my coat and folded my arm across it. I went to the elevators and pushed the bell marked *Down*.

CHAPTER II

Teacher of the Dance



IT was nearly seven o'clock when I got home. The apartment was empty, there was no sign that Stan had been there. I slid the register under a love seat cushion and started out to find him.

He wasn't at the Diner or The Skipper. He wasn't at Nick's, or Charley's or Pete's. He wasn't at Charles' or One Fifth Avenue. At eight-thirty I phoned home. There was no answer. By ten I had been in every bar and restaurant in our part of town at least once, I had phoned all of Stan's better friends at least twice. At ten-thirty I saw the headlines on the tabloids.

DANCING TEACHER SLAIN POLICE SEEK WALTZER

By the light of a street lamp I read the story. The body of beautiful Anita Farrell had been discovered a few minutes after six by another teacher at the Crescent Studio of Dancing. The music for the victim's last lesson, a waltz, was still playing.

The engagement book was missing but it would be only a question of time before the murderer's identity was discovered. The fact that the book had been stolen proved conclusively that Miss Farrell's killer was her last pupil, the Waltzer.

I folded the newspaper under my arm and started slowly toward West Tenth

Street. I unlocked the door and went into the living room. Folded up on one of the love seats lay the Waltzer. He was sound asleep. I shook him.

"Stan!" I said, "*Stan*, wake up!"

Without opening his eyes he smiled at me and said, "Hiya, Judy. Have a nice time in Jersey?"

"Sweetheart," I said, trying to keep my voice steady, "sweetheart, you're in a jam, you're in very bad trouble."

He opened one eye. "Huh?"

"Your dancing teacher. Anita Farrell. The Crescent Dancing Studio. Stan . . ."

"Oh." He was still smiling sleepily at me. "You know about that. Well, I'll tell you why I—"

"Stan, wake up! There's been a murder! And the police are looking for you!"

"The police—looking for *me*?"

"Stan, listen! It was your teacher who was murdered. The cops think you did it. They're looking for you because they think you're the killer."

He stood up. He was wide awake now. He shouted, "Did you say Miss Farrell was murdered? That I'm the murderer?"

I handed him the newspaper. I waited until he had read the story. Then I told him my story from the moment I spotted him leaving the *Globe* building until the moment I had read in the paper that he was the Waltzer. I showed him the drawing I had taken from the dead girl's hand, I showed him the register that I had stolen. He listened to me silently, open-mouthed and bug-eyed.

"The police," he said, "don't know that I'm the Waltzer."

"No. Because I stole the appointment book."

"But they'll know soon. There must be other records at the school."

"Yes," I said, "they'll know soon—and they'll be coming after you. Stan—"

"Yeah?"

"I know you didn't kill her. But I've got to hear you say that you didn't—just for the records."

"Judy," Stan said, "I went through grade school, high school and two years at college without rubbing out any of my teachers. I can do the same with dancing

school." He sat down beside me. "She was alive when I left her. She was fine. I thanked her for the lesson and shook hands. And left."

"She wasn't holding that drawing then?"

Stan shook his head. "I didn't see it."

"You didn't? Then that proves that someone came in after you left, killed her, and put that picture in her hand! That proves you weren't the last person—"

"No," Stan said. "Just because I didn't see it doesn't mean she didn't have it then."

"You're right," I admitted. "Besides, nobody did go in. I was watching the door. That door is the only one and nobody used it."

STAN put his head in his hands. "She wasn't killed by a death ray. She wasn't poisoned through the mail. She wasn't bitten by a snake that crawled out of the woodwork. She was shot."

"At close range. Even I could tell that."

"So she was shot by someone in the room with her."

"But, Stan, nobody but you was in the room."

"Judy, will you please stop proving that I killed her?"

"The murderer did that, Stan. He pinned this murder on you."

"And it looks real cute on me, doesn't it?"

"Stan, you've got to prove you didn't do it—by finding out who did. And you've got to be quick about it, dear. The police are looking for the Waltzer—and that's you."

"I can't do anything," Stan groaned. "I'm helpless. If I show my face at the school somebody will remember me."

"Of course they will. Stan, I'll have to do the leg work. My legs and your brains."

"A nice combination."

"Thank you, dear. I'll go up there tomorrow. I'll take lessons. No, I'll teach! I'm still a good dancer, Stan, I'll get a job. Maybe—maybe I can even get Anita Farrell's job!"

"Yes," Stan said. "That's unfilled now, isn't it?"

"I'll be right on the inside! I'll find out everything, who killed her and why and how it was done. I'll prove you're innocent! First thing in the morning I'll see the head of the school. Who is he, anyway, Stan?"

"Lanning," Stan said. "A Mr. Leonard Lanning."

The next morning I introduced myself to Mr. Leonard Lanning. He rose from behind the half acre of shining mahogany that was his desk and regarded me with somber brown eyes. He was a handsome man, in his late forties. His hair was thick and dark. The wave in it was carefully nurtured. His clothes, everything within reaching distance of him was neat as a pin.

Even his charm was tidy. There was just the right amount of it at the right times. Here was a man whom elderly ladies obviously doted upon, matrons admired and ingenues adored. I could see why the Crescent Studio of Dancing was just such a tremendous success.

He smiled at me. "You wish to join our faculty?"

"Yes, Mr. Lanning."

"And your name is—"

I didn't say that I was Judy Coulter, the Waltzer's wife. I had my alias ready. "My name is Hester Frost," I said.

"Hester." Mr. Lanning said the name as if he thought it was a nice one. "Are you married, Hester?"

"No, sir," I said.

"Have you had any experience in teaching dancing?"

"Well," I said, "to be perfectly honest, very little." I smiled modestly. "I have four brothers and I taught them and they're all wonderful dancers. At least, everyone raves about their dancing."

"That's a good recommendation." He shot me two ounces of his sedate charm. "Many of our students are brothers," he said, twinkling. "You know, I like to think of us as a family institution . . . all brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, ~~aunts and uncles~~, all learning to dance."

He stepped to a panel on the wall and turned a knob above the words FOX TROT. Music seeped into the room. He came to me. "Shall we dance?"

"Why, I'd love to, Mr. Lanning!"

I lied in my teeth. This was one that I would have given ten years of my youth to sit out. But I rose and did my best to float into his arms.

We danced. We fox-trotted. Mr. Lanning switched the music and we waltzed. Then we did a rumba. I was so nervous I could scarcely breathe. I prayed for the band to strike up "Good Night, Ladies" but we danced on.

AT last my partner escorted me back to my chair. He smiled at me. "You'll do, Miss Frost. I can always tell a teacher by dancing with her. You are a teacher. In fact, you are now one of my teachers."

"Thank you," I said.

"Our rules here, Miss Frost, are few and simple. We are always ladies and gentlemen. We are cheerful and gracious but we never lose our dignity. We never, no matter how much we are urged, make dates with our students. We never see them except in the studio.

"That applies also to faculty members of the opposite sex. We remember that this is a business, not a social club for boys to meet girls in. Romance is a beautiful thing, Miss Frost. I approve of it. But it can undermine and demoralize a business institution such as this one."

"I promise," I said, "not to fall in love with any student or any teacher."

"Fine." Then his charm evaporated and he was a troubled man. "You undoubtedly know," he said, "about our tragedy of last evening."

"I read about it," I admitted.

"A terrible thing. My school in all its eighteen years has never been touched by even the breath of scandal. I have guarded its reputation with all my strength. I have convinced the public that my school is as decorous as the most proper of homes. ~~That has been~~ the key of my success."

"Yes, sir."

"I am fortunate in having an uncanny ability to judge character. I know, for instance, that you are exactly the sort of person we want on our faculty.

"Now, I interview every single person who wishes to enroll with us as a student. My only slip in all these years was when I accepted the monster who was Miss Farrell's pupil at five-thirty last evening."

"The monster?"

"The newspapers are calling him the Waltzer. Unfortunately he had the cunning to steal the engagement book and none of the staff can remember at the moment who Miss Farrell's pupil was at five-thirty. But the police are working on our bookkeeping records and they will soon figure out by a system of elimination who he is."

"I hope so, Mr. Lanning," I said un- fervently.

"This tragedy has thrown us into a turmoil naturally. But the police expect to cause us very little inconvenience. They know who the killer is and it is simply a matter of finding him. They are anxious for us to go on as if nothing had happened.

"Now, Miss Frost, I hope I have put your mind at ease, because I am going to ask you to do something at which a person of less character might balk."

"Yes, sir?"

"I am anxious that our usual schedule be interrupted as little as possible. I want all my teachers to take their regular pupils. Therefore I am asking you to take Miss Farrell's place."

"Oh," I said.

"Does that upset you? I believe I can assure you that the Waltzer will not return to the scene of his crime."

"I'm not upset," I said bravely. "I'm not afraid of the Waltzer."

"Very well, Miss Frost."

We discussed terms. That is, Mr. Lanning told me what my pay was to be. He gave me some fatherly advice, some professional tips and a pat on the back. He pressed a button on his desk and in a moment the door swung open. The lovely blonde receptionist, her beauty this morning a little on the wan side,

stood framed in the entrance. Mr. Lanning rose to his feet.

"This is Miss Linda Webb," he said. "And this is Hester Frost, who is to take Miss Farrell's place. Miss Webb, will you show her to Studio K, please?"

I saw her shoulders stiffen, her head move in protest but Mr. Lanning was already attacking a stack of correspondence. We were dismissed. She looked silently at him for a moment, then, nodding at me, turned and left the room.

She led me to the locker room and assigned me a locker. She led me to the reception room, through it and down the hall that led to the door marked Studio K. She pushed it open briskly.

I closed my eyes for a moment. Yesterday those mirrored walls had shown a thousand figures crumpled on the shining floor, had shown a thousand blouses growing crimson. Now they reflected nothing but more mirrored walls. The room was bare, cold and impersonal.

CHAPTER III

Studio K



LINDA WEBB moved quickly across the studio. She stood before a row of small black dials set into the wall, her back toward me.

"The music is piped in here," she said.

"This dial is for fox-trot, this one for rhumba, this for waltz. You control the volume here. That telephone is an inside one—it's connected with my desk. I'll phone you from it when your students arrive. If you need any help, if there's anything you want to know, you can call me. I'll—I'll be . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Then, with a little cry, she buried her face in her hands. I went to her.

"Linda," I said.

"It's so dreadful." The words were choked, muffled. "It was I who sent him in to her, I—"

"Don't think of that, Linda." Then I

said, "You were very close to her, I suppose. You were good friends."

Her hands dropped from her face. "No, it isn't that," she said slowly. "I didn't know her very well. It's horrible of me but it isn't Anita that I'm thinking about now. It—it's myself. I'm afraid, I'm terribly afraid."

"Afraid?" I said. "But why? Why should you—"

"Don't you see? Don't you understand? I know who he is, the Waltzer. I saw him yesterday, I talked to him, I sent him to this studio. But it's all a blur in my mind now. I can't remember which one he was—there were thirty-six lessons starting at five-thirty—how can I remember? But I'm trying and—and he knows it. He must know!"

"But, Linda—"

"He knows that sometime—sometime I'll remember him. He'll have to do something about me, won't he, before I do? Maybe he's waiting for me now, waiting for a chance to—"

"Linda," I said, "the Waltzer won't come back."

I had put too much conviction into my voice, spoken too surely. The terror left her eyes and they were filled with wonder.

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"I don't know. I only meant—"

She smiled suddenly, a small, trembling smile. "I know. You're being kind and thank you. I'm all right now." The smile grew stronger. "I've got to get back to my desk. Call me if you need anything. And good luck."

I hardly waited for the door to close behind her before I started my inspection of the studio. I looked first for a concealed door, a camouflaged window. Then I searched for a crevice large enough for an arm to reach through, then a hole large enough for a bullet.

Foot by foot I went over the shining walls. There was nothing. There was no way for a murderer to enter except through the studio's only door. Once again I had proved conclusively that only Stan could be guilty.

The phone rang. Linda Webb relayed to me the name of my first pupil and my

new career began. I danced; I waltzed, I rhumbaed, I fox-trotted. I delved, I probed, I pried into the life of Anita Farrell.

That wasn't difficult. Each of her ex-students was, of course, full and overflowing with the killing. But I learned nothing valuable. The talk was mostly pure gossip and a little honest mourning.

By mid-afternoon I was on the ropes. At three-thirty I had a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound fox-trotter, who was dancing to reduce. I lost eight pounds. Then, in succession, I had two ex-G.I.'s who thought that dancing was something you did to win. At five o'clock when my final pupil, a little man in a large bow tie, arrived I was a stretcher case.

Little Mr. Wendell Kipp whirled me away. The top of his head reached just to the point of my chin. He held me tight, forcing my head up and back, so that I was looking at the ceiling. It was painful, it was uncomfortable—then, suddenly, it was fine. It was perhaps the answer to my prayer.

In the center of the ceiling was a four-foot square of grillwork. One corner of it contained the music's loud speaker, the rest of it was clear. It was evidently the ventilator for the windowless room.

I couldn't see through the grillwork. I couldn't see if there was space enough above it for a person to crouch, to aim a revolver, to shoot a dancing teacher who stood below. But it might be possible, it *had* to be possible.

MR. KIPP and I danced on. He danced dreamily, his pale, blue eyes half-closed. He droned on in a detached matter-of-fact voice about yesterday's tragedy. It seemed hours before I was finally walking with him to the elevator, shaking his hand and watching the doors slide closed between us.

Then, casually, I began to scout around. I cased the joint. I found what I was searching for in what seemed to be a conference room. In a corner, be-

yond a long gleaming table and its surrounding chairs, was a door that opened into a shallow closet. Fastened to its back wall was a ladder. I closed the door behind me and started climbing.

From the top of the ladder I crawled onto a narrow catwalk. There wasn't enough room to stand between the false ceiling that covered the school and the real ceiling above it. On my hands and knees I started forward.

Enough light sifted up through the grills in the rooms below for me to see that I was surrounded by a maze of wires and cables and pipes. That explained the false ceiling.

It was simpler to install wires and pipes overhead than to encase them in the labyrinth of temporary walls which cut the fourteenth floor of the building into dancing studios.

I came to an intersection of catwalks. I stopped to get my bearings. Then, in a few minutes, I was leaning away from the catwalk, my hands on a rafter, my eyes peering down into Studio K.

My theory had been right.

Up here the murderer had crouched, waiting, watching. The moment that Stan had left he had aimed his gun down through the grill, pulled the trigger and shot Anita Farrell to death. It had been as simple as that. He might still have been here when I entered the room, he might have watched me come upon the dancing teacher's body.

I rose and started back for the ladder. I was in a hurry now to get to Stan. He would be glad to hear of my discovery—he would be delighted with my proof that the Waltzer was not guilty. I reached the ladder and clambered down it.

My hand was on the knob of the closet door when I heard the voices outside it. There was Linda Webb's, tremulous and high, the soothing but formal rumble of Mr. Leonard Lanning's, then a quiet voice that was strange to me. I pressed my ear to the panel of the door and the blur of sound sharpened into words.

"I've told you," Linda Webb was saying, "I've told you so many times, Lieutenant! I can't—"

The unfamiliar voice cut her short. "Miss Webb, I'm not doing this to you because I enjoy it. In a murder case like this one every minute counts. You've got to remember who Miss Farrell's last pupil was. You'll save us at least two days' work on the school records if you do. You'll be helping us get our hands on this maniac killer that much sooner. Think, Miss Webb, think!"

"I'm trying," Linda said desperately. "I'm trying, but I can't remember."

"Look," the detective said. "You were sitting at your desk, you were watching the students arrive for the five-thirty period. You saw the Waltzer get out of the elevator and go into Studio K. Who was he, Miss Webb?"

"Please!" Linda cried. A chair scraped the floor and overturned. Linda's voice rose into wracking, hysterical sobs. "Please, I don't know—I can't think. Don't do this to me anymore! Mr. Lanning, don't let him do this!"

"Now, now, Miss Webb," Lanning said. "Mr. Dawson is through with you for the moment. Aren't you, Mr. Dawson?"

"All right," the detective said. "All right, that's all for now, Miss Webb. We'll call it a day."

I heard feet move across the room, a door open and close. It was quiet. I waited a long moment to make sure that none of the three returned. I opened the door, opened it wide. Then, quickly, I pulled it shut again.

LINDA and Mr. Lanning were still in the room. But they hadn't seen me. They had been far too engrossed in each other for that. The head of the Crescent Studio of Dancing was holding his beautiful young receptionist tight in his arms. He was kissing away her tears, murmuring sweet comforting sounds to her.

Then Linda spoke out. "Darling," she said to her employer, "it's so dreadful, so dreadful—"

"I know, Linda," Lanning said. "I know."

"I thought I'd had my share of horror. I thought that after all I went



Arms grasped me as I sought to flee from the locker room

through a year ago—"

"Now, dearest," Lanning said, "we won't speak of him. We promised each other that, didn't we?"

"I'm sorry. I can't—"

"Linda, you'll be happy again. You'll see. I'll make you happy, darling. I can, can't I?"

"Yes. Yes, only you can."

"And I will, my darling. Try to be calm now, Linda. We shouldn't be here together, someone might come in." Lanning's voice took on a note of banter. "Miss Webb!"

"Yes, Mr. Lanning?" Linda answered in mock servility.

"Go back to your desk, Miss Webb!"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lanning."

The two of them laughed. There was a long pause, then the corridor door opened and closed. I eased my door open an inch and watched Linda repair her make-up, pull herself together. She went out of the room.

I had only time to think, "Well, well!" as I hurried toward the locker room. I had slipped into my coat and was reaching for my hat when the three young teachers breezed through the door. They stopped at the sight of me and whispered among themselves. Then they moved closer. "Hiya," the copper blonde one said, "You're new, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said.

"You took Anita's place," the gold blonde said, "didn't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm Hester Frost."

"Gosh," the silver blonde said, "I wouldn't even have the nerve to go into Studio K. Wasn't it gruesome, Hester, working there all day?"

"Fairly gruesome."

"Poor Anita," Miss Gold said.

"That Waltzer," Miss Silver said. "I hope he fries."

"Yes," Miss Copper said and she shuddered. "To think that all of us have seen him around probably and we don't know which one he is."

"The police will get him," Miss Gold said, "if they don't have him already."

"And he'll fry," Miss Silver said.

I said, "Were you girls good friends of Anita's?"

"Not very. Anita was kind of aloof."

"She was never very friendly."

I said, "Is her family here in New York?"

"I never heard her mention any family."

"Neither did I."

"I asked Kathy about that this morning. Anita hasn't had any family connections for ages."

"Oh," I said. "Who is Kathy?"

"Kathy Rollins. She teaches here."

"She shared an apartment with Anita. She moved in with her about a month ago."

"Really," I said. "Where is the apartment?"

"I don't know."

"Downtown someplace."

"Yes. On the corner of Twelfth and West Fourth."

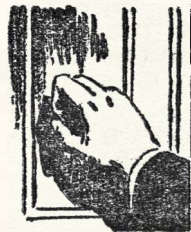
"Well," I said, "I've got to be running."

"You got a date?"

"Yes," I said and I winked at them. "I've got a date with the Waltzer."

CHAPTER IV

A Caller for Kathy



I could still hear them laughing as I boarded an elevator. From a drugstore off the lobby I called the *Daily Globe* and learned that Stan had left for home. I found a cab, told the driver to hurry. I said

that I was the bearer of glad tidings. The driver hurried.

Stan was sitting gloomily before the fireplace. He stood up when I came in and tried to put some welcome into his face.

"Hello," he said. "Been on your feet all day?"

"Darling," I said, "you won't fry!"

"What?"

"You won't burn for the murder. I've proved that someone else could have done it."

"You have? You're sure you have?"

"Positive! Stan, there's a false roof over the school. In each studio ceiling there's an open grill work. The murderer was up there . . ."

"No, Judy."

"Yes. I went up. It would have been simple for the killer. He waited up there and when you left the room, he simply fired down through the grill and killed Anita. Do you understand?"

"No."

"Well, listen."

"I understand you, Judy, but you're wrong. You didn't read the newspapers carefully enough. It's been established by the Medical Examiner that the bullet was fired by someone standing nine or ten feet behind Anita. The angle that the bullet entered her body proves that."

"Oh," I said. "The killer had to be standing in the studio with her. Right down on the floor."

"Yes," Stan said. "The angle of the bullet—"

"I know," I said weakly. "Then I haven't proved that you didn't do it."

"No," Stan said, "you haven't. I'm beginning to wonder if maybe I did do it."

"Oh, darling, don't joke about it."

"All right. But nobody else could have—"

There was a loud knock on our door.

"Who is it?" I shouted.

A voice that I had heard before shouted right back at me. "The police," it said. "Lieutenant Dawson."

I looked frantically at Stan. He was moving toward the door, he was going to give himself up. I stepped in front of him, put my hands on his shoulders.

"Run," I whispered. "Out the back, over the fence. I'll stall off the cop, you hide out. I'll—"

The policeman pounded on the door again.

"Take it easy, Judy," Stan said. He was smiling at me. "Be charming to the Lieutenant." He opened the door. "Come in, Lieutenant."

"Thanks."

Lieutenant Dawson was a big man, rugged. His wide face was set with determination. His humorless eyes took in the room at a glance. He gave Stan

the once-over. He inspected me.

"Do sit down, Lieutenant," I said, charmingly.

"Thanks," he said. He sat down and looked at Stan. "You're Coulter," he snapped.

"Yes, sir."

"You're taking a course at the Crescent Studio of Dancing?"

I saw Stan swallow. "Yes, sir."

"And your teacher was Anita Farrell?"

"How," I asked, "did you know that? I mean—I read in the paper that the register was stolen. I thought—"

WITH that I sat down abruptly. My legs no longer held me up. In that moment I had remembered where the stolen register was. It was under the cushion of the love seat and Lieutenant Dawson was sitting on it.

I forced myself to look in that direction. The detective's weight had squeezed the book forward. The back of it was almost touching the calves of his legs. I looked away."

"Yes, the killer stole the register all right," Dawson was saying, "but the bookkeeping department had the students' names. We boiled down the list to Anita Farrell's pupils by having the other teachers eliminate theirs." He took a sheet of paper from his pocket. "Now we see each man on this list. We find out what time he took his lesson."

I said, "That—that shouldn't take long, should it?"

"Not long at all," Dawson said. "And then we'll have the murderer."

"But how?" I asked.

"The killer will lie about his time, of course. He won't admit he took a lesson on Wednesday at five-thirty. So the moment we get two people claiming the same time—one of them is the killer. Coulter, what time was your lesson?"

"I took one lesson a week," Stan said, stalling.

"Yeah? When?"

I held my breath until Stan spoke. "Every Tuesday," he said. "At noon."

"Okay. Tuesday, twelve o'clock." The detective made a note and stood up. "Un-

less someone else claims that time, you won't hear from me again."

With my heart in my mouth I watched him start for the door. He didn't glance back at the love seat, at the register protruding from under its cushion. He didn't look back at all. The door closed safely behind him.

"Stan," I said, "what are we going to do? He might find a man tonight who gives the same time you did!"

"Yes," Stan said. "He might."

"If we could get to that man first— whoever he is! If we could get to him before Dawson does we could take care of him!"

"Sure," Stan said. "We could put him in a bag and drop him in the East River."

"I didn't mean anything like that. We could just threaten him, maybe, scare him out of town."

"All right, we'll scare him out of town. We'll tell him New York is just a shell. It's going to cave in."

"Darling, am I going to have to mention the electric chair to make you do something!"

"No, Judy, we'll do something. We'll find the murderer. It's as simple as that. Of course, we probably have to find him in the next hour or two."

"Well, then, let's get moving!"

"All right, you start. What happened today?"

I went through my day for Stan, from my interview with Leonard Lanning to my climb to the ceiling, to the conversation I had eavesdropped upon, to my talk with the three Crescent Studio blondes. I skipped nothing.

We discussed the school, the studio where Anita Farrell had died, we discussed Linda and Lanning. We got nowhere. We sat and looked helplessly at each other.

"Well," Stan said, "we'll concentrate on Anita. We'll find out all we can about her. Suppose you call on her roommate."

"Kathy Rollins."

"Ingratiate yourself with her, become pals. Win her confidence. Get her to talk."

"Yes, sir."

"I wonder if I could risk talking to her myself. She may not ever have seen me at the school."

I put my foot down. "No, darling, you'll risk nothing. You'll wait outside. Let's go."

We walked to the corner of Twelfth Street and West Fourth. In the third corner building we looked into we found, beneath a mail box, the names we wanted—Anita Farrell and, under it, Kathy Rollins. Stan rang the bell, waited until the door release clicked, then crossed to the other side of the street. I started climbing.

I had reached the fourth floor when the door of a rear apartment opened. A girl stepped into the hall, pulling the door almost closed behind her. She looked at me expectantly.

"Are you Kathy Rollins?" I asked.

"Yes."

SHE wasn't pleased to see me. Her face was grim, drawn with anxiety, but even that didn't erase its appeal. Her shining black hair was swept up into smart waves that gave her perfect little girl's face a touching sophistication.

Her eyes were something that must have made her dancing students bring apples, if not orchids, to her every day. Now, however, they were clouded with worry, a deep frown wrinkled her forehead.

"Kathy," I said, "I'm Hester Frost. I just started teaching at Lanning today."

"Oh," she said. "Hello."

"I heard one of the girls talking today and—well, she said you might be looking for someone to share your apartment."

Kathy's lips hardened into a straight line. "Yes," she said quietly. "My roommate was Anita Farrell."

"I'm sorry," I said, "I didn't know." I felt like a heel. I almost turned and ran. Then I thought of Stan and I went right on being a heel. "I guess that teacher was being ironic or something."

"Yes," Kathy said. "I guess that's it."

She was turning back toward her door. I swayed and leaned against the wall. I closed my eyes, I looked ready to collapse. "I've walked miles looking for a place to live," I muttered. "And after teaching all day I'm afraid that I—" I stopped; I was too faint to go on.

Kathy put her hands under my elbows. She glanced back at the closed door. She hesitated a moment, then kicked it open and led me into the apartment. I saw then why she had kept me standing in the hall.

The place was in a fantastic state of confusion, as though it had been the scene of an explosion. Pictures lay on the floor, their backs ripped off. Books had been tumbled from the shelves and scattered everywhere.

Pillows and chair seats, slip covers and lamp shades, window blinds and rugs—everything in the room had been manhandled and cast aside. Through open doors I saw into a kitchen and a bedroom. Both places had been similarly wrecked.

"Kathy," I said, "what's happened?"

"I don't know, I—"

"Someone's been searching your place—searching it in a terrific hurry."

"Yes, it looks that way. I haven't had time to even think about it. I only got home a few minutes ago."

"But who could have done it? What were they looking for?"

"I don't know," she said. Her eyes took in the chaos. She smiled grimly. "I certainly hope they found what they were after."

"Could it have been the police?"

"Maybe, but I doubt it."

"So do I. They would have taken their time. They wouldn't have had to—Kathy, you should call them right away. They should know."

"I'll call them. I was going to. But I wanted a minute first to—to pull myself together." She turned suddenly and looked at me sharply. "Are you all right now?"

"Yes. Yes, I guess I'm all right."

"You don't look it."

"What, Kathy?"

"You look kind of beat up."

"I do?"

"You need a drink."

"Kathy—"

But she was already in the kitchen. I heard the refrigerator open and close. I heard water running and the crackle of ice cubes leaving their tray. Then I heard a soft rat-a-tat on the hall door. I saw the knob move and the door begin to open. I stepped toward it.

"Who is it?" I called.

I pulled the door wide open. A young man was stepping back from it, deeper into the hall. He tipped his hat to the back of his head and grinned at me.

HE said, "I'm sorry. I knew when I heard your voice that I had the wrong apartment."

"Kathy Rollins lives here," I said.

"Yes, I know."

"You know?"

"Yes, I'm a neighbor, I live upstairs. I must have counted the flights wrong coming up."

"That can happen."

"Yes. And all the doors look alike."

[Turn page]

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You can't tell them apart without a program." He was backing down the hall. "I'm sorry. So long."

I was closing the door when Kathy came in from the kitchen. She stood just inside the living room, a glass in each hand. Her eyes were fastened on the door behind me.

"There was someone there," she said. Her voice was tight. "Who was it?"

"Just the young man from upstairs. He'd got the wrong floor."

She handed me a glass. She put hers carefully on the mantel.

"He has the apartment upstairs," she said. "Is that what he told you?"

"Yes."

She went quickly to the door and opened it. She looked down the empty quiet stairwell. She closed the door again and leaned against it.

"There isn't any upstairs," she said softly. "This is the top floor."

"Kathy—"

"What did he look like, this man?"

"He was dark. Well built, rugged, good-looking—and well dressed except for an atrocious necktie. He seemed nice, friendly. Am I helping you any? Do you know who he is?"

She shook her head. "No."

"He might be the one who searched here. Maybe he didn't find what he was looking for. Maybe he'll come back again and—Kathy, you must call the police!"

"Yes. Yes, I will. In just a few minutes. I'm so tired of answering their questions. All of last night, most of today—"

I went to the mantel and got Kathy's drink. I handed it to her and sat beside her on the davenport.

"Kathy," I said, "it might be that the Waltzer isn't just a maniac who had to murder someone, anyone. He could be a man who hated Anita, who had a motive to kill her. You ought to know, Kathy, if she had any enemies."

"I don't know. I wouldn't know."

"But you lived here with her. You worked with her at the school. You should know better than anyone else."

She shook her head. "I've only been teaching at Lansing for six weeks. I've

only been here for four. We were sharing this apartment, Anita and I, that's all. She was a sort of lone wolf. We never got to be friends."

"She was so beautiful," I said. "There must have been men in droves around her always. And maybe—"

She turned to me sharply; she was looking at me curiously. "You came to Lansing this morning," she said softly. "How would you know about Anita?"

"From her pictures in the papers," I said. "She must have had lots of beaux."

"I suppose she did. But I didn't see them. They didn't come here—she never talked to me about them." Kathy was moving about the room now, aimlessly picking up a book, righting a lamp. Suddenly she sank down on a sofa and put her head in her hands.

"I'm so tired," she said. "I'm sorry but I'd like to be alone for a little while."

"I know, Kathy." I stood up. "But you will call the police, won't you? You'll tell them about that man and show them this mess?"

She smiled. "Yes. Yes, I promise. And I hope you find a place to live, Hester. I wish you could move in here but—"

"It's all right," I said quickly. "I understand."

I heard the bolt shoot into its lock behind me as I started down the stairs. The girl behind that door was in trouble, perhaps in danger. I couldn't leave her alone there, I couldn't force my way back into her apartment. But there was something I could do, a little something. I started toward the basement.

CHAPTER V

Kippered



I found the superintendent's apartment and knocked on his door. He was a pleasant, middle-aged man, a solid, kindly-looking man.

He nodded sympathetically when I told him I was a friend of Kathy Rollins.

"A terrible thing for her," he said.
 "Her roommate was a nice girl."

"Yes. I wonder if you could keep an eye on Kathy. She's all alone up there, you know."

"My wife and me, we feel just the same. We're looking after her. I was just up to see her about an hour ago."

"An hour ago?"

"Just about. To see if there was anything I could do."

"But she wasn't home then," I said.
 "She only got in a few minutes ago."

He shook his head. "No," he said.
 "Miss Rollins come in about six o'clock."

"You were in her apartment then?"

"Like I said. A little after she come home."

"Then," I said carefully, "you saw the condition her place was in, didn't you?"

"What?" The man frowned at me, puzzled.

"Wasn't there anything the matter with it?"

"No," he said. "No, it was fine. Like always."

"You mean everything was in order then?"

"Of course! Why not?"

"After Miss Rollins came home at six," I said, "did she go out again?"

"No, she didn't go out. She's been up there ever since. Is something wrong?"

"No," I said. "No, it's all right."

I left him then. I went out to the street to find Stan. I wanted to tell him how Kathy Rollins had tricked me, how she had made me think that some intruder, not herself, had torn her place to shreds in a hectic race to find some hidden thing.

Stan wasn't in sight. I waited a few minutes, then crossed West Fourth Street and started toward home. A cab that had been cruising along the street stopped beside me.

The driver leaned out. "Are you Mrs. Coulter?"

"Yes, I am."

"Hop in. Your husband sent me to pick you up. He couldn't wait for you on this corner any longer."

I got in the taxi. "Where is my husband?"

"At the Feather Club. If he ain't still there when you get there you're to ask the bartender for a message."

"Where was he when you saw him?"

"Outside the Feather Club where I was parked."

"Oh. Well, thanks. This was nice of you."

"It's an easy ten bucks. Thank you."

At the corner of Sixth Avenue and Twelfth Street we stopped for a red light. A newsboy was shouting something that made the driver buy a paper. He shook it out and read the headlines. I leaned forward and saw that the police were closing in on the Waltzer.

The driver said, "The sooner they get that maniac, the better."

"Yes," I said.

"The streets ain't safe with him loose."

"No," I said.

"If I were you," the driver said, "I wouldn't run around unescorted. I'd stick close to my husband if I was you."

"I will. My husband won't let the Waltzer harm me."

"An out-and-out maniac," the driver said. "He should be shot on sight like a mad dog."

"The light is green now," I said.

"If this was anyplace but New York there'd be a posse out after the Waltzer! He should be strung up on the first pole, hung!"

"The light is green," I said again.

ALL this, I thought, from a man to whom the Waltzer had just given ten dollars for a two dollar job. It just went to show. We pulled up outside the Feather Club before I could figure out what it went to show but it went to show something. Perhaps, for instance, that Stan might get strung up on the first pole. And with the millions of poles in New York—I ran across the sidewalk into the Feather Club.

It wasn't a Greenwich Village tourist-trap. It was in one of the fine old hotels on lower Fifth Avenue. It was respectable but cheerful. It was expensive but worth it. There was a cozy circular bar in the first room and beyond that a din-

ing room. I looked around and sighed in relief. Stan was standing at the bar, both feet still on the ground, still unstrung. He saw me and turned quickly away. I got it. I wasn't to know him. There was someone in this room who must not know there was any connection between Stan and me.

I climbed on a stool that was at right angles to the spot where Stan stood. I ordered a coke. It was while the bartender was pouring it that I discovered the reason that must have brought Stan to the Feather Club.

Directly across from him but behind the pyramid of bottles that was the axis of the bar sat a little man in a large bow tie. It was Wendell Kipp, who had been my last pupil at the Crescent Studio that day, who had therefore been a pupil of Anita Farrell. He was turned away from me but I could see that he was talking earnestly to a woman, to quite a woman.

She was trying this evening to look thirty. Actually, she looked fifty and she was probably sixty-five. Her giddy hat, her low-cut tight dress, her silver fox jacket, her screen of heavy make-up weren't quite up to what she demanded of them. She was sixty-five if she was a day. Also, she was imitation blonde, stout and more than slightly potted.

Mr. Kipp seemed to be pleading with her. And she seemed to be ignoring him. With a wide, vacant grin she watched the bartender mix a drink. He brought it to her. She downed it in one gulp.

Mr. Kipp turned away from her in despair. He looked straight at me, then turned at once back to the woman. He had seen me, I was sure that he had recognized me, but he was keeping it a secret. He began talking more earnestly.

Suddenly, her voice boomed out. "All right," she said. "All right, all right!"

She dipped a hand into her purse, pulled out a sheaf of bills and slapped them down before Mr. Kipp. He reached for the money and stuffed it in his pocket. The woman pulled herself together, snapped her fingers under Kipp's nose and walked unsteadily out of the Feather Room.

I looked at Stan and tilted my head toward the door. He shook his head vigorously. I wasn't to follow the woman. I looked back at Kipp. He was standing now, gathering up his cigarettes and his glass. He was walking toward me, smiling broadly. He established himself at my side.

"Well, well," he said, "if it isn't Hester Frost! How are you, Hester?"

"May I call you Wendell?" I asked.

"I'd hate it if you didn't, dear."

"I'm just fine, Wendell, and how are you?"

"Just dandy!" He leaned his shoulder against mine. We were real cozy, Wendell and I. I glanced at Stan. He was scowling into his beer. "Just dandy!" Wendell repeated. "What are you drinking there?"

"A coke," I said, lowering my eyes modestly.

"A coke!" Wendell smiled, a slow deep smile, the like of which I hadn't seen since the silent films. "Really, darling, a lovely young thing like you should be drinking champagne!"

"Should I, Wendell, should I really? No, I shouldn't."

"Well, then," he said quickly, "let me buy you another coke."

"Well, just a little one."

"A sweet drink for a sweet girl." Wendell put his near paw over my left hand. Stan suddenly moved two stools closer. "Tell me, darling, where have you been all my life?"

"Has it been that long? Wendell, who was that beautiful lady I saw you with just now?"

"Oh, her? Oh, that's my partner's sister. You're a darling, Hester, did anyone ever tell you that?"

"Not in so many words. Wendell, your partner's sister—"

"No, darling, no. Let's not talk about her." He picked up my hand and seemed to find something about it to admire. This time Stan moved three stools closer. "Let's talk about you."

"Little me? Wendell, your partner's sister owed you a lot of money, didn't she?"

"Oh that. She was tight and I was

afraid she'd lose it or spend it on the way home."

"You should have taken her home, Wendell."

"No, Hester," he murmured, leering at me. His leer was a work of art in Technicolor. "No, darling, you see I have other plans for this evening. Don't we?"

I FELT a thud and Stan was sitting beside me. He put his face close to mine. "Hiya, toots," he said. He leered, and it made Mr. Kipp's effort seem a pale and sorry thing. He breathed down my neck. "How about big me buying cute little you a drink?"

Wendell Kipp was on his feet at once. "Look here, young fellow," he said.

"Watch who you're calling young fellow," Stan said.

"This young lady and I—"

"Watch who you're calling a young lady," Stan said.

"This young lady and I wish to be alone. Now please go away before I call—" He stopped. He stepped back and studied Stan thoughtfully. He said, "I've seen you someplace before."

"Not me," Stan said. "I've never been someplace before."

"Yes! Your face is familiar. I think—"

"Wendell," I said hurriedly, "you must be wrong, you—"

"I know! I know where I've seen him!" Mr. Kipp was triumphant. "At the Crescent Studio!"

"Never heard of it," Stan said.

"That's it! He took lessons from the same teacher I did—Anita Farrell! On Wednesdays. I always saw him coming in just as I was leaving." Mr. Kipp stepped back. His voice shook with excitement.

"I saw him yesterday! He had the lesson after mine, he was there at five-thirty!" He was shouting now at the top of his lungs. "I know who he is! He's the Waltz—"

Stan's fist stopped him from completing the word. Mr. Kipp staggered backward and collapsed on the floor. The bartenders were coming around the bar. One of them was climbing over it. The

doorman stepped in through the street entrance. Everyone in the room was shouting now, "The Waltzer!"

Stan leaped over Kipp and ran across the room. I darted after him, yelling, "Stop him, stop him!" The two of us beat everyone to a door in the side wall. I heard a woman scream, "Call the police!"

We raced along a short corridor, around a corner, up a flight of stairs. We ran through an empty darkened dining room and toward a door at its end. Above the door glowed in red the word EXIT. Then we were on the fire stairs, going down them. They opened onto a yard behind the hotel. Stan pulled me to a fence, boosted me over it.

He boosted me over four fences, dragged me across the back yards of four private houses. Then I had to stop. I leaned against a sumac tree and gasped for air.

"Stan," I moaned, "of all the people in the world, you had to tangle with Kipp! How did you manage it?"

"Easy. He was lurking around Kathy Rollins' building, watching the windows. Then he went around back and investigated the fire escape and I got even more interested. Something must have discouraged him though and he left. I followed him." Stan's hand tightened on my arm.

"Listen," he said.

I listened. I heard the faint moan of a policecar siren. It grew louder, nearer—it was joined by others. In a few seconds they were coming from all directions. The New York police, they were wonderful, they were efficient. At the moment I could have stood their being just adequate.

"Stan," I said, "what is it they throw around a block?"

"A cordon."

"That's for us. A police cordon."

"Let's go," Stan said.

We climbed more fences, crossed more gardens. We came to the rear of a large apartment house that had a passageway to the street inside it. We sneaked toward the front of the building, moving in the shadows. Twice we stopped, hud-

dled against the wall, as police cars flashed by on Twelfth Street. We edged out onto the sidewalk.

"Stroll," Stan said. "Be casual."

We took twenty steps and a police car was coming back toward us, driving west on an eastbound street. The car was moving slowly. The men in it were looking for the Waltzer.

We darted into a vestibule. The inner door was locked. From above a bright light beat down on us unmercifully, spotting us like two vaudeville stars in a darkened theatre. We were, in a word, trapped.

CHAPTER VI

Kathy's Boy Dave



SUDDENLY Stan threw his arms around me. He pulled me close to him and pressed his lips against my cheek. "Put your arms around me, Judy."

Without knowing why, I did it. "Stan!

What are we doing? The cops will see us!"

"They'll think I'm a fellow saying good night to his girl."

"You mean you *hope* they'll think that!"

"If they're smart they will."

The car droned nearer. I clung to Stan and we kissed good night. The car came abreast of us. I heard its motor slowing to a stop.

"Good night, darling," I whispered. "Good night!" Then the motor speeded up, the police rode on down the street and we were safe. Love had found a way.

Forty-five minutes later, after weaving, backtracking, skulking in doorways, doing all the things shrewd fugitives from justice do, we decided we were in the clear. We could go home.

We spent most of the night tossing the few facts I had gathered about the murder and its cast back and forth. Finally we shelved the whys and wherefores of the pencil sketch of Anita Farrell that I had found in her lifeless hand, the

secret relationship of Linda Webb and Mr. Lanning, the tipsy woman who had given money to Wendell Kipp, the young man who had claimed to live on the roof of Kathy's building, the lies Kathy had told me. We concentrated on one point.

Kipp had been watching Anita's windows, Kathy had been searching her apartment. The mysterious young man might have made his visit for the same purpose. What was it those people were hunting? We had to find out.

Stan drew up our plan of attack. I was to go to the Crescent School and somehow pilfer Kathy's keys. We would then conduct our own investigation while Kathy was still at work. We would search that apartment as no apartment had ever been searched before. If the others had not already found what they were looking for we would find it.

By a little after nine the next morning I was ready to start. I put the final touches on my make-up, checked the contents of my purse and waited for Stan, who had gone to the corner for a paper, to come back and wish me Godspeed. I heard a step in the hall. I called, "Stan!"

It wasn't Stan who answered. It was Lieutenant Detective Dawson. He asked me to open the door. I opened it.

"Why, good morning, Lieutenant!" I said. "Good morning!"

The detective was in no mood for pleasantries. His heavy face was wrapped in a black scowl, his sharp eyes were cold, his mouth set grimly.

"Where's your husband?"

It was his tone of voice that made me decide not to say that my husband was just around the corner, that he'd be back in a minute, please sit down and wait. Instead I said, "He's gone to work, of course. He left ages ago. He—"

"He's at the *Globe* office?"

I nodded.

"All right," Dawson said, "we'll pick him up there." He turned to go.

"Pick him up!" I said. "But, why? You haven't—I mean you didn't find someone else who claims the same lesson time Stan does, did you?"

"No. We haven't been able to catch up to all Anita Farrell's pupils yet. A couple

are out of town, a couple of others we haven't located here. But that doesn't matter now." Dawson smiled unpleasantly. "Now we got a witness."

"A witness to the murder?"

"No. To the Waltzer. A student at Crescent, a guy named Wendell Kipp, recognized the Waltzer in a bar last night. The Waltzer slugged him and ran. But Kipp got a good look at him."

"He—he gave you a description?"

Dawson nodded. "Two or three of Miss Farrell's pupils fit the description. Among them your husband. Anyway, Kipp will know the Waltzer when he sees him again. And he's going to see him—soon."

DAWSON slammed out of the apartment and our door shuddered in its frame. I ran to the window and shuddered myself. The police car bearing Lieutenant Detective Dawson spun around one corner at the same moment that Stan, a paper under his arm, spun around the other.

He was smiling as he came into the living room. He waved the paper at me. "It's all right so far, Judy," he said. "No progress has been made, it says here, no new clues uncovered on the Waltzer case. The police are still baffled concerning the identity of that maniac killer—"

"Oh, they are, are they?" I said. "We've just had a visitor who says different."

I told him then about Dawson and about Kipp, who was waiting someplace to identify him as the Waltzer. Stan wasn't smiling when I finished. He sat morosely, his head between his hands.

"Darling," I said, "you've got to get out of here! When Dawson finds you're not at the *Globe* he'll come back."

"Yes," Stan said. "And then if he doesn't find me here they'll start really hunting for me. I can't keep out of their way for long, Judy. They'll catch up with me and—"

"But maybe it won't take us long, Stan! If I can get Kathy's keys—if we're right that there's something hidden in her apartment. Oh, Stan, it's our only chance!"

"All right," Stan said. "I'll hang around Kathy's place—if the place isn't surrounded by cops. I'll try to keep out of sight until I see you."

"Yes," I said. "I'll go up to the studio now. I won't be long, Stan. I'll hurry."

I did hurry. In ten minutes I was in sight of the school. I hurried more. And then, when I had almost reached it, I saw the young man emerge from the Crescent building lobby. He was wearing the same clothes he had worn when I had last seen him, when I had talked to him outside Kathy's door.

But that was all that was the same about him. Last night he had seemed to be amused and pleasant, he had used the light touch. There was nothing amused about him now. He was a grimly worried young man about some business that was both urgent and unpleasant.

I stepped into a haberdasher's doorway and watched him as he passed. For a moment he hesitated. He looked at his watch. Then, abruptly, he headed uptown, walking fast. I made up my mind in a flash. I followed him.

It was more of a job that I had expected. He boarded a train of the Independent Subway and stayed on it until it stopped in Long Island at the town of St. Albans. I followed him through the town's main business street, out into its residential section. He walked into a four-story apartment house and left me standing flat-footed in the middle of Long Island.

There was no time to do any thinking. In a minute he would be safely tucked inside that building. I ran along the sidewalk into the vestibule. It was empty.

I hurried into the small lobby. There was no elevator. I found the stairs, stopped at the foot of them and listened. Above me I could hear him tramping upward. On tiptoes I started after him.

I rounded the newel post of the third floor just in time to see a door at the end of the corridor settle in its frame. I knew where he was. I had him. But I didn't know what to do with him. I decided not to answer that question. I decided to push my luck. I knocked at the door.

On my second knock the door opened. I wasn't prepared for what I saw. The sight of the gentle-faced, middle-aged woman hit me harder than if I had been confronted by a two-headed, double-drooling ogre. The little lady's smile put me back on my feet. She seemed delighted that I had knocked on her door. She reminded me of my mother, of everybody's mother. She made Whistler's famed parent look like a witch-woman.

"Good morning," she said and she meant it.

"Good morning," I said. "I—I'm looking for some people named Lamont. I thought they lived in this building but I can't seem to find them."

"Lamont," the lady said. "Lamont?"

"Yes. They have two children."

SHE was shaking her head. "There's no one in this building by that name. The Rankins have two children but you said Lamont."

I nodded. I sighed. "Oh, dear, I've come such a long way. I wonder—if I looked in your phone book? Perhaps I've got the wrong address."

"Of course! Come in, come in!" She stretched out a welcoming hand and tugged me through the doorway. There was no one else in the pleasant, homey living room. "You look like you've come a long way! You look all tuckered out!"

"I am," I said and that was no lie. "You're very kind."

"Don't be silly!" She sat me down in the most overstuffed chair in the room. "What's your name, dear? I do like to know people's names."

I was getting expert at aliases. "Sarah Simpson," I said promptly.

"I'm Mrs. Gray—Mrs. David Gray," she added proudly.

Somewhere in the apartment beyond this room a radio came to life. It was tuned to a news broadcast. I caught a few words . . . police . . . the Waltzer . . . early solution . . . then the machine was turned lower and I could hear only the hum of a voice.

I glanced about the living room. On the mantle were two large identically-

framed photographs. One was of a fine looking gentleman in his fifties, the other was of the young man who had led me to this room. Mrs. Gray placed a phone book in my lap.

I said, "Is that a picture of your husband?"

"Yes! And the other is my son—Dave Junior."

"You're a lucky woman, Mrs. Gray."

"Don't I know it!" she said. She beamed at me.

I went through the motions of using the book. There was a Lamont family living in St. Albans but I explained to Mrs. Gray that they weren't the ones I was looking for. "I guess they haven't a phone," I said. "Well, I'll just have to keep walking around and inquiring."

"Rest just a minute, Miss Simpson. Now, I bet you'd like a nice cup of hot tea!"

"I'd love it," I admitted.

"I'll put the kettle on."

The minute my hostess left the room I was on my feet, moving toward the library table behind the davenport. There was something there that interested me, that might give me quick information about the Grays. It was a huge scrapbook.

I opened it upon page after page of baby pictures. By the time baby was six or seven I was able to recognize Dave, Junior. At the age of about nine, he had been sent to dancing school.

There followed pages of photographs and newspaper pictures of him in action, in all kinds of costume. As Dave grew up he kept on dancing. Halfway through the book he graduated into a tuxedo and a silk hat. He got himself a partner.

The partner was a pretty girl with a pixie face and laughing eyes. The other half of Dave Gray's dancing team was Kathy Rollins.

There were footsteps behind me and Mrs. Gray was back in the room. There was no time to return the book, even to move. I looked up at her. Her face was wreathed in smiles, her voice filled with delight.

"Well!" she said. "You're looking at the scrapbook!"

"Yes," I said. "I saw it there and—"

Mrs. Gray was still beaming. "Dave has so much talent," she said. "He's a wonderful dancer."

"And his partner," I said, "is a lovely girl."

"That's Kathy Rollins. She's a darling."

"I gather that they've known each other a long time."

MRS. GRAY nodded. "Since high school. And they were dancing partners right up until Dave went into the Army." She sat down beside me. She needed no urging to talk about her son.

"He gave up dancing, though, after he got back from the service and went into newspaper work. He didn't say why but I knew. He wanted to make a steady salary so he could marry Kathy. Dancing's so uncertain, you know. But it didn't work out that way."

"It didn't?" I said. "What happened?"

Mrs. Gray's face clouded. "I don't know. Dave and Kathy were inseparable. I almost felt as though Kathy were in the family already. Then all of a sudden it ended. They haven't even seen each other for five or six weeks."

"And Dave hasn't told you why?"

"No. He says Kathy's busy, this and that. But I'm afraid they quarrelled. Dave's so unhappy, that must be it. I don't understand it. I've never seen two young people so devoted. Except maybe Dave Senior and I."

"I'm sure of that." I listened for a moment. The radio was still playing, music now. I said, "Did Dave get his dancing talent from his father?"

Mrs. Gray laughed until the tears stood in her eyes. "Just wait!" she said. "Just wait till I tell Dave Senior that! No, it was just the other way around."

"What?" I said.

"That sounds strange, doesn't it? Well I'll tell you. It was right after Dave went overseas that Dave Senior got another one of his crazy ideas. He thought the two of us should take dancing lessons! Imagine! Not theatrical ones, of course, the regular kind.

"Well, I just laughed at him. I said to

him, 'Dad, I'm a little beyond taking up dancing but you go right ahead. You be the dancer in our family,' I said, 'while Dave's away.' I thought he'd forget about it but, you know, he actually did take lessons. And he stuck at it for nearly a year.

"But finally he gave it up—just like everything else. Now it's surf fishing! He's going to make money surf fishing! Before it was story writing and heaven knows what it'll be next!"

"Where did he take his dancing lessons?" I asked.

"At a place in New York. It's called the Crescent School."

"I've heard of it," I said.

"Oh, yes, it's quite famous. It—wait a minute! I'll see if my water's boiling yet."

But Mrs. Gray didn't get to her kitchen. Before she could move from the davenport her son had stepped into the room. He looked at me and spoke quietly to his mother.

"I didn't know," he said, "that you had a guest."

"Dave," Mrs. Gray said, "this nice young lady is Miss Simpson. She's looking for some people named Lamont."

"Lamont?" Dave said.

"Yes. She thought they lived in this building but there isn't anyone in the neighborhood at all by that name."

Dave Gray smiled at me. To his mother it was probably a nice friendly smile—to me it was poisonous. "Yes there is, Mother," he said. "There are some Lamonts on the hospital road."

"Really, dear? I didn't know that."

"I'll drive you over there, Miss Simpson."

"Oh, no!" I said. "Really, I—"

"It's no trouble," Dave said. "The car's right outside."

"But I'm sure the people I'm looking for don't live near the hospital. It's the Frederick Lamonts I'm hunting! The—the Frederick T. Lamonts!"

He gave me that smile again. "That's it," he said. "Fred Lamont—Fred T. Lamont." He turned back to Mrs. Gray. "Do you have the car keys, Mother?"

"Oh, dear! I'm afraid I left them in

the car when I drove your father to the beach."

"All right," Dave said. "Ready, Miss Simpson?"

"Please," I said. "Please, I'd rather—"

He took my arm. His fingers dug into it. He steered me to the door. His mother smiled happily at us. "It's so nice of you, Dave. And, Miss Simpson, do stop in again! I owe you a cup of tea!"

I walked down the stairs in front of Dave Gray. On the second landing I began to walk faster. Behind me his footsteps speeded up and synchronized with mine. At the street door my elbow was locked in his grip once more.

"There's the car," he said.

"But I—I don't want to—I—"

"Please," he said. "Please, Miss Hester Frost, please."

CHAPTER VII

The Scuffling Footsteps



HE drew me along the sidewalk to the car. He opened the coupé's door and helped me, more than was necessary, into the seat beside the steering wheel. He slammed the door and started for the other side. I dove toward the far door and snapped down the lock. I did the same to my door.

He was pounding at the window now. I leaned back in the seat and folded my arms. Now it was my turn to smile and I did. He shouted at me through the glass.

"You might as well open it! I've got another set of keys upstairs!"

"Go and get them!" I said.

He cut across the rectangle of lawn and disappeared into the vestibule. I knew that that was as far as he went. I knew that just behind the door he would be waiting for me, waiting for me to leave the car and try for a getaway.

I slid under the steering wheel, turned the key in the ignition. I nursed the gas, making as little motor noise as possible.

The car started forward. I had it in second gear before Dave Gray leaped down the three steps and started after me. I pushed it into high and swung around the corner.

I had escaped Dave Gray. I had learned interesting things about him, about Kathy Rollins. I was doing better this morning. But I didn't feel much better for it.

The Coulter family was going rapidly to seed. Mr. Coulter was the Waltzer, that maniac killer that the police of the world's largest city were seeking. Mrs. Coulter was, at the moment, driving the streets of St. Albans in a car that she had stolen, a car that was hot.

I abandoned the hot heap at the subway station. I parked it within sight of an honest looking traffic cop and took it on the lam for New York. I didn't duck under the subway turnstile. I paid my dime and that returned a little of my self-respect. I wasn't completely unregenerate yet.

* * * * *

The operator started his elevator up toward the Crescent Studio. I leaned back against the wall and tried to catch some breath. I had run all the way from the subway stop. There was a lot of time I had to make up.

By now Stan would be sure that I had been caught trying to snitch Kathy's keys. He would be frantic, he—suddenly I realized that the elevator boy was talking to me.

I said, "I beg your pardon, what did you say?"

"I said, he got another one."

"Who? Who got another what?"

"Haven't you seen the afternoon papers?"

"No," I said.

"The Waltzer," the boy said, "has struck again!"

"What? You mean—?"

"Yep. Again. Murdered her and hid the body."

"Who—whom did he murder now?"

"Hester Frost."

"Hester Frost!" I covered my face with my hands. "No, not Hester!"

"Yep. You know her?"

I nodded. "Hester and I were very close. How did it happen?"

"She was with that guy named Kipp in a bar last night. When the Waltzer slugged Kipp and ran she tried to stop him. She chased after him. That's the last she was ever seen."

"Poor Hester."

"The police," the boy said, "figure that the Waltzer let her catch up with him. On a rooftop maybe or in a backyard. They're still searching for her body."

"And when they find it," I said, "I'm sure it will be mutilated."

"Yeah," the boy said. "Mutilated beyond recognition."

The door slid open. Across the reception room sat Linda Webb, her blonde head bent over her desk. If the police were looking for Hester Frost—

Linda started to raise her head. I stepped quickly behind the boy. "I forgot cigarettes," I said. "Will you take me down again?"

"Sure." The boy grinned at me. "I don't have anyplace else to go. This is the top floor."

I WAITED in the lobby until twelve o'clock, when the classes at the Crescent School would be changing. I rode up to the fourteenth floor again, looked cautiously out into the reception room before I left the elevator. One of the male teachers and his matronly pupil were standing in front of the desk, talking to Linda. I glanced about the room. I saw no one else who knew Miss Hester Frost.

Quietly I slipped by the desk and into the corridor that led to the locker room. The door to Lanning's office was closed, the hallway empty. I started down it.

I had almost reached the locker room when, at the end of the corridor, a girl appeared. It was Miss Silver, the blonde who had been all in favor of having the Waltzer fried. I bent over and fussed busily with the heel of my shoe.

She paused beside me. "Having trouble, honey?"

I giggled but didn't speak.

She kept on going.

I ran the rest of the way down the corridor. The locker room door closed behind me with a squeaking sound. Carefully I walked down each of the three rows of back-to-back lockers. The room was empty. I found the locker that had Kathy's name above it. I held my breath and turned its handle.

I let my breath blow out again in a sigh of relief. Kathy was not one of those mistrusting souls who suspected her colleagues of doing what I was about to do now. Kathy's locker was unlocked.

Her handbag lay on the shelf beside her hat. In the change purse I found a ring with two keys hanging from it. I slipped it in my pocket and was turning away when I heard the soft scuffling sound.

The quiet steps weren't coming from the corridor outside. They were in the room with me. One of the girls had entered while I was searching Kathy's handbag. She had been watching me.

Almost at once I realized that that was wrong. The outside door opened

[Turn page]

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with a squeal. I would have heard it. The door had not been opened since I had come into the room. She had been there then. She had hidden while I made my examination of the place. She was not just a teacher who had happened to be here. She was someone with a purpose and now that purpose was directed at me.

I heard the steps again. I placed them. She was behind the next row of lockers now. She was between me and the door.

But I had to get out. There was so much to do that had to be done. The clue to the dancing teacher's murder must be in Kathy's apartment and the key to her apartment was in my pocket.

There was nothing now, no sound, no steps. I tiptoed down the long row of lockers to the door. I reached the last locker. I took one step out past its protection and I saw the tip of a shoe.

It was a dark shoe—dark, red-brown leather, with an absurdly pointed toe—a man's shoe. Above it rose a few inches of the dark material of his trouser leg, then the bottom of the locker cut off my view.

I must have gasped. I must have made some sound that warned him for there was a crash, the sound of breaking glass and the room was dark. The overhead light had been shattered.

I turned and groped to the back of the room, away from him. My hands hit against the steel of locker doors, then against a wall. I edged along it to a corner and then I saw him, only a black shape in the darkness. Arms grasped me, thrusting me back. My head knocked against the wall of metal behind me. A searing pain flashed across my eyes, my legs began to crumple.

Light was seeping in on me when I opened my eyes. I was propped against the wall behind the open door. My purse was on the floor, its contents strewn over my lap. Everything was there, money, compact, lipstick—everything but my keys.

I reached into my pocket. I touched a metal ring, two attached keys. My keys had been stolen but Kathy's were still safe in my pocket.

CHAPTER VIII

The Letters



STAN opened the door to Kathy's apartment. I slipped by him into the living room. He closed the door, locked it. The first leg of our mission was completed. We were in.

Kathy must have spent the night putting the place back to rights for it was in apple pie order. I followed Stan as he walked slowly through the three rooms and bath. I watched him as he went back into the bedroom for the second time and settled himself in an easy chair. After what I had just gone through I was in no mood for such a lack of activity on his part. I spoke sharply to him.

"Darling," I said, "are you comfortable?"

"I'm thinking."

"Let's find what we're after and then think."

"Judy, if Kathy didn't find this thing we're after, then it's someplace where she didn't look. Now Kathy's a girl and you're a girl. Where would you have looked?"

"Stan, I'm nervous! It's nearly four o'clock!"

"You said that Kathy had taken the shades off the lamps, torn the covers off books. Therefore, what we're looking for is small, it's thin. Pictures, for instance, or documents of some kind. At least it's probably paper. Now where would you, a girl, not have looked for it?"

"Please, Stan! Don't you realize that we're trespassing?"

"But this is the quickest way, Judy. Why waste time looking where Kathy looked?"

"All right," I said. "All right!"

"I can see, Judy, you're not going to be any help. I'll have to do it all by myself."

"Go ahead," I said. "Go ahead and find it. All by yourself."

"I will," Stan said.

He put his feet up on a stool. He relaxed. It was all I could do to keep from striking him. He sat motionless for ten minutes, then got up, moved into the living room and settled himself in an easy chair. After ten minutes of that he went back into the bedroom. I left him then and made another aimless tour of the apartment. When I went back to Stan he was standing up.

"Judy," he said, "this room has been painted recently."

"Is that all you've discovered?"

"And it wasn't painted by a professional. You can tell from those streaks. Judy, I bet Anita painted this."

"But, darling, you can't hide anything under a coat of paint."

"This is water paint. You can put it on anything. Anita painted right over the wallpaper. Judy, would you have looked under the wallpaper for what we want?"

"Certainly not," I said. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Then Kathy probably didn't either. Maybe—"

Stan skirted the room. He shoved the beds out from the wall, he moved a dressing table, a bureau. He ran the palms of his hands over a large rectangle of wall that seemed to have been patched. Four feet up from the floor a horizontal line ran jaggedly across one segment of paper.

Stan took a long nail file from the dressing table. Carefully, he worked it into the horizontal seam, then down the vertical one. In a moment a triangle of wall paper folded down like the page of a book. A half dozen pieces of stationery fluttered to the floor.

Stan scooped them up. He glanced at each one and passed in on to me. The first five were letters—letters that throbbled passionately with admiration and deathless love. They were all written to Anita, they were all from different gentlemen, who signed themselves, respectively, as Reggie, Lee, Wilton, Kippie and Dave.

"Stan," I said, "Wendell Kipp. And Dave Gray."

He grunted his agreement.

"Anita," I said, "certainly brought out the poetry in men's souls. Not to mention the beast."

Stan was still holding the sixth letter. His concentration on it twisted his face into a frown. I stepped closer to him and looked over his shoulder.

THE letter was dated a little more than a year ago.

"My darling," it said, "I have failed. In every way a man can, I have failed. My greatest failure is losing you. I could have survived the others, not this. Without you there is nothing. I can't stay here of course.

"I had thought of going back to Pittsburgh but that's no good either. There's no place I can be without you. There it is. I can't go on without you and I have lost you. Forgive me, my darling, and remember it was because I loved you."

The note was signed Charles.

"That man," I said, "that Charles—he killed himself!"

"Yes," Stan said.

I shuddered. "What kind of a girl was Anita."

The voice spoke quietly from the bedroom doorway. Kathy Rollins was looking at us with expressionless eyes but she was speaking to the superintendent of the building.

"It's all right, Mr. Gordon," she said. "Thank you for letting me in."

"These people are friends of yours?" Gordon asked.

"I loaned them my keys," Kathy said. "Thank you, Mr. Gordon."

She waited until the superintendent had closed the door behind him, then she moved slowly toward us. She looked from the letters in our hands to their hiding place in the wall, then back at us.

She said, "Who are you?"

"Kathy," I said, "you remember—"

"Who are you?" she said again.

Stan said, "We're working with the police, Kathy."

Kathy's eyes closed. When she opened them again she was looking at me. "You were planted at the school, then—to watch us?"

I said, "Kathy—well, yes."

"Why are they saying that you're dead? Why do the police say the Waltzer murdered you?"

"It's a trick," Stan said. "A trick to catch the Waltzer."

She looked at Stan. She looked at him hard while I stood there waiting, holding my breath. But if she had ever seen him at the Crescent School she had forgotten. She said, "You—you're a detective?"

Stan ignored her question. He said, "We've found what you were looking for, Kathy."

"I don't know what you mean. I wasn't looking for anything."

"We know you were, Kathy. You wanted to find these letters because Dave Gray had written one of them."

"No. I don't know any Dave Gray."

"Kathy," I said, "hasn't he phoned you? Don't you know that I followed him to his house?"

Her lips were tight. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Kathy," I said, "I saw pictures of you there. I talked to Dave's mother about you. I—"

"Yes, baby," Stan said. "We know about you and Dave. We know you were going to be married. And then he got mixed up with Anita. He put how he felt about her on paper." Stan held up one of the letters. "This is a sample of Dave's correspondence."

Kathy stood silent. She shook her head.

"Baby," Stan said gently, "Anita was blackmailing him among others. She used the dancing school as a place to meet men, respectable but susceptible men. You knew when she was murdered that the motive was probably blackmail. You knew Dave had that motive, that he might have killed her."

"No!" Kathy's voice was harsh. "No, Dave had no motive! That's not his letter. It—it was his father's."

"His father!" I said. "Kathy—"

"Yes. He's a nice old man, a nice, simple, foolish man. He went to the Crescent School, he met Anita. I guess he was easy prey for her. But he had no money and she found that out. So she

waited for Dave to get out of the Army and she blackmailed him."

She turned to me. "You've seen Dave's mother," she said, "you've talked to her. Then you know what it would do to her if she found out about Anita. Dave couldn't let that happen—I couldn't either. Not to Mrs. Gray."

"Yes," I said. "If I had been Dave I would have paid the blackmail."

"So Dave was paying it," Stan said. "And he told you about it, Kathy? Right away, I mean?"

"Yes."

"And that's why you moved in here with Anita? To try to find those letters?"

SHE nodded. "Yes. I got a job at Crescent and I worked on Anita. I even wangled the suggestion from her that I move in here. She never suspected. She knew nothing about me, and Dave and I were careful—we didn't even see each other.

"Every chance I got I looked for those letters. There was a drawer in her desk that was always locked, I think she kept them there. But she must have finally suspected me for when I got the drawer open it was empty."

"She'd found a new place for them," Stan said. "Behind the wallpaper."

"I should have known that," Kathy said bitterly. "I should have guessed. I was the one who suggested we paint this room, I started the job. Then one night when I came home I found she'd fixed the paper where it was loose, and she'd painted that whole wall herself. I should have known then. Anita never lifted a finger if she could help it. She wouldn't have done all that without a reason."

The room was quiet for a long moment. Then Kathy took a deep breath and walked over to Stan. "Now," she said, "you know all about it. Now may I have that letter?"

Stan shook his head. "No, Kathy. Not now, not yet."

"But why? It hasn't anything to do with you or with Anita Farrell's murder! But if the police got hold of it—"

"They won't publish it, Kathy. They aren't interested in breaking nice old ladies' hearts."

"But what about Dave?" she said. "They'll think Dave—"

"No, Kathy. They won't believe that he committed a murder to spare his mother's feelings."

"I know, I know that!" she said desperately. "But if they connect him with Anita they'll investigate him. They'll find out that he was up there on Wednesday and—" She stopped, her lips still parted, her eyes filling with dread.

Stan said, "Dave was at the school on Wednesday?"

"Yes." Her voice was flat. "He went there to pay Anita off. He always did."

"What time?"

"A little before six. She was giving a lesson then, her last one, the one she gave the Waltzer. So Dave went back later and that time—that time she was dead. He was seen, of course. The police probably know already he was there. But they're looking for the Waltzer. And if they don't find him—if they start looking for someone else . . ."

Stan put a hand on Kathy's shoulder and she fought off the hysteria that was engulfing her. She looked up at him, quiet now.

He said, "Kathy, the police are going to find the murderer. And when they do you can have this letter. You can destroy it yourself. But in the meantime you've got to help."

She said slowly, "How? How can I help?"

"There are other letters here besides the one you want. We know who wrote two of them. Do you know anyone named Reggie or Lee? Or Wilton?"

"There was a Lee—Lee Armstrong. He was a pupil of Anita's. I don't know the others."

"Was there anyone named Charles?"

She shook her head. "I never met a Charles. I—"

"No. He's dead. But he was very close to her. She might have spoken of him." Stan handed the short, tragic note to her. She read it and I saw the horror cloud her eyes. Her hand trembled as

she gave the letter back.

"I knew that she was evil," Kathy whispered. "I didn't know how dreadful. I never guessed."

Stan said, "It's going to be all right now, Kathy. It'll be over soon."

"Yes," she said. "I've got to believe that."

We left her standing in the middle of the room, facing the spot in the wall that Stan had found before she had. We went down the stairs, out onto Twelfth Street. Stan stopped at the corner. His eyes were on me and they were critical.

"You," he said, "look ready to collapse."

"Now that you mention it," I said, "I could use a week or two of sleep."

"You go home, Judy."

"Oh, Stan, no."

"There's nothing better for you to do. I'm going to work on these letters. I'll call you as soon as I find anything. And double lock your door. Remember someone has the keys."

"I won't let anyone in," I said, "except the Waltzer. And, Stan—"

"Yes?"

"Be careful, Stan. And call me soon. I'll worry."

WORRY was a mild word for what I did. I found myself at home sitting beside the telephone, talking to it. I swore at it, I threatened it, I pleaded with it to ring. At last I decided to take a bath. If I got in the tub it would ring. It did.

"Stan!" I said. "Are you all right? Where are you?"

"I'm all right so far," Stan said. His voice was grim. "I'm at the library. Listen, Judy—"

"At the library! Why?"

"There isn't time to tell you why now. Judy, you've got to go back to the school."

"The school! Darling, I can't! It was just luck that I got away with it before. If anyone sees me—"

Stan interrupted. "You've got to. You've got to get some information for me right away. If Wendell Kipp shows up for his lesson find out from him what

business he's in. Ask him how business is. And ask Linda Webb where her husband came from."

"Her husband?" I said. "I didn't know—"

"I don't have time to explain. Get those answers and phone." He gave me the number of the phone booth. "I've got to hang up now, Judy. Good-by."

"Stan, what—"

But he had hung up. I dressed quickly and left the apartment. I found that I was nervous, more nervous than this undertaking justified. The asking of two foolish, unrelated questions shouldn't have bothered me but they did. There had been something about Stan's voice, an urgency that disturbed me. In fact I was more than disturbed. I was frightened.

CHAPTER IX

The Waltzer



I stepped cautiously out of the elevator into the reception room. Linda was at her desk but in front of her stood Lanning, his back toward me. I turned back to the elevators, as though I were waiting for one to take me down. Behind me I could hear them speaking, their voices low and secretive. Then I heard Lanning walk hurriedly away. I turned to Linda. She looked at me, her eyes widened in astonishment. She seemed about to scream and I put my finger to my lips and shook my head vigorously.

"Linda," I said, "I've got to talk to you alone."

She whispered, "You! We thought that you—"

"Linda, quick! Where can we talk?"

She looked distractedly about her. "Studio K is empty, but—"

I took her arm and pulled her along to Studio K. I led her into a corner where we could not be seen through the door's small window.

"Linda, I'll explain everything later—why I'm not dead, where I've been,

everything. But first you've got to help me. Linda, where did your husband come from?"

She looked at me blankly. "From Pennsylvania. He was born there and—" She stopped, frowning. "Why? What difference does it make to you where Charles came from?"

"Charles!" I said. "Your husband was—it was your husband who killed himself."

She looked at me and the color fled from her face. "How did you know that—that Charles killed himself?"

"I saw the note he left."

"You found his note? You were at Anita's then. You found it there?"

I nodded.

Her hand grasped my arm, her sharp nails bit into it. "What did you do with it? You haven't given it to the police?"

"No, I've put it away. It's all right."

The grip on my arm relaxed. "If they were to see it now," she said slowly, "after all that I've gone through, all that I've paid—"

"You paid Anita?"

"Yes, of course. For nearly a year now."

"But why, Linda? How could she use a suicide note."

"Nobody knew it was suicide, nobody but Anita and I. I didn't know either at first. The doctor said his death had been caused by an accidental overdose of sleeping tablets and nobody ever questioned his decision. Charles had been ill. I knew he was unhappy—but that he would kill himself! No, I never thought that."

"Then, how—?"

"Anita found the note. We'd been to a concert together. Oh, we were good friends then, Anita and I." Her lips curved in a little bitter smile. "She got me my job here. She took me under her wing. And she was with me when I went home and—and found Charles. She saw the note. She didn't show it to me, not to anyone. She kept it herself. She knew right away how she could use it. And she did use it."

"But why would it matter if the note were shown?"

"Because of Leonard Lanning. I'm in love with him. I have been for years. When Charles found out he did what he did. Now do you see? Leonard thinks his death was an accident. If he knew that Charles had committed suicide because of him—oh, I don't believe you know Leonard well enough to understand."

"Yes," I said, "I think I do."

"He would never marry me if there should be a single breath of scandal about it. Maybe you think he's selfish about his reputation. Perhaps he is. I don't know. It doesn't seem to make any difference to me. I happen to love him. I'd do anything to keep him from knowing about that letter."

"Yes," I said.

"Anita had that letter—and now you've got it."

"Linda," I said, "you mustn't think—Linda, the moment this murder is cleared up you'll get your letter back. I promise you will."

"Yes," she said. "I believe you."

"There's something you can do for me, Linda. I've got to talk to Wendell Kipp. Will you send him in here when he comes?"

"Why do you want to see him?"

"I can't tell you now. Will you do it for me?"

"Of course," she said.

I waited until she was back at her desk, then I darted across the corridor to the phone booth. I called Stan.

"Stan," I said, "Charles was Linda's husband?"

"I know. Where was he from?"

"From Pennsylvania."

"Did Linda admit that Anita was blackmailing her?"

"Yes. It was because of Lanning. He thinks Charles' death was an accident. If he knew it was suicide it would have made a difference to him. He's afraid of scandal."

"You're a good girl, Judy. I love you."

THE line deadened with a click as he hung up. I replaced the phone and went back to Studio K. Wendell Kipp was standing in the middle of the room.

His eyes popped when he saw me.

"Thank heaven," he breathed. "Thank heaven!"

"Yes, isn't it nice? My being able to be here."

"I thought you were—I thought the Waltzer had got you."

"No, the police asked me to pretend that. Strategy, you know. They've made me do all sorts of things and I—I'm so tired. I've been working so hard. Do you work hard, Wendell?"

He smiled waggishly. "I don't overdo it. All work and no play, you know!"

"What do you do, anyway, Wendell? What business are you in?"

"A lawyer, my dear. I'm in a law office."

I knew that he was lying, that law was not his business but only the first profession that sprang into his mind. But I had to be sure. I said, "Oh, did Linda give you your phone message?"

"No. What message?"

"I guess she forgot. Your partner, Mr. Fuller, wants you to call him."

Something happened to Mr. Kipp's face, something that was subtle but frightening all the same. He hadn't budged, yet I felt that he was moving in on me. Involuntarily I stepped back.

"Fuller," Kipp said slowly. "Fuller."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I think—"

I took another step back and I saw his shoes—dark red-brown shoes with sharply pointed toes. It had been Wendell Kipp hiding in the locker room. I stood still, remembering his hands as they found me in the darkened locker room. I couldn't bring myself to raise my eyes to his.

I said, "Shouldn't you call him? It might be important."

I forced myself to look up. He was smiling at me, a jeering, derisive smile. He straightened his bow tie with a flourish.

Still smiling, he said, "Yes, of course. If you'll excuse me I'll do it now."

With a little bow he turned and left the studio. I watched him through the peephole as he walked down the corridor past the phone booth and out into the reception room. Two teachers were

moving down the hallway and I ducked quickly away from the window. I turned back into the studio and my eyes fell on the piece of paper on the floor.

I was reaching out my hand to pick it up when I saw what it was. It was a picture of me, my own eyes looked up at me, my own lips smiled up from the floor. It was the same kind of white cardboard that I had found in Anita Farrell's dead hand, it was drawn with the same quick penciled lines.

I knew that if I turned it over there would be the same face again, my face. I drew back my hand; I started moving backwards, away from that thing on the floor, until I was huddled against the mirrored wall behind me.

This was what had happened to Anita Farrell. She had closed the door behind Stan, she had turned and seen the paper on the floor. She had picked it up and instantly she had died. But the paper wasn't poisoned, there was no trap concealed beneath it. Anita had been shot. Then why?

I knew why. I had had the answer all along. The grillwork in the ceiling was the answer. If she had been shot from there, shot in the back as she bent over to pick up that picture of herself, the angle of the bullet would have been as the killer wanted it. It would have seemed to have entered her body on a line parallel to the floor.

No one could have fired such a shot from the false ceiling above the room. The murderer would have had to be someone who stood in the studio with her. The murderer would be her last pupil, the Waltzer.

The killer was above me now, waiting for me to touch the drawing, to move into the position he wanted. I made my eyes look into that black checkered square of ceiling.

I could see nothing behind it but blackness. And yet the killer was there watching me, waiting for me to touch the trap he had set, waiting to shoot.

But I wouldn't touch it. By now, I suddenly realized, he must know that I had stumbled on the truth, that I wouldn't touch it. And I understood now

why he hadn't already sent a bullet crashing into me.

He was waiting for me to move, to step out from the wall. Flattened against it as I was, with the small iron squares of grill between us, I was out of range of his gun.

I looked toward the door. To reach it I would have to pass close to the grillwork. I would make myself an easy target for him. My eyes circled the room, the shining, mirrored walls, the black knobs that were the music regulators, the telephone—

The telephone hung on the wall beside me only a few feet away. I started inching toward it, my back glued against the wall, my eyes fastened on the black hole above. My hand touched its smooth coldness and I raised it to my lips.

"Linda," I whispered. "Linda!"

There was no answer. Frantically, I jiggled the hook. "Linda," I said again, "Linda, please!"

The phone on her desk had rung. It buzzed automatically when a studio phone was lifted. Linda was there, she had to be there. I glanced at my watch. It was five-thirty, the classes were changing now. She would be assigning new pupils to studios, calling teachers, scribbling appointments in her book. She was always at her desk when the classes changed, she had never left it before—except once.

I REMEMBERED that once and my hand, clutching the black receiver, fell limply to my side. I remembered sitting in the reception room that afternoon as the classes changed. I remembered the pupils moving toward the elevators, the beautiful blond receptionist, her purse under her arm, hurrying away and then, a minute later, Stan swinging down the hall.

I knew then why the telephone went unanswered. Linda Webb wasn't there to pick it up. She was huddled above me, a gun in her hand, watching me, waiting for me to move.

The sharp sound came from the grillwork. I saw the disc in its corner, the plate that was the loudspeaker start to

move, to inch back from the grill that held it. When it was pried off there would be room for a hand to extend into the room and aim the gun it held at me.

At first I thought the voice I heard was coming from the loudspeaker. It was blurred and metallic, a man's voice. Then I knew that it was closer to me, right at my side.

The phone almost slipped from my fingers as I raised it.

"Please," I said, "please, hurry . . . this is Judy Coulter in Studio K and— and hurry—whoever you are—"

"This is the Waltzer," a familiar voice said, "and I'll be right there. . . ."

* * * * *

The lights in the Rosewood Room were low, the music soft. It was just the place for a girl to spend her fifth wedding anniversary. I watched the waiter refill Stan's glass, then do the same to mine.

I said, "Let's drink a toast, Stan. To that policeman."

"Which policeman?"

"The one who arrested you outside the library, of course! If he hadn't picked you up and brought you up to the school—if you hadn't heard the phone on Linda's desk ringing—"

"Don't think about it," Stan said. "Shall we dance?"

"There are still a few more things I want to know. For instance why did Linda want to kill me? Of all people?"

"Because of the suicide note. In protecting me you led her to think that you were the only one alive who knew about it now that she had killed Anita. You

were a threat to her. You might figure out sometime that the note was a phony."

"A phony? Stan, maybe you'd better start right at the beginning. How did you know it was phony?"

"Well, there was a date on the note, remember? And I was able to look up the story in the files at the library. It wasn't much of a story. Charles Webb had died accidentally from an overdose of sleeping pills. He was thirty-three. He had gone to college at Bucknell, then studied law. Well, a boy from Kansas can go to Bucknell but—"

"What, Stan? Slower."

"Judy, there is a Pittsburg without an H in Kansas. There is a Pittsburgh with an H in Pennsylvania. The suicide note spoke of the Kansas Pittsburg—no H. Well, boys from Kansas do go to Bucknell. But more boys from Pennsylvania go there."

"I see. So that when Linda said her husband came from Pennsylvania you thought the note was a fake. You know he wouldn't have spelled his own home town wrong."

"Right. And Linda told you that Anita was blackmailing her because of that note. So I wondered if maybe Linda hadn't written it herself—after she had murdered her husband—and if that wasn't why she was willing to pay blackmail."

"But Linda said—"

"I know. She said she paid it because of Lanning. But that didn't ring very true. I doubted if even Lanning would give the girl he loved the air simply be-

[Turn page]



3 good reasons why men prefer

**WILDROOT
CREAM-OIL
HAIR TONIC**



EASY TO USE
NO WASTE
OR SPILLING
HANDY FOR
TRAVELING

cause her husband committed suicide.

"But if she had killed her husband—well, that's another thing. She'd pay blackmail to keep that quiet. She'd kill again to keep it quiet. And that's exactly what she had to do."

"She admitted everything?"

STAN nodded. "The whole, sad story. It seems our Linda is a mercenary creature. After she married Charles and it began to look as if Charles would never make much money Linda didn't love him anymore.

"She fell in love with Leonard Lanning, who has lots and lots of money. Poor Charles wouldn't give her a divorce, so she did the only thing she could. She slipped him an overdose of sleeping medicine and wrote a nice suicide note for him.

"It turned out the note was unnecessary and, when Anita got her hands on it, it was also her undoing. Linda knew that if she ever married Lanning she'd have to pay Anita even more blackmail. Her marriage wouldn't ever be safe. So she killed her."

"Just as she would have killed me," I said, "if I had picked up that picture."

"Yes. The picture was a nice touch. When a person sees a picture of himself on the floor he picks it up. It's irresistible. And Linda had drawn on both sides of the card so that it didn't matter which way it fell."

"But how did you figure that out, Stan?"

"I didn't. All I knew when I went up to the school to meet Dawson at four o'clock was that Linda Webb had good reason to have killed Anita, that she had murdered once before and that she wasn't at her desk when the murder was committed. But I certainly couldn't prove that she had committed this mur-

der nor how she had done it. You did that for me."

"Bless me," I said. "And bless me again for having my brainstorm before I picked that picture up." I took a long sip of wine. "Stan, what about Kipp and his business? Did you want to know where he got his money to pay blackmail?"

"Yes, I had a hunch that the woman with him at the Feather Club was his wife. Kipp wouldn't be seen with anyone like that unless he was married to her. He is and she's a very wealthy baby. Every cent Kipp has comes from her.

"If she ever learned that he loved someone else she would have given Kippy the gate and he wouldn't have liked that. He wouldn't have wanted to give up all Mrs. Kipp's money. He might even have murdered Anita to keep his hands on it."

"Frankly, Stan, I like you better than Kipp. Any man who would knock out a girl—he was looking for Kathy's keys, too, wasn't he?"

"Yes and I don't blame him for being annoyed when you beat him to them. Judy, for the last time. Shall we dance?"

"Natch," I said.

Stan led me to the floor. He put his arm around me. I snuggled up to him. I closed my eyes and we were dancing.

Then, suddenly, my blood turned cold. Stan was waltzing! People would see him, they would know who he was. I listened for the cry of recognition—"The Waltzer!" I tried to disengage myself from him but he held me tight.

I opened my eyes. The floor was crowded with couples. They were all waltzing. The music—I realized then that all evening the orchestra had played nothing but waltzes. When Stan learned to dance he started a craze. The waltz was sweeping the country,

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

MURDER HAS GIRL TROUBLE

A Book-Length Mystery Novel

By WADE MILLER

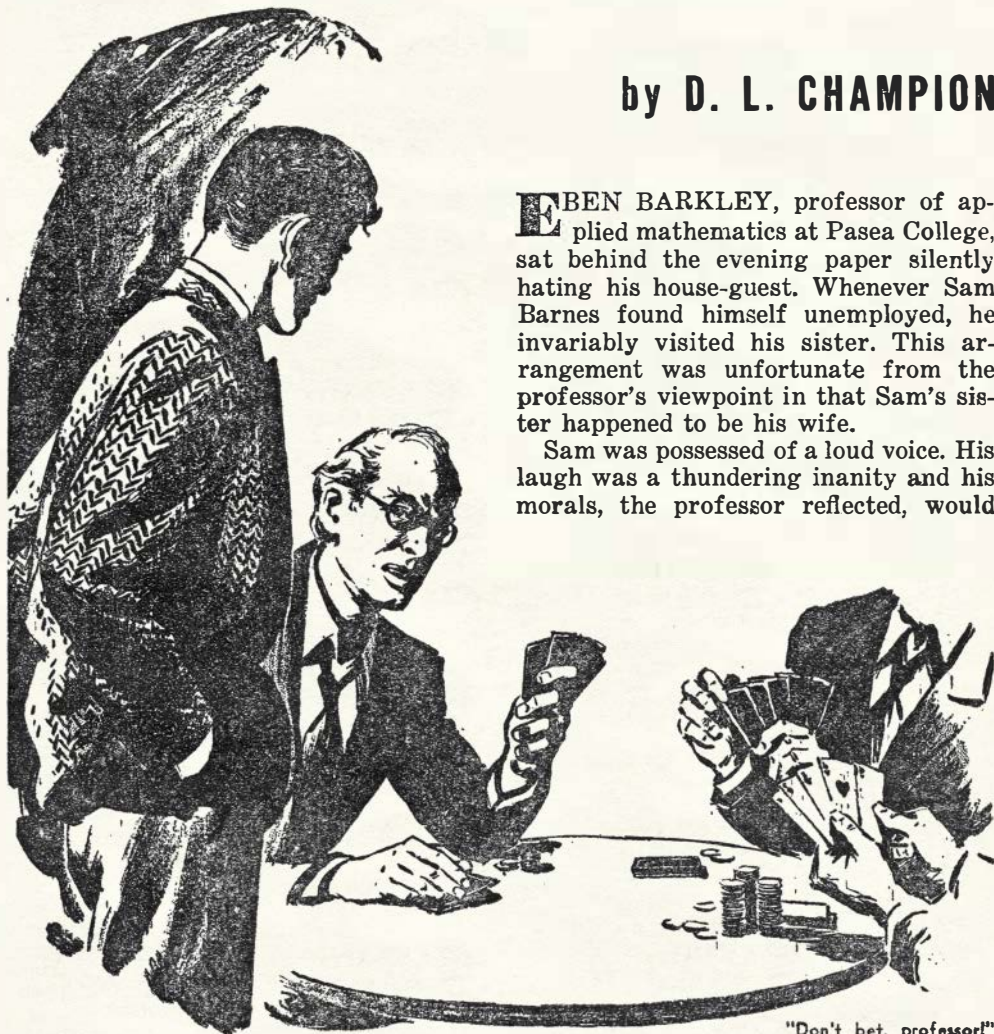
How

CAN YOU LOSE?

by D. L. CHAMPION

EBEN BARKLEY, professor of applied mathematics at Pasea College, sat behind the evening paper silently hating his house-guest. Whenever Sam Barnes found himself unemployed, he invariably visited his sister. This arrangement was unfortunate from the professor's viewpoint in that Sam's sister happened to be his wife.

Sam was possessed of a loud voice. His laugh was a thundering inanity and his morals, the professor reflected, would



"Don't bet, professor!"

Mathematics professor Eben Barkley had the game of poker figured down to a science, and his system could not fail—or so he thought!

furnish grounds for gossip in a jungle.

At the moment, Sam was attaining a high number of decibels in reviewing the events of the afternoon.

"So I get in a poker game with these suckers, Sis. They know nothing of the fine points of the game. But they out-luck an expert like me. I drop a hundred and a quarter."

Maria Barkley said sympathetically, "That's too bad, Sam. You're so much cleverer than those stupid loungers at the poolroom."

The professor bristled. Normally, Maria was a sensible woman whose opinion of tinhorn braggarts coincided with his own. But she was putty in Sam's wonderfully manicured hands.

"Poor, poor Sam," said Maria. And this time the professor's gorge rose high.

He lowered his paper. He said in his precise voice, "I fail to see how even a fool can lose money at poker."

"Huh?" said Sam. "How's that?"

"It is simply a matter of percentage."

"What do you know about poker?"

"Nothing," said the professor. "However, I can master it in fifteen minutes."

SAM'S grin failed to lower the professor's blood pressure.

"And after that," Sam said, "I suppose you'd clean up?"

"I would not clean up, as you put it. However, I wouldn't lose."

"How do you figure that?"

"Obviously, if I am playing with reasonably intelligent men who also have mastered the percentages, no one would win. Theoretically, everyone would finish absolutely even to the cent."

"You'd lose your cap, gown and shirt," said Sam, and brayed like an amused mule.

The professor had never been so angry in his life and his anger betrayed him. "Very well," he said. "Tomorrow afternoon I shall master the mathematics of poker. Tomorrow night I shall play."

"Well," said Sam, "you're a member of the Rotor Club. There's always a steep game there. Detin, the lawyer, is always getting something up. I always

wanted to crack that game myself."

"I shall look into it," said the professor.

"You be careful," admonished his wife. "You don't know as much about cards as Sam."

"I know vastly more of arithmetic," said the professor with dignity and took himself off to bed.

On the following evening, the professor made his desire known to Detin. Detin, a portly man with a cherubic countenance, regarded the professor oddly for a moment, grinned. "Good," he said. "We need a fifth hand."

"Thank you," said the professor. "I hope I've brought enough cash."

"You don't need cash. I'm the banker. I keep a tally sheet and we pay by check at the end of the game. It's stiff, though. Two hundred dollar limit."

"I do not expect to lose," said the professor with quiet confidence.

But at twenty minutes to twelve there was a thirty-five hundred dollar hole in the professor's bank account and an even larger one in his theory. In spite of his new knowledge of percentage, Andrews, who sat next to him, appeared to be winning all the money.

The professor glanced swiftly at the stacks of chips around the table. Detin was in almost as deeply as himself. Wexley, the hardware merchant, was losing even more. Manners, the third player, a guest of Detin, played cautiously, but still wasn't ahead. Only Andrews, a pale, thin man with long tapering fingers, was a winner.

The professor, who had begun with a king in the hole, acquired another king during the deal and challenged Andrews. After losing to aces, he had a queasy sensation at the pit of his stomach.

The monetary loss was bad enough, but Sam's mocking laugh was going to be worse. Moreover, the loss was something Maria would remember as long as she remembered the multiplication table. She would see that the professor didn't forget it, either.

Manners, opposite him, said suddenly, "Gosh, I should have phoned home an hour ago. Excuse me."

He left the table and Detin said with heavy humor, "Well, with one less, I've more chance of winning."

"True," said the professor pedantically, "but the pots will average less money, so it comes to the same thing."

But the pots didn't average less money. They were fat with blue chips and a great many of them were the professor's. The queasiness in his stomach was now definitely bilious.

A FEW minutes later, the professor was prepared to plunge. He had a six in the hole and two other sixes showing. Andrews' face cards were a nine, a four and two eights. The professor reached for his last stack of chips.

A voice behind him said, "Don't bet, professor. Andrews will beat you."

The professor blinked behind his glasses and looked up. Manners had returned and was standing by the professor's chair.

"He will beat you," said Manners, "because he has a third eight, the eight of clubs in the hole. You, professor, have the six of hearts. Detin's hidden card is the jack of spades and that of Wexley the queen of clubs."

They all stared at him. The professor blinked again. The reading of hole cards was not covered in his studies of percentage. He said in astonishment, "How do you know?"

"Because," said Manners. "The cards are marked. I've learned to read their backs in the past few hours."

Andrews broke the taut silence. "Who marked them?"

"You did," Manners said.

Andrews took the accusation calmly. "That's impossible. We've used several decks, all of which have been brought to us, sealed, by the club steward."

"That's an old gimmick," said Manners. "You marked the cards. You resealed them, gave them to the steward to deliver whenever we called for them. You gave him two hundred dollars for his trouble."

Andrews lit a cigarette. "This," he said, "will require some proof."

"I have it," said Manners. "You see,

Detin, here, hired me to expose you, Andrews. My real name is McDonald. Mike McDonald. You may have heard it before. My profession is exposing gambling cheats. I'm a card detective. Detin framed this game as he'd suspected you for some time. I've spent the last fifteen minutes with the steward. I've confiscated the remainder of the phony cards in his possession. Moreover, a threat to call in the police broke him down. He's admitted his part in the conspiracy."

Andrews crushed out his cigarette. "And do you call the police for me, too?"

Detin stood up. "No," he said. "We don't want a scandal. But you'll resign from this club and every other club in the state. We'll circularize them. Also I suggest you leave town."

Andrews stood up, avoiding the four pair of eyes staring at him. He strode from the room and closed the door quietly behind him. Detin walked around the table and stood behind Andrews' towering piles of chips. In his hand he held his tally sheet.

"Well, gentlemen," he said. "It's not too odd that all of us, save Andrews, finished in the red. Naturally in a situation of this kind all losses are returned. No one wins. No one loses." He ripped the tally sheet in two and dropped it in the basket. "Sorry to have wasted your evening, gentlemen, but it was in a good cause."

The professor stood up and his fingers trembled slightly as he polished his glasses. As he left the club, some slight nervousness was yet upon him. By the time he reached his house, his assurance had returned. He hummed a little melody under his breath.

Despite the late hour, his brother-in-law was awaiting him as he entered the living room. "You took a heck of a time getting home," said Sam impatiently. "What did they take you for?"

The professor looked puzzled. "Take me for?"

"Yeah. How did you make out in the game?"

"Oh, that," said the professor with a fine careless gesture. "It's just as I told you. I came out even—to the cent."

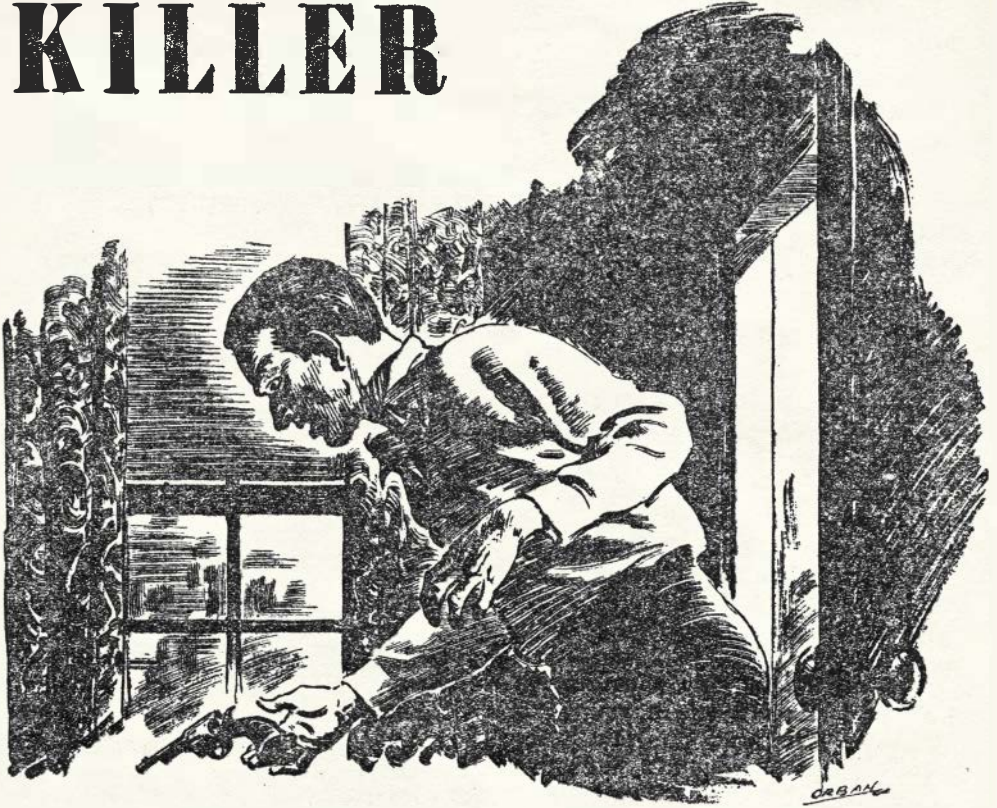
PORTRAIT of a

Fred Garlin was surprised to find that Detectives Rand and Winslow were luscious cover-girls—but he was due to be amazed by the deadliness of their kiss!



Both twisted. The gun-
cock was sharp in her
ears

KILLER



a novelet by **ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT**

CHAPTER I *Shamusettes*

HE was heavy set, his hatless hair grizzled, and something very like fear glimmered in his gray face. Holding the door open, he peered uncertainly about the office.

It wasn't a very big office. It was just about large enough to hold two varnished pine desks with their swivel chairs and a chair apiece for clients, and an olive-green filing case. Everything was very new and very neat, including the flowered chintz slipcovers on the chairs and the matching drapes at the single big window.

Behind one of the desks sat a girl with hair the color of pale honey and eyes the deep blue of cornflowers. The one behind the other desk was not precisely a girl. She was crowding thirty, the type called "wholesome."

There was no one else.

The man's eyes fumbled back to the lettering on the door's frosted glass half panel:

RAND & WINSLOW
Confidential
Investigators

"I guess I've made a mistake," he apologized. "I thought—well, I stepped into the lobby downstairs to get some

cigars at the stand and noticed the new name on the directory and I thought it meant you were private detectives."

"That's what it means," the blonde girl smiled. "That's exactly what it does mean. Do come in."

"Thank you, but I can't wait." He looked both disappointed and relieved, like someone who's been told the dentist is busy. "I'll come back some other time when Mr. Rand or Mr. Winslow is in."

"Oh," the blonde girl exclaimed, her eyes rounding. "There isn't any Mr. Rand. Or any Mr. Winslow either. You see, Mr—?"

"Garlin. Fred Garlin. I own the Crown Haberdashery across the street. Next door to the bank."

"Really!" The way she said it, he might have announced that he was president of the Standard Oil Company. "It's a lovely store, Mr. Garlin. Really lovely."

"Thank you, miss. I must get back to it. I—"

"What my friend was about to explain," the dark one broke in, rising, "is that we are Rand and Winslow." Her voice was deep for a woman's, but somehow warm and pleasant. "She is Beth Rand and I'm Martha Winslow."

"And we're the detectives," the blonde girl added.

UP out of her chair, too, the blonde girl was graceful in a pale blue sweater that revealed intriguing curves and a gray skirt that did not reveal nearly enough of shapely legs sheathed in smoky nylon.

"We thought confidential investigators would look better on the sign," she explained.

"I see," Garlin muttered, edging out. "But I left my clerk alone in the store and he's new and doesn't know the stock. I've got to hurry back."

"You can spare another moment or two," Martha Winslow said, coming toward him. She was squarely built, almost chunky in her decorous black dress, but she was as feminine in her way as Beth Rand. "You came up here because you need help, didn't you?"

"Yes." He couldn't close the door in her face. "Yes, I suppose I did."

"But you've decided not to ask us for it, now that you've discovered we are women." There was the faintest hint of rebuke in her smile. "May I remind you that as a youngster it was your mother you always went to with your troubles, and she always helped you. And now your wife—"

"I have no wife," Garlin broke in. "She passed away ten years ago when Larry—when our son was only twelve." A muscle knotted at the corner of his jaw. "I don't think this would have happened if she were alive."

Martha's eyes widened, but only slightly. "Exactly," she said. "Your mother and your wife were the ones you relied on for help, and they never failed you. They were women, Mr. Garlin. What makes you so sure two other women cannot help—Larry?"

His gray face was startled. "How do you— What makes you think it's Larry—?"

"Who's in trouble? I know it is. When I reminded you of your dead wife, you thought of him, and that he was only twelve when you lost her." There was deep understanding, and compassion, in her tone. "And then you said that if she'd lived this might not have happened." Her hand on his arm urged Garlin toward the chair beside her desk, and he did not resist. "You've been blaming yourself for whatever it is that's happened to him. You've been thinking that she would have done a better job of bringing him up than you have."

"I had to be in the store all day," he said drearily. "Six days a week." Letting Martha press him down into the chair, he sighed. "He would be in bed by the time I got home. I never had a chance to be a real father to him. But he always was a good boy."

"Of course," Beth exclaimed, looking at him from the middle of the floor. "Of course your Larry was a good boy."

"A little wild, perhaps. He used to get into quite a good deal of mischief when he was little, but nothing really bad."

Resuming her own seat behind the desk, Martha murmured, "All small boys worth their salt get into mischief and some of them keep on when they grow up, only then it gets them into trouble." She straightened her desk blotter. "Please close the door, Beth, and lock it so nobody will interrupt us while Mr. Garlin tells us about the trouble his son Larry has got himself into."

The interruption came before the blonde girl could quite get the door shut, but it was only momentary. It took the form of a T-shirted urchin who appeared in the doorway and handed her a folded newspaper.

"Here's your *Courier*, Miss Rand. It just come an' I brung it right up, the way you said I should."

"Oh thank you, Jimmy," she smiled. "You're sweet to remember." Then she had the door closed and was coming toward Garlin. "Your son's the handsome young man I saw in your store yesterday, isn't he? The one with the curly red hair."

"No. That was Ben Cavell, my new clerk. Larry's hair is black, like his mother's." Watching Beth perch herself on the other end of Martha's desk, the old man sighed. "He wasn't in the store yesterday. I don't know where he is. I haven't seen him or had any word of him since last Wednesday."

"And this is Tuesday," Martha observed placidly. She straightened her desk blotter and asked, "What are you afraid the police might find out about your son if you reported to them that he disappeared almost a week ago?"

Garlin stared at her, his blue-veined hands twisting at the ends of the chair's arms.

"We can't help you," she said, "unless you tell us. You can, you know, rely on us not to betray your confidence."

THE heavy-lidded, tired eyes moved to Beth's face, studied it. They saw a tip-tilted, saucy nose, velvet lips a little parted, breathlessly. They saw a blunt and resolute small chin and a clear, frank look. Fred Garlin sighed again.

"Yes," he said, "I can rely on you. I can tell you."

Larry, he told them, had returned from the Army some months ago unhappy that all his onerous training had wound up only in years of dreary occupation duty. He'd refused to go back to college, had refused to pick up with the old friends he'd lost track of. Taking over as clerk in his father's store, he'd made a trio of new acquaintances who, to the old man's mind, were worse than none at all.

"Walt Durstin," Garlin named them, "Henry Strang and Phil Fator. My best customers, but—well, all through the war they'd be around for weeks and then disappear, and when they showed up again they'd be rotten with money. They told me they were in the merchant marine but all the time ships were being sunk right and left nothing ever happened to them and after V-J day they kept right on the same way and spent even more than before.

"Larry brushed off my warnings. He spent his lunch hours with them and most of his evenings, in the bar of the Continental Hotel where they live, and he talked a lot to me about the adventurous life they led and how he'd like to ship out with them."

"Maybe that's what he did," Beth suggested. "Maybe he did ship out with them without telling you."

Garlin shook his head. "No. They're still around, and when I got hold of them Thursday noon, in the Continental Bar, and asked if they knew why Larry hadn't come home, Durstin told me they hadn't the slightest notion."

"He told something more," Martha Winslow murmured. "I can see it. Something that frightened you."

The fear smoldered in Garlin's eyes. "Yes," he admitted. "Durstin told me that if I knew what was good for Larry, I would go back to my store and keep very quiet about not knowing where he was. It wasn't so much what he said, but the way he looked saying it, that made me afraid."

"Afraid," Martha nodded, "that if you asked the police to hunt for your

son, they would discover he was involved in something criminal." The long, whispering breath Garlin pulled in was assent enough. "And so you want us to try and find him for you."

"Can you?" the tortured question came. "Can you find Larry without bringing the police into it?"

She was silent for a long minute, two pairs of pleading eyes on her. Then, "We'll do our best, Mr. Garlin."

The old man's sigh was one of relief now, and Beth's eyes were two shining blue stars. Martha asked a few questions that elicited nothing more significant than what they'd already heard.

"It would help," she wound up. "if we had a picture of your son."

"The only one taken since he grew up is on my desk in the store. I'll send it up to you." Garlin hesitated. "What—what are your charges, Miss Winslow?"

"Twenty-five dollars a day," Martha smiled. "And expenses."

"And we really ought to have a retainer in advance," Beth added. "Like a lawyer, you know."

"Naturally." The old man dug out of the inside breast pocket of his coat a well-filled wallet. "Will a hundred dollars be all right?"

"Quite." Martha took a card from the desk's long top drawer. "I'll write your receipt on this. It has our phone number on it. Please call us at once if you have any word from Larry or about him."

"I certainly shall," Garlin said, rising.

BETH went with him to the door, shut it and pirouetted across the floor, her arms flung wide in elation.

"Our first client, Martha! Our very first and it was wonderful the way you made him actually beg us to take his case. Wait till Bill hears about it." She reached the desk and snatched up the newspaper, started flipping pages. "He'll be twice as glad he wrote about us in his column."

"He did what!" Martha exclaimed. "Oh, Beth. How could you?"

"I didn't, Martha. I didn't even know about it till Bill told me last night that

it was going to be in the *Courier* today." The blonde girl flattened pages on the desktop. "Here it is."

It was a double column, mastheaded "THE WAY I SPELL IT" and by-lined, Bill Evans. A small cut was inset of a school slate on which was sketched, white lines on black, a roundish face, spectacled and good humored. But what the firm of Rand & Wilson read was the first three paragraphs of text:

THE WAY I SPELL IT this Tuesday, October 13th, is s-h-a-m-u-s-e-t-t-e. The feminine gender of *Shamus*—Okay, teacher. Private detective to you.

Our fair city now boasts not one but two of said shamusettes. How come? Well, up to when they were busted to civilians the gals were Corporal Beth Rand and Sergeant Martha Winslow, of the WAC. They'd been attached to Military Intelligence and, meeting again recently, they figured that since they'd once learned how to be pretty fair sleuths, why not make a living out of it now?

They mean business, students, and that's not spelled m-o-n-k-e-y b-u-s-i-n-e-s-s.

"The way I spell Evans," Martha said indignantly, "is a-p-e."

"Bill's trying to help us, Martha." Beth looked as if she were about to cry. "He has faith in us, which is more than you can say of that flatfooted cop you're carrying a torch for."

"Is that so?" the older girl flared. "Dan Teller may not like what we're doing, but you know darn well he'd give us a hand any time we need— Which reminds me. We need him right now." She jerked the phone to her, dialed a number. The burr of the ringing signal cut off and she said, "Lieutenant Teller, please. Detective Lieutenant Dan Teller."

The receiver emitted sundry clickings, rasped harshly. "This is Martha, Dan. I—"

A minor hurricane exploded at the wire's other end.

"I don't like it either," Martha murmured meekly, "but it's in the paper and that's that. Tell me, Dan, what do you know about a Walt Durstin and his pals? We've got a case that involves them, and—"

The tornado blasted again. Subsided. "I see. Look. Why don't you come to

dinner tonight and we'll talk it over? . . . Good!" Martha cradled the instrument.

"What did he say?" Beth asked eagerly.

"That no girls in their right minds would get mixed up with a trio like that and that if we don't drop the case he'll personally see to it that our licenses are revoked."

"He wouldn't dare!" Beth blazed. "He—" She broke off, her eyes widening. "Would he, Martha?"

"Maybe he would if he could. But he can't." A wistful smile tugged at the corners of the dark girl's mouth. "Still I kind of love the big lug, and he's really in a stew about this."

"That's why you promised to talk it over with him. But you didn't promise him we wouldn't do anything about it till we did."

The smile broke through. "No, Beth. I did not."

Beth's sudden grin was impish. "I'm awful hungry all of a sudden, Martha. And I've heard they serve the most luscious Business Men's Lunch at the Continental Bar. What say we go there, right now?"

"At eleven-thirty! What an unearthly—The Continental!" Martha broke in on herself. "You know, Beth," she chuckled, "every once in a while I suspect that you do have a brain behind those lovely plucked eyebrows of yours. Well, what are we waiting for?"

"For me to fix my face," Beth Rand replied demurely. "My father always said a good mechanic makes sure his tools are in A-one condition when he goes on a job." Going to her desk to collect the requisite paraphernalia, she added, "We'll pick up Larry's picture on the way."

CHAPTER II

Death at Noon



THE CROWN Haberdashery was all glass showcases and chromium fixtures. Far back the vista was repeated in a partition that was one vast mirror. Near it a bleached walnut desk was huge enough

to furnish lumber for both of those in Rand & Winslow's little office. The desk's leather-backed swivel chair was shoved against the mirror as though its occupant had jumped up to wait on a customer and sent it skidding back.

But no one was in the store—except Martha Winslow and Beth Rand. They came to an uneasy halt where a green crown was inlaid into gray linoleum midway of the floor's length.

"Do you think he went out, Martha?" Beth's voice was very low, barely more than a whisper. "Do you think he went to lunch?"

"Leaving the door unlocked and no one to watch the shop?"

Martha got moving again. Plodding noiselessly toward the rear on her low heeled, stub toed black oxfords, she reached the desk and stopped there. Beth came up beside her, high heels clicking. Martha took hold of the blonde girl's arm with fingers that trembled a bit and with her other hand pointed to the dull black cash register that crouched at one end of the plate glass desktop.

The register's drawer juttied out, open. There was some silver in the change compartments but the longer ones that should hold bills were empty.

"That explains it," Beth whispered. "When Mr. Garlin came back here from our office he found that his new clerk had run off with the money and he was too excited to lock the door when he went to report it to the police."

"Why didn't he phone them?" Martha gestured to the telephone at the desk's other end. "Why did he—" Her fingers tightened on Beth's arm. "What's that?"

NEXT ISSUE

CLAWS OF THE PEACOCK

An Exciting Crime Mystery

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The dull thud came again, from the mirror. Someone was pounding the partition it formed, from behind. Martha went around the desk's end, saw her reflection jump as the mirror was jarred by another thud. She pawed at it and could find no joint. A curious, choked gurgle pulled her around to Beth, rigid just behind her, one sweated arm angling stiffly out and down toward the desk's dark kneehole.

It was large, that hole. It was large enough easily to contain that which had been crammed into it, and to have concealed it, had not a blue-veined hand slipped into light.

"I kicked it," Beth whispered. "I came around behind you and I kicked—" She took hold of the desk's edge and peered in under. "It's Mr. Garlin, Martha."

The heavy set form was doubled up, sidewise to them, and the gray head was jammed down on bent up knees. Back behind the ear they could see the grizzled hair was darkly blotched by an ooze of fluid that had not yet quite dried.

Beth put her pocketbook down on the floor. She found the wrist of the dangling arm with her fingertips and held them there. The muffled thump thudded twice more against the partition. Beth released the wrist, picked up her pocketbook and straightened, her eyes blue ice in the still, white cameo of her face.

"He's dead." Martha put into toneless words what she read in Beth's face. "You phone the police while I find the clerk. That's who— Oh, I see."

She'd spied the swinging door in the sidewall that obviously was the way to get behind the partition. She reached it and pushed it inward and stepped into a narrow, dim space, a landing from which stairs slanted down on her right to a dark basement.

On her left, however, was a brighter opening and it was through this that the pounding came to her. Turning that way, she found herself in a shallow backroom cluttered with packing cases and piles of cardboard boxes. It was dingily lit by an iron-barred window

high up in its rear wall. The wall at this end was the unplanned wood of the partition's back and looking along it Martha saw ankle-lashed legs kick at it.

Copper colored wisps of hair protruded from the plaid wool muffler that was wound around the head and over the eyes of the man who lay on his back and kicked at the partition, his arms twisted under him.

HE stopped kicking as Martha knelt and pulled down over his chin a necktie, a softly glowing emerald, that held a gag in his mouth. She dug out the wet wad of silk handkerchiefs and he made incoherent noises, trying to talk.

Tugging at the blindfolding scarf, she said, "You're Ben Cavell, aren't you? Mr. Garlin's clerk."

"Yes," he got out. His face was long, narrow, and the eyes that blinked dazedly at her were almost effeminately long-lashed. "What," he gasped, "what did he do to the boss?"

"He?" Martha shoved at him, rolled him on his side, his back to her. "Who?"

"I don't know," Cavell husked as she went to work on the russet tie with which his wrists were bound behind him. "I—Mr. Garlin was waiting on a customer and I had my back to him, putting away some gloves that had just come in." The tie was of some rough textured fabric that refused to slip. "First thing I knew anything was wrong was when something hard jabbed my spine and someone said, 'This is a gat, bub. Freeze.' I froze, all right, and then this soft stuff was winding over my eyes. Then hands turned me around and the gun prodded me in back here. The guy didn't say anything. He just gagged me and tied my wrists and shoved me down on the floor and tied my feet."

The clerk's voice was thin, quavering. "I heard him walk away," he continued, "and then I heard the cash register ring. When the front door slammed, I started hitching myself toward the partition here and when I heard the door open again I started kicking at it."

Martha wondered why she had not heard Beth dial the phone, why the

blonde girl was not coming back here to her.

"Why did he blindfold you?" she asked. "You'd seen him when he came in, hadn't you?"

"Yes. Yes, I had, I suppose." Cavell sounded uncertain. "But I couldn't tell you what he looked like except that he was kind of short. You know how it is in a store. A customer comes in and if somebody else goes to wait on him, you don't give him a second look, so he's just kind of a blur to you."

"Even if he's someone you know?" Martha persisted. "Even if he's a regular customer, like Mr. Durstin?"

The clerk jerked under her hand. He must have heard, an instant before her, the pound of heavy footfalls behind Martha. She went cold all through as a deep-chested voice growled:

"What the devil put it into your head that I had anything to do with this mess?"

The man who loomed above her was huge, but his was a hugeness of bone and muscle, not fat. His brown hound-tooth suit was beautifully cut, his tie a swirl of harmonizing burnt umber and his wide brimmed hat a darker shade of brown. The face shadowed by the hat's brim also was brown, the leathery brown to which sun and wind tan skin. It was all broad planes and there was in it a dark and frightening violence.

Her fingers still mechanically working at the knot, Martha fought the terror that clasped her throat, but before she could speak, the menace faded out of Walt Durstin's countenance, was replaced by a taunting smile.

"Just where did you get the strange notion that I had anything to do with this stickup?"

"But I haven't." The knot had yielded and Martha scrambled erect, leaving Cavell to free his ankles himself. "Mr. Garlin once mentioned your name to me as that of a good customer, and I merely used it as an example." And to distract Durstin from the weakness of this excuse, she countered with a question of her own. "How do you know this is a stickup?"

"What else could it be? I come in to look at some gloves Garlin told me he'd be getting in today and nobody's in the store. I see the cash register's been cleaned out and then I hear voices in back here and come in and you're untying Ben." The big man's hands spread in a gesture that indicated it was obvious. "Where, by the way, is Fred Garlin?"

Martha bit her lip, remembering. "He's outside there," she said. "Under his desk. Dead."

"The devil you say!" Durstin heaved around and lunged back the way he'd come and Martha, following, heard the red-haired clerk's feet stumble clumsily after her.

The door to the store's front already was swinging shut on its spring when she got to it, but she batted it open again and saw the big man stooping to peer under the desk.

Saw only him. Beth was nowhere in the shop.

AS Martha reached the desk's nearer end, Durstin straightened up, let his masked look slide past her to Ben Cavell.

"All right, Ben," he said. "Get that sick calf expression off your phiz and go lock the front door before your lunch hour trade starts barging in on us."

He watched Cavell get started past the gleaming showcases, turned to Martha. "You called this in to the cops yet?"

"I didn't have time." She plucked the phone from its cradle, slashed the dial around.

The ringing signal burred in her ear, cut off and a gruff voice said, "Police Headquarters."

"Lieutenant Teller, please. Tell him Miss Winslow's calling and it's important."

The diaphragm clicked. Durstin was looking at her, silent, his face as still as Beth's had been when she'd announced that Garlin was dead. Martha recalled what had brought her and Beth here in the first place and she let her eyes rove the desk's plate glass top. Between the phone at this end and the open register

at the other were only an ebony fountain pen set with an electric clock between the two upslanting pens, a pile of what looked like bills, face down, and a scratch pad with some doodlings on its top sheet.

The angle at which the light from above fell across the glass made distinct its fine powdering of dust, and in the dust, just beyond the pen set, was a line about six inches long where none had gathered.

"For Christmas sake," Dar's voice rumbled in her ear. "What is it this time?"

She swallowed, said, very calmly, "Murder, Dan. I came in here to the Crown Haberdashery about those three ties I asked you about this morning, and I found the proprietor had been murdered."

"The three ties? Why so cagey?"

"In the Graymore Building, near Third and Jefferson. The clerk wasn't hurt, just tied up, and there's another customer here, a Mr. Durstin, so I'm not afraid to wait till you get here."

"I got you! Hold the fort, kid. I'm practically there now."

Martha hung up, fumbled open the bag that hung by a strap from her shoulder. "I—I must look a sight."

Durstin ripped a sheet from the scratch pad and started tearing it across and across as she dabbed at her cheeks with the lambswool pad from her compact. Cavell stumbled back to them, his pupils dilated. His mouth worked and words spewed from it.

"I could have been killed too. I don't understand why I wasn't."

"You didn't see the holdup man," Durstin said. "Garlin did."

"Yes. He could identify—" The red-tatched head jerked to the muffled wail of a siren.

Through door glass Martha saw a green roadster veer out of traffic. It halted, slantwise to the curb, and two uniformed patrolmen leaped from it.

"Your Lieutenant Teller's radioed a prowler car here," Durstin growled. "Go let them in, Ben."

Cavell started away from them again

and the big man started to stuff into the side pocket of his jacket the shreds into which he'd torn the scratch sheet.

"Look at that mob!" he exclaimed. "You'd think they'd popped out of the sidewalk."

The clerk hadn't reached the door yet, but the pavement out there already was black with a shoving crowd and noses flattened, white with compression, against the windows' plate glass. Out of the corner of her eyes Martha saw Durstin pull his hand out of his pocket again, the bits of paper still in it, and throw them into the wastebasket someone had moved out of the desk's knee-hole to make room for the corpse.

Ben Cavell opened the door, let in a yammer of excited voices, and the two policemen.

Now Martha Winslow could let herself try to think what Beth could possibly be up to.

CHAPTER III

The Spider's Parlor



AS BETH RAND had started to reach for the telephone a flutter of falling white had caught her eye and she'd glanced down to see what dropped from her pocketbook. Then she was bending to

pick up the tiny scrap of stiff paper that had stuck to the bag's turquoise plastic when she'd put it on the floor, freeing her hand to feel for the dead man's pulse.

A rectangle with two cut sides and two torn ones, it was even smaller than the jigsaw puzzle pieces she loved to fit together into a picture. But it was big enough to hold a date, ink-written in Martha Winslow's meticulous small script: *13 Oct 49*.

Staring at it, Beth became aware that the thuds against the mirrored partition had ceased. She heard Martha's voice through it and a man's voice answering, and knew by their timbre that Martha did not need her. Her narrowed

gaze went to the desktop on which a father had said his son's photo stood.

It was not there. That fact became another piece of the design that was forming behind the penciled blonde lines of her eyebrows.

The pieces of this puzzle would not, like colored bits of plywood, wait for her to pick and fit them into a picture. The picture these pieces would make when assembled was the portrait of a murderer and ~~he~~—they?—would in feverish haste be hiding those pieces that still were missing. Would be destroying them. Larry Garlin was one of the missing pieces. He was the key piece that, above all others, must be put out of reach of those who would try to solve the puzzle.

Martha had told her to call the police, but that would mean interminable questions, delay that well might be fatal. If some customer came in, she'd have to call the police. Even to go back behind the partition and tell Martha what she'd decided would waste critical seconds.

Beth made up her mind. She left the store. She passed the bank next door, and turned the corner. From a tower clock somewhere the first stroke of noon welled through traffic roar, and the office buildings past which she hurried began disgorging their lunch hour crowds.

At the end of the long block the gray granite steps of the old Continental Hotel, still holding its ancient site against the incursion of trade, were clustered with girls and women waiting impatiently for their luncheon companions. Just beyond the steps was the booth-like, decorous street entrance to the Continental Bar.

Narrow, high-ceilinged dimness within held the malty aroma of beer and the spicier tangs of whisky and gin. Only a few men as yet stood at the long and ponderous mahogany bar. Farther back the room widened and there waiters hovered among round tables, for the most part still unoccupied. A short, rotund man came toward Beth, sparse hairs pasted across his pink scalp, the shape of a professional smile painted on his heavy jowled pink face. He met her

opposite the far end of the bar, and planted himself in her path.

"Sorry, miss," he said regretfully but firmly. "Ladies are not served here."

Her blue eyes rounded. "But you're wrong. You must be wrong, because Larry told me to meet him here. 'Any time, Beth,' he said. 'Any time you feel like letting me buy you the best lunch you ever ate, you'll find me at the Continental Bar.'"

SHE could feel the eyes of the drinkers on her, knew without looking what their expressions, their thoughts, were.

"It isn't that I need him to buy me a lunch," her artless prattle continued. "Honestly it isn't. Any time I want a fellow to take me to lunch, or to dinner if it comes to that, there're dozens who'd jump at the chance. Only I haven't heard from Larry for days and days and when I went in his store this morning to buy some handkerchiefs for my boss, old Mr. Garlin told me—"

"Maybe I can help you out, girlie." The man who'd stepped over from the bar was about Beth's own height, hawk nosed, oddly bleak about the thin mouth so that the grin he tried to make winning was anything but that. "I'm a friend of Larry Garlin's."

"Are you?" Beth's tone intimated doubt, intimated that she was not a girl to be picked up by any Tom, Dick or Harry. "Are you really?"

"I can vouch for that, miss," the pink-faced man said. "This gentleman is Mr. Fator. Mr. Phil Fator."

"Oh yes!" She was all genial warmth again. "You're the ship captain or bos'n or something who tells him all those thrilling stories. Larry thinks an awful lot of you and—and Mr. Strang and Mr. Durstin. He really does."

"We think a lot of the kid ourselves," Fator said, grinning.

The pink-faced man said, "Excuse me," in a relieved tone and went toward a group coming in from the street, big men, well-dressed, the "executive type."

"We think Larry's pretty swell," Fator was saying. "He—What did you say your name is?"

"Beth Rand." Her fingers went to his sleeve. "I'm worried about him, Mr. Fator. I really am. On account of what he told me last time I saw him. He told me—"

"Look," he broke in. "Why don't we go to the Washington Room right here in the hotel and talk about it while we have lunch? It's right across the lobby, you know. Right out this door. Come on."

He was moving toward the side door he'd indicated, his shoulder pressing her toward it, deftly, but they had to pause to let some of the newcomers pass. One of them stopped, grinned broadly.

"Hi, Phil. Long time no see."

"Not since last night," Fator responded, dryly. "You forget quick, Oscar."

"Can you blame me?" Oscar's admiring look was on Beth, but Fator ignored the obvious hint, and the other fell back on a question he quite evidently had no real interest in. "What do you like in the fourth at Jamaica?"

"Flyaway. She's a good mudder and it's raining in New York, according to the *Courier*." A tiny muscle flicked in Fator's sallow cheek. "Be seeing you, Oscar."

He got Beth to the side door and pushed it open. They crossed the noise and bustle of the crowded lobby.

A bellhop wandered by intoning, "Mr. Ingermann. Call for Mr. Charles Ingermann."

Fator slowed, said, "I just got a brain wave. Why don't I have lunch sent up to my room and we can talk there without a bunch of nosenheimers butting in. How do you like that?"

Beth made the slowing a complete stop. "I don't," she said. "Not that I'm not sure you'd be a perfect gentleman, but it wouldn't look nice if somebody who knows me saw me going to your room with you."

"There's nobody here knows you. They'd have said hello or waved or something by this time." His hand fell away from her arm and slid into his coat pocket and bunched there. "And your picture wasn't in the *Courier*. So,

ex-Corporal Elizabeth Rand, there's a gimmick in my pocket says you're coming upstairs with me."

BETH'S smile didn't fade. "You wouldn't dare use it here. With all these people around, you wouldn't stand a chance of escaping."

"Maybe not." Fator was smiling too, crookedly, and little worms of light were crawling in his black pupils. "But somebody might get hurt if they tried to stop me. That kid with the doll, looking at the souvenirs on the cigar stand over there, might get hurt or maybe that cute gal whose guy's brushing rice out of her coat collar. You never can tell who'll get in the way of lead when it starts spraying around."

Breath whispered out between Beth Rand's red lips. "All right," she sighed. "I came here asking for it, and I guess I've got it. All right, Mr. Phil Fator, I'll go up to your room with you."

Steering Beth into an elevator that had just emptied, Fator snapped to the white haired operator. "Take off, Tom. Fast."

The gate clanged shut and the cage leaped upward with only the three of them in it. Fator's hand—his left, the right still was sunk in his pocket—touched the old man's gnarled one and something green passed between them. Tom leered at Beth, chuckling knowingly.

"You don't have to worry about your old man, darling," Fator said. "Tom here has an awful good forgettery."

The car eased to a stop. Its gate rattled open, clanged shut again, and no one was in the long, door-lined corridor down which they moved. Beth wet her lips with the tip of her tongue.

"You didn't have to bribe Tom to forget your bringing Larry Garlin up here," she said. "He wouldn't remember just another man in a crowd."

"Tom wasn't on—" Fator caught himself, but she'd found out that she'd been right in her guess. "You better skip Larry, sweetheart," he was saying. "You better start worrying about yourself."

"I am. Really I am, but you're worrying about me too, aren't you? About what to do with me. After all, the men in the bar saw me leave there with you and they'll remember."

"That," he murmured, stopping her at a door that had the number 611 on it, "will be taken care of. There are ways. Go on in," he directed. "It ain't locked."

It was a typical hotel suite living room. Heavy maroon drapes hung at the two windows, maroon broadloom on the floor was worn in spots and ponderous armchairs were upholstered in a dark green, hard napped plush. The odor of stale tobacco smoke was explained by the butts overflowing a heavy bronze ash tray on the oval table that centered the room. On a simulated mahogany writing desk against the wall to Beth's left, beside a phone, a newspaper was spread, open to the sports page.

A door in that wall was shut, as was another in the one to her right. The lock of the hall door clacked and Beth came around to Fator. He had his gun out now, a dull black revolver and a little smile of triumph hovered about his thin lips.

CHAPTER IV

The Missing Photo



"HERE COMES the big brass," grunted the policeman who'd stayed just inside the store door.

The one who'd herded Martha Winslow and the two men away from the desk at the rear said, "They sure made a fast run."

The sirens that were wailing outside moaned to silence. The crowd surged, opening a path from the curb. The cop at the door unlocked it and the first man to enter was almost as big as Walt Durstin, but his tweed suit did not ride his frame as neatly as the latter's brown one did, and there was not the same feel of suppressed violence about him.

As the others crowded in after him, he glanced anxiously about the store,

saw Martha standing alone near a showcase on the right. He came thudding hardheeled to her.

"You all right, Marty?"

She answered, equally low-toned, "Quite all right, Dan, but awfully glad you're here," and then her voice was sharp with surprise. "Why, here's Bill Evans! How in the world—?"

"This bozo phoned me practically in the middle of the night," Evans grinned, "to raise Ned about those paragraphs I gave you gals." His chubby frame and round shape made him look even younger than the six years difference between his age and Dan Teller's hardbitten thirty-three, but there was an expression of ageless worldliness about his brown eyes. "I offered to buy him lunch and spell out for him the sweet uses of publicity, and had just gotten to his office to pick him up, when you called. So," he shrugged, "I came along, figuring this thing might make a follow-up in tomorrow's column."

"You put any more about Marty in your column," Dan growled, "and I'll skin you alive." He touched Martha's cheek with the tip of a thick finger. "They want me back there, hon. I'll talk to you soon's as I get the chance."

Her eyes followed him as he strode off to where a little knot of men had clotted behind Garlin's desk. Several were uniformed cops, but she recognized Detective Sergeant Joe Fusco, of Homicide, and the warming realization came to her that this wasn't Dan's bailiwick, which was Gambling and Narcotics. He must have arranged with Lieutenant Moe Abrams to let him take over this call because she was involved in it.

"Where's Beth?" Bill Evans was asking. "Up in the office?"

"No, Bill," Martha looked for Durstin, located him across the store, leaning disinterestedly against another showcase. The red haired clerk beside him was not nearly as calm, not by far. He was chewing on his knuckles, his eyes wide and scared. They weren't near enough to overhear her, though, nor was anyone else as Martha went on, guardedly.

"I'm very much afraid Beth is busy getting herself in a mess."

"That would be nothing new for our Beth."

"No, but this time she's really got me worried. It's this way, Bill. Just before he was killed, Mr. Garlin employed us to hunt for his son Larry, who's disappeared. We came here to get a photo of the boy, a photo his father said was on his desk. It wasn't. It's missing, and I think Beth got the same idea I have, that this means what happened here is tied right in with our case. One of the three men Mr. Garlin thought might have some connection with Larry's disappearance is over there. Walter Durstin. The others are—"

"Henry Strang and Phil Fator." Bill's grin was gone. "I've heard things about that threesome and nothing good. Your guess is that—?"

"Beth's gone over to the Continental Bar, where Mr. Garlin told us they hang out, to try and wangle some information out of them about Larry."

"And that could be not pretty," the chubby chap nodded. "Why not get Dan to chase a couple of dicks over there to pick Beth up?"

"I can't." Martha's teeth caught at her lip. "I'd have to tell Dan why, and that would be breaking a promise we made to a dead man. Beth could hardly have found that threesome yet, Bill." She was reassuring herself more than him. "And even if she has, what could possibly happen to her in a hotel crowded with the lunch hour rush?"

"Nothing much." But his round face was worried. "I'll go get her out of there."

A PHOTO bulb flashed in the rear, and Dan detached himself from the group, was walking with a plain-clothesman Martha knew as Harry Lane toward Cavell.

"Oh, Lieutenant," Bill called. "I just remembered I've got to see a man about a trolley car. I'll ring you later and get the lowdown on this."

The policeman opened the door for him and locked it after him and Martha

went across to listen to what the clerk would tell Dan.

It was the same story he'd told her. The only thing he added, in answer to a question, was that there hadn't been much in the till.

"We always start with fifty in bills for change, but I don't think we took in more than twenty or twenty-five this morning."

"Making about seventy-five in all," Dan grunted. "Darn little to kill a man for."

"If," Durstin put in, "that is what he was killed for."

Dan glared at him. "Meaning what, mister?"

"Meaning," the big man responded, imperturbably, "that Garlin's son's been missing about a week and for some reason the old man was scared boneless to report it to you."

Martha saw Dan's head jerk to her, saw comprehension come into his florid face, but that didn't matter so much as her shock of surprise that Durstin should bring this into the open.

"Last Thursday," Durstin was saying, "Garlin told me Larry hadn't come home, wanted to know if I had any idea where he was. I told him I didn't and I reminded him that his son was a big boy now and had a right to treat himself to a night out without asking papa's permission. I pointed out that his making a fuss about it would be apt to make trouble between them."

It was, factually, very nearly what the old man had told them, but Durstin had given it a very different flavor.

And he'd beaten Martha to the punch.

"I found out my explanation had been a mistake," he went on, "when I came in here Saturday and Garlin said he hadn't yet heard from the kid. That was different, I said. I said it was high time he got the police on the job, and that was when he let it slip that he was afraid to. I got the idea that someone had got to him in the meantime and put the fear of the devil into him."

In the back of the shop the technicians had finished taking their photos and making their measurements and the uni-

formed policemen were hauling the corpse out from under the desk so the medical examiner could go to work on it.

"Did Garlin," Dan asked, "say anything to you about hiring a private detective to look for his son?"

Massive shoulders shrugged. "Not to me."

Dan looked at the clerk. "How about to you?"

Cavell's mouth opened, but nothing came out, and his pupils pulsed like those of a woman on the edge of hysteria. Was it delayed reaction, perhaps, from his experience? Durstin seemed to think so. He touched the clerk on the shoulder with a gentleness somehow incongruous.

"Answer the man, Ben," he said. "Tell him the truth. Did Garlin say anything to you about hiring a private eye?"

The youth found his voice. "Yes. He did say something like that when he stepped out, around ten o'clock."

Between them, Martha decided, they'd released her from her promise to the murdered man.

"It was us he hired, Dan," she said. "As you've already guessed. That's how I happened to find the body." She was free now to ask for help. "I was here to get a picture of Larry Garlin that the old man had told us he had on his desk. It wasn't there. I don't see it anywhere, but I've a hunch the killer didn't want us to get it and," she pulled in breath, "and that it's still somewhere in the store. Could you spare someone to look for it?"

DAN was angry. She knew by the way the veins stood out at his temples that he was very angry, but he merely grunted and turned to Harry Lane.

"See if you can turn it up."

"It's in a frame," Martha said, recalling the mark in the dust on the desk. "About six inches wide and probably nine inches tall. If I were you, Mr. Lane, I'd look for it on or near the basement stairs."

The plainclothes man nodded and went off.

"I gather, Miss Winslow," Dan rumbled, "that you were the first one in here after the killing."

"That's the way it seemed."

His dark eyebrows arched. "Only seemed?"

"Well I saw no one come out and there was no one in front here when I entered. I'd just noticed that the cash register had been rifled when I heard someone banging on the partition back there. I went back and found Mr. Cavell on the floor, tied and gagged and blindfolded. The first thing I did was to get the gag out of his mouth and he started telling me what had happened. Then Mr. Durstin came up behind me."

"Check," the latter interjected. "I'd come in to look at some gloves Garlin had promised he'd have for me today and like Miss Winslow I was puzzled that no one was out here. Then I heard the voices behind the partition."

The pit of Martha's stomach was fluttering, but she managed to keep her voice steady. "You should have seen someone out in front here, Mr. Durstin. You should have seen my partner, Beth Rand. We came in together and I'd left her at the desk, and there wasn't time enough for you to have come all the way through the store and into the backroom without your at least having met her at the door. You were already in the shop when we came in, weren't you?"

Cringing inwardly from the violence that flared into the big man's face, she went on, a bit breathlessly, "You were in that back room, tying Mr. Cavell up, when you heard the street door open and close. Beth's high heels clicked on the linoleum, but my flat ones didn't make a sound loud enough to carry through the partition and we spoke too low for you to hear us. You thought only one person had come in and darted down those basement stairs, figuring the customer would go back there to Mr. Cavell when he started kicking and that would give you the chance you needed to slip out and get away clear.

"It would have," she continued, "but you heard me mention your name to the clerk, and you had to find out why I sus-

pected you, so you came back there to me instead."

"Pretty," Dan Teller rumbled. "Very pretty, Marty," and Martha knew she was forgiven. He rounded on the glowering Durstin, asked, with mock politeness, "Do you mind if we frisk you for your rod?"

Not waiting for an answer, he nodded to a wiry detective and the latter stepped in, started pawing the big man's body. Dan moved closer to Martha.

"Maybe I was wrong, kid," he said, too low for anyone else to hear. "Maybe you'll make a first class shamus yet," and a glow of gratification at the accolade warmed her.

But it faded as the detective's hands fell away from their search and he reported, "No gun, Lieutenant. He's clean."

Cavell's thin squeal pointed up what that meant. "The killer had a gun. He stuck it in my back. I swear he did."

"Okay," Dan Teller said heavily. "So he ditched it. We'll turn it up."

But suddenly Martha knew that they would not.

CHAPTER V

Death Trap



BETH RAND'S fingers tightened on her bag, but there was no fear in her voice as she said, "You're not going to shoot me, Mr. Fator. You'd be silly to, because somebody would be sure to hear it, and even if they didn't, what would you do with my body? So I don't understand why you brought me up here."

He made his eyes wide. "I told you, didn't I? I told you it's a good place for us to talk."

"About what?"

"About you hunting for Larry Garlin, shamusette."

"He's here, isn't he? In a room behind one of these doors. Which one?"

It didn't work. He didn't glance at either door.

Standing about a yard and a half from her, the gun hanging at his side, he merely said, "Maybe he is. Maybe he's somewhere else. Wherever he is, he don't want his old man to know. He don't want him to know so bad that it's worth a nice piece of change to you and your partner if you'll tell Fred Garlin you've located Larry and he's okay, but he don't want him to know where he is."

This was a piece that didn't fit into the jigsaw pattern. It meant that Fator knew Mr. Garlin had hired them to look for his son, but he didn't know the old man was dead.

"Why, Mr. Fator? Why doesn't Larry want his father to know where he is?"

She didn't expect him to answer that, and he didn't. He said, "Five hundred bucks, sweetheart. Five hundred'll buy you and the sergeant a lot of swell clothes."

"That's what you think," Beth flared, indignantly. "Have you tried to buy any women's clothes lately? Why, this little rag of a sweater, just nothing at all, cost me eighteen eighty-nine."

"Sucker," he observed. "They must have seen you coming." He grinned and went on, "Five hundred still ain't hay, baby. That's all you get. You take it, or else."

Beth giggled.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

"You. You use all the right words from the gangster movies, and you even look right." She giggled again. "What would you do if I whistled?"

"Maybe you'd like to try?" Whitish pits had bloomed at the wings of his nose and the light worms were squirming again in his eyes. "This ain't a movie," he said, flatly. "This is for real. Here's a couple of things you can whistle about, if you want to. Like you saw, this time of day there ain't anyone in the hall to hear a gun go off, and the rooms both sides of this one belong to us, so no one in them will pay a *pop* any never mind. There's a trunk inside it'll be easy to fix so that with you stuffed in it, it'll sink fast when we cart it out of here and dump it in the river. As for Tom, for fifty bucks he'll remember, in case

anybody should ask him, that he took you down in his elevator, alone."

"You've got it all worked out, haven't you?" Beth still was smiling, but she held her pocketbook in both hands against her, and the fingertips with which she held it were white with pressure. "You really have."

"That's right. I really have. So are you playing along with us, or would you rather stop playing with anybody, ever again?"

Beth managed a shrug. "I haven't much choice, have I? The only thing for me to do is—*this!*"

Her arms lashed out and hurled the turquoise bag into Fator's face, and in the same instant she leaped toward and past him, but she'd seized his gun-wrist and carried it with her, forced it in now toward his spine as she pivoted to his back, hooked a leg across in front of his shins and levered his arm up.

THE neatly calculated application of momentum and fulcrum required little strength to throw Fator forward, his feet out from under him. Beth's two hands, clamped on his wrist, held it from following, and it was his own falling weight that tore shoulder ligaments from bone and wrenched a shrill scream from him.

She let go his wrist and watched him finish his fall, then gaped down in something like awe at his caught-fish floundering.

"I did it," she gasped. "I really did it. They made us practice it and practice it back when I was in the WAC, but I never believed I could do it for real." And then the walls of the room started to drift around her and the floor to slant up, and she had to grope for the back of an armchair and hang desperately on to it.

"Mustn't," she told herself in a little girl voice. "Mustn't faint. Got to go and find Larry. He's in—"

The voice died in her throat as the door in one of the sidewalls came open.

"That was a cute stunt," drawled the tall, thin man in shirt sleeves and no tie, who'd opened it. He pushed long fin-

gers through his black hair. "I'll remember not to let you get near enough to use it on me."

Beth swallowed, made the room stop whirling about her. The man in the doorway seemed older than twenty-two, what with the pallid skin drawn tight over a narrow, angular skull, but he did have black hair and he was here.

"Are you Larry Garlin?" she asked him.

His hand dropped from his head and his satiric smile faded. He seemed suddenly wary as he asked, "How'd you figure out I was here?"

"I wasn't sure, but I thought you might be. On account of the picture."

"What picture?"

"The one of you that wasn't on your father's desk in the store." If only Fator would stop moaning, on the floor there between them, she could think more clearly. "Your father told us it was, but it wasn't, and I decided that must mean you were still alive and somewhere we might run into you and recognize you. Otherwise there wasn't any good reason why it should have been taken away by the man who killed your father, and—"

"Killed!" The exclamation was a groan. "The fool!" And then the gaunt shape in the doorway was silent, was motionless except for the hand at its side that closed slowly to a joint-spread fist.

"Ohhh," Beth wailed, repentant. "I'm sorry. I meant to break it to you gently, but it slipped out. I'm dreadfully sorry."

He stared at her, but his eyes were unfocused. Blind. Phil Fator still moaned on the floor there, and the sound seemed a reflection of the bereaved son's agony.

"Who did it, Larry?" Beth asked. "Not Mr. Fator. He obviously didn't know about it. Was it Mr. Durstin or Henry Strang?"

He didn't answer, but his hand writhed open again and a sort of ague ran through his lank body, shivered it into motion. He prowled into the room and bent and picked up the gun Fator had dropped. Straightening, he looked

down at the moaning man for a long and terrible moment and then, very deliberately, kicked him in the head.

That stopped the fellow's moans, but it brought one to Beth Rand's throat instead. Just one.

After that, in the room, in the corridor outside the room's locked door, there was no sound.

Beth's throat was tight, so tight that it hurt. She massaged the hurt with icy fingertips and that eased the tightness enough so that she could ask:

"Why? Why did you kick him, Larry?"

HE looked at her and he saw her now. His long arm hung straight down, the revolver black at the end of it. His tongue licked lips gone gray.

"You wouldn't have lived long enough to spend the five hundred he was trying to terrorize you into taking." His voice was flat. Dead-sounding. "What he wanted was to get you to walk out of this hotel, alone, so he couldn't be hitched to the bullet in your brain, but he would have followed you, and you wouldn't have got far. You knew that, didn't you?"

"I guessed it was like that," Beth said. "It was plain he wasn't talking for— for you. If you really didn't want your father to have people looking for you, all you'd have had to do was phone him and say so." She glanced at the instrument on the writing table across the room and said, "I could have taken the money and played for a chance to call the police from the lobby, but I was afraid of what he'd do to you in the meantime, knowing I'd traced you here. I'd better call Martha now and tell her I've found you."

She pushed away from the chair to which she'd been clinging all this time and started toward the phone.

"Wait!" The sharp command pulled her around and the gun had jerked up. "We haven't got time for that." The febrile urgency in his voice was frightening. "Strang'll be coming back any second now. We've got to get out of here fast."

He turned to the hall door, twisted back again. "No. We might run into him. There's another way out. In there." His gun gestured to the door he'd come out of. "Quick!"

Beth hesitated an instant, was about to say something, but the gun motioned again and she thought better of it. She went through the door into a narrow passage on which a bathroom opened, faltered at the edge of a bedroom heavy with the odor of sleep and very dim with drawn blinds. A shaded lamp on the headboard of the nearer twin bed spilled a sharp half-cone of light on a propped-up pillow and the garishly colored cover of a detective story magazine that lay open, face down, on the rumpled spread.

Coming from the brightness of the living room, the bedlamp's light made the other bed seem almost black to her, but she had an impression that its blanket mounded darkly.

Before she could confirm this the voice behind her spoke.

"Go on," it commanded. "Straight ahead," and she was moving again, past the ends of the beds, toward a door directly opposite the end of the passage in which padding footfalls followed her.

SHE reached that door and grasped the knob, was aware that the footfalls had stopped.

"Open it," the voice ordered.

She did. She stared at a rank of men's suits, a bathrobe, neatly hung from a rod that ran across the top of a deep closet.

"Don't turn," the voice behind her ordered, the fever hot in it. "I'm not taking any chances with those judo tricks of yours."

Beth did not turn.

Her hand dropped away from the knob and fumbled to her suddenly constricted midriff.

"I couldn't fool, could I?" Distorted by stiff lips, her words sounded like a stranger's even to her own ears. "I couldn't trick you into letting me phone for help." The corner of her mouth twitched and she asked, "What are you going to do with me?"

CHAPTER VI

Blunt Instrument



WALT DURSTIN also knew that they would never find a gun that belonged to him in this store. His eyes were laughing at Martha, tauntingly. Then they slid past her, narrowing, and she turned to

find out why, and saw Detective Lane approaching. In his gloved hand was a rectangular, flat package wrapped in paper that was smudged with gray dust.

"That the picture?" Dan demanded.

"Could be, sir. I found it where Miss Winslow said to look, wedged in between the siderail of the cellar stairs and the brick wall, halfway down."

"Open it up."

Lane put the package down very carefully on top of the showcase by which they stood. He fished out a penknife, slit the dabs of Scotch tape that sealed the paper folds and used the point of the knife to lift them. Glass glittered in the light. Dan grabbed Ben Cavell by the elbow, dragged him over.

"Is that young Garlin?"

The photo was of a young man in Army uniform, a sergeant's triple chevrons on its sleeve. Shown full length, his stocky frame gave promise of becoming as heavy set as the older Garlin's in middleage, and already the resemblance was unmistakable in the broadly oval, somewhat petulant countenance.

"Well," Dan growled. "Is it?"

"I—I don't know," the clerk stammered. "I never saw him. I only started working here last Saturday."

But Durstin volunteered, "It's Larry all right, and I can tell you how this picture got where it was. I just remembered that as I went through that door my foot hit something on the landing and I heard it skid down the stairs."

"And a gremlin caught it," Dan grated, "and stuffed it in between the side of the stairs and the wall. Well, we'll soon find out who that gremlin was. You don't seem to know it, Mr. Durstin,

but we can bring up fingerprints on paper these days as easily as we can develop them on glass."

A muscle knotted in the big man's leathery cheek, but what his comeback would have been Martha was not to know. Just at that instant a gangling, shabbily dressed little man shambled up to the group, wiping his hands with a Kleenex that had been soaked in some pungent antiseptic.

Dan rounded on him, demanded harshly, "Okay, Doc. Let's have it."

The medical examiner peered at him through thick lenses. "Death occurred from forty-five to ninety minutes ago, Lieutenant. The cause was trauma of the cerebral tissues resulting from a compound fracture of the sinistral occipital—"

"Meaning his skull was bashed in," Dan interrupted, "at the back on the left side. By the usual blunt instrument, I suppose."

"With somewhat sharp edges, from the way they lacerated the capilliferous epidermis." The twinkle in the physician's pale eyes was enormously magnified by his glasses. "Cut the scalp, to you. I've given the removal ticket to Sergeant Fusco, so if you've nothing more to ask me—"

"I have," Martha exclaimed. "I have a question to ask you, Doctor, if I may."

He peered at her as if she were some unique entomological specimen. "You may ask, young lady. Whether I shall answer is another matter."

"Naturally. Look there, Doctor." She pointed to a wall-section, a few feet toward the rear, that was built up of long, narrow drawers. "The way the clerk's told it to us, he was putting away some gloves in those drawers and Mr. Garlin was waiting on a customer right behind him. That's what you said, Mr. Cavell, isn't it?"

Cavell's Adam's apple worked up and down in his throat. He nodded, wordlessly.

"There isn't room," Martha went on, "for three men behind that showcase. If the killer had come around behind it, you would have known it, but you told

me that the first you knew anything was wrong was when he stuck his gun into your back. If that's so, he must have hit Mr. Garlin from in front of the case. What I'd like to ask you, Doctor, is if you think that with that wide case between them, one man could have struck another at the back of his skull hard enough to fracture it."

"Hmmm." The physician rubbed a meditative thumb along his jaw. "I dare say he could." Martha's heart sank. "That is, if he had an arm about four feet long and fitted with an extra elbow joint. Otherwise no."

"Got it!" Dan grunted. He heaved around to Cavell. "There never was any gun in your back. The two of you worked this kill together and then staged a phony holdup to cover it. With Durstin out of here and you blindfolded, you would both have been in the clear, since you couldn't describe the bandit if you hadn't seen him." He thrust his face almost into the clerk's. "Which one of you was it kept the old man talking while the other slugged him from behind?"

"With what?" It was Durstin who asked that, the taunting smile back that had been on his face when Martha first had peered up into it from her knees. "The way you've got it figured, neither of us ever got out of the shop, so where's the blunt instrument that cracked Garlin's skull?"

"In here somewhere. We'll find it if we have to rip the place to pieces. I—" Dan choked, whirled to Sergeant Fusco, who'd tugged at his sleeve. "What the devil are you butting in on me for? Don't you see I'm busy?"

"Yes, sir," the swarthy detective responded, imperturbed. "But this is something you ought to know, Lieutenant. Right now."

"What is it?"

"Just that we've got what killed the old man, and it ain't what you'd rightly call an instrument at all."

MARTHA saw Durstin's hand go back behind him to the showcase front, saw his palm rub the glass.

"What I mean," Fusco continued, "is

we noticed that one leg of that swivel chair back there looked a little cleaner than the other three, like it had been washed. So we looked it over good and underneath the end of that leg, right where the caster is screwed to it, we found a speck of blood and a hair stuck to it. A hair, sir, that matches the stiff's. And the way that leg end's shaped matches the dent in the skull."

Fusco's face was impassive, his tone respectful, but an evasive something about him was saying, plainly, "This is what happens when an amateur takes charge of a homicide case. If Lieutenant Abrams was here, he wouldn't have made the fool of himself that you have."

Dan understood. His skin went four shades darker with suffused blood and his neck corded. Martha wanted to say something to help him over the bad moment, could think of nothing, but Walt Durstin saved her the trouble.

"Okay," Durstin said. "I was dumb enough to think I could get away with a fast one, but I was wrong. I was in here when Garlin cracked his skull on that chair leg. It wasn't murder. It was an accident."

That pulled Dan around to him, master of the situation once more. "That's where you're wrong, mister. Dead wrong." He grinned, triumphantly. "If you knock a man down and his head hits something, even if you don't mean it to, and he's killed, the law still calls it homicide."

"Agreed." The big man actually appeared to be enjoying this. "But I didn't knock Fred Garlin down. I wasn't anywhere near him when it happened, nor was Ben Cavell. Ben was putting those gloves away, out here, and I'd just come in the door."

"He just slipped, huh. He just committed suicide by banging his head on that chair leg, and you didn't want anybody to know he'd done the Dutch so you staged all this hocus pocus to make it look like murder."

"No." Durstin's smile deepened. "Someone was scuffling with the old man when he fell and was killed, and it's that someone we tried to cover up.

But he didn't have any intention of harming Garlin, so—"Ben and I may be guilty of obstructing the police investigation of a death, but we're not even accessories to a homicide, because there was no homicide."

"Who," Martha asked, her heart pounding, "who was scuffling with Mr. Garlin when he was killed?"

"His son, Miss Winslow. Larry Garlin. And by this time he's where you and the police put together will have Satan's own time finding him."

"Now we're getting somewhere!" Dan Teller grunted. "All right, Durstin. Since you've decided to stop lying, suppose you tell us exactly what did happen here."

"I'll be delighted to," the big man responded, still amused. "Larry's being missing was on my mind this morning so I decided to come around before lunch and find out if there had been any news of him. As I come in the door who should I see but the youngster himself, back there at the desk squabbling with his father."

Martha wasn't listening to this. She was going back past the showcases with their brightly colored displays, past the long wicker basket into which policemen were putting a body, but Durstin's deep voice followed her.

"I'd got to just about here," he was saying, "when Larry yelled, 'Give it to me, curse it!' I see he's grabbed this package and is trying to pull it away from the old man, but Fred Garlin's hanging onto it and the youngster's pulled him half up out of his chair. The next moment the kid wrenches it loose and his old man flops down, but he kind of misses the chair seat and it goes skidding back and he keeps on down, grabbing at air. Then the desk hides him from me."

BEHIND that same desk Martha upended the wastebasket. Wadded circulars spilled out of it and crumpled envelopes, and the ripped halves of a catalogue. And, in a miniature snowfall, some tiny shreds of paper.

"There's a nasty sounding crunch," she heard Durstin saying, up front. "I get to Larry and his eyes are like two black holes in his chalky face and he yammers at me, 'I couldn't let him give my picture to the police, Walt. I couldn't.'"

"I shake some sense into him and he tells me why. He's in a tough jam and has to skip town, and if you cops get hold of his photo, every hick constable in the country will have it, so he'll be sure to be picked up when the thing breaks. Well, I've got no use for you bulls, and I like the youngster, so I tell him to get going. I tell him I'll take care of the old man—neither of us know yet that he's dead, think he's just knocked out—and ditch the photo, and between us we'll cover up for him.

"Larry's broke. That's why he's taken the chance of dropping in here, for get-away money. I scoop out what's in the till and hand it to him, and that's what gives me the idea of faking a stick-up when the kid's gone and I find out I've got a corpse on my hands.

"I pound it into Ben's head that he's in as bad a spot as I am and that if we work it right we can both get out of it. We would have got out too—" Durstin let a note of bitterness come into his tone—"if it hadn't been for that blasted she-shamus and her questions."

"That she-shamus," Martha murmured, returning, "is still asking questions. What she'd like to know now is why you tore into little pieces a certain receipt she herself wrote this morning."

The big man went still, abruptly, his jaw ridging. "What receipt?"

"The one I gave Mr. Garlin for his hundred dollar retainer. On our business card. Why—" Martha pressed him—"did you tear up that card?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Martha looked at Dan. "Didn't you say a few minutes ago that you can develop the fingerprints on the paper the photo is wrapped in?"

"Right."

"Then you can also bring them out on the little pieces of card I just spilled

out of the wastebasket back there. If you do, you'll find Mr. Durstin's prints on them, overlaying any others."

She turned back to the latter and resumed, wearily. "Back then when I was calling Lieutenant Teller, it struck me as odd that you should be ripping up a sheet from the scratch pad. That was the act of a neurotic, and you obviously were far from one."

He'd fought so hard and so shrewdly that she was almost sorry for him, but she reminded herself of how a grizzled head had been jammed ruthlessly down on bent knees.

"Just now it came back to me how when the prowler car arrived you'd started to stuff the pieces into your pocket, but pulled your hand out again and threw them into the basket instead, and I decided to go see if you'd thrown something more in with them. You had. The bits of our business card that if they'd been found in your pocket would have given the lie to the story you already were concocting behind that mask of yours."

Martha put her hand on Dan's sleeve and the contact gave her strength to go on. "There was some truth in that story, but very little. Mr. Garlin would have told us if you'd advised him to ask the police to hunt for Larry. You lied about that and you lied about Larry's being in this store today. Larry would have no reason to tear up the card his father was copying our office number from, onto the wrapping of the photo, because he'd have no reason not to want the police to find that card and through it learn from us what the old man had told us. To learn—" she made it clearer—"that even if Fred Garlin's death was an accident it came about as a result of his son's being kidnaped, and so under the law is murder.

"The man who did have that reason was you, Walt Durstin."

Someone exclaimed, "I'll be darned," and someone else, "She's got him."

But it was Dan's voice Martha heard, rumbling, "Good girl." Saying, almost humbly, "You've been a mile ahead of me from the start."

She could not let that pass. "Only because I knew some things you didn't," she said. "You've been leading him on beautifully, Dan, letting him hang himself with his tongue, but you hadn't heard the old man tell us how Mr. Durstin looked last Thursday when he warned him not to report Larry's disappearance to the police."

He must have looked as he did now, his mask crumbling once more to let the terrible violence of him show through.

CHAPTER VII

Framed for Killing



FROM THE CORNER of her eye Beth Rand saw on the inside surface of the closet door a shadow of a shadow that told her the gun behind her was lifting. Her hands were pressed to her slim

waist as though in some way they could stop the shot that would come from behind.

And as though words could stop the man from firing it, she was saying, "You're making a dreadful mistake. The penalty for kidnaping may be only ten years in prison, but for murder it's death."

"I know," the voice behind her agreed, the fever hot in it, "but Walt Durstin's my partner in this thing and he's killed a man." This, then, must be Henry Strang. "In this State, that tags me for the chair too, and so I've got nothing to lose any more, and maybe my life to gain." The sound in the pause that intervened was very like a sigh. "Get into that closet, Elizabeth Rand."

That was why he'd brought her in here. He was taking no chances of his shot's being heard by someone passing through the corridor. The closet would muffle the sound of his gun and afterward he need only shut and lock its door to make of it a vertical coffin, and he would have gained precious minutes for his escape.

Beth bit her lips and stepped into the cubicle. The clothing with which it was filled blinded her, rasped her cheeks, wrapped around her. She twisted.

The gun crack was sharp in her ears.

The look of surprise on Strang's face was almost ludicrous. His gun thudded down and he folded down after it, slowly, as if his joints were melting.

Beth stepped out of the closet, her hand bruising itself on the butt of the small, flat automatic it held. Her pupils dilated, pulsing, she stared down at the huddle on the floor. A dark stain crept from the gash diagonal across Strang's left temple, but his nostrils fluttered and his breast rose and fell shallowly. She had not killed him. Her snap shot had come within a quarter inch of missing him entirely.

Her mind fumbled back to the pistol range in the Pentagon Building, to Master Sergeant Roberts, who would have bawled her out for so poor a shot. There was a whimper in the room, and it did not come from Strang.

A chill, prickling pucker at the nape of her neck, Beth looked for its source. Her eyes found the bed whose headboard did not hold a lighted lamp, found the black-haired head that lay on its pillow, eyes that were smoot-smudges thumbed into a face pallid as the pillow staring at her.

"Where?" a shadow voice whispered. "Where did the gun come from? You didn't have it when you went into the closet. Where did you get it from?"

"From here." She touched the waistband of her skirt, where the sweater bloused over it. "When you need one, you need it in a hurry, and you can't get it out of a pocketbook in a hurry. So," she said, starting to move toward the bed, "I sewed a little pouch in here for mine and when he made me get in there, I had the chance I'd waited for to pull it out. I've known he wasn't Larry Garlin ever since he kicked Mr. Fator. You are, aren't you? You're Larry."

"Yes," he answered, trying to push up, so feebly that Beth exclaimed, "Don't! You're sick, aren't you?"

"No."

BUT as she reached the head of the bed, the youth sank down again. "They told the chambermaid I was sick, but I'm not. I'm just full of dope." A wan smile brushed his colorless lips. "Which is better than being dead, I guess. Phil wanted to kill me and slip me out of here in a trunk, but Hen said it was too risky and Walt said if they doped me and kept me here I'd come in handy when they finished the job."

"Walt Durstin?"

"None other. He's got a mean temper, but he sure can think up the angles." Durstin, Beth thought, is still left. He may be coming back here any minute. I ought to get Larry out of here quick. But the drug-thickened mumble held her. "This one sure is a beaut. They're going to keep me till they pull the job and then they're going to take me aboard ship with them as a sick Spaniard going home. No one'll blame them if Senor Whoozis gets delirious some night and climbs out a porthole. See? I'll have disappeared, so it'll be me the cops'll look for, and they'll be in the clear."

That's why Durstin took the picture, Beth thought. If the police broadcast it after some big crime, they couldn't get Larry aboard any ship without risking his being recognized.

"They told me I was lucky," he maundered on. "They were going to let me in on their last big job because they needed my help."

"For what, Larry? What did they need your help for?"

"To let them into the store nights, so the cop on the beat would think I was taking inventory or something. I said I wouldn't have any part of it, and Walt came back with okay, that wouldn't stop them. They knew Dad wouldn't play with them, but any clerk he hired to take my place would be glad to pocket a couple of grand just to cover them a couple of nights while they dug a hole through the cellar wall."

No. Oh, no. It didn't make sense. He was just dreaming it up. "Why ever would they want to dig a hole through your cellar wall?"

"Because—" The youth's lids were

drooping. He was sinking back into the narcotic-induced cloud out of which her shot had pulled him. "Because it's—the back wall—of the bank's vault—next door."

His eyes closed. "Larry!" Beth cried in sudden panic. "Wake up, Larry!"

It had no effect. He was dead asleep, but she had to get him out of here. She had to get him out before Durstin came, even if she had to carry him.

She thrust her automatic back into its improvised holster, got her arms around his torso and struggled to lift him. His head came up away from the pillow, his shoulders, and he was very heavy in her arms, but that wasn't what held Beth suddenly motionless, her head turning to where the passage from the living room opened into this room.

A form appeared there, stopped there at the edge of the room and hung, rather than stood, on widespread legs. Phil Fator. Hate flared into his bruise-blotched visage as his agonized eyes laid themselves on Beth. His right arm was dangling useless, but his left crooked up to jab a gun at her.

"Okay, shamulette," he h u s k e d. "You're tricky, but you ain't smart. You forgot a guy can come out of a knockout, an' you forgot he can have another rod cached in his bunk." His mouth twisted grotesquely. "Yeh, you're tricky, but you've busted your last arm." . . .

AT THAT precise instant, back in the Crown Haberdashery, Martha Wilson was thinking that there was something almost admirable in the way Walt Durstin seized the black wrath that had flared into his face and forced it down again beneath the surface.

"Quite a coincidence, isn't it—" Durstin made a last effort to extricate himself from the trap that had closed on him—"that I happened in here at exactly the right moment to catch Fred Garlin with your card on his desk?"

She shook her head. "It was no coincidence. You'd hurried here to try and bulldoze him into telling the detective he'd hired that he'd heard from Larry and so there was no need to go on

with the case. You knew he'd hired a detective because while he was in our office Ben Cavell here had telephoned you what he said when he went out."

She saw Sergeant Fusco move to Cavell, handcuffs glinting. "It was your terrible temper, Mr. Durstin, that betrayed you. It not only sent you into the backroom to me when you heard me mention your name, but it was what made you struggle with Mr. Garlin for the picture and then tear the card into little pieces before you even looked to see what his fall had done to him."

She pulled in a quivering breath, let it seep out again. "Where is Larry Garlin, Mr. Durstin?" but inside Martha another question hammered, *Where's Beth?* Surely by this time Bill should have found her. "What have you done to Larr—"

The telephone's shrill ring was like a scream, cutting her short.

Back there at the desk a policeman picked up the instrument. "Crown Haberdashery," he said. And then, "Just a minute, please." He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "It's from the Continental Hotel, Lieutenant Teller. The operator says a Mr. Evans wants to talk to Miss Winslow."

Martha cried, "Tell her to put him on," and she got there somehow, snatched the instrument from the cop. "Bill?"

"Right."

"You've found Beth?"

"I'm afraid not," Bill's voice said. "I got on her trail, but I've lost it again. She picked Fator up in the bar and they started for the Washington Room, but the maitre d'hotel there says he's sure they never got there and George, the doorman here, swears he didn't see Phil Fator leave, with or without a blonde. Here's what I called to ask you. Will I upset any apple carts for you there if I go up to Fator's suite on the sixth floor, on the chance the kid was crazy enough to let him take her there?"

"You'll not be upsetting anything," Martha broke in, fingers whitening on the phone. "Get up there as quick as you can and I'll meet you there as fast as I can get there."

She missed the cradle with the transceiver, let it lie where it fell and was running toward the door. She saw Dan, his eyes big with question.

"Come with me, Dan," she called to him. "I may need your help."

Then they were in a police car and it was careening around the corner on two wheels. . . .

ON THE sixth floor of the Continental Hotel, Beth Rand had been helpless to do anything but squeeze out of her clamped throat, "Hold it a second, Mr. Fator. You can't aim well with your left hand and you might hit Larry instead of me." She didn't know what good delaying death another moment would do, but every moment is precious when it's all you're ever going to have. "Let me put him down."

Perhaps it was the effrontery of her request that did it. Perhaps some last remnant of sanity remained in Phil Fator's pain-addled brain. At any rate he held his fire. "Okay," he said. "You can put him down."

Beth bent, as slowly as she dared, till the black-haired head lay on the pillow again. As slowly as she dared she pulled her right arm from under Larry's weight while her right hand, hidden by his body from the man waiting to kill her, slid under the waistband of her skirt.

Its fingertips touched cold metal, but she couldn't close her hand on the little automatic's butt. Bent and straining, the way she was, the waistband had constricted too tightly the neck of the

pouch she'd sewed to it. "Okay," Fator rasped. "Quit your stalling."

He'd see what she was after when she straightened up, but Beth had no choice but to do so. She lifted and her hand closed on the pistol. Too late. She didn't have time to pull it out.

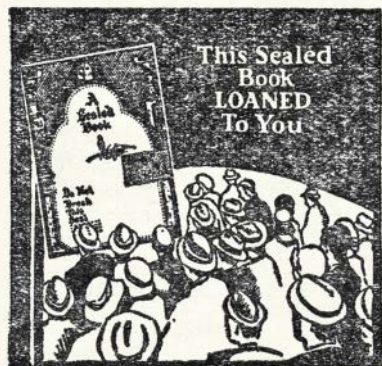
Fator's head jerked to sharp sound from the other room, to knuckle rap, and Beth had her gun out. He saw it and his eyes widened and suddenly there was a black spot right between them and he was sliding down along the corner of the wall. The crack of her automatic and the pound of fists on the door inside merged in Beth's ears, the room swirled and its floor was heaving up to meet her.

Someone shouted somewhere. Somewhere there was a crash of splintering wood. Footfalls thudded toward her. Durstin, she thought. He's back. He's going to finish me off. But she was too tired of fighting to fight any longer.

Durstin loomed over her. No. It was Bill. Very strangely it was Bill Evans' round face Beth peered blearedly up at, his spectacles glittering.

And a veil hazed those spectacles and a dark sea engulfed Beth Rand, but she put forth a tremendous effort and weltered up out of it. It was Martha's anxious face that hung over her now.

"Don't look so worried, Martha," Beth heard herself saying. "I've found Larry Garlin. He's right there, on that bed." And then she saw Dan Teller and she said to him, "You can't take our licenses away, Dan. We've proved we're good detectives. We really have."



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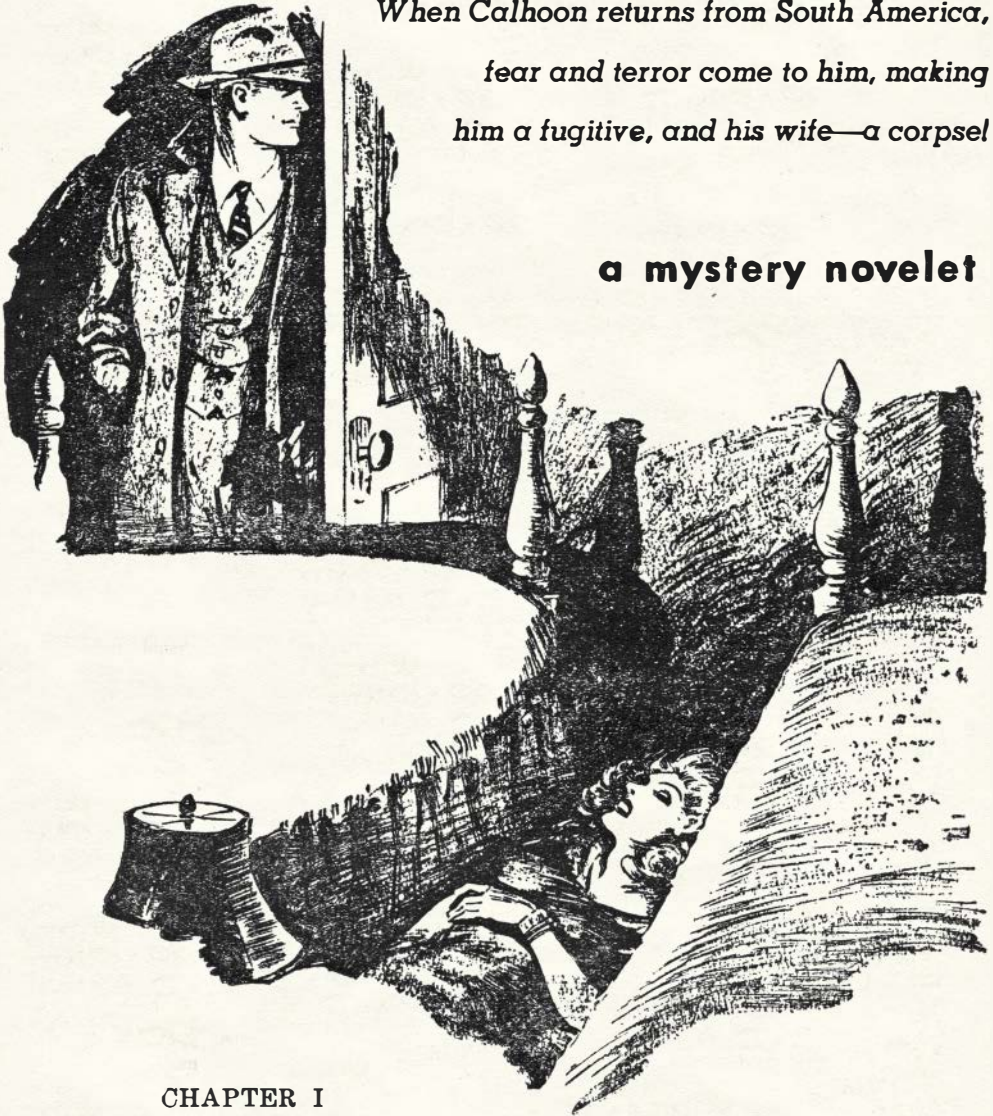
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b y W Y A T T B L A S S I N G A M E

*When Calhoon returns from South America,
fear and terror come to him, making
him a fugitive, and his wife—a corpse!*

a mystery novelet

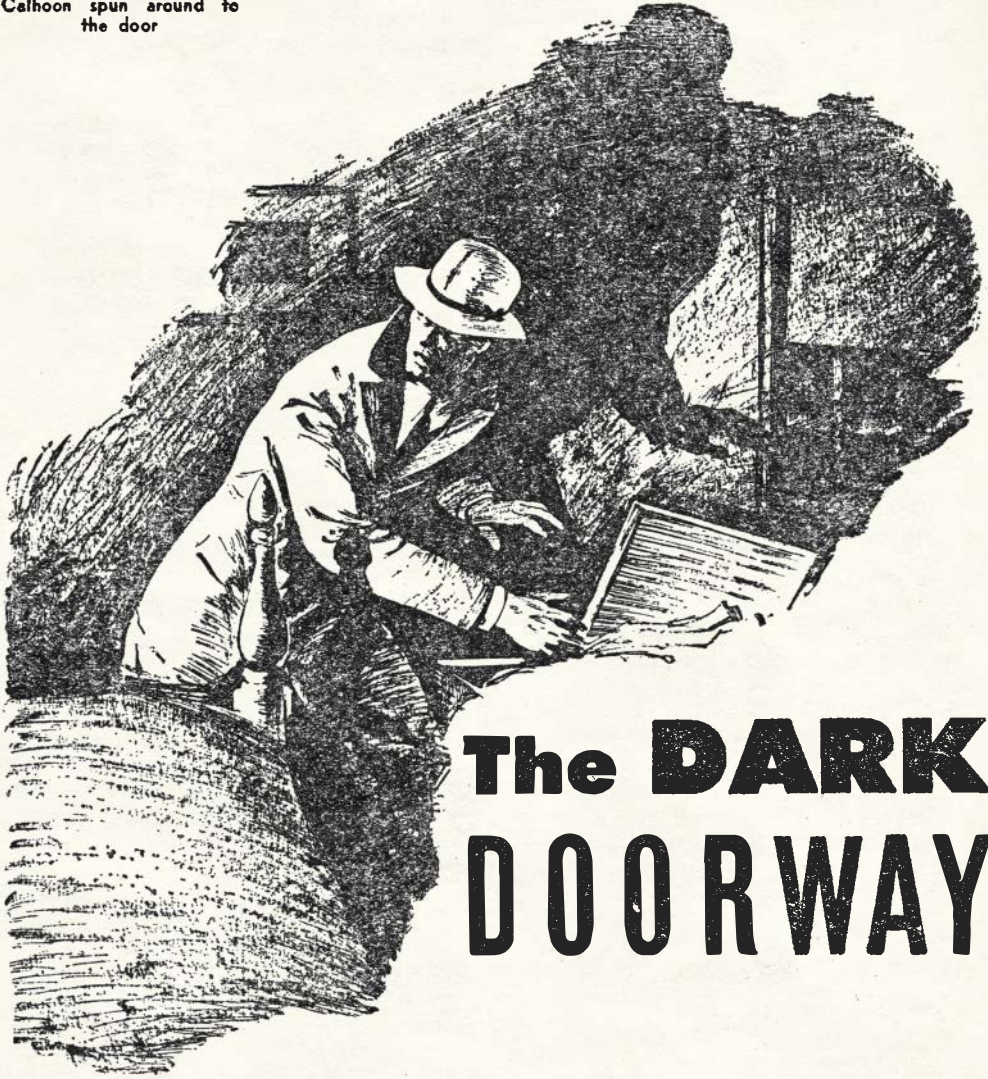


CHAPTER I

JOHAN CALHOON was a man of about average height. His face was thin, dark skinned, with high cheekbones. His nose and mouth were sensitive, almost to being fragile. There was an intelligent width between his eyes, but the eyes were shadowed with shy-

ness like those of a child. This came from his lack of vanity, which was so complete that sometimes he doubted his ability even in things which he had proved. Because of this doubt he was slow to make up his mind, slow to come to conclusions. He tried to think a thing

Calhoon spun around to
the door



The DARK DOORWAY

through from all angles before deciding and he might waver back and forth for a long while.

But once settled on an issue, he was inclined to be stubborn about it.

Now he was thinking of Janet as he drove over the long bridge which led from the mainland to the little island off the gulf coast of Florida. Only a few more miles, he thought, and the tension began to mount in him, constricting the muscles in his chest. He knew

how she would look. A year could not change her beauty. But how would he feel when he saw her? And what would be the expression of her eyes when she looked at him, and when he touched her. They'd had their troubles in the six months they lived together before he took the job in Venezuela. But that was all over now, he told himself. He had come back determined on a fresh, clean start.

When he found the store he parked

and went inside. "Good afternoon," he said. "Can you tell me where Mrs. Calhoon lives?"

"Who?"

"Mrs. John Calhoon. Janet Calhoon."

The storekeeper scratched his head with a forefinger, turned and called his wife in the back of the store, "You know a Mrs. Calhoon?"

"Who?"

He said the name again.

"I don't know her," the woman said.

"Is this the only store at this end of the island?"

"Yep."

"I'm sure this is where she trades. She wrote me. She lives within walking distance."

"I'm sorry. I don't know her."

TWO blocks away he found a cottage like the one she had described in her letters. The tightness was in his throat now. He went up the steps, across the little porch. The level, late-afternoon sunlight was warm on his back. He raised his hand to knock—and stopped. Through the screen door he could see into the house, see the mirror hung above the mantel on the far side of the room. He knew that mirror and so he knew that now he had found the right house.

He pushed open the door without knocking and stepped inside. It was a small room, plainly but comfortably furnished. There was a bowl of wildflowers on the table, another on the mantel beneath the mirror. The whole place had a lived-in and pleasant look. It was better than the furnished apartment they'd had in New York. It was happier. John Calhoon felt his tension lifting.

"Janet!" he called. "Janet!"

A boy of about four came into the room from the back of the house. When he saw Calhoon he stopped and regarded him quite calmly. "Hello," he said after a moment.

"Hello," Calhoon said. "Is Mrs. Calhoon here?"

"Who?"

"Janet Calhoon."

"Mommie!" the boy yelled, never turning his head. "Mommie! The man wants—"

"I'm coming, Darling."

The girl was in her middle twenties, about five years younger than Calhoon. She wore a house dress that was clean and attractive on her. Her hair was brownish, her eyes wide-set and level.

"Yes?" she said.

"I beg your pardon," Calhoon said. "I was looking for my wife, Janet Calhoon."

The girl frowned slightly, thinking. "I'm afraid I don't know her."

"I was sure this was her cottage. It's like the one she wrote me about." The girl said nothing. "I thought I recognized some of the furniture," Calhoon said. "That mirror. And those bookends."

"I got those from the girl who had the house before me. I sublet it from her, bought some things she had here and didn't want to take with her. But her name was Murphy. Jane Murphy."

"I'm almost sure—"

He went across the room and lifted one of the bookends and looked at it. His initials were scratched on the bottom, put there years ago when he was in college. Nor was there any doubting the mirror over the mantel. It had been a wedding present: and in a back corner of his mind he remembered the couple who had given it to them; they had been friends of his. There had been no friends of Janet's. She had come to New York from somewhere in the Middle West and he knew little, almost nothing of her life before he met her.

"What does this Jane Murphy look like?" he asked.

"She's one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. Tall, about three inches taller than I am. Very blond."

It was his wife. But why had she been using another name? It was a mistake, he thought. Probably this girl had simply got names confused in some way.

He asked, "Where is she now?"

"I don't know. She told me her husband had come back, from South America, I believe, and they had to leave in

a hurry for his new job."

"When was this?"

"A month ago."

"A month?" His mouth felt dry. A month ago he had been in Venezuela, not even certain of the date on which he would leave. Then how? His brain felt as though it had fallen apart like the bits of a jigsaw puzzle.

But there had to be some solution. He remembered that in his last month in South America he had received no letters. He had been back in the jungle, moving from place to place. And then he had come down to the sea coast and his gear had been brought down from the inland camp. There had been no letters, but he had been headed home and letters seemed unimportant.

The girl had been watching him. "Is Jane—are you her husband?"

"Yes." There was no need to argue about the name. "Don't you have any idea where she was going?"

"I owe her some money. I couldn't pay the rent and at the same time pay for the things she wanted to sell. She was to send me her address as soon as she knew it herself. But—wait a minute. Perhaps the postmistress will know. I'll phone her."

She went into another room and John Calhoon stood there, feeling dazed. The four-year-old boy watched him.

"Your wife left you?" the child asked.

"I don't know." And then he caught himself and laughed. "It's just some mistake," he said.

"My daddy's gone too," the child said. "He was in the war and he was shot. He was a hero."

The girl came back. "Mrs. Warren says that Jane got letters addressed to her as Mrs. Calhoon. But she didn't leave any forwarding address."

Calhoon heard himself saying something about it being a misunderstanding. He would have letters in Venezuela that would explain everything. He backed out into the paling afternoon sunlight.

"I may hear any day now," the girl said. "Would you like me to phone you?"

He knew of no address to give her. "Perhaps I can call you, Mrs—?"

"Peterson," the girl said. "Mary Peterson."

HE SENT a cable to Venezuela from Bradenton and the answer came the next day. It was explicit. There had been no letter for him after he left the camp on Lake Maracaibo. The last letter for him had arrived there five weeks ago and he had got it before leaving.

So she hadn't written any explanation. It wasn't just a mistake. But why had she left here in such a hurry when there was still a month before his return? Why leave at all? If she wanted a divorce he would have granted it, alimony with it. She had always been a person to put a great value on money. Why disappear when she could have had her freedom and an income with it? Especially since she had no money of her own. And why had she used another name?

There was no solution to it sitting here. He put the cable in his pocket, went out and drove to Mary Peterson's house.

The little boy was riding a tricycle along the sidewalk. "Hello," the boy said. "Did you find your wife?"

"No," Calhoon said.

"Mommie got a letter. She said for me to tell you if I saw you. She's in the house."

There were fresh flowers in the bowls on table and mantel and Mary Peterson, in a print house dress, looked as fresh as the flowers. There was a clean, healthy look about her which gave an impression of beauty that her features, taken singly, did not have.

"It was in today's mail," she said, and gave Calhoon the letter.

It was in Janet's slightly crude, almost juvenile writing. It asked that a money order be sent to her, care of General Delivery, at Raiford, Florida. And it was signed, Jane Murphy.

"Raiford," Calhoon said. The name had a faintly familiar sound, but he could not remember what it meant to him. "Where is that?"

"In the north central part of the state, I think." She looked at him as though expecting him to say something, but he could think of nothing to say. "The state prison is there," the girl said, finally.

"Oh. . . ." He stood looking at the letter, but his brain was too tangled to think clearly. "I— You've been very kind." He put the letter down and moved toward the door.

"Mr. Calhoon."

"Yes?"

"Perhaps it isn't important at all. Perhaps I'll only worry you by telling it. I've been wondering whether or not I should."

He waited for her to go on, feeling a tightness in his chest.

"The night Jane—Mrs. Calhoon—came to offer me this house, there were bruises on her face and throat. I thought then that—well, she said her husband had come back. I thought they had been fighting. She seemed frightened and I wondered what kind of a man her husband could be. Then when you came. . . I think you ought to go to the police, Mr. Calhoon."

"No!" His voice was sudden and sharp, surprising her. "No," he said again, more slowly. "I think I can find her."

CHAPTER II



HE WENT back to his car. It was a U-Drive-It which he had rented in Bradenton that first day. Now he drove northward through Tampa, through Dunnellon and Gainesville. He wouldn't go to the police, he thought. It was his affair. It was personal. He just wanted no help. Certainly not from the police.

As a young man just out of college he had worked on a newspaper in a city where the police were corrupt and the papers vicious. He had seen what that combination could do. He'd had to take

his part in it in order to keep his job—until he rebelled, a little sick with shame and hatred. He was a man who carried scars a long time, and they were still on him. He wanted no part of the police.

For two days John Calhoon waited in his rented car in front of the small village post office. He tried to spend the time thinking, but there were too many things which he did not understand, and it seemed almost suddenly that he saw her. She got out of a car and went into the post office and John Calhoon, watching from across the street, did not move.

She came out, putting money into the bright red purse which she carried. The afternoon sunlight gleamed red-gold on her hair. Her dress fitted smoothly over the full curves of her body. Down the street a high school kid whistled appreciatively. Janet glanced toward him, but she neither smiled nor looked annoyed: her face was beautiful, and blank, and as frozen as though it had been carved from ice. She got into her car and drove off.

Calhoon followed. The road ran on through the open, desolate country of north Florida. It joined another highway. A few miles farther on Janet turned into a group of tourist cabins.

Calhoon drove on. Five miles down the road he turned around and went back. It was almost dark now. Twilight was a blue gray haze with the blue fading quickly and a threat of rain. The afternoon had been warm but there was a chill on the air now. Calhoon stopped before the cabin marked OFFICE and blew his horn.

The man who came out was bald and his eyes looked out from under a sloping forehead like the eyes of a turtle.

"A cabin?" Calhoon said.

The man put his bald head through the window and looked at Calhoon. After a moment he said, "Five bucks."

"All right."

When they reached the cabin the man unlocked the door, took Calhoon's money. "There's a restaurant and bar across the road," he said.

Calhoon closed the Venetian blinds,

then sat on the bed and waited. He waited a half hour. Then, turning off the light before he opened the door, he went outside.

The mist was thin rain now. He had neither raincoat nor topcoat and yet he was scarcely aware of the dampness or the chill. He went through the gray night, looking at the cars parked beside the cabins, until he found the one Janet had driven.

There was a light inside the cabin, but the blinds were closed. He could hear nothing except the soft hiss of the rain, the ripple of wind in the water-oaks, and from the bar across the road, softened by the night and the rain, came the sound of the juke organ playing a tune so old he could not remember the title at first. *Poor Butterfly*, he thought. How long since . . . ?

A man came along the walk toward Janet's cabin. Seeing him, Calhoon stepped backward into the shadows.

The man came steadily along the walk. He was a small man, wearing a coat that reached almost to his ankles and he had an odd way of moving. That was all Calhoon could tell in the dark. The man went up the two steps to Janet's cabin, went in without knocking. As he went inside he was silhouetted for an instant against the light. And in that moment Calhoon saw that his right foot was twisted unnaturally. A club-foot.

NO sound came out of the cabin that Calhoon could hear. Across the street the juke organ was playing *Poor Butterfly* again and it was very sweet and soft through the rain. Calhoon stepped out, and moved close alongside the cabin. He could hear the voices then, the man's voice, Janet's in answer, the man's again. But he could not understand what was being said. And he could not try too hard, for he felt a little cheap, a little dirty standing here in the darkness eavesdropping. He turned away and went across the road to the bar.

"Whisky and soda." He sat making wet rings on the bar, turning the glass

slowly. He would have to see Janet, but he'd rather the man wasn't there. He didn't want trouble. He didn't want to fight or even to argue. He just wanted to find out the truth, to clear the mystery so that he could sleep again.

"Waiting for somebody?" the bartender asked him.

"My wife." The words were bitter on his tongue. "But I don't think I'll wait any longer," he said and finished his drink and went out.

The rain was soft as a girl's whisper. Against lighted windows the mist moved like butterfly wings and in the water-oaks the wind played like a kitten. At the cabin beside which Janet's car stood, he paused, then forced himself to go on, up the steps, across the porch. The light still showed from behind the Venetian blinds, but there was no sound.

John Calhoon raised his clenched fist and knocked.

He waited, and there was no answer. He knocked again. When there still was no answer he half turned to leave. And then he checked himself. He was here and he would get it over with. He'd wait until Janet came back. Whatever it was he had to know, it was best to know it now.

He went back to the door, turned the knob, and stepped inside.

It was like any one of a thousand tourist cabins. There were twin beds with a small table between them, a lamp burning on the table. There were two straight chairs and one with blue leather upholstery. To the right was the bathroom. To the left, on a small bench against the wall, was an open suitcase. He remembered the suitcase: Janet had used it on their honeymoon. The only garment which he could see from where he stood was a man's shirt.

Calhoon started toward the suitcase and had to pass by the two beds. The light from the lamp shown down on the floor between them: on Janet lying there on her back, her face livid and contorted and her tongue showing between parted lips. Her dress was torn and her throat was dark with bruises.

Even before he could reach her, be-

fore he could kneel and touch her, he knew that she was dead.

HE SAW his hand go out as though it were not part of his own body. He saw his fingers touch gently on her bruised throat. The flesh was still warm, but there was the feel of death upon it and it passed like a chill through his own flesh and into his blood. Beside her was the red leather purse, open, and automatically he picked it up.

There was a handkerchief and from it the clear sweet odor of perfume—a perfume he had sent her from South America. There was a lipstick, a compact, a key like the one to his own cabin, car keys. There was an envelope addressed to Jane Murphy, General Delivery, Raiford, and with Mary Peterson's name in the upper left corner. The note inside said that she was inclosing a money order without naming any amount. But there was no money at all in the purse, not even loose coins.

Calhoon stood up. He looked around him and the room seemed strange to him now. He moved out from between the beds to where the suitcase lay open on the stand. He saw that the man's shirt was a new one which had never been worn, size sixteen—a full size larger than he wore, he thought automatically.

He did not hear the steps until they were on the porch. There was no time for anything except to spin around and face the door. Then the door opened and a man came in.

He was a big man, blond, good looking—a little too good looking, as though the classically cut features were a mask for what went on behind them. He wore a gray topcoat, damp with rain and a little threadbare. He saw Calhoon and for just an instant the muscles of his face tautened, then were natural again. He pushed the door closed behind him.

"Hello," he said. "So you're back from South America."

"Yes," Calhoon said.

"Venezuela, wasn't it?" the man said.

"Yes."

"And looking for Janet." The big man smiled at him, a polite, meaningless

smile on the handsome face. The gray topcoat hung open and Calhoon could see the gray suit beneath, the gold chain across the vest with a small good luck charm shaped like a running rabbit. "Well, there's a bottle here. Let's—" He had started for the table between the twin beds, but at the foot of the beds he stopped, staring. The smile was gone from his face and when he turned toward Calhoon his eyes had a white glitter in them.

"You were looking for her. And you found her."

"I didn't kill her," Calhoon said.

The big man went on his knees between the beds, but still facing Calhoon. He picked up the pocketbook, glanced in it, dropped it. "Where's the money?"

"I don't know."

The man stood up, the pockets of his gray topcoat rising above the bed and the gun appearing in his hand at the same moment. "The money," he said.

"I don't know anything about it."

He had never had a gun pointed at him before, and he found that he kept looking at the muzzle rather than the man behind it, staring at that small, dark hole that seemed no larger than a pencil. Yet he was not as afraid as he was dazed. It had happened too suddenly and there was no sense in it at all.

"I came in here a few minutes ago," Calhoon said. "I found Janet—dead. That's all I know."

"Maybe." This man was not one to waste time on action or decision. "Turn around."

Calhoon looked at the gun and then at the man's face. He was conscious of a dryness in his mouth and of a small hot pain around his heart.

"Turn around," the man said again. "Put your face to the wall."

He turned. He heard the steps cross toward him. A hand began to feel over him. It took the wallet from his pocket, and after a moment put it back. It searched him thoroughly.

"Okay," the man said. "Move away from that suitcase."

The man searched the suitcase. He

searched the room, working like one who knew how to do the job. He was thorough—and unsuccessful.

CHAPTER III



WHEN HE was finished, he faced Calhoon, balancing the gun in his hand.

"I've been through hell for that money, Mr. Calhoon," he said. "I plan to have it. If it is necessary to kill

for it, I will. Where is it?"

"I don't know."

The gun tilted up. The muzzle looked at Calhoon like a dark eye, a dark doorway to eternity.

"I don't know." His mouth was so dry he could scarcely speak. "It couldn't have been more than a hundred dollars. I've got that much. I—"

The man's laughter stopped him. "How long have you been here?" the man said.

"Not more than five minutes before you came."

"You saw nobody?"

"A little man with a clubfoot," Calhoon said. His own mind was beginning to work now. "He was wearing a long coat and I could just see the foot beneath it as he came in the door. Janet was alive then, because I heard them talking."

It seemed to surprise the blond man, but to make sense at the same time. "I'll be damned!" he said. Then, "When was that?"

"About an hour ago."

The man came promptly to his decision. He reached out and overturned one chair, then another. He tore the cover from a bed. He went between the beds, leaned, and ripped Janet's dress more than it was torn already. Then he came toward Calhoon. He had the gun in his left hand, his right hand in his topcoat pocket. When he was close, he shifted balance and kicked hard at Calhoon's ankle.

John Calhoon moved with the kick. His right hand caught the gun, pushed it upward. He swung his left fist at the man's jaw. It landed, but the man's right hand was already out of his pocket and swinging and there was something dark and blurred in it.

Calhoon tried to move inside the blow. It struck far back on his head and he fell forward against the man. He tried to push himself away. The gold watch chain was tangled in his fingers. He felt it snap, his hand closed over the charm. Then the big man swung again.

Calhoon's brain seemed to shatter like a dropped light bulb. With tiny, tinkling sounds the fragments dropped into darkness.

THERE was light somewhere and he blinked at it, the pain throbbing in waves through his head. His brain felt as though it were being ground round and round in a cement mixer. He moved, and the pain flowed out of his head and down through his body. Something cold splashed over his face and splashed again.

A man stood over him with an empty water glass in his hand. He seemed to waver, to come and go like things in a mist. And there was the sickening smell of whisky. John Calhoon shut his eyes and when he opened them again the room had steadied a little. The man was sitting opposite him in a chair.

"Come on," the man said. "Get out of it."

Calhoon put his hand to his head. There was a red stab of pain at the touch.

"A sap," the man said. "They don't leave much of a bump."

He was drunk, Calhoon thought. The odor of whisky came over him in waves and his vision was blurred. He wiped at his eyes and as his sleeve passed his face the odor of liquor was stronger than ever.

"There must have been a half bottle of the stuff poured on you," the man said. "The fumes have you groggy. That with the sock on the head."

Calhoon got to his feet, staggering.

He found the bathroom and washed his face and head. When he could see more clearly, could think a little, he turned and looked out at the room.

It seemed the same tourist cabin, the same twin beds, the same furniture. But there was a difference, though it eluded him as he stood there. Finally, it came to him. The spreads on the beds were not of the same color they had been in Janet's cabin. The bath itself was on a different side of the room. It was a different cabin.

"I brought you here," the man said.

Calhoon could see him clearly for the first time. He was shorter than Calhoon, but broad in the shoulders. He was bald, and the long sloping forehead, the eyes without lights in them made him look like a turtle. It was the man who had rented him the cabin earlier in the night.

"Why?" Calhoon said. "What—?"

"The cops are over in cabin number thirteen," the man said. "There's a dead woman there and she was registered under the name of Mrs. John Calhoon. The cops would like to locate her husband."

Calhoon stood there, holding to the doorsill. He felt like a man who steps through a doorway in a dream, a dark doorway, and then falls, spinning over and over through a world of madness.

The man said, "I suspect you could use some help, Mr. Calhoon. A lot of help." He took a badge out of his pocket and let it lie glistening in his palm for a moment, put it back. "I'm a private operator, Mr. Calhoon. I work for whoever pays me."

"How can you help?"

The man's eyes were without lashes. When he blinked, the lids moved slowly down over the eyes, then up again, so that he looked more like a turtle than before. "I could go tell the cops that I found a man wandering drunk in the rain and brought him to my cabin."

The men looked at one another. The detective said, "Sometimes a cop is more interested in getting a conviction than in making sure he's got the right man. A case like this will stir up a smell and

with the sheriff coming up for election soon he'll want a quick arrest. You'd be the answer to his prayer, Mr. Calhoon. I don't think he'd look much farther."

"All right," Calhoon said. His head hurt too much for him to think clearly, but he knew there was truth in what the man said. His wife had deserted him and he had followed and found her in a tourist cabin, another man's clothes in her suitcase. He remembered the blond man overturning the chairs, pulling the cover from the bed, tearing Janet's clothes. And there was his own appearance and the liquor spilled over him. Everyone would draw the same conclusion.

He took his wallet from his pocket.

"How much do you want?"

"Three hundred."

"To hide me here?"

"As a retainer, to start with."

CALHOON opened his wallet. There was five hundred dollars in traveler's checks, but the hundred he'd had in cash was gone. Calhoon looked at the detective, who looked back at him. After a moment Calhoon took out three hundred in checks and signed them.

"My name's White," the detective said. "Tom White. I may be a lot of use to you, Mr. Calhoon."

"How do you know I didn't kill her?" Calhoon asked.

"I don't." He looked at the traveler's checks, folded them and put them in his own wallet. "But I happened to overhear a big blond man phone the sheriff's office to say some guy and his wife were fighting in cabin thirteen. Now I was interested in that cabin."

"You? Why? What did you know about Janet?"

Tom White did not seem to hear him. His voice was quite slow and deliberate. "I took a look at the place, and you were out too cold to have been doing much fighting. Also, there was another man there earlier tonight, a little man with a clubfoot."

"I saw him!"

Something that was very much like

pleasure showed in Tom White's face, but all he said was, "So it could have been any of the three of you. Or somebody else." He stood up. "The sheriff's deputies are giving this place a pretty thorough going over. But I don't think they'll stop you if you just walk across the street to the bar. If anybody does, say your name is White. There's a toilet in the bar and a back entrance. You'll find your car out back with your bag in it. I wouldn't stop inside a hundred miles."

"Why were you interested in Janet?" Calhoon asked. "What did you know about her?"

"When you get a place to stay, drop me a note. General Delivery, Raiford."

"What did you know about Janet? What had happened?"

White looked at him out of dead eyes. "I'm working for you, Mr. Calhoon, but right now you got to do things my way, or it's all off." He reached out and patted Calhoon on the back. "Don't worry too much. They may not ever convict you." He turned and went out into the night.

Calhoon washed his face again, soaking it in the cool water. He combed his hair. There wasn't much he could do about his clothes. He'd have to get away, he thought. If he stayed here, the sheriff would have him before he could even make up his mind what to do.

It had quit raining, but the dampness was still in the air. A half moon ran in and out of clouds like a luminous mouse playing in a field of shadows. Moonlight would touch like spilled sugar on the damp earth, and vanish again. In a moment of moonlight he saw the man standing at the gate, leaning against it, one hand resting on the gun strapped around his waist.

There wasn't really time for thought. Calhoon was opposite the cabin marked OFFICE. He crossed the porch, knocked on the door, and went in.

A man was sleeping back of the desk. He was a thin man and not too clean. A desk drawer was open and the top of a whisky bottle showed.

"Hello," Calhoon said loudly.

The man's head bobbed and he opened one bloodshot eye.

"Where's the other fellow works here?" Calhoon asked.

"What fellow?"

"The heavy fellow, looks sort of like a turtle."

"He don't work here." The man's voice was thick. "He just sits around and helps me sometimes. He likes to, though God know why."

"What's his name?"

"Tom White. That who you mean?"

"That's him."

"He's crazy," the clerk said. "Gave me this. Best liquor I ever tasted. Here, have one."

"Thanks." He took a sip, and the liquor was good. The thoughts ran through his mind, blurring with the knowledge that the guard was at the gate, and going to stay there. And he himself couldn't stay here much longer.

"I'll bet that guard at the gate would like one," he said. "It's cold out tonight."

"Call him."

Calhoon went out. Moonlight wavered over them and he could see the outline of the guard's face.

"The clerk's got something good there in the office," he said, "if you'd like a little nip against the cold." The man looked at him. "Or I'll bring you a cup of coffee. I'm going over for one."

"Thanks. But I think I'll take that drink in the office."

Two minutes later Calhoon drove his car from behind the bar and restaurant. He was headed south when he hit the highway and he kept going because he didn't want to turn around.

CHAPTER IV



IN TAMPA he got his clothes pressed. He sweated out a Turkish bath and got an hour's sleep. In the afternoon papers he read that a woman registered as Mrs. John Calhoon had

been found murdered in the Lone Palm

Tourist Cabins. The owner of the cabins said she had been living there, alone, for a month. There was no mention at all that John Calhoon had registered there on the night of her murder.

Calhoon put his chin in his hand and tried to make some sense out of what he knew. But it was like trying to work a mathematical problem with only a few loose numbers and no idea of the laws that governed them. Yet there was one thing he could learn, he thought—or at least he could try. He could ask Mary Peterson how much money had been in the letter she sent to Janet. It must have been more than the little amount he believed, or why should the blond man have been so desperate to find it?

It was twilight when he drove over the long bridge to the island. The tricycle was on the sidewalk in front of Mary Peterson's, but the boy wasn't there. Calhoon went up the walk to the door and knocked.

He saw her come from the back of the house, across the lighted room. She opened the screen door, looking out into the gloom of the porch.

"Good evening," Calhoon said, and stepped forward into the light. Then, "I'm sorry. Did I startle you?"

"No. I—I hadn't expected to see you." Her face was pale so that a sprinkle of freckles showed across her nose and high on her cheeks. Her eyes were wide, too wide, and he knew, instantly, that she had seen the story in the newspaper. "I didn't kill her," Calhoon said.

She kept staring at him. "Why did you come back here?"

"I'm trying to find out who killed her, and why. It was for money, I think. She had just got your letter from the post office with the money in it."

"My letter? But there was only sixty-five dollars in it. No one would murder for that!"

"Sixty-five—" He put a hand to his head, touching the bruise at his temple. The blond man had slugged him, had said he was willing to murder for money. But not for sixty-five dollars surely.

He found that he was talking, telling this girl detail by detail all that had happened. Because he hoped somehow to find a clue in the telling, in the reliving of what had happened. And because it was easy to talk to this girl with the quiet brown eyes.

When he told how he had left the tourist camp she said, "You shouldn't. You should have gone to the police."

"Perhaps." But even as he said it, he could feel the stubbornness in him.

"It's not too late. You could go to them now. Tell them the story just as you've told me. I'm sure—"

"No," he said. And because he thought perhaps he was wrong, it made him angry. But he was afraid of the police. They could convict him of murder, using his own story, if they chose.

He tried to tell this to the girl because it seemed important to him that she should understand. He told her some of the things he had seen happen a long while ago when he had been a newspaper reporter.

"But this sheriff," she said, "he could be different."

"He could be. But I don't want to gamble my life on it."

"You remember things a long while," Mary Peterson said. She was looking at him, but it was almost as if she spoke to herself. "You have been badly hurt."

"Life hurts most people." He looked past her to the mantel. Over it hung the mirror which had been given to Janet and him as a wedding present. And below the mirror was a picture of a man in uniform—a light haired, smiling man with the eyes and mouth of the child he had seen.

The girl too looked at the picture. From the first it seemed they could understand each other's thoughts, could sit silently for minutes and yet when they next spoke each would understand, as though their minds had followed the same trail and arrived at the same point.

"Why did you take the job in South America," she said now, "go away and leave your wife for so long, when you had been married such a short while?"

"It was a chance to make more money. Janet liked money."

"And you?"

"It was a chance to think things over. I came back to—to make a go of our marriage. To make it work out."

"And now you are faced with something new, and there is no year in which to think it out. You won't, you can't go to the police. And you can't keep on as a fugitive, a man hiding from something he doesn't understand. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going back," he said. He was looking at her, and it was like a promise. "I'm going back up there and find out who killed Janet, and why. After that—after that, I can think about what comes next."

He stood up and went to the door. He stopped there and looked back at her.

"Good luck, John Calhoon," she said.

IT WAS on the way back toward Raiford that he got his first break. He was driving through Ocala and was held up by the traffic. Several official looking cars were parked in the street with the drivers standing around. Calhoon, uncertain whether or not the police had learned his license number by now, sat fretfully waiting.

Then from a building came the little man with the clubfoot. He was surrounded by people, all of whom seemed very anxious to tell him something of great truth and importance, and he walked as though they were dogs baying behind him.

There wasn't a chance not to notice him. He wore a brown topcoat which reached almost to the ground, partially hiding the clubfoot, but the limp was still there.

The little man got into the biggest of the waiting automobiles, accompanied by the most pompous of the men following, and the caravan drove away.

Calhoon followed. There were a dozen automobiles and a motorcycle escort, and all Calhoon had to do was tag along. They went east, and into the grounds at Silver Springs. Calhoon paid and went with them.

It was evidently an inspection party of some kind. Tagging along, Calhoon found himself beside a rather effeminate man who wore a plaid shirt, a checked coat, and wavy hair. "Who's the fellow in the topcoat?" Calhoon asked.

The man looked at him as though he had heard blasphemy. "You don't know? Really?"

"Really."

"That's Otto Hill!"

"Who's he?"

It was clearly a blow to his companion, who put a hand to his throat to help himself recover. "He is Hollywood! He makes the stars. And all the best pictures. All of them! He made *Tropic Moon* here several years ago, and now he's looking the Springs over again. He may make another picture here."

"Thanks," Calhoon said.

But still it did not tie up. If Janet had ever had any connection with Hollywood, she had never mentioned it to him.

She had been beautiful, beautiful enough for the movies—or for a producer, he thought, and the thought was like old acid in his mind.

Calhoon followed. There were tourists all over the place, looking at the Indian village, the zoo, the crystal lake. On the glass bottom boat, Calhoon managed to get next to Otto Hill.

The boat moved out onto the Springs. Sixty feet below them a bottlecap lay among pebbles that shone like jewels and he could read the lettering on the bottlecap. Fish moved like strange birds hung in space. On Hill's left, a man with a large baywindow was talking as if he were paid by the word, but if the movie producer heard him he gave no sign. If he saw the beauty below him there was no sign of that either. His little brown face looked as though it had been frozen by hatred of the whole world. His lips were thin and his eyes mean.

Bending close to the little man's ear Calhoon said softly, "Why did you murder Janet?"

Hill's start was like a snake coiling

to strike. Yet the move was so slight, so controlled that the fat man on the other side did not notice. And all at once Calhoon had a feeling that he had run into an evil over and beyond anything he had ever known or even believed possible.

The boat moved like a feather in mid air.

Far below it water hurtled up from the bowels of the earth. The pebbles danced on the bottom. The fish moved. Off to the right the underwater grasses bent and flowed.

"I only want to know why," Calhoon whispered. "I've got to know why!"

The little man turned his head, bent it back so that he could look up at Calhoon.

"What are you talking about?"

The big man on the other side was still orating.

His voice rumbled around them and neither heard it.

"I saw you," Calhoon said. "I was under the tree in front of her cabin."

"When this is over I am going back to my hotel."

He turned away from Calhoon. On the other side the big man was still talking.

THE drive back to Ocala was like the one coming out. Before his hotel Otto Hill shook off the group around him. Calhoon was close alongside. They rode together in the elevator. They went together along the carpeted hall, neither of them speaking. Hill opened the door to his room and went in first, pushing ahead as though he took pleasure in deliberate rudeness.

There were four bags, packed and ready to go. Otherwise the room was bare except for the hotel furniture. Without glancing at Calhoon, Hill crossed to the phone.

"Send up a bellboy," he said. "I'm checking out."

"Not in such a hurry," Calhoon said. He crossed the room in long strides. "Why did you kill her?" They looked at one another. "You are not leaving until I know," Calhoon said.

"Tom!" Hill called. "Come here."

The door to the next room opened and Tom White, the private detective, stood there. He leaned his heavy, sloping shoulders against the doorsill and regarded Hill and Calhoon out of dreamy, turtle eyes.

"Is this the man?" Otto Hill demanded.

"Yep."

"You handle him. Keep him out of my way. I'm leaving."

White said, "Come on over in my room, Mr. Calhoon."

"This is the man I saw go into Janet's cabin," Calhoon told him.

"I know. Come on over here."

"No," Calhoon said. "I've been pushed around enough. I want to know the truth. I—"

WHITE had a gun in his hand. He had not appeared to move the hand, and yet the gun was there.

"You don't want any trouble, Mr. Calhoon," he said. "You just come on over and talk to me."

"The devil with you. Janet was alive when this man saw her. He must have killed her!"

"The police don't know that he was there, Mr. Calhoon. And it would only be your word, with the cops already looking for you. And Mr. Hill is a very rich man."

There was a knock at the door and a voice called, "Bellboy."

White said, "Between your story and Mr. Hill's money, I expect the sheriff would take Mr. Hill's money."

Calhoon moved toward the detective. As he did, Hill spat, the saliva striking Calhoon's shoe with a noise like that it had made in leaving his lips. And John Calhoon turned, not even knowing he was going to, moving before he was aware even of emotion, swinging his right fist in a long arc and with all his weight behind it.

Then he saw Hill lying there on the floor with his small rat eyes glaring up at him, and Calhoon stepped over Hill's face, lifting his feet carefully, and went into Tom White's room.

CHAPTER V



HE SAT on the bed and looked at his hands and they were shaking. He felt futile, and a little sick. He took out a handkerchief and wiped the hand with which he had struck Hill as

though it were filthy, and he dropped the handkerchief on the floor.

"That was a good lick," White said. "But I don't think it was very smart. Mr. Hill is a man who likes revenge. Sometimes I think he gets himself hurt so he can have revenge."

"Was it revenge, with Janet?"

White didn't answer. Sitting on the bed Calhoon said, "I'm like a man who stepped through a door, a dark door, and got lost in the night. I ask questions and there are no answers. But I'm going to find out some of the answers."

The detective's eyes blinked slowly, and opened again.

"Now that I know Hill's name," Calhoon said, "maybe I can learn something from the papers. Or I'll go to the police if I have to. Or I'll get a gun and try. Maybe with a gun I can get somebody to talk."

"You're not the kind of a man to go around with a gun," White said. "You wouldn't want to shoot anybody. You'd have a lot of trouble bringing yourself to it. But if you had a gun, somebody else might not understand. You'd get shot while you were making up your mind."

"I'm going to find out," Calhoon said.

"You could probably learn enough from the newspapers, knowing Hill's name, to guess at most of it." He lit a cigar, holding it between his teeth, rolling it slowly. "But I can save you time."

"Go ahead."

"How well did you know your wife when you married her, Mr. Calhoon?"

Calhoon didn't answer. Tom White said, "She used to go around with Sam Duke. Maybe she was married to him, maybe not. But she worked with him."

"Sam Duke?"

"A confidence man, a big blond guy with a face like it had been cut out of a picture in a woman's magazine and pasted on him—the man who tapped you with the blackjack. Well, three years ago Mr. Hill was making a movie down here at Silver Springs and Sam Duke and his girl turned up. Sam is the sort who usually turns up in a place where there is money."

Tom White relit his cigar. He spoke slowly, looking into the smoke with his sleepy eyes. "Mr. Hill has a kind of fetish for good looking women. He has plenty of women, because he is Mr. Tops in Hollywood, but most of them hate him even if they do take his money, and he knows it, and he hates them. He hates everything, but he hates good looking women most. And he can't leave 'em alone."

When he held the cigar steady, the smoke from it was blue. When he puffed out a cloud of smoke it was white and the air current from the window drifted it back across his face.

"Sam Duke and another guy—a guy named Foots Benton—got Mr. Hill in a gin rummy game. Sam's girl did the fronting, made the contacts. Mr. Hill was looking for something else when he invited her to the house where he was living. But he thinks he's pretty sharp as a gin rummy player. He thinks he is pretty sharp at everything." He blew smoke out and let it drift back across his face. "They took him for fifty thousand dollars. In cash. He had a safe and part of a movie payroll in his house."

WHITE slid deeper in his chair, his bald head back against the upholstery. "I told you Mr. Hill liked revenge," he said. "And he carried a lot of weight around here. The movie was bringing money into the area and a lot of publicity. And both Sam and Foots had records. By nine o'clock the next morning they were both in jail, and they never did get out. I don't know how much it cost Mr. Hill. But Sam and Foots went up for three years.

"What galled Mr. Hill was—the girl

got away. She just vanished. But he wasn't the man to let that slip. He's been paying me and a whole agency for three years to look for her."

He stopped as if he were through, as if that were all of it. He took the cigar from his mouth and the smoke thinned and cleared from before his face, leaving it solid and thick and without expression.

Calhoon said, "What did he want with her? What did he plan to do when he found her?"

"I never asked him that," White said. "What would Mr. Hill want? He's a smart man. He could think up a lot of ways of getting his revenge."

"Murder?"

"If she fought, if she was about to get away again, he would have killed her."

"And that's why he came back here from Hollywood? It had nothing to do with making another movie?"

"He was about to leave when a newspaperman recognized him, and he had to think up that movie gag. Then the Chamber of Commerce got ahold of him. And he likes to have people panting after him, even in a town this size."

Calhoon sat thinking. "And the fifty thousand dollars Sam Duke and this man Benton won from Otto Hill that night? There was no chance to spend it. What happened to it?"

"Nobody ever found it."

"So that could have been the money Sam Duke was looking for."

"Yeh," White said. "And it could be the money he'd already found."

"What do you mean?"

"Sam Duke is no amateur. He figures the angles all the way through. He knows there is a good chance that even though he's had the girl registered at the tourist place as Mrs. John Calhoon, she will, sooner or later, be identified as the girl who worked with him before he went up. When she is, the cops will look for him—and maybe he knows for sure she is going to be identified. Maybe he's been seen and recognized. Then his act with you gives him two outs. It furnishes the cops with somebody else

to hang the murder on—that's you. And it gives him an alibi that will be almost impossible to break in a courtroom. Imagine a good lawyer asking why his client would go back into a room where he committed a murder and ask for money he'd already found. They'd never convict him."

John Calhoon sat there and tried to piece it all together. "How did you find Janet?" he asked finally.

"Sam Duke found her. They let him out of jail six weeks ago. He went to New York, with me following. Then he came back to Florida, and found her. Maybe she wasn't too happy about it, I don't know. Anyhow, he took her up to those tourist cabins and left her, registered as Mrs. Calhoon. And Sam came back here to Ocala. They were waiting for Foots Benton. Benton is a little round man who looks like a kewpie doll. Your wife used to check each day to make sure he was still in the pen, to watch for him. He got out two days ago."

White took the cigar out of his mouth and flipped it at a spittoon on the other side of the room. "He got out two days ago, and that night your wife was killed. Benton used to live around here, but since then he seems to have disappeared."

Calhoon got off the bed. He went to the window and stood there looking out.

"Do you know who killed Janet, Mr. White?" he said after a moment.

"Nope."

"Could you find out?"

"I could try. But it's expensive."

Calhoon considered. Most of the money he had made, sweating in South America, had been sent to Janet. But he had saved a little.

"A thousand dollars," he said. "I'll give you a thousand dollars if you find out and tell me who did it."

TOM WHITE went to the desk and wrote a brief but perfectly legal contract. Calhoon signed and White folded it carefully, put it in his wallet.

"Now if you don't mind a bit of advice, Mr. Calhoon, I'd say for you to

get out of this part of the country and stay out. If you hang around here the cops are going to pick you up before long. And there's Mr. Hill to consider now. You hit him and he won't forget it. If you come up for trial, there'll be a witness ready to testify to anything the cops want. Even if the sheriff turned out to be honest, it wouldn't help. He wouldn't know who was buying the witnesses, and couldn't do anything about it if he did."

Calhoon turned from the window. His face was set and hard.

"So you better head for Missouri or South Dakota or someplace," White said. "Give me a chance to get some work done for you."

"No." The stubbornness was like a wall and it angered him as it always did. Because there was a good chance the detective was right. But he had wavered back and forth for a long time. And his mind was made up now. "I'm staying," he said. "I'm going to do what I can."

The detective looked at him. After a moment he shrugged.

"The papers have never mentioned that I was registered at the tourist cabins where Janet was killed," Calhoon said. "Why?"

"Maybe they don't know it. Maybe the cops don't know it."

"They must. Unless—"

"You checked in there with me, didn't you? You paid three hundred bucks that night for help. They never found any record of you being there. I give service for my money, Mr. Calhoon."

"Thanks."

"But I still say the best help you can get right now is to get away from this county."

"Probably." He knew he ought to go. "But I've got to stay," he said.

He rode the elevator down to the lobby. At the street door a newsboy was selling afternoon papers and Calhoon bought one.

The story struck him like a blow. A man believed to be John Calhoon was being held at the city jail in connection with the murder of Mrs. Calhoon at the

Lone Palm Tourist cabins. The man denied his identity, but persons who knew Calhoon were being called to identify him.

He folded the paper and went slowly toward his car. He could not allow an innocent man to be persecuted. But the man should be able to identify himself soon and in the meanwhile would be in no danger.

Calhoon's car was in the middle of the block. He was within thirty feet of it when he noticed the two men leaning against the nearby store front. They were in plain clothes, but they wore guns on their hips and their coats didn't quite cover them.

Calhoon walked straight past his car, feeling that everyone was staring at him. Then he was past and around the corner and moving faster until he was almost running, wanting to run and forcing himself to walk.

He turned into a drugstore and sat there, nursing a soft drink, until the sweat dried on his forehead. He was without a car now. But he could still walk. He could still look for this man Foots Benton. And for the money, the fifty thousand dollars which had been taken from Otto Hill.

Because Janet must have had the money, and whoever had killed her—had it now!

CHAPTER VI



CCALA WAS not a large town. Calhoon, always alert, asked questions. "You know Foots Benton? Seen him around lately? I have a business deal I think he'd be interested in."

It was late afternoon of the second day. He was standing at a bar, a hole-in-the-wall place where he thought Benton might be known. There was a half empty beer bottle in front of him. His body sagged with weariness. Failure rode him like a weight so that even now, leaning against the

bar, there was no relief from the weariness. It took physical effort to reach out and lift the beer.

The man said, "You don't belong in this business, Pal."

Calhoon turned, a little too fast, almost dropping the bottle. The blond man was standing beside him. He was wearing the same gray suit he had worn before, without the topcoat.

"No," the blond man said, "this isn't your racket."

Calhoon said, "Hello, Duke."

"So you know that much. Well, nobody can say you don't try. Buy me a beer."

Calhoon called the bartender.

"It's tough being broke," Sam Duke went on. "I should have taken your money when I had a chance."

The bartender slid another bottle in front of them and Calhoon paid.

"I hear you are looking for Foots," Duke said when the bartender moved away.

"I am."

"Why?"

"I want to talk to him. I want to find out who killed Janet."

"You are stubborn, aren't you?" Sam Duke said. "You are out of your depth, and I think you've got sense enough to know it, yet you keep on."

Calhoon did not answer, and after a moment Sam Duke said, "I can show you where Foots is, for a hundred bucks."

"Fifty. I've got only a little over that left."

"Fifty is better than none."

Sam Duke had a car and they drove through streets where twilight was clabbering into dark. Along the sidewalks persons were visible, but they were faceless in the gloom and the few lights going on in houses had a pale and lonely look.

"When you got out of prison," Calhoon said, "why did you come down here after Janet? She didn't have the money."

"No?"

"Janet liked money. She spent whatever she had. She couldn't help it. And

I must have met her soon after you went to jail. She couldn't have spent fifty thousand before then, and she didn't spend it after I knew her."

"You are learning, aren't you?" Duke said. "Well, Foots had it. He'd cached it away before the cops picked him up. But in prison he told me he had passed it on to Janet. A neat little scheme, planning to have it all to himself when he got out. But with luck and good behavior I got out a couple of months before he did."

"And found Janet?"

"It wasn't hard. She'd written me when she married you. She was starting a new life and all that. And she tried—give her credit. When she knew I was looking for her, she got out of New York in a hurry, went down to that little island and changed her name. Probably she thought I wouldn't come back to Florida. But she left her forwarding address with the company you worked for. As you say, she liked money, and she wanted her check each month."

"You forced her to come here with you—after Foots Benton?"

DUKE glanced at him then, and on the blond man's face there was a look almost of pity, of compassion.

"Were you in love with her?" he asked.

"I don't know. I was at first, for awhile. And then—"

"I knocked her around when I thought she had the money," Duke said. "Then we both realized that Foots had it. And the idea of it being so close, so easy to get from Foots, was too much for her."

They had passed through the center of town. Now the streets were rough and there was the faint odor of filth in the air. "Tell me what happened when you found Benton," Calhoon said.

"We got the money from him. He's easy when you put the pressure on him. Janet took the money back to the tourist cabin and I was to join her. I stayed with Foots to— to give him a lecture. But the little butterball got away from me."

"Could he have got back to that cabin before you did?"

"That's what I want you to find out," Sam Duke said. "My method didn't work."

He stopped the car. His face was pale in the gloom. "I'll take that fifty bucks now."

"Is this the place?"

"Go around to the back. There's a stair to the second floor. The first door on the left."

Calhoon paid and got out. Duke leaned so that he could see him through the car window. "You got a gun?" he asked.

"No."

He could just see the smile on Duke's mouth, the way his head shook from side to side.

"I guess you were better in the oil business," Sam Duke said. "You ought to have stuck to it."

The car moved away. The tail-light looked back at Calhoon like a bloodshot eye. Then it rounded a corner and disappeared.

Overhead the moon was growing toward full, and the moonlight was like luminous mist. In it Calhoon could see the hulk of the building which had been a store or a warehouse at one time. The glass was gone out of the windows now and they were boarded over. There was a vacant lot to each side. Down the street there was a sprinkling of lights, kerosene lamps showing through the windows of Negro shacks, their light gold against the tarnished silver of the moon. On the cool air there was the voice of someone singing, the words barely audible:

Gonna put my burden down, Lord,

Gonna put my burden down.

Calhoon went alongside the building.

The ground was sandy and soft under his feet. A tin can glowed like a jewel in the moonlight. The man had quit singing and there was no sound except what Calhoon made himself.

He reached the back and looked up. The windows were dark, boarded or with drawn shades, he couldn't tell. But he went up the stairs and the door at

the top opened when he pushed on it. Beyond the door, darkness and ancient, stale odors lay in wait for him.

He looked back and thought he saw something move beyond the vacant lot. But it may have been only the shadows beneath a mango tree. He turned to the door again, stepped over the sill into darkness, and moved forward.

And now he was afraid again. Then he saw the thread of light and some of the fear left him. He found the door-knob with his left hand. He knocked twice quickly, and pushed the door open.

THERE was a chair, an unmade bed, a table with a kerosene lamp on it. One of the men Calhoon had seen watching his U-Drive-It the day before sat on the bed. The other man was in the chair by the table. The lamp light shone on him. It glittered more brightly on the star pinned to his shirt than on the gun in his hands.

"Come on in," he said. "We thought you'd be back."

Calhoon stood there and looked from one to the other. "Foots Benton?" he said finally.

"Foots," the man in the chair said, "is dead. As I expect you know. Somebody choked him. Say, aren't you Calhoon?"

"Yes."

"Well, well," the man said. "So it was you."

"I didn't—"

"The sheriff thought you'd come back," the man said. "That's why we been waiting here." He reached out and touched something on the table, something that shimmered thin and yellow in the light. It was a fragment of chain with a little goodluck charm on it—and the charm was shaped like a running rabbit.

"Benton had it in his fingers," the man said. "He must have grabbed it off you while you were choking him. I expect this is what you came back to get."

"No," Calhoon said. His heart was beginning to beat high in his throat. He knew where he had seen that chain before and now ideas pounded through

his head. "Look! I know who—at least, I think—it must have been!"

"Yeah," the deputy said. "Now turn around and keep your hands up while Pete gives you a frisking. This is the end of the line for you, Bud."

"Damn you, listen to me!" All the old bitterness and distrust took hold of him. Once they had him in jail he would have no chance. No one would listen to him. "I know who killed Janet. Who must have killed Benton. If you'll trust me, come back to the hotel with me."

"You are going to the brig. Now get your hands up."

He let a long breath through clenched teeth. "All right."

He raised his hands. The deputy's eyes watched his hands go up. At the same time Calhoon raised his foot. It caught the corner of the table, flipped it. The kerosene lamp went over.

Calhoon was dodging sideways. Gunfire shook the small room, but the deputy was off balance, trying to keep away from the flaming lamp, his aim was wide. Calhoon felt a bullet jerk at his coat. Then he was outside the door, slamming it behind him, leaping for the back stairs. He went down the steps with two long jumps, hit the yard, stumbled, and went rolling. He saw the bullet throw sand close to his face before he heard the shot. Then he was running again and around the corner of the building.

Up and down the street, lights had gone out in the shack. Calhoon ducked between two of them. A dog howled.

John Calhoon kept running.

CHAPTER VII



THE TAXI put Calhoon down in front of the hotel. He had got there as fast as possible, and saw no sign of police waiting for him as he entered and took the elevator. He went along the carpeted hall and knocked on Tom

White's door, then entered without waiting for an answer.

The detective sat in a chair with a floorlamp on one side, a table on the other. On the table was a bottle of whiskey, a bottle of sparkling water, a bowl of ice. He had a glass in his hand and his face was wreathed in a thin mist of cigar smoke.

"Hello," he said. "I see you are still around."

"Yes," Calhoon said. He went over and picked up the whisky bottle. He took a drink from it straight, then stood there holding the bottle.

"Something is eating on you," White said. "What is it?"

"It's the matter of a little gold chain with a goodluck charm on it. And a man who likes money too much."

The cigar smoke drifted into White's unblinking turtle eyes. He put his glass on the table, took the cigar out of his mouth with his left hand. His right hand lay quietly on the chair arm.

"Yes?" he said.

"Sam Duke had such a chain. But—" He stopped. Someone was knocking on the door.

White said quickly, "Who's that?"

"The police maybe. Why don't you find out?"

He didn't get out of his chair. He sank deeper into it and called, "Come in."

The door opened and Mary Peterson stood there. She wore a suit of some gray-blue material and her hair was brushed until the dim light of the room seemed to tangle in it.

"I thought I recognized you in the hallway, but I wasn't sure," she said. "And then I heard your voice. I wanted to speak to you."

White slid out of his chair. His eyes were going from Mary Peterson to Calhoon, back to the girl. There was a long, awkward moment.

"I came to Ocala, Mr. Calhoon," the girl said then, "because the police wanted someone who could identify you. But the man they had wasn't you at all—just some traveling salesman who had been at that trailer camp and who looked

a little like you." She kept watching Calhoon. When he didn't answer she said, "I can wait for you in the lobby."

"No," Tom White said. He crossed the room and closed the door into the hallway. "Mr. Calhoon was about to tell me something. What was it, Mr. Calhoon?"

"We can talk about it later."

White leaned his big shoulders against the door. "I want to hear it now."

Fear moved along Calhoon's spine. He could remember Sam Duke saying: *I guess you were better in the oil business. You should have stuck to that.* He had made a mess of everything so far. And if things went wrong now—

"What about this chain that used to belong to Sam Duke?" White said.

AT THAT moment there was a faint sound in the hallway. Perhaps someone had gone past the door. Calhoon couldn't be sure. He didn't know whether or not White had heard, or the girl.

"When I fought Sam Duke," Calhoon said, "he was wearing a gold chain. In the fight I pulled it off him. The last thing I remember is having it in my hand, under me, when he slugged me with the blackjack. Now Fooks has been killed, and Benton had that same chain in his fingers when the police found him."

"So you think Duke killed him?"

"No. When I saw Duke tonight he was broke. He didn't take the money out of my pocket after knocking me out. Someone else did that. And the same person who took the money took the chain."

"Who?"

"You," Calhoon said. "You have a great affection for money, Mr. White. You've taken me for all you could. You don't want me convicted, because as long as I'm free there is a chance to get more money from me. And I think you are getting money from Otto Hill too. You told him that I knew he had been to Janet's cabin, while she was still alive, and very close to the time she was killed. I heard Hill tell you to

'take care of' me. Probably he thinks I am blackmailing him. He doesn't want to be charged with Janet's murder. He doesn't even want the publicity of being mixed up in the case. I think he gave you blackmail money to pay me off. And I think you kept the money."

"A nice theory," White said. His face showed nothing.

"The police can get in touch with Mr. Hill. They'll get the truth from him—and tell him the truth. He'll be a rough man to handle when he learns what you've been doing. He hired witnesses to convict Sam Duke and Benton. He'll do the same to convict you."

"Convict me of what?"

"Of murder," Calhoon said. "You told me you had been following Janet, watching her. So you must have known when she got the money from Benton and took it back to her cabin. You'd got the old man who owns those cabins drunk and had free run of the place. You knew when Otto Hill came to see Janet, but Hill didn't know that Janet had the money, the fifty thousand dollars. Just what Hill expected to do, what he wanted, I can't say."

White's laughter had a nasty sound. "What Mr. Hill wanted would be hard to say in front of this lady—and I take it she is a lady. Mr. Hill wanted revenge, and he had pretty filthy ways of getting it. He wouldn't have been satisfied there at the cabin. He'd make her come crawling to him. And after that it would be whatever his dirty mind could think of."

"You hate him," Calhoon said. "Probably anyone who's had to work for him would hate him. And you knew Janet had the money. And you don't resist money very well, do you? Though maybe you wanted the chance to blackmail Otto Hill more than you wanted the money. Anyway, you killed her."

It was quiet in the room. White stood with his back against the door and his thick hand touching gently on the lapel of his coat. For a moment his eyes went to Mary Peterson, then back to Calhoon.

"What about Fooks Benton?" he asked.

"He must have learned what happened and tried to cut himself in. So you got rid of him, not wanting to share that money with anybody. But it was planting the chain on him, Sam Duke's chain which you had taken from me, that gave the thing away."

WITH his left hand White flipped the stub of his cigar. It made a slow parabola and dropped into the spittoon across the room.

"It's a good theory," he said. "But you've got no proof."

"Sam Duke will testify. I will. You had the opportunity and the motive, and probably a record behind you that won't help. But I think it is your friend Mr. Hill who will furnish the proof—even if he has to buy it. You said he was that kind of a man."

"Yes," White said slowly. "He is that kind of a man. So—" His hand went under his coat. It began to come out slowly. His eyes were filmed like those of a turtle. His thick nostrils flared back. "So—" he said.

Calhoon could see the butt of the gun coming into view. The girl screamed.

John Calhoon threw the whisky bottle. He had been holding it all the time. Now he flipped it with his wrist, went under it in a long, driving dive. He saw the gun whip free in the same instant that White dodged from the bottle. Then Calhoon's shoulder smashed into him just above the knees and they went down with a crash.

They rolled, tangled together. A floor lamp smashed down. Calhoon got a

glimpse of the gun swinging toward him. He clutched desperately and got White's wrist.

For a long moment then they lay almost motionless, struggling for possession of the gun. And slowly White's strength began to tell. The gun moved.

Then the room was full of people and White was lax on the floor. The girl stood over him with the whisky bottle in her hand and a voice was saying, "Don't hit him so hard, Lady, or we won't have any trial."

Calhoon got to his feet. He was trembling a little and there was a lump in his throat that he had to swallow. He saw the two deputies he had met at Foots Benton's place and another man who wore a sheriff's badge.

"It took you quite a while to get here," Calhoon said. He tried to make his voice steady. "I told your deputies where I was going. At least, I asked them to come here with me. So I was pretty sure they'd come along eventually. I wanted witnesses to what was said."

"I think we heard enough of it." The sheriff was a thin, brown-faced man. "But if you had come to us in the first place, as you should have done, it would have saved a lot of trouble."

"I tried to tell him that," Mary Peterson said. But she was smiling, looking at Calhoon. "I think he's learned."

Taken singly her features weren't really beautiful, Calhoon thought. And yet she looked beautiful to him. Very beautiful indeed.

"I'm just slow at learning," he said. "But I get around to it."



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The **ARDENT** **MISTRESS** **ARDEN**



or murder with passion

A true crime story of the Sixteenth Century wherein a faithless wife plans a dour fate for her milksop spouse! **by LEO MARR**

IN THE year 1551, there lived at Feversham in Kent, a young gentleman named Arden, and his wife. These two made a striking couple, for the man was tall and handsome and the lady was a knockout, judging from the remarks of the local wits, who termed her "well-

favored in shape and countenance." In those days the shapes were different, but there was as much interest in them.

It seems that Master Arden was much in love with his wife, but Mistress Arden was of a slightly deceitful nature. In fact she was more interested in a swart tailor

named Mosby, for whom she had developed an unnatural and flaming passion.

These two carried on a tempestuous love affair and it would seem that they took little heed to conceal it, for Arden either suspected or knew. But so fearful was he of offending his wife that he never dared reproach her, or even refer to it. This Milquetoast attitude did nothing to endear him to his faithless wife, more likely his lack of spirit disgusted her.

She carried on openly with Mosby in her own home. And Arden continued to close his eyes to the affair.

An inn-keeper named Adam Foule, host of the Flour-de-Lice (vintage humor) was evidently in Mistress Arden's confidence. For once when she and Mosby had quarreled and she could not bear their estrangement, she sent Foule as her emissary to plead with Mosby and to bring him a pair of silver dice as peace offering.

Poor Mosby, he didn't know the dice were loaded.

The Inconvenient Husband

Mistress Arden's passions flamed higher. She could not stand her husband any longer and was determined to have the swart tailor for her own. By some means she heard of a painter in Feversham who knew much of drugs and poisons. To him she went post haste.

"Can you mix me a poison," she asked, "which will dispatch its eater most vehemently?"

"That can I do," he assented. It never occurred to him to ask her whom she wanted to dispatch so vehemently, or maybe he just didn't care. Morals were not too dissimilar then, but perhaps the painter simply wasn't curious.

Anyway, he gave her a vial of poison. "Pour this into the bottom of a porringer," he instructed her, "and then pour milk upon it. Thus will it be concealed."

Mistress Arden rushed home, as pleased as a child with a new toy. She

could hardly wait to try it out on friend husband. But her impatience tricked her. Instead of putting the poison in first and the milk on top of it as told, she quickly poured out a porringer of milk and dumped the poison in on top of it. This friendly dish she brought her husband, who was preparing to ride to Canterbury.

But he took one or two spoonfuls of the milk and tasted something wrong "What have you given me here?" he asked.

Seeing that things had gone wrong, she seized the dish and dumped its contents. "Nothing pleases you," she said snappishly.

Grumbling, Arden went out and got his horse and rode toward Canterbury. On the way he became violently ill and fell off his horse and was purged and so got rid of the poison. But the historian recordeth not that he had any suspicion of foul play. In fact, he probably got back on his horse, remarked, "Something I et, no doubt," or the equivalent and proceeded on his way.

Mistress Arden drew a breath of relief that she had come through undetected, and pondered what to do next. A woman who is looking for trouble is very apt to find it. And so Mistress Arden located an enemy of her husband's—a man named Greene. Arden had somehow gotten away from Greene a piece of land and Greene had retaliated with threats and blows, so that when the men were separated, there was a ripe enmity between them. This seemed like a good man to do business with, she thought. Accordingly she sounded him out and found him wishing heartily that lightning would strike Arden, or some similar fate.

"Prithee," said the temptress, "wait not upon the lightning. For ten pounds could you not get one to hasten laggard Nature?"

Greene thought he might. Shortly afterward he went to London on business. Since he had to carry a large sum of money, he invited an honest goldsmith of Feversham named Bradshaw to accompany him.

Hire Sinister Ruffian

At Rainham Down they saw approaching them on a road a very tough character of the day, a ruffian named Black Will, who was very handy with sword and buckler and whose favorite sport was murder.

Bradshaw became uneasy, but he saw coming the other way four servingmen, and with these reinforcements, they went forward together to meet Black Will.

"We are happy to find company," Bradshaw explained, "for here cometh up against us, as murdering a knave as any in England. I knew him at Boulogne where we both served as soldiers. He committed many robberies and heinous murders on such as traveled between Boulogne and France."

Feeling safe in numbers they spoke to Black Will and asked him where he was bound. "I care not," he said with a curse. "I set up my staff and even as it falleth, I go."

The very man, thought Greene. He drew Black Will aside and asked him if he minded rubbing out one Master Arden for the sum of ten pounds. Black Will was delighted at the chance to turn an honest penny.

"That I will," he answered, "if I may know him."

"Marry, tomorrow will I show him to thee in Paul's," replied Greene.

From London he wrote Mistress Arden a letter. "We have got a man for our purpose; we may thank my brother Bradshaw."

This letter he gave to Bradshaw, who innocent of its contents, delivered it to Mistress Arden. The next day, Greene, having returned home, pointed out for Black Will, Arden walking in Paul's.

"And who is that goeth after him?" demanded Black Will.

"One of his men."

"I will kill them both," offered Black Will generously, not wishing to quibble over a fee.

"Nay," said Greene, "he is one of us."

"I will kill him anyway."

"Nay," said Greene. And with difficulty he persuaded the merchant of

death to confine his talents to the chosen victim alone.

The stage was now set and the conspirators had only to wait for the plot to hatch. Black Will, anxious to perform his mission, would have killed Arden on the spot, but Paul's was crowded with gentlemen promenading. For it is a little known fact that the middle aisle of St. Paul's Cathedral was the meeting place for all the fashionable young bucks of London at that time.

Black Will tried to get Arden at his lodgings in London and failed. Then he tried again as Arden rode homewards, at Rainham Down, but missed once more. He reported back somewhat glumly to Greene.

That enterprising organizer called a meeting of all the conspirators at the house of Mosby's sister in Feversham on the evening before St. Valentine's Fair. Mistress Arden was there, with her servant Michael and one of her maids. There were also Mosby, Greene, Black Will and a henchman, George Shakebag. Here, for the first time, Mosby learned that murder was being planned. The tailor hadn't bargained for this.

Plot Horrifies Mosby

"I shall be no party to a cowardly murder!" he stormed and tore out of the house and up towards the Flour-de-Lice, where he lived.

Mistress Arden lifted her skirts and flew after him. There took place then one of the most famous scenes in English literature. For this murder case was turned into a play called "Arden of Feversham" which is regarded by some as the best murder play in the English language. The author of the play is not known—at least his identity is a matter of dispute. Swinburne maintained it was Shakespeare. Others thought it was written by Christopher Marlowe or Thomas Kyd. Whoever wrote it penned these dramatic lines as Alice Arden pleads with Mosby not to desert her:

Look on me, Mosby, or I'll kill myself;
Nothing shall hide me from thy stormy look.
If thou cry war, there is no peace for me;

I will do penance for offending thee,
 And burn this Prayer Book, where I here use
 The holy word that had converted me.
 See, Mosby, I will tear away the leaves,
 And all the leaves, and in this golden cover,
 Shall thy sweet phrases and thy letters dwell;
 And thereon will I chiefly meditate,
 And hold no other sect but such devotion.

It was hard to resist a beautiful, panting, passionate woman down on her knees and holding out her arms in supplication. Mosby wavered.

"There is no one who would care about Arden's death," she told him, "and none to make great inquiry. When the deed is done, it will be done."

Mosby was lost. He returned to the house with her and the plot was completed. Mistress Arden took Black Will home with her and hid him in a closet. All the servants were sent out except those in the plot. Then Mosby took up a post at the door in a silk dressing gown.

Towards seven o'clock Arden came home and found Mosby standing there. He asked if supper was ready and Mosby said it was not.

"Then let us go and play a game at the tables in the meantime," Arden said.

They went into the parlor and started to play. Arden's back was toward the closet where Black Will was hidden, Mosby faced it. Black Will stole forth and threw a towel around Arden's neck, twisting it to strangle him. Mosby brought forth a pressing iron of fourteen pounds that he had been carrying for the purpose and struck Arden on the head. Arden fell down with a groan.

Quickly the murderers carried him into the counting house where he groaned again and stretched, whereat Black Will gave him a slash across the face with a knife and troubling himself no further about him, stripped the rings from his fingers and took what money he found in his purse.

Leave Slain Husband In Field

Then he came out of the counting-house and found Mistress Arden, from whom he claimed his ten pounds and rode away. The good wife then went into the counting house and with a knife gave the already dead man seven or eight

jabs in the breast. This was presumably to see if he were dead. After that they cleaned up, wiping up the bloodstains and putting down fresh rushes on the floor.

Two London grocers named Prune and Cole had been invited for supper and when they arrived, Alice Arden went through her little act with them. "I marvel where Master Arden can be," she said. "Well, let us not tarry for him. Come and sit ye down."

So they ate and made merry and Master Arden came not. After the Londoners were gone and the hour was late, the conspirators made ready to dispose of the body. They took it up to carry it out into the field.

When they came to the door they found it had begun to snow. Nevertheless, they went out into the garden and then found they had forgotten the key to the garden gate. A servant went back for it, then they opened the gate and carried the corpse out into the field and laid it down, still in its nightgown. Then they went back to the house.

When the innocent servants who had been sent away, came home, they found Mistress Arden in a state of great anxiety. "You must go and search for Master Arden," she cried. Then there was much hubbub and this went on, with the fair lady growing more distracted, until the affair began to look serious.

Now came the Mayor of Feversham with others, to inquire and to aid in the search. When this party came out into the field, the grocer, Prune, caught sight of the body lying in the snow. They hastened to see what it was and so discovered the missing husband.

Now the Mayor of Feversham was a man with eyes in his head. "Stay and move not," he commanded, "for there are curious footprints here in the snow."

So he observed that footprints came forth from the house to where the corpse lay and then returned to the house. Moreover he saw plainly what the conspirators had missed in the darkness: caught between Arden's foot and his slipper was a long rush from the floor of the house.

"Methinks it is plain," said the Mayor, "that this unhappy man was carried from the house and laid down here."

No procrastinator, he marched straight in and tackled Mistress Arden about the matter. "I am no such woman!" she screamed.

Mayor Traces Killers

But the Mayor had a look about him just the same. The carelessness of the murderers is amazing for soon the searchers had found a bloody knife and cloth, some of Arden's hair and other stains. Upon questioning, the servants cracked and confessed. Then panic took Alice Arden and she cried, "Oh, the blood of God help, for this blood have I shed!"

With that the Mayor did his duty and the whole crew were hauled off and cast into jail. Knowing Mistress Arden's playmates, the Mayor next went looking for Mosby. They found him at the Flour-de-Lice, in bed. He too, had neglected to take adequate precautions and they found his hose and purse with tell-tale stains.

"What mean you here?" he demanded. They showed him the bloodstains. "Here, by these tokens may ye understand."

Mosby confessed and named Black Will as the murderer, with Greene and George Shakebag as his accomplices. He even brought in the painter who had given Alice Arden her first vial of poison. The painter and George Shakebag escaped and never were caught. Greene and Black Will got away temporarily,

but were caught later.

Meanwhile the prisoners who were in custody were brought to trial at the very next session in Feversham.

"Shameless woman, if you have any other accomplices, name them!" was the demand.

Alice Arden's spirit of malice was not yet dead. Though she knew he was innocent, she named Bradshaw, perhaps hoping that it might go easier with her if she did so. Bradshaw was at once arrested and brought to join the others at the trial.

"I am innocent, I know nothing of this," he protested.

The fatal letter from Greene was read: "We have got a man for our purpose; we may thank my brother Bradshaw."

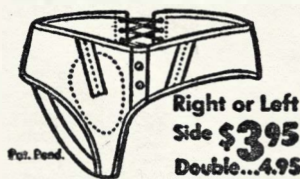
What else could this mean than that he had been hand in glove with the conspirators?

The verdict was guilty for all and none escaped. The servant Michael was hanged in chains at Feversham. Mistress Arden's maid was burned at the stake and she made a great to-do about it, wailing and crying that her mistress had brought her to this untidy end and that she would never forgive her for it. Evidently she expected to meet her again. Her chances might have been good at that, for Mistress Alice Arden was likewise burned at Canterbury on the following 14th of March.

Mosby and his sister were hanged in Smithfield at London. Greene, who had

[Turn page]

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gotten away, came back some years later when he thought it was safe, but inexorable British justice caught up with him and passed belated sentence. He was condemned and hanged in chains on the highway between Ospring and Boughton.

Black Will Shuns England

Black Will never did come back to England. But he continued his netarious career on the continent and the Dutch presently had enough of him and caught up with him, whereat he was burned on a scaffold at Flushing in Zeeland and had a chance to join Alice Arden and the maid.

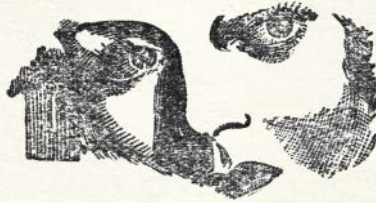
Adam Foule, host of the Flour-de-Lice was under suspicion for a while due to a slim bit of circumstantial evidence. When Mosby was arrested, he had muttered, "Were it not for Adam Foule, I had not got into this trouble."

The investigators leaped to the not

unlikely conclusion that Foule had been mixed up in the business as well, or even more than Mosby. But unlike poor Bradshaw, Foule was cleared at the trial. Mosby swore that Foule knew nothing about the murder and that his remark meant only that if Foule had never brought him the silver dice he would not have renewed his affair with Alice Arden. For some strange reason the story was believed and Foule was acquitted.

Legends grew up about this story of passion and murder. The local people of Feversham said that for years afterward, in the field where Master Arden's body lay, the outline of him could be seen, for no grass would grow where he had touched the ground. So for many years people came to see the place and talked and wondered about the cruel fate which had overtaken him.

And modern man might wonder too and ponder that age-old question: just how far can you trust your own wife?



"I Can't Tell You What I'm Threatened with, Mr. Thursday, But You've Got to Help Me!"

THE mysterious Irene Whitney, who was being blackmailed and wanted her gambling IOU's recovered from their holder, met Max Thursday's eyes without flinching.

"There's a lot I can't tell you," she admitted, "and perhaps Irene Whitney isn't my real name, either. But there'll be a nice fee in this for you. . . ."

"Sorry, I'm no stickup man," said Thursday, "I work within the law. I don't even own a gun, much less wear one. You think you've got me tabbed, on account of the sensational stories you've read in the papers about me—but remember, I can drop anything I feel burning my hands. However, I'll play along. I have my own reasons."

Max Thursday "played along"—and the next thing he knew, he was neck-deep in an extortion plot and what's more, the bloodstained hat of the gambler he was pursuing found its way into his hands!

Max Thursday is plunged into a carnival of calamity—and dragged into a circusful of mischief—when he seeks to unravel a baffling crime puzzle in *MURDER HAS GIRL TROUBLE*, the swift-moving book-length novel by Wade Miller featured in our next issue! Look forward to a tense, taut and terrific mystery thriller—*MURDER HAS GIRL TROUBLE*, starring trouble-shooting sleuth Max Thursday!

The KISS-OFF

by
ROBERT TURNER



Nick wanted to tell her,
tell her everything

HE KNEW that you had to be a hard guy. You couldn't go chicken. All the way back to the hotel in the cab, Nick kept telling himself: "It's got to be the same with Cathy as with the others, and don't fool around. Make it short and sweet. You've warned her that it would be like this."

The cab stopped and he got out and

paid the driver. The rain had quit and it was sticky hot and he was sweating, but he kept the trench coat buttoned up to the neck. The hackie studied him.

"You all right, mac?" he asked.

"Sure," Nick said. "I'm all right. You know how it is on pay night."

"Yeah." The cabbie grinned. "Sometimes a guy has a little trouble navi-

*Nick knew how to use a pistol to get what he wanted,
but could he use it to destroy—what he wanted most?*

gating. But so long as you're all right—"

He walked through the lobby stiffly, controlling his legs, toward the elevator bank. Now that the time was here, he suddenly couldn't kid himself any more that this kiss-off was going to be the same as it had with all the others. Not any of it was the same.

Yet the affair-Cathy had started off like a lot of others. He remembered the night he met her. A small New England mill town, a long time ago, now, it seemed, yet it couldn't have been more than a few months. He'd pulled a finance company office job that day and it had gone smoothly. There hadn't been any trouble. It turned out to be a better haul than he'd figured, too, and he came out of that finance company office with over fourteen hundred dollars.

He felt fine and bought some new clothes and set out on the town. He started with a small tavern where he and this girl and an old rumdum drinking gin-and-beer, were the only ones at the bar. He didn't intend to stay because the joint was dead and he craved excitement and fun. But just as he was about to leave, he caught the girl's eye in the backbar mirror.

He automatically gave her the smile and she reacted in the usual way. A little timid, perhaps, but that was about all that was different. He moved over next to her then, and bought her a drink, gave her the usual fast spiel.

SHE said her name was Cathy McDowell, and she was wearing a cheap black frock that had seen better days but was bravely trying to still look gay and sophisticated. She was young and really stacked, but that wasn't anything. A lot of them were. She had hair of an off-shade brown, thick and clean looking but needing a permanent badly. Her neat, patent leather pumps were worn and cracked in places. So was the purse on the bar in front of her. She had her lipstick on too thick, but her mouth was gentle and curved. She had a tiny nose and wide, serious, half frightened gray eyes under delicate brows.

A cute, sweet looking kid that first

night he met Cathy, and that was about all you could say for her. Nothing there for a guy to get excited about. Yet he took her out of the dead little ginmill and they hired a hack and hit for some roadhouse she knew outside of town. It turned out to be an evening. They didn't do anything but drink some and dance and talk a lot but somehow it was something. It was special.

Taking her home in the cab he found out that she worked in the thread mills and that her mother and father were dead. She lived alone in a small flat and that was always nice to know. So he kissed her and told her he loved her and made it sound like the McCoy the way he always did. But she pulled away and in the street light filtering through the dark back of the cab, he saw her face. She looked pale and tired and her eyes were wide and scared. Her lips were a little open and she whispered:

"Nick, you don't have to tell that to me." Her eyes went over him, taking in the slickly tailored tan suit and the terrific hand-painted tie with the large Windsor knot. "You don't *have* to pull that line with me."

"I said I love you," he told her fiercely. "What's the matter, don't you believe me? I never said that to a girl before. I love you." He tried to pull her close to him again, but she put her hands against his chest. She shook her head a little wildly.

"No, Nick!" she said. "You don't understand. I don't want you to say those things to me until you know me and can really mean it. I—I don't want to be *kidded* into anything. You don't have to say those things to soften me up."

Right then and there it really started to get different and their eyes held each other and he somehow felt what she was trying to tell him though he didn't fully understand it, had never run up against anything like this before.

He grinned and said, uneasily, "You're a crazy kid!" He put his fist playfully against her chin.

When the cab pulled up in front of the broken down three story house, they got

out and they stood in the vestibule and talked, hushed and tense and intimate, the way it always was at this point. He kissed her again. They clung to each other this time and he could tell by the way that she held his kiss that she had been leveling with him. It could be any way he wanted it. She really wouldn't put him to any trouble.

That was when he went haywire. He dropped his arms from around her and looked down at her face tipped up to his, the small pretty features soft in the hall light glow coming out through the dingy orange door-curtains. Her eyes were still closed, the lashes long and shadowy on her cheeks, her lips faintly parted.

Something happened to him then and he reached up and patted her cheek. He said, "So long, baby. You're a nice kid, a real nice kid. I—I'll see you around." He turned and walked off, out of there, out of the vestibule, without looking back.

He heard her call twice, "Nick! . . . Nick!" But he didn't turn. He kept on going.

He walked back to the center of town. He told himself that he must be blowing a valve, that he was getting out of there, out of this moldy burg, fast. He was going to grab a train or bus and head for New York with his fourteen hundred dollars.

But he didn't do that. He checked into a hotel and he almost went crazy with waiting until the next night when he went and picked up Cathy. Then everything was all right again with him.

THREE days later they were married and went to New York for their honeymoon, and that was a time when they walked in clouds and lived their dreams every minute and were happier than either had ever been before.

From the beginning he meant to tell Cathy the truth or close to it, not going into too many details about it. He always had done that with the others. He meant to tell her that he was a wrongo, a heel, crooked as a corkscrew and that was that. She could take it or leave it alone, he didn't care. But that, like everything else with Cathy, was different.

Instead he shot her some fast talk about being a gambler, a card sharp and that when he went broke, he went out and found a fat game somewhere and sat in and made his killing. Then he did not have to work anymore for awhile until he ran out of dough again.

She bought that. She went for it. She didn't like it, though. She never said anything right out but he could tell she would rather he had been some guy working in a store or something for an honest living. She hinted to that effect. She told him that having all those dresses and stuff and the new permanent, traveling all the time, living in big hotels, didn't mean anything special to her. Even if he didn't make a lot of money, she'd still love him. But she never came right out and said anything direct.

When they went broke that first time, he stuck to his story and told her he was going to this big card game he'd found out about. He went out and stuck up a liquor store and got three hundred bucks. When he came back to Cathy at the hotel, he told her his luck had run good. He tossed the pile of bills on the bed, but she hardly looked at them.

She didn't say much. She got sort of a scared look in her gray eyes and threw herself into his arms and hung onto him hard. When he tried to raise her face from his shoulder, she wouldn't let him at first. He saw why. There were tears on her cheeks.

"What's the idea, honey?" he asked.

"I don't know, Nick," she said. "I don't know. I got a funny, crazy feeling. It—it was nothing, Nick."

"Feeling?" he said. "What kind of feeling?"

She tried to smile and rubbed the tears off of her cheek onto his jacket. She shook back her rich brown hair, with its long and shining waves.

"I couldn't explain, Nick," she said. "It was just crazy. Forget it. I—I'm all right, now."

Then it was okay for awhile until they went broke again and the next job. When he came back this time, she acted strangely again. She wasn't wise,

though. If Cathy even suspected what he was really doing, how he got all that money, he'd have known. She would have gone out of her mind. He finally figured that she just didn't feel it was right for a man not to work, to live the way he did. It didn't strike her as honest or something. Even though he could imagine how she would act about the truth, he tried to tell her that night.

He wanted to make a clean breast of the whole thing, tell her how he'd come out of the penitentiary after a rap for something he hadn't really done. He'd tried to do things right, but nobody would give him a decent job and the girl who'd gotten him into the trouble in the first place and promised to wait for him to come out, had taken off with some other guy.

He told himself if that's the way they want it, that's the way they're going to get it, and he went out and bought himself the gun with his last few bucks.

He picked on a swank dentist's office for the first job. He figured at the end of the day there would be a lot of money around from people who paid cash for the work done when they came in. He was scared stiff, but it came out easier than he'd figured and he got \$350 from the dentist and there wasn't any trouble. He wondered then, how long this had been going on? If you made your dough like this, life could be short and sweet, and if you got caught, so what?

HE took it from there. He graduated from dentist's and doctor's offices to liquor stores and finance companies and small hotels. He grew cold and calloused about it and thought about it only as another man would think about his trade. When the money from one job was gone, he'd go out on another. All very simple. Especially when you never worked the same town twice.

But after he and Cathy were married, it was different. When he went out on a job now, he was nervous. He thought about getting caught or getting killed. That was important now, where it hadn't been before. He knew what it would do to Cathy. Because of this jit-

teriness, he almost botched a couple of jobs. He knew that soon he'd have to set her straight, settle the thing one way or another.

This night he tried, but she was looking right at him with those lovely, innocent gray eyes of hers and he couldn't bring himself to do it. The right words wouldn't come. The best he could do was to ask her: "What would you do, Cathy, if you or I busted up this deal?"

"What do you mean, Nick?" She tried to hold his gaze, but it kept getting away from her.

He shrugged. "How do we know this'll last? Maybe you'll get tired of me. Maybe one of us will find somebody else. Those things happen. Something like that."

She laughed. "Don't be silly, Nick. Nothing could bust us up. Could it, Nick?"

"You can't ever tell," he said doggedly. "Who knows what's going to happen?" He got sore then, not at her, but at himself for getting mixed up with a good kid like Cathy, for not having the spine to bring it all out clean and maybe start over from scratch—or to get the devil away from her and not drag her down with him.

He took her shoulders and held them so tightly she winced. "Listen, Cathy," he said. "I'm a crazy guy. You don't really know me. If the time comes that anything goes wrong between us, I'll make it short and sweet and clean. No long drawn-out scenes. Some day I'll come in here and I'll say: 'Cathy, it's over. Get out of here. We're washed up. It's finished.' . . . Just like that. When that happens, promise me you'll go. Don't ask any questions. Don't give me any arguments. Don't make it tough on both of us, Cathy." He knew that would be the only way he'd ever have courage enough to do it.

A funny look came over her face. For a long time she didn't answer. She let her eyes go over all of his features as though memorizing them. Finally, she shook her head, slowly.

"All right, Nick." Her voice was barely a whisper. "If that's the way you

want it. If that ever happens, Nick, I promise. It'll be like you say."

Well, tonight the time had come. The hotel elevator stopped and he got out. He walked along the corridor to their room and put the key in the lock and went in. Cathy was reading a movie magazine. She looked up and smiled that slow, sweet smile. She looked cute as a kitten, curled in the chair, so soft and small. The way she looked at him, so glad to see him, her face lighting up like it always did when he was out for a few hours and came back. It almost got him. For a moment he almost weakened. Then he got a grip on himself.

He leaned against the door. He looked right at her and he took a deep breath and gave her the business without preamble. He said, hard-voiced: "All right, Cathy, get out. Pack a bag and take off. It's over. I'm kicking you out. I—I've found somebody else. I lied to you. I didn't go out to any poker game to-night."

SHE came up out of the chair, all color gone from her face, her eyes large and bleak. "Nick!" She said his name and that was all, but there was everything else in the way she said it.

"Come on, come on!" he said. "I told you this was the way it would be. What are you looking so surprised about? You said you wouldn't give me any trouble. You promised, Cathy. So get going!"

She stood, staring at him, letting this sink in. She frowned a little. "Nick," she said. "You—something's wrong. You're drunk or something. You—"

"Sure," he stopped her. "Okay. I'm drunk. Get going, Cathy."

Her lower lip came out and her chin started to pucker but she didn't cry. After a moment she turned slowly, woodenly and went to the closet and got out a small bag and pulled stuff from the dresser drawers and the closet and threw it into the bag.

He didn't move. He watched her, smoking one cigarette after another. He watched Cathy pack, knowing that she was going and he would never see her again and it was all over. He remem-

bered the way she had looked, the little-kid awe on her face, the first night she had stepped out into Times Square. He remembered the way she kissed him, mornings, to wake him up. He thought about the night of her birthday and the sweet way she blushed and looked at him with all her love in her eyes when the M. C. in that night club led everybody in the singing of *Happy Birthday, Dear Cathy* . . . and all the million and one little things that made up their short life together. And it was a very bad deal for him, this moment.

She finished packing then, and she moved toward the door. He stepped away from it, getting out of her way, keeping his back to her, so that he wouldn't have to look at her face and maybe weaken. He heard her say, softly, "Nick . . . Aren't you even going to say good-by to me?"

"No," he said. "No good-bys. Get out."

He heard her open the door. He heard it close after her and she was gone. He waited until he was sure that she was good and gone, hadn't forgotten anything, wasn't coming back. It was terribly quiet in the room and the walls seemed to close in upon him. The hotel room furniture looked cold and cheap and tawdry. Once, the pain in his stomach reached him for the first time, bad, and his legs almost gave out.

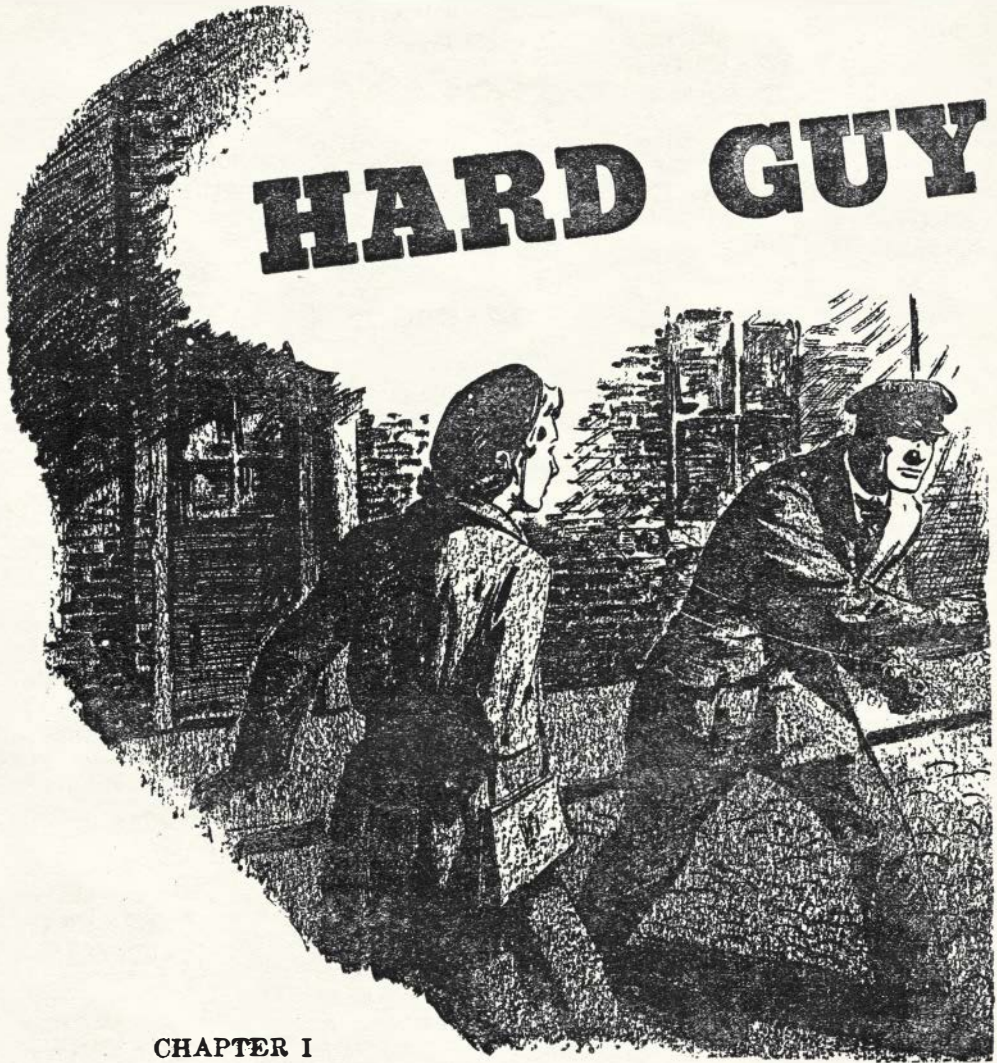
He put his hand under the buttoned-up trench coat and it came out sticky, but he didn't look down at it. He just wiped it on the side of the coat and walked stiffly toward the telephone on the night table next to the double bed. He picked it up and called the police. He told them about the pawn shop job where the guy had a gun under the counter and gave him some trouble.

"You'd better send an ambulance," he told them. "I think I'm hurt bad."

He hung up and sat down on the edge of the bed and felt pain wash over him in sickening waves. He sat there, waiting for them to come and get him and telling himself that you really had to be a hard guy. You had to cut it short and sweet and clean with a dame like Cathy.

You couldn't go chicken.

HARD GUY



CHAPTER I

THE rusty, crusty Liberty, the S. S. Donald Wilson, stood alongside the dock as though, already, she had been towed to the derelict grave that one day would be hers. She had overstayed her life now, and only the necessity for post-war shipping had kept her alive.

She was fresh from China, and she was paying off her crew. Nobody knew when she'd make another run, or where she'd go if she did. But it would probably be another slow, hot, hate-filled run to some stinking end of the earth where

the regular freighters, with their streamlined sides and fast turbines, didn't go.

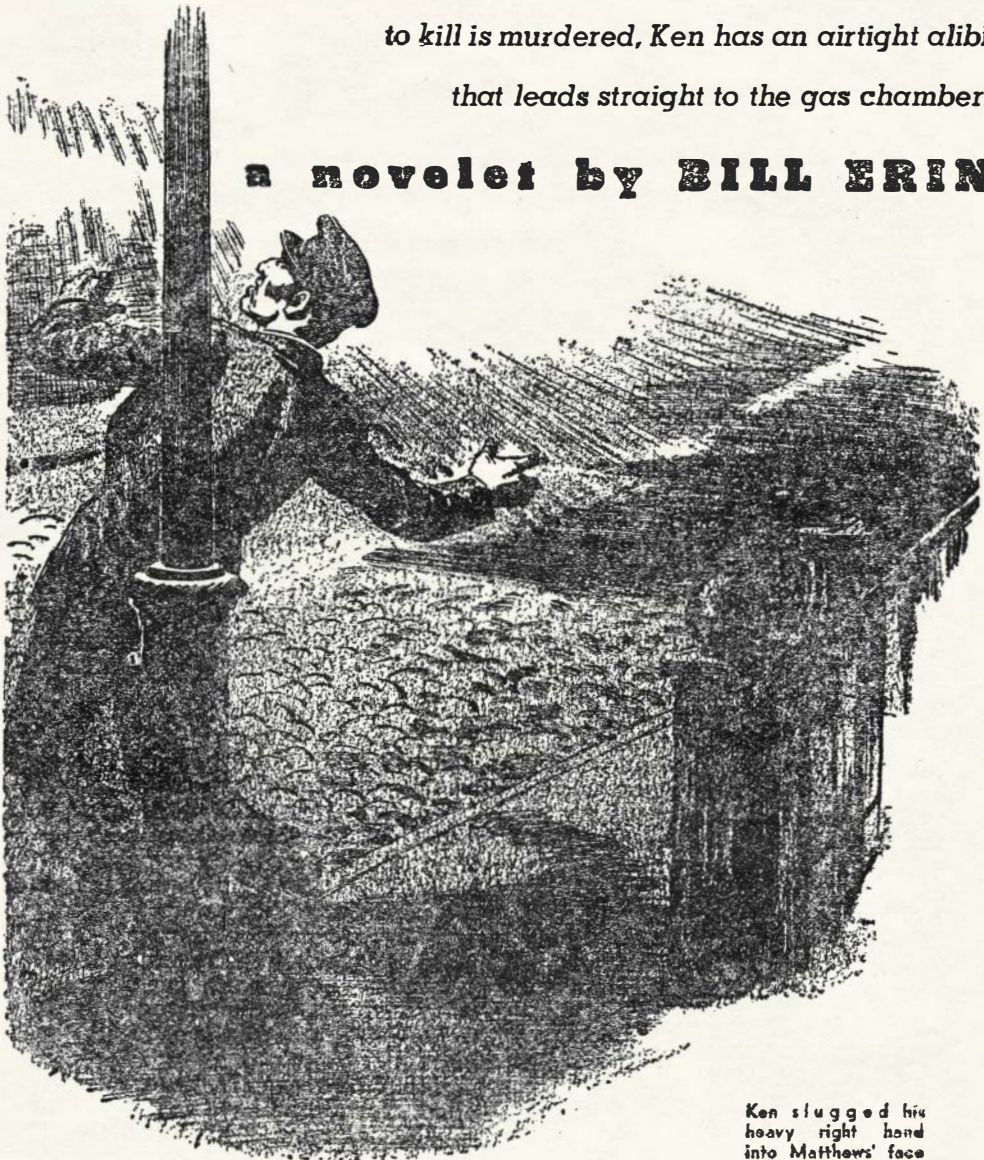
Able Bodied Seaman Ken Burke stepped up to the paymaster's table in the officer's saloon, if you could call it that aboard a Liberty, and faced the company paymaster. To his right was the purser, to his left the Coast Guard Inspector.

The paymaster droned some figures, selected two crisp one hundred dollar bills from the pile in front of him,

BURKE

*When the sailor Ken Burke threatened
to kill is murdered, Ken has an airtight alibi
that leads straight to the gas chamber!*

a novelet by BILL ERIN



Ken slugged his
heavy right hand
into Matthews' face

counted out some other money, and gave it to Ken Burke. He shoved the A. B. a small envelope of papers containing the records, social security and income tax payments, and then gave Ken a pen to sign for the money.

Ken signed in the necessary places, and then stood. He had the money in one hand and the papers in the other. He faced the Coast Guard Inspector.

"Burke," the Inspector said, "we're letting the trouble with you on this ship slide. But it's on the records. You mend your ways, or one of these days we'll lift your papers."

"Any trouble in the crew on a ship can be traced to the officers," Ken said darkly. His voice was controlled and his diction good. The hard power of his body and the roughness of his face and clothing belied his speech.

"Not always," the Inspector said.

"Always," Ken replied. "Any officers that'll treat their crew like men will find their crew willing to meet them halfway. The only thing you see on the log is the officer's version."

"There may be two sides to an argument," the Inspector admitted.

"There are more than two sides to this one," Ken said. "Three or four sides. All kinds of angles. Why do you suppose the officers asked to let it ride? Especially that dirty-faced first mate?"

"That's enough," the Inspector said, and he waved Ken away. "Next man."

KEN grinned tightly and stuffed the money in one pocket, the papers in the other. He turned away from the table and found the dark, heavy first mate, Matthews, blocking his way.

"I heard what you said about me," Matthews rasped in his coarse voice.

The two faced each other, both big and muscled men, the mate beefier and a little softer from the inactivity of his officer's job. There was a flare of antagonism between them.

"It's no secret," Ken said without raising his voice. "Every one aboard ship knows what a Fascisti-minded illegitimate you are."

"I'll take you on the dock and cram the words down your smooth-tongued throat," the mate bellowed.

"Don't try anything on the dock with me," Ken said, and his voice had an edge of steel to it, "or I'll kill you. I'm looking for a chance to get even."

"Are you threatening me?" the mate yelled, one eye on the Coast Guard Inspector.

"I won't threaten you," Ken said. "Some day I'll just beat your brains out—what there is of them."

"That'll be enough of that," the Inspector said. He stood as Ken turned to face him. "Perhaps you're not entirely familiar with marine regulations, Burke, but the mate has recourse to law for any physical action you might take against him even though you're signed off the ship. And threats will only get you into trouble."

"What about him?" Ken asked. "Where's my protection?"

"The same thing holds true if he starts anything with you," the Inspector said.

Ken turned back to the big mate, and his eyes glinted dangerously. "Be sure you walk backward down any dark alleys," he said.

Ken left. He went to his fo'c'sle and put his heavy jacket on against the chill San Francisco night. Over his shoulder he slung the heavy seabag which contained the total of his worldly effects, and he made his way to the ladder. He threw a hitch around the bag and lowered it to the dock. Then he went smoothly down the ladder to the dock, threw the line free from the bag, and shouldered it once again.

He turned to look at the black side of the ship rising high above him. He always said good-by to his ships in kind, whether they had treated him well or poorly.

"Good-by, you hell ship," he said. He looked up at the deck and his teeth clenched. "And if I ever meet that over-bearing mate, God help him."

He turned away into the huge dock house and his steps echoed hollowly as he made his way to the gate at the far end. The dimness and the darkness of the place were depressing.

"What a place for murder," he said.

He stopped, and there was a creeping up the back of his neck. The mate would be one of the last ones paid off. He'd come through here alone, in all probability.

Ken didn't exactly have murder in mind. Nor did he have any intention of robbing the mate of his fat pay-off. But there were a few things he'd like to take out of the mate's hide.

He slid his seabag behind a stack of boxes and stepped in beside it. He had time. He wasn't off on a drunk with his money, the way many of the men were. He'd had his drunks, and he'd still have some in the future, but he didn't drink for the sake of it. Not yet, anyway, although it was probably his eventual fate.

HE slipped a cigarette out of the opened pack in his pocket and put it in his mouth. Then he thought of the no-smoking restrictions in the dock houses. He hesitated a moment, shrugged his shoulders, and lit the cigarette.

"Who's there?" asked a half-frightened voice from the passageway through which Ken had just come.

Ken ground the match out carefully under his foot and cupped the cigarette in his hand. He said nothing.

"Who's there?" asked the familiar voice again. Ken recognized it as one of the cooks, a wizened little fellow with a subservient air and sly tongue. Was he going to stand there all night bleating?

"Beat it," Ken said.

"Oh," said the other with a sigh. "You, Burke? I nearly jumped out of my britches when that match flared. Whatcha doin' there?"

"Beat it," Ken said again, his voice menacing.

"That's no place to cop a smoke," the second cook said. "If they catch you they'll—"

"Get out of here, cookie, before I spread your snooping nose all over your face!" Ken's voice rose a notch and he was ready to carry out his threat.

"All right, all right," the cook said. He shuffled on. "But if you're waitin' for Matthews, give him one for me, the slob." The cook giggled nervously over his shoulder and his shadowy figure bobbed on to the gate.

Sure he knew what I was waiting for, Ken thought bitterly as he carefully nursed his cigarette in a cupped hand and watched one shadowy figure after another, and sometimes two and three at a time. There was some talking and laughter, but Ken was busy with his thoughts.

This was what he had come down to. Hiding behind a stack of boxes and waiting to waylay a man who had been

his superior. Superior? In what way? Manliness? Seamanship? Decency? Only in the papers he held. Papers and a law that said Ken had to stay on the ship and he had to obey.

Ken drew the cigarette down to a butt and carefully ground it out under his foot. He peered through the blackness to make sure that it was out and there were no sparks.

What a hell ship it had been. A doddering old captain who was signed aboard by the owners only because the Coast Guard regulations said there had to be someone with a Master's papers aboard her. The crew hadn't seen the captain a dozen times. Matthews ran the ship. Delbert J. Matthews. Delbert! What a first name for someone like that pig.

As if in answer to his thoughts, a raucous laugh boomed down the huge dock house. It was Matthews! Ken stiffened and froze against the pile of boxes. He slipped to the edge and peered toward the ship. But there was no light at that end and he could see nothing. He's have to wait for the mate to get silhouetted against the gate light.

Matthews was talking. That meant he was with someone. That was just as well. It would keep him occupied while Ken followed. Ken didn't intend jumping him near the dock.

"Just the same," drawled a voice that Ken recognized as that of the Texas-raised third mate, "I wouldn't go out of my way to antagonize a crew the way you did. If we don't have enough supplies and fresh water, that's not our fault, but there's no use sinkin' the hook the way you did."

The first mate's laughter roared again. "Why not?" he asked. "Keep 'em on their stinkin' toes, that's my motto. Make 'em work. They're a buncha scum that'd sign on that old tub for a run like that. No good ship'll take 'em."

"Why do you suppose a guy like Burke is sailin'? And how come he signed on that tub?" the third asked.

"I don't know," Matthews growled, "but I fixed his record so he won't be sailin' anything else but tubs for a while." Matthews laughed again.

They were getting out of his hearing range, so Ken slipped his bag to his shoulder and stealthily followed. He paused outside the circle of illumination cast by the gate lights until the two men

were through. They yelled a greeting at the gatekeeper which rang back through the vault-like dock house, and then they disappeared into the dark, misty and fog-shrouded San Francisco waterfront, dimly lit at best.

CHAPTER II



KEN HURRIED after them. He went out the gate and was conscious of the keeper peering at him. He waved without saying anything, and hurried, so as not to lose Matthews in the fog. As soon as he was out of

the bright glare from the gate, he saw the shadowy figures ahead of him.

They walked down the railroad tracks toward the Ferry Terminal. Then they stopped under a street light, for which Ken silently thanked them, since it increased his vision as he lurked in the protecting blanket of mist, and the third mate was obviously going on alone.

"I gotta meet someone here, Matthews said. "See you again."

The third mate held out his hand and they shook perfunctorily. "So long," the third said, and he disappeared into the fog.

Ken leaned his seabag against a building and edged forward. The mate was standing under the light, and he looked at his watch. Someone's due any minute, Ken thought. I'd better do it now, and fast. I can drive him out from under the light and kick his teeth in before anyone can get to him. Ken, since his advent into the Merchant Marine, had learned waterfront commando fighting well. With surprise on his side, he'd have the mate helpless in seconds.

He was crouched, ready to charge, when a voice spoke from the other side of the circle of light. It almost tinkled through the fog, it was such a pleasant voice.

"Mr. Matthews?" asked the voice. It was feminine, and in just the two words Ken, hardened to waterfront women, could tell it was an educated, cultured voice. He dropped back to his seabag hurriedly.

"Yeah," Matthews said roughly in answer. "It's about time you showed up."

"I'm sorry," said the voice, and its owner walked into the light.

She was dressed in a trench coat, and it fit her figure well. Her legs were slim and good-looking, what he could see of them, and from where Ken stood, she was pretty. How did the mate rate a rendezvous with someone like this?

She was only a pace from Matthews, and they were talking in very low voices. Ken could hear the tinkle of her voice now and then, and the rasp of Matthews' heavy vocal chords, but he couldn't make out the words.

This is swell, Ken thought bitterly. He'll go somewhere with this woman, maybe shack up with her, and I'll never get him alone. If I lose him now, it may be years before I see him again.

Maybe I'll find him in some foreign port, he thought. There was a pleasant tang to such a thought. In some hole of a foreign port he could cut the mate to pieces and nobody'd ever connect him with it. It was a little silly to jump Matthews this soon after discharge from the ship. Everybody would know who did it, and Matthews could have him thrown in the clink on assault and battery charges.

Ken sighed, decided that his revenge would have to be postponed until the next time, whenever that would be, and put a strong hand around the neck of his seabag.

There was a sharp exclamation from the girl that drew Ken's attention. She had stepped back a half pace from Matthews, and Ken thought he could see a leer on the heavy face as the mate leaned toward her. Matthews said something.

"No," she said sharply and clearly. "I'm prepared to pay money, but nothing like that."

The mate growled something and put out his arms. She tried to twirl away, but Matthews grabbed her by the shoulders and held her. She raked a hand across his face, but he pulled her to him and pinioned her arms while he laughed.

Ken was across the sidewalk and into the circle of light in a second. He grabbed the mate by the shoulder and spun him roughly around. He saw the mate's surprised face clearly, and then he slugged his heavy right hand into Matthew's face.

Matthews grunted and reeled up against the lamp post. He buckled to

his knees. Ken grabbed his shirt front and hauled him to his feet. Ken slugged home the right hand again with a heavy splat that threw blood over the front of him. Matthews' head banged against the lamp post and he went to his hands and knees. He rolled onto his back, and then rolled again, off the curb and into the gutter on his face.

Ken circled around him warily, in a half crouch. The mate moaned and tried to raise his head. Ken drew back his heavy boot.

"No!" It was a sharp, hissed, horror-stricken exclamation.

Ken lowered his foot and looked at her. In the moment, he had forgotten that she was even there. The back of her hand was over her mouth, and she was looking at both of them as if suddenly confronted with Frankenstein's monster.

KEN stepped across the prone body of Matthews and took her roughly by the arm. "Let's get out of here," he said. He steered her past his seabag and heaved it to his shoulder with his free right hand. She came along without protest and they walked in silence. He turned up a side street and away from the Ferry Building and the Embarcadero.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"No place in particular," he said. "Where do you want to go?"

"If you can show me how to get to Market Street from here," she said, "I can find my own way back."

"I'll take you to Market Street," Ken said. They moved into a better lighted district with a few cheap stores and taverns. He relaxed her arm and she walked beside him.

"Thank you for helping me," she said.

He grinned drily. "Forget it," he said. "It was a pleasure." He looked down at her. "The thing I can't understand," he said, "is what a girl like you was doing with a slob like him."

He thought he saw red in her face, but he couldn't be sure because of the yellow light and the mist. "It's a long story," she said.

"I'll buy you a drink," Ken said. "You can tell me about it."

She hesitated. "You're a sailor?" she asked.

"I'm not carrying this seabag because

I like exercise," he said sarcastically.

"Oh," she said.

"I'm sorry," Ken said immediately.

"That's all right," she said. "I guess it was a little obvious. Well, if you're a sailor, maybe you can help me."

"Good," Ken said. "What kind of drinking do you want? Tavern or restaurant?"

"Restaurant, if you please," she said. "I could use a strong cup of coffee."

Ken chuckled. "You'll get your coffee strong along here," he said. He turned into a second-rate restaurant. They went to a greasy booth and Ken dumped his seabag. They slid into opposite sides of the booth.

"Whaddya want?" the single waiter yelled from behind the counter.

"Two cups of java," Ken yelled back. "Anything else?" he asked her. She shook her head no. Ken let it go at that.

The waiter brought two heavy mugs with coffee slopping over the sides and set them on the table. "Twen'y cents," he said.

"Twenty cents?" Ken asked. "The war's over, you know."

"In a booth we don't serve nickel coffee," the waiter said.

"Why didn't you say so," Ken said. "For a dime I'd have walked to the counter myself." He threw twenty cents on the table.

The waiter opened his mouth to say something, met Ken's eyes, and thought better of it. He picked up his twenty cents and left.

She was looking at him curiously, but the fear was gone from her eyes.

"I hit old women and little kids," Ken explained.

"You look like a sailor," she said, "act worse than most of them, but you don't sound like one."

"That's my early training," Ken said. "It was very bad. They educated me."

"Where?"

Ken's lips tightened. "Never mind that," he said. "What about this long story of yours?"

"I'm looking for my brother," she said.

"I hope you didn't think Matthews was him," Ken said.

SHE looked at him sharply. "You know Matthews?"

"Just finished a trip under him," Ken said grimly.

"Oh," she said, and a little comprehension came to her face.

"Your conscience can rest easy," Ken said. "I was going to beat him up anyway. As a matter of fact, you probably saved him a real beating.

She was quiet a moment. "Are you really that brutal?" she asked.

"I'm worse than that when I get going," Ken said. "I hate people." He took a big drink of coffee. "What about this brother of yours? You thought Matthews was him?"

"No," she said, "but Matthews knows something about him. He sailed under Matthews during the war, and again just recently.

"What'd Matthews want for the information?" Ken asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You hit him at the wrong time," Ken said. "We just made a long trip to China. He got paid off and he's got plenty of money, but it's been a long time since the last woman. Wait a couple of weeks until he's more interested in money again."

"Thanks," she said. "You may have something there."

She had hair that wasn't blond and wasn't brunette. It was sort of honey-colored under the dirty lights of the restaurant. Her eyes were a deep blue, very steady. There was no trace of dissipation in her face. She was clean looking and pretty. Ken had been a long time on the trip to China, too, and he shifted nervously.

"The reason I'm telling you all this," she said, "is because I thought you might have run across my brother."

"What's his name?" Ken asked.

"Charles Merton," she said. "I'm Marion Merton."

"Pleased to meet you," Ken muttered mockingly. "I'm Ken Burke."

She nodded, but otherwise ignored the interruption. "But he isn't sailing under that name."

"That sounds funny," Ken said. "During the war they didn't issue papers to anyone without birth certificate, fingerprints, a minister's testimonial and their principal's recommendation. How did he do it?"

"He ran away before the war and had papers. He came back to us, then went away again right after the war started," she explained.

Ken raised an eyebrow. "Patriotic?"

"No," she said. "Not Charley. He got into trouble at home again."

"What's so good about him that you're running around looking for him?"

"There's nothing really bad about him," she said. "You see, he has one thin leg that makes him limp. And now he has a scar on his face, too. Then, somewhere while he was gone the first time, he learned to use marijuana."

"Ah," Ken said.

"Basically, I feel he must be all right. If I could find him, I could have him cured of the—of marijuana. Then he'd be all right." She looked appealingly at Ken to see if he understood.

Ken looked at his cup and it was empty. "Hey," he shouted at the waiter. "Come here!"

"Whaddya want?" the waiter asked sullenly.

"Come here," Ken said again, "before I come over there and talk to you by hand."

The waiter shuffled over. "Well?"

"Listen, sour face," Ken said, "if you refill our cups, it won't cost us anything, will it?"

"Look—" the waiter started. But Ken gripped the mug as though it were a weapon.

The waiter swallowed and his eyes glanced quickly around the restaurant. The two or three derelicts inside were looking curiously, but if anything started they'd just get out.

"No," the waiter said, "it won't cost you anything."

"All right," Ken said, and he relaxed his hold on the cup. "Fill 'em up."

CHAPTER III



THE WAITER took the cups back to the counter.

"You're a little cruel and mean, aren't you?" she asked.

It didn't bother Ken any. "Most people are," he said. "Only in the thing you call civilization they can't do anything physically, so they do it mentally. Much more cruel that way."

"I'd like very much to know what made you this way," she said.

The waiter came back with the coffee and Ken ignored the question. He

became so interested in watching the expressions on the girl's soft, mobile face, that he didn't see the waiter slip out the front door.

"Why didn't you cure your brother when he was home last time?" Ken asked.

"I didn't know he had the habit," she said, "until after he was gone. It got him into trouble—that's how I found out."

"A very tragic story," Ken said. "Frankly, I don't have much sympathy for you. Here's your brother, a guy who is rejected by the people you call friends because he's a gimp. He—"

"A what?" she asked.

"He limps," Ken said. "So he goes out to find people who don't care whether or not he limps. He finds them. All you want to do is to drag him back to the people you consider proper because you don't consider *his* friends proper. Fooey."

She paled a little. "You won't help me, then?"

Ken shrugged. "Who knows," he said. "I might help you if I could. But I don't know the guy, never met him, and wouldn't know where to find him. You don't even know what name he's sailing under."

"No," she said.

"Hire a private eye to keep a tail on Matthews," Ken said. "When he gets liquor and women enough, and needs money, offer him fifty for what he knows. He'll spill it."

"Well," she said, and she gathered in her purse and gloves, "I guess that's that, then. Thank you very much for your help—such as it was."

It hurt Ken. It hurt him as nothing had hurt him in a number of years to see her leaving. But he knew he wouldn't stand a chance at a serious pitch with this girl, so he might as well let her go and get her out of his system.

The waiter appeared and there was a policeman with him. Marion had started to get up, but she relaxed to see what was going to happen.

"That's him," the waiter said. "He owes me a dime."

"That right?" the policeman asked.

Ken turned to the waiter very slowly. "What do I owe you a dime for, Jack?" he asked.

"Refills on the coffee," the waiter said. "That's a nickel each."

"You said refills were free," Ken said. "I asked you and you said they were free." He addressed Marion. "Isn't that right?" he asked.

"Yes," she said quietly. "Yes, that's right."

THE officer looked at her and he was puzzled.

"He was gonna hit me," the waiter said. He was pale and frightened, but somehow he had the courage to see it through. "He was gonna hit me, and I hadda say it. It's up there on the board." He pointed to a dirty sign. "Refills five cents" he said.

"Did I say I was going to hit you?" Ken asked gently.

"No," the waiter said, "but you looked it. You looked like you were."

"Officer," Ken said, and he turned to the policeman. "Undoubtedly you are cognizant of the law enough to realize that without a spoken word, a threat cannot be recognized on a witness stand. I can look anyway I please. But there must be worded threat before it would stand in a court of law. Doesn't that sound logical to you, officer?"

The policeman turned to Marion. "Did he threaten the waiter?" he asked.

She looked at them all, last at Ken, and scorn showed in her face. "Yes," she said. "Yes, he did threaten the waiter."

"Come on," the policeman said, and he tapped the table top with his nightstick, "cough up a dime. You're a wise guy, but now you'll pay up."

"The jury returned a verdict of guilty," Ken murmured. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a dime. He threw the dime on the table.

"All right," the policeman said. "And no trouble after I leave, understand? I'll remember you."

"Thank you, officer," Ken said. "You're so kind." He was to be very thankful that the officer did remember him.

The waiter's hand was shaking so much he could hardly pick up the dime. Marion rose to go.

"Thanks a lot for *your* help," Ken said. "Now we're even."

"I'm sorry," she said, and she looked as though she were. "You're not that way. That's all an act with you." She walked away from him, out the front door, and out of his life.

Ken shook a cigarette out of his pack and lit it. "Hey, Jack," he called to the waiter. The man turned as if Ken had a gun in his hand.

"Another refill," Ken said. He took a nickel out of his pocket and held it so the waiter could see it. "One cup," he said, and he laid the nickel on the edge of the table. He regarded the waiter steadily as the man shuffled across the room.

"Any charge for a clean cup?" he asked the waiter when he arrived.

"N-n-no," the waiter said.

"All right," Ken said. "Bring me a clean cup—without a policeman."

KEN went to a bar he knew. He went inside and down the crowded bar until he came to where the proprietor was serving.

"Johnny," he said softly.

Johnny Kine looked up. "Ken!" he exclaimed. "I'll be a son-of-a-gun, how are you?"

Ken held the seabag on his shoulder with his left hand and pumped Johnny's right with his. He had a wry grin on his face.

"When did you get in?" Johnny asked.

"Two, three days ago," Ken said.

"Paid off tonight. Just back from a dry trip to China."

"It's good to see you," Johnny said.

"You haven't changed much."

"Tell you what," Ken said. "I want to go on a good drunk. Can I leave my bag here until I sober up?"

Johnny's face fell. "Sure," he said.

Ken shucked the seabag off his shoulder onto the bar and Johnny grunted with the weight of it as he opened a cabinet in the backbar, shoved aside some bottles, and deposited the seabag. Johnny turned back to Ken.

"One step nearer the dogs, is that it?" he asked.

"Cut out the sermon, Billy Sunday," Ken said. He put a bill on the bar. "Give me a fifth of something cheap and rotten, but potent. I want to do this up brown."

"Cut it out, Ken," Johnny said. "I'll sell you a drink at a time. Maybe you'll get some sense."

Ken picked up the bill and put it in his pocket. His face was hard. "I'll go some place where they appreciate my business," he said. "I'll pick up my bag

tomorrow night." And he left the place.

He went next door and got his fifth and a large tumbler. He took them to a booth and methodically began to reduce the bottle's contents. When the bottle was about half gone a blowzy brunette sat across from him.

"Get yourself a glass," Ken said. She did.

He woke up the next morning as if someone had turned on a switch. Suddenly he was awake and lying there. He raised his head cautiously, but there was no hangover. He felt sick in his stomach, but that was all.

He was in a large room with about fifty other occupied cots, and the place stank. It reeked with unwashed bodies and stale, alcoholic air. Ken couldn't remember much of what had happened after he started the second bottle.

Ken went through his pockets and there wasn't a cent in them. "I wonder if she paid my hotel bill?" he muttered. He picked up his jacket, which lay on the floor at the head of the bed, and he got slowly to his feet. Still no headache.

She must have let him drink himself under without bothering to give him a mickey.

Ken went down the rickety steps to the small lobby that opened onto Front Street. There was a little, gray-haired man behind the desk.

"Good morning," Ken said pleasantly.

"Fifty cents," the little man said.

"You mean she didn't even pay for my lodging?" Ken inquired. He shook his head sadly. "Not at all what she promised me."

"I wasn't here when you came in," the little man said. "But it ain't paid."

"Sorry, Pop," Ken said, "but I don't have a penny. Maybe you can lend me a buck."

"Come on," the little man said in a tough, loud manner. "Pay up or I'll call the cops. Everyone else pays in advance, we just let you in because you were so drunk. Now come on, pay up or I'll yell for the cops."

Ken put his hands flat on the counter and leaned across it until his nose was very close to that of the little man's. "Go ahead, yell," he said. "Open your mouth and I'll knock those false clickers of yours down into your stomach."

THE little man backed up as far as he could, but it wasn't very far. He licked his lips nervously as his eyes examined Ken's face to see if he would do it.

"Go ahead," Ken said. "Open your mouth and call for the police."

The little man shut his lips firmly and his eyes were very big in his white face.

"That's a good boy, Pop," Ken said, and he relaxed. "Got a cigarette?"

The man fumbled in his pocket and came up with a pack which he gingerly put on the counter. Ken knocked one out and put it in his mouth.

"Light?" he asked.

The little man put a cheap cigarette lighter on the counter. Ken lit his cigarette and put the lighter back. He drew deep and luxuriously, then exhaled through his nose.

"Thanks, Pop," he said, and he sauntered out into the sunshine with his jacket over his arm.

Ken needed a stake until he could go down to the union hall and sign on another ship. He figured his best bet was to go back to the *Donald Wilson* and see if any of the crew were still around. They were flush.

He walked to the Ferry Building and turned down the Embarcadero, bright now in the sunshine. He turned in the gate, nodding to the keeper who knew him, and walked to the ship. She stood there, her rusty plates showing in the sun, and Ken saluted her mockingly.

He climbed to her littered deck and went into the main deck house. There he met the Coast Guard Inspector. The man looked surprised to see him.

"Hello, Burke," he said.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," Ken said.

He paused, and the man looked very uneasy. He brushed past Ken and headed for the ladder. Ken shrugged his shoulders and went into the mess room. There was fresh coffee in the pot that the night watchman must have made, and Ken rinsed out a greasy cup in the over-filled sink. The strong coffee felt good on his upset stomach.

He finished his coffee and made a quick tour of the ship. There was nobody around. Well, there was always Johnny, and his seabag full of clothes as a last resort. He climbed back off the ship.

"There he is, officer," he heard the Coast Guard Inspector say, and Ken

turned around from the ladder. The lieutenant had a policeman with him.

"Your name Kenneth Burke?" the policeman asked.

"That's right," Ken said.

"Come on along, then," the policeman said, "and no funny business."

Ken grinned at the Coast Guard Inspector. "Well, well. So the lieutenant didn't have the nerve to arrest me himself?"

"I didn't have the authority," the lieutenant said gruffly.

"You didn't have the nerve, either," Ken said, and he laughed when the lieutenant turned angry red.

"Come on," the policeman said.

"What's the charge?" Ken asked.

"They'll tell you at the station," the policeman said. "They've got a call out to pick you up."

CHAPTER IV



AS SOON as he reached the station they searched him, and they booked him on vagrancy when they found he didn't have any money.

"What do you really want me for?" Ken asked the plainclothes

captain who seemed to be in charge.

The man was half leaning against, half sitting on the desk in the small room. "What happened between you and Matthews?" the captain asked.

"Aboard ship?" Ken asked.

The captain shook his head negatively. "We know all about what happened on board ship," he said. "I've been working on this since about ten-thirty last night. Now what happened between you and Matthews after you got off the ship?"

"Nothing much," Ken said cautiously.

"Cut it out," the detective said. He ticked off on his fingers as he enumerated. "First, you left the ship ahead of Matthews. Second, one of the cooks saw you hiding behind some boxes waiting for Matthews. We found a burnt match and cigarette butt to substantiate the cook. Third, the gatekeeper saw you leave the dock after Matthews. Right after, and you were in a hurry, like a hound on the trail, he says. Fourth, the

third mate says he left Matthews in the fog on the Embarcadero and he thought he saw a shadowy figure as he went, but he didn't pay much attention. Now you take it from there."

"What's this all about?" Ken asked. "Just because I beat up Matthews?"

The detective's eyebrows raised, and he looked at the policeman stenographer. "Then you admit you beat him up?"

"Sure," Ken said. "I slapped him a couple of times."

"With a club," the detective said.

"With my fist," Ken said.

"No fist ever beat a man's head in like that," the detective said sarcastically. "Not even yours, although I hear you're quite a tough guy."

"Beat his head in?" Ken asked warily.

"Come on," the detective said. "Save us some time. I'm sleepy. What did you do with the club after you beat him up?"

"I didn't use a club," Ken said. "I slapped him in the face a couple of times. With my fist."

The detective sighed. The door opened and a uniformed man came in to whisper to the detective. The detective nodded.

"There are blood spots all over the front of your jacket," the detective said.

"Sure," Ken said. "I told you I bounced him in the teeth a couple of times."

"I get it," the detective said, and a little admiration showed. "You knew the blood was on the jacket, that's why you admitted hitting him. But you don't admit killing him."

"Is he dead?" Ken asked.

The detective nodded slowly. Ken whistled. "I'm in trouble," he said.

"I'll say you are," the detective said. "You know how they execute in California? Cyanide gas. Ain't that nice?"

"I can't wait," Ken said.

"We'll try not to keep you," the detective said. "I was thinking, though, that if you came clean and could show us that maybe Matthews started it, or that it wasn't premeditated, we could change it to manslaughter and keep you out of the gas chamber."

"I hide behind some boxes, I follow him down a dark street, then I confess and claim it wasn't premeditated," Ken said. "That fixes everything."

THE detective grinned. "It was a thought," he said.

"I didn't kill him," Ken said.

The detective sighed again. "All right, tell us your story."

"The third mate left him," Ken said.

"I was going to jump him when this girl came out of the fog. He was waiting to meet her."

"Why there?" the detective asked.

"Why not at a bar?"

"She wasn't that kind of girl," Ken said. "They talked a while and then he made a pass at her. She didn't like it, but he was giving her a rough time. So I slapped him in the puss and knocked him out. Then we beat it."

"You and the girl?" the detective asked.

"That's right," Ken said.

"You mean you're gonna try and convince a jury that you were fighting over a girl?" the detective asked.

"We weren't fighting over a girl," Ken said patiently. "I helped the girl out. She's my alibi."

"She was with you the rest of the night?"

"I told you she wasn't that kind of girl," Ken said. "I left her about ten o'clock. Maybe a little after."

The detective pursed his lips. "This all happened on the Embarcadero?"

"That's right."

The detective shook his head. "No go," he said. "He was found in the tunnel on Stockton Street. People at first thought the F car had hit him. We thought at first maybe it was Chinatown."

"Well?" Ken asked.

The detective shook his head. "Chinatown doesn't do it that way. This was the way a sailor might do it—maybe with a steel marine spike."

"Not guilty," Ken said. "The girl will alibi me."

"From the time you left Matthews until after ten?" the detective asked.

"That's right," Ken said.

The detective sighed. "That would do it," he said. "What's her name?" He shoved a pad around to where he could write on it.

"Marion Merton," Ken said.

"Address?"

"I don't know," Ken said.

The detective looked up. "A visitor?" he asked.

"I think so," Ken said.

"Hotel?"

"That sounds like it," Ken said.

"All right," the detective said. "We'll see if we can find her. Anybody see you with her?"

Ken remembered the policeman. "Sure," he said. He related the episode at the restaurant.

"That'll be easy to check," the detective said. "Anything else?"

"No," Ken said.

"All right," the detective said. "I'll put the boys on this. You go take a nap. That's what I'm gonna do."

They took Ken to his cell. Toward evening the policeman of the night before showed up. He looked at Ken, and Ken grinned. "That's him," the policeman said sourly, and he walked away.

KEN cooled his heels until the next morning. He was called into the little room again. The same detective captain was there, and he looked fresh now.

"This girl," he said. "Sure her name was Marion Merton?"

"That was it," Ken said.

The detective shook his head. "No sign of her," he said.

"She has to be somewhere," Ken said.

"I'm beginning to wonder about that," the detective said.

"Cut it out," Ken said. "Your own man saw me with her."

The detective nodded. "He saw you with a girl. A nice girl, he says. She wouldn't lie for you about a dime, then. Maybe you don't want us to find her."

"She's my alibi," Ken said.

"You're a smart guy," the detective said. "Maybe she's your reasonable doubt, as long as she doesn't show up."

"You talk like a sausage," Ken said.

"Maybe, but that gas chamber's getting very, very close." He turned to the door and opened it. "Bring him in," he said.

They brought in the waiter from the restaurant. The waiter wasn't afraid of him now. "That's him," he said, before anybody asked him anything. "He's the guy."

"Look," Ken said, "both the guy here and the cop can tell you that I was in the restaurant about the time the body was found."

"That's right," the detective said. "About the time the body was found. But not for all the time before the body

was found, about five or ten minutes from there."

"You know how long I was in there, Jack," Ken said. "Tell these jokers."

"I got other things to do besides watch the clock," the waiter said.

"All right," Ken said, "how long before you got the cop?"

The waiter sneered. "Too long," he said, "but not long enough for you."

Ken tightened his lips and didn't say anything. He saw it was useless.

"In your opinion," the detective asked the waiter, "could this man commit murder?"

"I'll say," the man said. "He was gonna hit me in the head with a coffee mug over a dime."

The detective motioned toward the door and they took the waiter out.

"That's an idea," Ken said. "Maybe somebody knew Matthews had just been paid off and was after the money."

The detective shook his head. "Every dime was still on him," he said. "Which brings us right back to you."

"Find the girl," Ken said.

The detective shook his head. "What's a nice girl, as you put it, doing meeting Matthews in the fog on the Embarcadero, and then calmly walking away with you after you slug Matthews? Does that make sense?"

"She was looking for her brother."

"Her brother?"

"Sure," Ken said. "Matthews had some information about him."

"So you knock Matthews out, she says thank you, I didn't want the information anyway, and walks off with you." The detective was grinning amiably.

"What Matthews wanted for the information, she wouldn't give," Ken said patiently. "He tried to take it anyway, and I slugged him. She thought maybe I could help her then."

"All right," the detective said, "what's her brother's name? We'll find him for her."

"His name's Charley Merton, but he's not sailing under that," Ken said. "She doesn't know what name he's sailing under."

The detective threw up his hands. "This gets fishier as it goes along. You go back to your cell and dream up another one." The detective left and they took Ken back to his cell.

"Listen," he said to the jailer, "I want a lawyer."

"For vagrancy?" the jailer asked. "Don't be stupid."

"I want a lawyer," Ken said, "or I'll raise a stink. I want bail, too, if vagrancy's the charge."

"You want a lot of things," the jailer said, and he walked away.

CHAPTER V



RESTING on the cot in his jail cell, with a cigarette between his lips, Ken realized he was in a jam. It was a good one, too. He had to get Marion to substantiate his story. She must have read about it in the papers

by now. What was the idea of her not coming forward? Could it have been a frame?

No, there was too much coincidence to the whole thing to make it a frame. Anyway, if someone was trying to frame him, they could have beat Matthew's head in right where Ken left him. Besides, there was nobody Ken could think of who would want to frame him.

Then why didn't the girl go to the police and spring him? They might not believe her story, but it would at least create a reasonable doubt.

If I could only get out of here, Ken thought, maybe I could find her. She'd be hanging around the waterfront somewhere in all likelihood. Then Ken realized that if he did get out and bring her back, they'd surely figure it was a fixed story. She had to be found, or come forward, while Ken was still locked up.

Ken put his brain to work. There had to be an answer. Could it have been someone from another ship that Matthews had driven into a murderous state of mind? It was possible. And if it was true, it was going to be rough for anyone to figure it. No robbery, the money left on him, no clues, nothing.

Still, there might be clues. The police had just fastened onto Ken because everything pointed to him. There might be other clues that they weren't even following.

Ken sat up and ground out the cigarette viciously. He had to get out of jail. And the only way he was going to get out was to get the girl, or to get

a lawyer. There was no one else.

He went back over the merry-go-round again. Could Marion's brother be the key to this? He began to work on that angle. By her description of him, he wasn't much of a man. Limped, with a scar on his face. Ken thought back to the great number of different men he had met and known in the merchant service.

Wait a minute! In Mers El Kebir that time. They were waiting for a convoy back to the States, and Ken had just come down from Oran—that guy on the little Navy dock where they had waited for their boat to take them back to the ship. He had limped, he had scar on his face, and best of all, he was on a marijuana jag. He and the guy with him were both wild with marijuana.

They had knocked the two guys out to keep them from killing themselves, and then they had taken them back to their ship. Sure, the guy with the limp and the scar was named Charley. He could remember the bosun of the ship sending a line down. They had sent the first man up, then the line came back down for the gimp.

"Put Charley on there," the bosun yelled, "and then much obliged to you."

WITH his inspiration and discovery, Ken was standing up straight. That could be Charley Merton. But what was his name aboard ship? Ken didn't know, but he could remember the ship very well. To men in the Merchant Marine, the names of other ships are like the names of other people. They are remembered and discussed. She was the *William Culbert*.

Ken paced the cell feverishly. If he could get word to Marion that he had information on her brother, she'd come running. She'd have to clear him to get him out so he could give her the information.

Then another thought occurred to him. Matthews and her brother, and her brother was a dope fiend. There could be a connection there. Then another stunning thought. Matthews was killed just this side of Chinatown, and might have been on his way to Chinatown. Thoughts began banging and clicking in Ken's head until he could see a pattern. That was logical. That was sensible. There had to be some hook-up.

He had to get out of this place. He had to start getting information. There could be an answer if you were on the right trail. But how was he going to get out?

As if in answer to his thoughts, the jailer came to the cell. "Visitor to see you," the jailer said in a monotonous voice. He let Ken out of the cell and escorted him back to the little room that was very familiar to him by now.

Johnny was there with Captain Marley. Ken stood in the doorway and masked his joy behind a hard face.

"Well, well," he said. "The Marines."

"Not exactly, Ken," Johnny said, and he looked worried.

Ken looked at Marley. "Did you find him, or did he just come?"

"He just came," Marley said. "I was surprised to learn a guy like you had a friend."

"I knew Ken before he decided he was a tough guy," Johnny said.

"You're helping me a lot," Ken said. "Why don't you tell him what time I was in your place?"

"I got the whole story," Marley said. "Johnny and I had quite a talk, as a matter of fact. I got a boy going through that seabag of yours already."

Ken grinned. "You won't find anything there," he said.

Marley shrugged. "We gotta look at everything."

"How about it?" Ken asked. "Did Johnny tell you what time I got in his place? Doesn't that add?"

Marley looked at Ken narrowly. "It adds up very well," he said. "You kill Matthews, so what's more logical than that you get yourself stinking to forget it. Especially when it's not in character for you to go on a binge like that. At least according to Johnny."

Ken looked at Johnny.

"I'm sorry," Johnny said. "I was trying to help."

"All right," Ken said, "if you want to help, go get me a lawyer. Get bail set, or get me in front of a judge, so I can pay my fine and get out of here. Maybe I can beat this rap, then."

"That's why I came," Johnny said. "But the captain's got a different idea."

"Never mind the captain," Ken said.

"He's trying to put me in a gas chamber. Get me a lawyer."

"I just explained to your friend," Marley said casually, "that we want you

where we can watch you. You see, the D.A. and I both feel that we have enough to put you on trial right now. If you force our hand, we'll have to bring a murder charge and get an indictment. But if you're a good boy and stay in our hotel, we can work on this a little more. Maybe find your girl friend."

"Sure," Ken said. "If you got enough on me, why don't you start the works?"

"Well," Marley said easily, "contrary to what some people think, we don't care about gassing innocent people. We have enough, but I'm not convinced you're guilty. If you try to spring yourself, we'll lay on a murder rap. And once we get an indictment, we have to try to convict. That's all."

KEN looked at him shrewdly. "You make a good salesman," he said. "You're wasting your time as a copper."

"Suit yourself," Marley said.

"How come you figure I'm innocent?"

Ken asked.

"Right up to the crime," Marley said, "you're guilty as hell. Everything points to it. We could get a conviction on the evidence we've got. But after the crime, what do you do? Do you act guilty? You do everything that a guilty man wouldn't do."

Ken looked inquisitive.

"You calmly take a girl and have a cup of coffee. You get in a beef that brings a cop to the scene, and then you get tough with the cop. Then you go to a friend of yours and decide to get drunk when getting drunk isn't in character."

"You just told me that was against me," Ken said.

"There are two sides to every piece of evidence," Marley said. "As I see it, a guy like you wouldn't hand around the waterfront and get drunk. You had a big pay-off in your pocket. You'd get out of town. Probably go to New York and ship out, or maybe grab a ship somewhere, get out of the country. By the way, what happened to all that money?"

"I got drunk and got rolled," Ken said.

"Why did you go back to the ship the next morning? That wasn't sensible for a man who had killed its first mate."

Ken shrugged. "I thought one of the boys might be around and I could borrow a stake until I could ship out."

Marley rose. "As I said, up to the

crime, you're number one. After it—" He shook his head. "Go back to your room and be a good boy, will you? Don't start anything with a lawyer."

Ken chewed it over for a minute while Marley and Johnny waited for his decision. "All right," he said to Marley. "You find the girl for me, then."

"We're trying," Marley said. "If we find that girl, I'll spring you myself. As it is, I have to hang onto you just in case you're a genius and rigged the thing this way."

"Here's how you smoke her out," Ken said. "Give the papers a story about how I was helping her look for her brother. Then explain to the reporters that I have some new information about her brother. That'll bring her."

"It's an idea," Marley said. He scribbled on a pad and tore the sheet off. He looked up casually. "Do you have anything new on her brother?" he asked.

"Yes," Ken said.

Marley pursed his lips and looked thoughtful. But evidently he decided not to pursue the subject. He nodded, and Ken was taken back to his cell.

CHAPTER VI



IT SMOKED her out. Marley must have given the story to the reporters right away, and she was there the next day. When Ken came into the little room, Marley had just finished with her. He had her story and he

nodded the stenographer away.

She looked a little haggard. Evidently Marley had given her a good working over. She smiled wanly at Ken.

"Hello," she said.

"Thanks for so promptly coming to the aid of a fellow man," Ken said sarcastically.

"Mr. Marley has already told me how wrong I was," she said. "But you seemed so capable, I didn't think you'd need my help."

"Thank you also for your confidence in me," he said, still laying on the sarcasm.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Knowing you were innocent, it didn't seem reasonable to me that they could possibly convict you. I wouldn't have left town until

it was over, one way or the other."

Marley, who had been listening with interest, broke in. "As far as I'm concerned," he said, "she's cleared you for the time being. I'll spring you. But don't try to leave San Francisco."

"Do you really have some information about my brother?" she asked.

"I think I do," Ken said. "Let's go out and get a cup of coffee. I'll tell you about it."

She stiffened a little. "No thank you," she said. "Just tell me here and I'll follow it."

Ken looked at Marley, and Marley was grinning. Ken had a sudden urge to plant a fist in his grinning face.

"You satisfied?" Ken asked Marley. "Can I let her out of my sight?"

"Sure," Marley said. "We've got her story. She's agreed to be a good girl and come around if we want to ask her any more questions."

Ken turned back to her. "I remember seeing your brother, or someone that answers his description anyway, in a little port near Oran, name of Mers El Kebir."

Her eyes were hopeful. "When?" she asked.

"Back about January of 1944," Ken said.

The hope faded from her eyes. "Oh," she said. She looked a little contemptuous. "Anyone could remember that."

"But they couldn't remember the name of the ship," Ken said. "Furthermore, I heard this man called Charley."

The hope came back. "The name of the ship? Will that help?"

"Find an angel in the Coast Guard and he can dig through the ship's articles and find out anyone who's first name was Charles who shipped on the *S. S. William Culbert* in the winter of Forty-three, Forty-four. Then we know his last name. More research, and we can find his latest ship. Maybe get a good idea of where he is right now."

The hope was all over her face. She stood up. "*S. S. William Culbert*," she said.

"Wait a minute," Ken said. "There may be more than one Charley in the Merchant Marine who limps and has a scar on his face. Do you have a picture of him?"

"Naturally," she said. She fumbled in her purse and brought out a close-up. She handed it to Ken.

HE looked at the picture a moment. "That's him," he said decisively. It was a good likeness and a distinctive face with the scar from forehead around the left eye and down the cheek. She took the picture back.

"If you don't mind," Ken said, "I'd like to go with you. I've got an idea."

Marley glanced at the girl. "What kind of an idea?" he asked.

"You've got a dirty mind," Ken said. "Look, her brother's a hop-head. Now—"

"What's a hop-head?" she asked.

"He takes dope," Ken explained. She flushed, but didn't deny it. "Now," Ken continued, "Matthews was apparently a close acquaintance of his if Charley mentioned him in a letter. Matthews always shipped to the Orient. As far as we know, marijuana was all Charley took, but the last time we saw him was back in Forty-four, so he could have graduated to opium."

"No," she said violently.

"Matthews, the Orient, Charley a hop-head, it all ties up," Ken said. "It may tie-up somehow with Matthews' murder."

"Do you think my brother killed Matthews?" she asked angrily.

"Farthest thought from my mind," Ken said. "But your brother might know Matthews' connections in Chinatown. After all, that's apparently where Matthews was headed, and Charley might have a few ideas. I'd like to find your brother myself."

"I think you're grasping at straws," Marley said.

"Sure I'm grasping at straws," Ken admitted. "I'm the guy that's got a date with the gas chamber. It looks like it might be a stout straw, and I'm reaching for it." He turned to the girl. "We might as well go together. There's no use both of us running around doing the same thing separately."

"All right," she said.

Marley wrote on his handy pad and tore off the sheet. He gave it to Ken. "Look up this guy in the Missing Persons Bureau. Tell him I sent you. You'll get good service that way."

"Thanks," Ken said. He hesitated. "You don't mind if I poke around on this case, do you?"

"If you mean, can I give you any kind of official status," Marley said, "the answer is a big no. But I don't mind if

you nose around. Just keep the nose clean and don't try any strong-arm stuff. Narcotics is a dangerous business to play with. It's a multimillion dollar business and they play for keeps. A hop-head will do anything for a pipeful. If you run onto anything, call the law."

"Thank you for your kind advice," Ken said. He grinned tightly at Marley. "By the way," he said, "as you know, I am broke. How about lending me five?"

For once, Marley couldn't mask his feeling. His face went slack from sheer surprise. "I'll be damned," he said.

"Who better to ask?" Ken said. "You're one man that knows I won't leave San Fran. Or, if I do, you'll get me back in a hurry. Nobody else would trust me."

Marley shook his head. "You win," he said. He reached in his wallet and came up with a five dollar bill. He handed it to Ken. "And if I don't get it back," he said, "I'll witness that gas chamber scene with pleasure."

"As if you don't enjoy it anyway," Ken retorted.

CHAPTER VII



THE MAN Marley steered them to in the Missing Persons Bureau was the head of the department. He gave them immediate action. He discovered the information they were after would have to come from New

York. He told them to come back the next day.

Ken stopped the girl on the steps. "How about something to eat?" he asked.

"You're persistent, aren't you?" she answered.

Ken shrugged his shoulders. "I know when I'm out of my class," he said. "I just thought maybe you were hungry."

She frowned at him. "You have the wrong idea," she said. "I don't care what your class is, as you put it. After all, my own brother is a sailor, and not a very respectable one, apparently. It's just that I don't think it's a good idea."

"Why not?" Ken challenged.

She smiled. "Let's just say that after seeing you borrow five dollars, it wouldn't be very sporting to let you buy me

a meal. Let's just say that and skip the rest. I'll see you here tomorrow at one." She turned away from him and walked down the steps.

He took the five dollar bill out of his pocket and looked at it ruefully. He had a sudden idea. What was five dollars? Just a good gambling stake.

He blew a dollar on a good meal and a pack of cigarettes, and then he made his way down to the docks. It wasn't hard finding a crap game that looked as though it had some money in it. He moved into the intent circle.

Three hours later he counted his money. Three hundred and seventy-two dollars and fifty cents.

He went to Market Street and bought himself a shave and haircut. He went to one of the better clothing stores and blew two hundred of his money on a gray, pin-stripe suit, a hat, good shirts, ties, socks, underwear, and a good pair of shoes. He sat in the back of the store and waited until they altered the suit to his taste, and then he ventured to the Palace Hotel. He got a room there, and was all set.

The next day, before he met Marion, he went into the Homicide Bureau and found Marley. He gave Marley the five dollars.

Marley looked him up and down and whistled. "Should I call the robbery detail and ask them what jobs were turned in last night?" Marley asked.

"Better call the vice squad and tell them about the crap games down on the docks," Ken answered.

Marion was waiting on the steps. Ken walked up to her. "Hello," he said.

She glanced at him, and then looked away. Ken took off his hat. "I guess you don't recognize me," he said.

She took another look, and then did a double-take. "Ken," she said.

"That's me," he said. "How do I look?"

"Like a prosperous business man," she said.

"For three hours yesterday I was," he said.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Got in a crap game," he said.

HER face fell. "You're incorrigible," she said.

"Not necessarily," he said as they turned up the steps. "My folks owned a small ranch. Dad always said any horse

could be gentled if the right trainer got hold of him."

She was interested. "You lived on a ranch? How come you left it?"

"The war," he said.

"Why didn't you go back?"

"Folks died, and I didn't feel like running the spread myself." His eyes took on a faraway look. "Oh, it isn't much of a ranch, not very big, but it's got some nice hill land and a good valley, and a guy could settle down there with the right girl to enjoy life." He looked at her closely. "If that's what he wanted in life."

She didn't answer. Her eyes were straight ahead and he couldn't tell what she was thinking. They turned into the Missing Persons Bureau.

They were in luck. Only one seaman with the first name of Charles had signed on the *William Culbert*. Charles Davis was his name.

"We have now started the tedious process of finding out the last time he sailed, what ship, and where," the man said. "I don't know how long that will take. We may get a wire any minute. On the other hand, we may have the information right here in San Francisco."

They waited in the anteroom. "Where is this ranch of yours?" she asked.

"Arizona," he said.

"It must be pretty there, from what I've heard," she said.

"Nice," he agreed.

"Do you like life in the Merchant Marine?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's a man's world," he said. "A guy can say what he wants to, live with his muscles, and have freedom when he's ashore."

"Don't you ever have a desire to go back to Arizona?"

He grinned at her. "You're worse than Marley for questions," he said.

She reddened a little. "I'm sorry," she said. "I just wonder about you. Sometimes in the middle of the night I find myself wondering about you."

"I must have a magnetic personality," he said.

"There's something about you," she agreed. She examined his face closely and he continued to smile at her. "But every time I start to think nice things about you," she said, "I think of you about to kick Matthews when he was down."

"Only because he would have done

the same to me if the positions were reversed," Ken said. "It seems funny to you because you have never known men like that. I believe in treating people the way they treat me. That waiter that night was trying to be wise. He wasn't doing his job. So I gave him a bad time." He was close to making her understand, he knew.

"Don't you ever have a desire to go back to Arizona?" she asked again.

"Sometimes," Ken said. "Not very often, but sometimes I see a girl that I could do it with. I don't get much chance to know her, however."

It was a good moment. Ken felt later that it could have developed into something. But just then their man appeared and waved to them. They went into his office.

"Your man signed aboard a ship here in San Francisco for his last trip. They went to Shanghai and back. He signed off, and as far as we know he hasn't taken another ship since."

"When did they get back?" Ken asked.

"Four months ago," he said.

Ken worked it out. That was well before the *Donald Wilson* left port. "Can you find out who his first mate was?" he asked.

"It'll only take a minute," the man said. He picked up the phone, made a couple of connections, and then asked the question. There was a pause of only a minute or two, then he had his answer.

"Delbert Matthews," he said.

"Thanks," Ken said. "Thanks a lot. We'll take over from here ourselves."

WHEN they were out in the corridor, Ken turned to Marion. "When did your brother write you about Matthews?" he asked.

"Some time ago," she said. "It must have been just before he made this last trip that we found out about. He said life aboard ship was easy if you got the right first mate, and that his old friend Matthews would be his mate on his next trip."

"That adds up," Ken said. "How did you get in touch with Matthews?"

"I addressed a letter to First Mate Matthews and sent a copy to every shipping company in the registry," she said. "It evidently reached him, for about two weeks before you arrived I got a

cablegram telling me what ship he'd come in on and telling me to contact him. I sent him a message at the dock and he phoned me at my friend's, where I've been staying. He arranged that rather mysterious meeting you witnessed."

Ken pondered a moment. "Let's go see Marley," he suggested.

At Headquarters he told Marley what they had learned. "Charley signed off here four months ago, and hasn't shipped since," Ken continued. Marley raised an eyebrow. "Matthews was his mate on that trip, and it was before that when he wrote Marion. She says Charley referred to Matthews as an old friend and that last trip was one to the Orient."

"Maybe we ought to look for Charley Davis at that," Marley said thoughtfully.

"If you pick him up," Ken said, "you won't get a thing out of him. If I can get him alone with Marion, we might get him to talk."

"How are you going to find him?" Marley asked.

"I don't know yet," Ken said. "First, I'd like permission to look over Matthews' belongings."

"Down at the morgue," Marley said. "So far nobody's claimed the body or tried to pick up his things." Marley wrote on his pad, signed it, and tore off the sheet. "Give this to one of the attendants down there. Maybe you can see something that we didn't, since you're a seaman."

The attendant took them into a small room and brought in a box which held everything Matthews was wearing or had with him the night he was murdered. Ken dumped them on the table and consulted them. The sweater and shirt were both bloody, and Marion cringed a little. Ken tossed them back into the box.

There was Matthew's money, a good-sized knife, his papers, a wrist watch, a black address book, and various other uninteresting articles. The shoes attracted Ken's attention. They were bright, new-looking shoes.

"Matthews wore his new kicks," he said reflectively. "You know," he said almost to himself, "there's only one other place I ever saw him wear them—in China. Now why do you suppose that would be?"

He picked up one of the shoes and ex-

amined it. The heels and soles were hardly worn. It was a thick heel, almost a high heel. Ken frowned at those heels. There was a small crack where the heel joined the shoe. He picked up Matthews' knife and examined it.

There was one blade that came to a peculiar, pin-like point.

KEN picked up the heel and looked at it again. Suddenly he found what he was looking for and inserted the point. The heel of the shoe sprang back and revealed a good-sized cavity. The entire heel was hollow—and empty.

"I'll be darned," the attendant said in great surprise.

Ken picked up the other shoe and repeated the process. "What in the world is that for?" Marion asked.

"Refined opium is not very bulky," Ken said. "He could hide several thousand dollars' worth in one of those heels. Every time he came ashore, he brought maybe ten thousand dollars' worth of refined opium. Quite a profitable business for an individual."

"Isn't that dangerous?" she asked.

Ken grinned. "I guess it must be," he said. "It cost Matthews his life."

Ken picked up the address book and thumbed through it. There was one mysterious address. No name, just an address on Pacific Street in the heart of Chinatown.

"Have you a phone I can use?" he asked the attendant.

There was one. Ken called Marley.

"Marley," he said, "did you check these addresses in Matthews' book?"

"Sure did," Marley said. "What a collection of females that man had."

"What about this one on Pacific in Chinatown?" Ken asked.

"They never heard of Matthews," Marley said.

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"Naturally," Ken said.

"Naturally," Marley agreed.

"You knew of this address when I was talking to you about dope," Ken said accusingly.

"I'm not paid to give you information," Marley said. "Find your own."

"I did," Ken said. "How do you like this? Matthews' brand new shoes, which he wore only in China and here, have hinged heels."

Marley swore.

"You're a fine cop," Ken said.

"We weren't looking for dope," Marley said.

"You better start looking," Ken said, "because that's what I'm after."

"The current past the Golden Gate Bridge is cold and fast," Marley warned

"It still sounds better than that gas chamber," Ken said.

"Anything in the heels?"

"No," Ken said. "And you told me it wasn't robbery!"

"We all make mistakes," Marley said.

"What about this address?" Ken wanted to know.

Marley paused a long time. "Why don't you let us handle this?" he asked.

"Go ahead," Ken mocked. "I'm not paid to give you information."

Again Marley paused. "But they work in the open. You can't work undercover men there. They'd find it out in a week. They know their people too well. We can usually find out anything we want. The Chinese don't want any trouble and they're very co-operative—unless they figure it's something that's strictly Chinatown's business. Then you can't get anything out of anyone."

"Did you ever think of walking down there and just asking?" Ken asked sarcastically.

"Go ahead," Marley invited.

"Thanks," Ken said, and hung up.

He thanked the attendant, and they left.

"What now?" Marion asked.

"We're on the right track for both your brother and Matthews' killer," Ken said. He gave her the number of his room at the Palace. "You go there," he said. "I'll see if I can bring Charley out. If it gets late and you go back to your friend's, leave the number."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Chinatown," he said.

CHAPTER VIII



WHEN HE found the address in Chinatown, it proved to be a Chinese restaurant. He was hungry, so he ordered a meal. He ate it in leisurely fashion, and he observed the people who inhabited the place. There was a mixture of Orientals and Occidentals. To Ken they did not look like people who took dope. He was not an expert in the matter, but he realized that only in the latter, more vicious stages, did it show.

Ken finished his meal and went to the cashier. "I'd like to see the proprietor," he said.

The cashier was a nice looking Chinese girl, and she smiled politely. "You have a complaint?" she asked.

"No," Ken said. "I'd just like to talk to him."

She looked puzzled. "What about, please?"

"He has a very nice restaurant," Ken said. "I'd like to tell him about it."

"I will pass on the compliment," she said.

"I want to tell him myself," Ken said, his smile remaining in place. "As a matter of fact, I insist on it."

She hesitated. "I will see," she said. She walked to the back of the restaurant.

Soon she came back. Her face was bland. "He says many thanks, but begs to be excused. He is very busy."

"Look, sis," Ken said, and his voice hardened. "You go back and tell him it's in connection with Charley Davis."

His tone upset her. "Who?" she asked.

"Charley Davis," Ken said slowly.

"Charley Davis," she repeated, and once more she made the trip to the back of the restaurant. Soon she returned.

"Mr. Chan says he knows no one by that name, but he will be delighted to talk to you if it is important."

"It's important," Ken said. "Lead the way."

She took him into the kitchen and then to a little office off the kitchen. A portly Chinese gentleman sat behind a desk and worked on some papers. He looked up politely.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Ken said,

"but I'm looking for some information about the brother of a girl I'm going to marry."

"Yes," the Chinese said, and he, too, spoke good English. "The girl said something about that. What was his name?"

"Charley Davis," Ken said.

The Chinese shook his head. "Sorry," he said, "I know nothing. What led you here?"

"Something he mentioned in his last letter home," Ken said.

"That is very peculiar," the Chinese said.

"On the contrary, it makes sense," Ken said. "You see, Charley has turned into a drug addict."

The restaurant proprietor's face showed nothing. "Very sorry to hear that," he said. "Many of my own people, unfortunately, were enslaved to the poppy while still in China."

"That's why it's not so peculiar to come here in search of Mr. Davis," Ken said.

The yellow face of Mr. Chan broke into a happy smile. "You infer we handle drugs," he said. "No, no, you are wrong. Many people have a glamorous impression of Chinatown which, I will admit, we do not try to discourage. But we are just business men, the same as you. We do nothing illegal."

KEN'S voice hardened. "Cut it out. Chan. Let's lay our cards on the table. We don't want to go to the police. We don't want the publicity. However, if we go to the police, and show them the letter, you can expect a quick, unfriendly visit from them. Take your choice."

"May I see this letter?" Chan asked. "Perhaps there is something about it that I can straighten out."

"No," Ken said, and he cursed himself for not thinking of this. "Unfortunately I don't have it with me."

"What did you say your name was?" Chan asked.

"George Ziff," Ken said quickly. That one he had thought of.

"Where are you staying, Mr. Ziff?"

"Palace," Ken said.

The Chinese reached for the phone.

"Not yet," Ken said. "I haven't registered yet."

"You have a reservation?"

"No," Ken said, and he realized he

had been very stupid. "I have a friend there who can get me a room anytime at all."

"And one for the sister?"

"She'll stay with a friend," Ken said, and he was relieved to be on solid ground again.

The Chinese sat for a long time, his almond eyes thoughtful. Ken waited him out quietly.

Finally he sighed. "I do not believe you are from the police," he said. "They do not operate with us this way, or if they did, they would not be this transparent and stupid. I cannot, however, determine what it is you do want."

"Charley Davis," Ken said. "That's all. Just Charley Davis. Give him to us and let us take him back to the Midwest for a cure. We will not bother you again."

Chan smiled faintly. "A cure? You are a very foolish young man."

"You think he can't be cured?" Ken asked.

The Chinese shrugged delicately. "I do not even know him."

"I can have a squad of police down here a half hour after I leave," Ken said.

"If you leave," Chan said softly. Ken grinned tightly. Now he was convinced that the man knew something about Charley, and he knew the threat of the police was his ace in the hole. On the other hand, Chan knew nothing of him, of what influence he might have, of how much he really knew.

Chan stretched forward and picked up the second of two phones on his desk. Here he indulged in a sharp, sing-song Chinese conversation. There was a long pause, and then more conversation. Finally he hung up.

He looked at Ken.

"Mr. Davis sleeps," he said. "You understand?"

"I understand," Ken said. He understood that Chan's conversation had not been about Charley Davis. Some orders had been issued.

"He cannot be moved in his present state," Chan said. "When he can safely be taken away, I will call you at the Palace Hotel."

"Fair enough," Ken said. He stood.

"You understand, Mr. Ziff," the Chinese said, "we are counting on your discretion. You must understand that we do not wish Occidentals in our rooms.

They mean trouble. The police will leave us alone to run our Chinatown our own way only so long as we don't involve their people. Understand?"

"I understand," Ken said.

"Unfortunately, your Mr. Davis forced himself upon us in a manner we didn't like."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"So the best way to keep him quiet was to give him a pipe and let him be happy, is that it?" Ken asked.

Chan smiled faintly.

"The American language is so blunt," he said.

Ken found a pay phone as soon as he was out of Chinatown, and called Marion at his hotel room.

SHE was glad to hear from him. "Where are you?" she asked. "Did you find out anything about Charley?"

"Sure did," Ken said. "I'm hot on the trail."

"I'll wait here for you," she said.

"You better go back to your friend's," Ken said. "Leave your number for me."

"No," she said.

"Listen, Sugar," Ken said easily. "You be a good soldier now and follow orders, will you? No questions, just do as I say. When I get Charley I'll bring him up to my room and we'll talk to him. Until then, you sit tight at your friend's."

"All right," she said reluctantly.

While he gave her time to get out of the hotel, Ken grabbed a cup of coffee in the drug store. One thing he didn't want was for Chan's hatchet men to get on her trail.

He felt a little better with Marion out of the picture.

Stopping at the desk of the Palace, he talked to the clerk. "A friend of mine is coming to town tonight," he said. "I thought I'd just bunk him in with me and save a lot of trouble."

"Perfectly all right, Mr. Burke," the clerk said. "Just have him register."

"Can I sign for him now?" Ken asked.

"Certainly," the clerk said.

He pushed the cards to Ken and Ken filled one out in the name of George Ziff. He thanked the clerk and went to his room. He put the chain lock on the door, pulled the window shades, and then, feeling a little foolish, inspected the closet carefully and also looked under the bed.

CHAPTER IX

He took off his coat and tie and relaxed.

He stayed in the hotel the next day so that he could be paged, but he was in his room after dinner that night when they called.

"Mr. Chan speaking," the gentle voice on the other end of the line said.

"Oh yes, Mr. Chan," Ken said.

"Could you come again to see me this evening?" the voice politely asked.

"Be delighted," Ken said heartily. "How soon?"

"The sooner the better," Mr. Chan said, and Ken thought there might be just a little double meaning under the silken voice.

"I'll come right down," Ken said.

HE hung up and looked at the phone. He called Marion and she said she'd be right over. He said he'd leave his hotel room unlocked.

He spent some time in contemplation while he smoked.

The Chinese must have a very efficient system. It looked as if they worked faster in San Francisco than the police did. By now they must know all about him. It would be good if he had a gun, but he wasn't much with a firearm anyway.

He took his time dressing and looked himself in the eye in the mirror. "Take a good look, son," he said aloud, "it may be the last time. I sure wish that girl didn't turn me inside out, I'd go down and get Marley and to hell with her hop-head brother."

Ken got out of the cab in front of the restaurant and paid off the driver. He walked inside with nothing but extreme confidence showing.

He nodded to the same cashier and she smiled back.

Getting to be old friends, Ken thought.

She beckoned to him and he followed her back to the little office. He entered, and there was no one there.

Ken turned around, and instead of the girl, a young Chinese was in the doorway. He lounged against the door frame and his right hand was in his capacious pocket. Already it starts, Ken thought.

"Ziff?" the young Chinese asked.

"That's right," Ken said. "I was looking for Mr. Chan."

"I'll take you to his apartment, Mac," the Chinese said. "Come on."



HE STEPPED aside and motioned Ken through the back door of the restaurant. They dodged some garbage cans, and they were in a very narrow and dark alleyway.

"That way," the kid said, and he motioned with his free hand.

"Perhaps you had better go first," Ken said innocently. "You know the way and I don't."

In the faint light he could see the kid grin. "Just straight up the alley," he said. "You can't get lost."

Ken shrugged his shoulders and went ahead. They threaded their way between the buildings as the alleyway became narrower and narrower.

Maybe they weren't going to give him any chance, he thought. Maybe the kid would let him have it here in the alley, then they'd hand him over to Davy Jones. Ken's spine tingled and he had difficulty keeping his eyes ahead and maintaining his unruffled exterior.

They reached a point where Ken was twisting his shoulders sideways to keep his shoulders from brushing the dirty houses. The kid stopped him.

"That door," he said.

Ken opened it and went in. It was an evil-smelling little hallway. There was a stairs that disappeared from the dim light into a Stygian darkness below, and it was from there that the odors emanated.

"Down there are sweet dreams," the kid said. "Just a little cot and a pipe and you can own this lousy world."

"You have to wake up sometime." Ken said.

"Reach for another pipe instead," the kid grinned. "We go upstairs." He indicated a set of stairs that led up.

Ken mounted the carpeted stairs and gradually an odor of perfume and incense took over to do away with the uglier smells from the bowels of the building. At the top of the stairs was another corridor, but this one was well decorated and had dragons muraled on the walls. The hall led to a doorway at its end.

"Down there," the kid said. "Mr. Chan is waiting for you."

Ken hesitated. "I'm not so sure I like this," he said.

The kid produced his gun to let it glint in the light. It was a businesslike, heavy automatic. "Come on, Burke," the kid said. "Quit stallin'. From here on in you don't have any choice."

Ken turned and walked to the door. There he stopped again. "Go on in," the kid said. "Mr. Chan is anxious to see you."

Ken still waited—until he felt the gun prod him viciously in the back. He wheeled his body away from the gun then and his right hand swung against the kid's wrist, paralyzing the gun hand. His left fist crashed against the kid's jaw and sprawled him ten feet down the corridor on his back.

Ken picked up the gun and stepped to the kid's side. He reached down and grabbed the kid by his coat collar, dragging him to his feet. Grabbing the kid's left wrist with his strong left hand, he brought the arm behind the kid's back. He put pressure on it until the pain brought the kid around.

"Listen," Ken hissed into his ear. "One yip out of you and I'll break your arm. You walk to that door and throw it open wide, and don't make the wrong move, understand?"

Ken applied just a little pressure to emphasize his words and the kid's face contorted with pain. "I get it," he said.

THEY walked to the door and the kid opened it wide. They were flooded with bright light. In a room, which was furnished in the best Occidental style, sat Chan, flanked by two burly Chinese and a thin, haggard, washed-out looking Charley Merton.

Charley's eyes were glazed and he nodded dopily at the two who came in.

Chan and his two men were caught completely by surprise. The two men leaned forward, but Ken waved the gun at them and they relaxed. Mr. Chan remained bland.

"Good evening," Ken said politely.

He twisted the kid's arm up until he felt it crack and heard the kid scream, and then he shoved the kid forward on his face. That was one less to worry about. He closed the door with his free left hand and leaned against it.

"Very foolish, Mr. Burke," Chan said. "You cannot live after this, and we had such nice plans for you, too."

"I imagine," Ken said. "Don't tell me they included living?"

"Oh, yes," Chan said. "We would have given you a very comfortable bunk next to that of Mr. Davis. There the two of you could talk over old times in your more lucid moments. The rest of the time—pleasant dreams—with plenty of poppy to hasten your longest sleep."

"You've got me sold, Chan," Ken said. "Do you want my gun now, or can I keep it to shoot the dragons in my dreams?"

The kid on the floor moaned with pain.

"You will bear your pain more easily when I tell you that you shall have the pleasure of killing Mr. Burke," Chan said to the kid.

"How come you sent a boy to do a man's job?" Ken asked.

Chan nodded. "Perhaps a mistake," he said. "You see, I thought my son was now capable of a man's work. But he has learned a valuable lesson. Though certainly not as big a mistake as Liu here made when he murdered Matthews where the body could be found."

"Your son?" Ken asked. He looked at the kid. "You're really bringing him up in the old man's footsteps, no?"

"Some day it will be his duty to run the tong," Chan said.

Ken switched his attention to the ugly bruiser addressed as Liu. "So Liu's my man."

"You should not have investigated, Mr. Burke," Chan said. "The gas chamber would be much more pleasant than what we shall do to you before you die."

"You boys forget I've got a gun in my hand," Ken said.

Chan shrugged. "Getting out of the spider's parlor is always much more difficult than getting in," he said.

"Well," Ken said, "we might as well start trying."

He walked over to Chan's desk and pulled the phone out by its roots. He did the same with a talk-box on the desk. He may have missed something, but he didn't have time to search.

"Come on, Charley," he said, "let's go."

Charley looked at him stupidly.

"Up," Ken said. "Let's go, Charley." Still keeping his eye warily on the three immobile Chinese, Ken went to Charley and helped him to his feet.

Charley fought out of his stupor. "What's the idea?" he asked.

"I'm going to take you to your sister," Ken said. "Wouldn't you like to see your sister?"

A little lucidity came to the drugged man's face. "Sure," he said.

"All right," Ken said, and he helped the man across the room.

"Charles," Chan said. "They want to take you where you cannot have your pipe. No more dreams if you go with him."

CHARLEY hesitated uncertainly, his fogged mind working on the words, but Ken opened the door and shoved him out into the hall. Ken stopped at the door and looked back at the three of them. If there weren't three, he could knock them out or tie them up, but if he got in among the three they'd get him while he was working.

"It's hard to tell how long I'll be out in this hall," Ken said. "And the first man that opens this door gets a slug from Junior's gun, here."

Closing the door, he grabbed Charley by the arm, and the two of them hustled to the head of the stairs. The door was still tightly closed when Ken took a last look as he went down the stairs. That meant they felt confident they could cut him off.

The odor took over as he reached the lower floor. He hurried Charley to the back door. He realized then that to get into that narrow alley would be suicide. Someone from the restaurant would bottle it up, perhaps even now was hurrying to it, and men from this side would cut off retreat.

Ken opened the door and slammed it without going out. Then he led Charley down the steps until they were out of sight in the blackness. The odor was nauseating, but apparently didn't bother the stupefied Charley.

"They should have air conditioning in these places," Ken muttered.

He heard hurrying feet over his head, and heard the door open and close. Good, they thought he went down the alley. Ken took Charley firmly by the arm and cautiously nosed his way up. The hallway was empty.

As he crept down the hallway toward the front, he heard the banging of guns in the alleyway. He grinned tightly. The tong was massacring itself.

Ken got past the stairway leading to Chan's apartment, and found himself

facing three corridors. A door opened and Ken crouched. A yellow face peered out into the hallway. Ken stuck the gun in his face. "Which way out the front door?" he hissed.

The frightened man pointed down the middle corridor.

"Thanks," Ken said, and he brought his gun down on the man's head.

He helped Charley over the prone body and they went down the hallway. As he reached the front door he heard the back door open and a babble of excited Chinese voices.

"Nip and tuck" Ken said. He closed the front door carefully behind him.

Inside of ten minutes every hatchet man in Chinatown would be after them. He was on a dark street that he didn't know. He saw traffic and lights to his right, and headed Charley that way.

Charley stumbled and hung back. Ken stopped and took Charley over his shoulder. Then he ran swiftly down the street. He didn't know what would be forming at his back, but he wanted to get to civilization before anything formed in front of him.

Charley was thin and emaciated. He was practically no weight at all to Ken and he carried the man easily over his shoulder. A half block from the main thoroughfare, Ken stopped and put Charley on his feet. The run had jolted lucidity into Charley again.

"What's the idea?" he asked. He looked closely at Ken. "Who are you?"

"I'm taking you back to your sister," Ken said.

Charley looked surprised. "I don't want to see her," he said.

Ken thought he saw shadows hurrying up the street. He grabbed Charley by the arm and thrust him forward. They came into the light and Ken looked anxiously for a cab. The shadows were getting closer.

A cab came down the street and Ken stopped it by stepping out into the street in front of it.

"I got a fare, Mac," the driver said.

"My friend is sick," Ken said. "I have to get him home right away." He shoved Charley into the cab and crawled in.

"I have to take this guy where he's goin' first," the driver complained.

"All right," Ken said, an eye on the shadows that were taking the forms of bodies, "but hurry."

The driver put the car into gear and drove away. Ken looked through the rear window and saw several Chinese appear from the street down which he had made his escape.

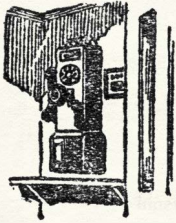
"He does look sick," the original occupant of the cab said. "What's the matter with him?"

"An Oriental fever," Ken said.

"Oh," the man said, and he drew away a little.

The man was going to the lower end of Market Street, and since that was close to the Palace Ken decided to go back to the hotel. He felt he should go directly to the police station, but on the other hand, Marion, alone in his hotel room, was in mortal danger if any of the hatchet men showed up there. He'd get to the hotel, lock them in the room, and call Marley.

CHAPTER X



KEN ENTERED the lobby of the Palace, its long, main corridor, with the shops and dining rooms opening off it bustling with activity, and it seemed unlikely that he had anything to worry about here.

He went to the phone booths. He decided to call Marley from the lobby so as not to alarm Marion. He called the station and was told that Marley was off duty. He asked them to locate Marley immediately and have him call. He emphasized that it was urgent. Then he took Charley upstairs.

Opening the door, he pushed Charley in ahead of him. He saw the frightened face of Marion and he tried to duck and twist away. But his head exploded into a million pieces and he floated away into space.

When he regained consciousness, Marion was working on his head with a water-soaked towel. His head throbbled and the towel felt good. He grinned at her.

"A hotel like this should have a better roof," he said.

He saw the Chinese behind her, and her brother sitting in a chair, his eyes wide open and clear now. Ken shifted his hip so as to feel whether or not he still had the gun. It was gone. He

sighed. That was that. Marley was his last hope now.

Struggling to his feet, he held his head until it settled down. "When did your friend come?" he asked Marion.

"He was here when I got here," she said.

"You must have been waiting for me to go," Ken said.

The Chinese looked at him with unblinking eyes.

Ken turned back to Marion. "Does he have a tongue?"

Marion nodded. "Chan called him, then he called Chan back after you came in."

The situation was grim. "Well," Ken said, "I got your brother, although I guess I was a little stupid in places."

"Why didn't you leave me there?" Charley asked thickly.

"Don't talk that way," Marion said.

Charley held his head and said nothing.

Ken, as the throbbing in his own skull subsided, began to calculate his chances of getting the gun away from the Chinese. The man was staying well across the room from him, however.

"Charley," Ken said, "how come Chan had Matthews killed?"

"Matthews was greedy," Charley said. "He started selling the goods to another tong for a higher price. Chan's tong in China was furnishing Matthews, so it was a double cross. Chan sent Liu to get him, and Liu got anxious."

Ken nodded. It all fit in. Now if they could just get out of this booby trap to tell Marley about it.

"Mind if I get a drink?" Ken asked, and he moved toward the bathroom which was close to the Chinese.

The yellow man's gun rose sharply. "Please, no," he said. "You stay here. Honorable Chan arrive shortly, and I do not wish to join Liu in disfavor of ancestors."

"Well, well," Ken said. "At last I meet a real Chinese."

Soon Chan arrived, and Liu slipped quietly into the room behind him. Chan's eyes took in the little group.

"Very bad," he said. "This will bring trouble to the tong, but it must be done to avoid greater trouble." He nodded to Liu. "Quickly," he said.

Liu pulled a heavy, tapered, two-foot club from under his coat.

"How do you expect to get away with this?" Ken asked desperately. He was pleading for time and praying for Marley.

"That's our problem," Chan said. "You will observe the quick method of death. Liu is expert in placing the blow just so. You will feel no pain. It is more certain than a knife and less noisy than a gun. Liu, for his blunder, will be turned over to the police to satisfy them. Mr. Burke first, Liu. He is the most dangerous. Yung, keep him covered. Shoot if necessary."

LIU moved across the room and Ken tightened his muscles to sell his life dearly. Then, into that tense moment, the phone rang shrilly. It stabbed the attention of every occupant, and Liu stopped halfway across the room to look back at Chan.

Chan looked at Ken. "You will answer, Mr. Burke. Liu, stand close to strike if I say so. Mr. Burke, not a wrong word."

Ken nodded and walked to the phone. Calling for help into the phone wasn't the answer, he realized. He picked up the phone and put it to his ear.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," Marley said. "Is that you, Burke?"

"Yes," Ken said, and he made his voice cheerful.

"What's up?" Marley asked.

"Oh, very fine, Captain Marley," Ken said, and he saw Chan stiffen and saw the club of Liu, over his head, poised to strike.

"What in the devil did you call me for, then?" Marley asked.

"That's right," Ken said. "I haven't gotten to first base. Can't seem to get anywhere."

"What's the matter with you?" Marley asked, but Ken noticed a sudden edge to his voice.

"Well, if you work anything out," Ken said, "I'll be very glad to hear from you."

"Are you in trouble?" Marley asked.

Ken laughed cheerfully. "You hit the nail on the head," he said.

"In your room?" Marley asked.

"That's right," Ken said.

"I'll be right up," Marley said. "Hang on."

"All right, Captain," Ken said happily. "I'll be seein' you then." He heard

the line go dead and hung up.

"What did he want?" Chan demanded. He had to know, and that's what Ken depended upon. That's why he had mentioned Marley's name.

"Chan," Ken said, "I know a few things. Your tong is in imminent danger, but with me on hand to tell you what the police know, you can salvage something."

"It is impossible to allow you to remain alive," Chan said. But Ken noticed that he didn't order Liu to end the conversation.

Ken rubbed his forehead thoughtfully. He looked up and sighed. "I suppose," he said, "that even dreaming your life away in an opium den is better than death. Chan, I'll trade what information I have for the proposition you mentioned earlier."

Chan was calculating. Ken now was in the king seat because Chan didn't know what Ken knew, nor was he sure what the police had.

"What about these two?" Chan asked.

"Charley is already your slave," Ken said. He looked at Marion and his face hardened. He licked his lips. "As for the girl—it would be nice to have her on a cot by my side for the rest of my life, to dream with, but I don't suppose you'd go for that."

Marion straightened proudly and said nothing.

Chan shook his head. "You humiliated my son and broke his arm," he said. "For that you forfeited your right to pleasure in your life. Your life belongs to my son."

"All right," Ken said. "Fair enough. Take us to your son. He's the future ruler of the tong. Let him decide whether my life is worth that of the tong's."

CHAN hesitated. He knew he was on dangerous ground, and he was afraid of that phone call on two counts.

"What information do you have?" he asked.

"Come now, Chan," Ken said. "What would I have to bargain with if I told you now?"

Chan made a decision then. Ken could see it in his eyes. His methodical mind had worked it out, and something in Ken's tone gave him the answer. He decided they had to die and right away.

"Liu," he said sharply, "finish them."

We have to leave before it is too late."

Charley had been regaining his senses more and more as the drugs wore off. The situation was very clear to him.

"Wait a minute, Chan," he said, and his voice quavered. "I've never caused you any trouble. Let my sister and me go. I swear we'll never talk."

Liu, distracted, stopped to look at Charley.

"Quiet, fool," Chan said sharply. "You, pig, have brought her to this. Quickly, Liu."

Liu turned to Ken and the big seaman was judging his distance closely. Then Charley acted. Whether it was Chan's tone of contempt, actual realization of what he had brought his sister into, or just a desperate attempt to save his own miserable life, they would never know. But Charley shoved up out of his chair and jumped on the man with the gun.

There were muffled explosions as the gunman pumped the trigger, and Liu turned again to see what was happening.

Ken pounced like a hungry cat. He slugged Liu in the jaw and knocked him back against the foot of the bed. Liu staggered there, recovered his footing and raised the club. Ken dove into Liu's mid-section and knocked him back on the bed. They rolled off the bed onto the floor, with Liu on top.

Ken brought up his knee, raked his elbow across Liu's face, and heaved the man aside.

He cracked Liu's forehead with the heel of his hand and knocked Liu's head against the hard floor. Liu's eyes glazed over and he relaxed.

Ken saw Chan coming up with a gun. Ken grabbed the club and flung it at Chan. It hit him across the chest and knocked him back against the bureau. Ken leaped across the room and kicked Yung in the head as he began to get up from under the dead body of Charley.

Chan was bringing his gun to bear again. Ken dove behind the big chair that Charley had been sitting in and came up with Yung's gun. Lying on the floor, with the chair protecting him, he snapped several shots at Chan until the gun was empty. At that range, no-

body could miss, and Chan sort of melted away to the floor.

When Marley arrived with his policemen, Ken was sitting on the short step up into the bathroom commanding the scene of carnage with Chan's gun.

He was still dragging deep for breath.

THEY sat in the cab outside her friend's house. Marion was in his arms and sobbing gently.

"You can take him home to bury him," Ken said. "Don't tell them the truth. Give them a good story. He deserves that. He died like a man."

She controlled herself and straightened up. She jabbed at her eyes with an ineffectual little handkerchief. "Do you suppose the papers at home will get the story?" she asked.

"Marley said he'd keep your name out of it," Ken said. "As far as the Frisco papers are concerned, he was just a hop-head seaman by the name of Davis."

"What will you do now?" she asked. "Go back to sea?"

Ken sighed. "I think I've had enough," he said. "I don't know, I guess I'd like to find the right girl and go back to that ranch."

"Oh," she said.

"It'll be hard on the girl, though," Ken said. "I'll need a lot of gentling. I'll have to learn to get along with my neighbors and not slug a guy just because he doesn't agree with me."

"The right girl could do that," she said.

"Do you think so?" he asked.

"I know it," she said. "You're not really hard. You just decided to be that way because the world kicked you around a little bit. You won't be difficult to gentle."

Ken tipped her face up to his. "Think you could do it?" he asked.

She nodded. "I could do it," she said.

"Will you?" he asked.

"I will," she said.

The cab driver looked up in his rear-view mirror and then tipped his hat over his eyes as he settled down for a nap. This was going to take a while, he could see that, but he didn't care. The meter was ticking. . . .



A Bargain IN CRIME

by
SAM SLEUTH

A **BETTED** by bloodhounds (of the Baskerville strain, naturally) and our trusty magnifying glass, we have managed to cull a quartet of real chiller-dillers from the cream of the current 25c mystery reprint crop for your fireside delectation.

Since the flood of titles available at all newsstands is waxing both in quantity and quality, this weeding-out process represents no small effort along lines of research and deduction. However, the four listed and reviewed below are guaranteed by no less an authority than ourselves to return not only excitement and mystery but a full measure of good writing and swift-paced action against authentic backgrounds. The authors constitute a top-section of detective-story Who's Who.

Reviews in Brief

THE GRINDLE NIGHTMARE by Q. Patrick

It all began with buzzards. They swarmed suddenly, like the birds of ill-omen they are, over the Valley and roosted prodigiously in Grindle Oak. According to local tradition their coming meant death and for once tradition more than lived up to itself.

For a maniacal killer was on the loose, a killer who seemed to delight in the torture, mayhem and death not only of human beings but of animals as well. The start of the trail was small enough—consisting in the finding of the mutilated corpses of a kitten, a marmoset and a goose.

But these were only preludes to a campaign of murder, whose apparent senselessness made finding of the killer apparently impossible as their gruesomeness made the entire Valley chill with panic. A brilliant study of horror combined with a first-rate detective puzzle that will keep the reader shivering and baffled.

HOME IS THE HANGMAN by Richard Sale

Death and disaster have long walked hand in hand with efforts to recover lost treasure—and when Mike Heywood arrives in Haiti to run the Punta Negra meteorological station he finds them already on the scene in full and fatal partnership.

His predecessor has died mysteriously and there are ominously strange goings-on aboard a visiting luxury yacht, supposedly engaged in retrieving gold bullion from a long-sunken French frigate offshore. So Mike digs in to find out the truth of what has happened.

The weather, in the form of a rip-roaring West Indian hurricane, doubles the danger and difficulty of his task—but it is nothing compared to the fierce opposition he meets from a band of ruthless criminals when he discovers their presence and true purpose on the scene. This one has mystery, perilous suspense, high

romance and a beautifully drawn exotic background for full measure.

THE DOLL'S TRUNK MURDER by Helen Reilly

Nature, this time in the form of a blizzard, is again a major factor in this finely-wrought story of old passions and new, old crimes and murder yet to come in a secluded Pennsylvania mountain mansion. Miss Fenwick has rented the aging house for vital and absolute seclusion but the blizzard turns it into an impromptu Grand Hotel.

Richard Brierly, trapped by the snow, leaves his car to be met by a stranger complete with gun and flashlight. Together they wade through the mounting drifts toward the house, where a terrified man greets them with the cry, "In the closet upstairs—there's blood. . . ."

Before any of the wayfarers can resume their journeys murder strikes again and menace rises rapidly about the stormbound group of killer and suspects. Mrs. Reilly at her best

REUNION WITH MURDER by Timothy Fuller

There is such a thing for a woman as being too attractive—and Ann North finds it out to her cost. For she seems to attract murder like a Borgias princess. And when her husband is found dead on a golf course during a Harvard reunion, Jupiter Jones learns likewise.

Not only does he have to shelve his own wedding to get his best man-to-be free of suspicion but he soon finds himself trapped by the charm of the glamorous widow and her young sister and in danger of going to jail himself.

It takes the elusive clue of "Sir Galahad" to get him even started on the right track—and then the track itself falls out from under him. A witty and stirring story which should confound and fascinate its readers right up to the utterly unexpected climax.

Santa Claus Precinct



As Muggey Darle sent slugs at him, O'Doole began firing

Perhaps it was the Yuletide spirit that brightened the eye and speeded the shooting-arm of Matt O'Doole!

WHEN he reported for duty at the 23rd precinct station on the morning of the day before Christmas, Patrolman Matt O'Doole was almost jovial.

Since the first of his twenty-three years of service on the Force, the day before Christmas had been an outstanding date each year. The holiday spirit

was in the air. Last-minute shoppers were elbowing and jostling, and most of their faces were wreathed with smiles. People called cordial greetings to one another. Shopkeepers beamed. Everybody was so busy that there were few of the usual disturbances to annoy the patrolman on his beat.

It was a day cops received gifts, too.

b y J O H N S T O N M c C U L L E Y

The precinct was one of small shops, cheap hotels, housekeeping suites, children playing on the stairways and in the streets. They were people fighting off poverty. The district had been called the Little League of Nations because men and women of many races and many faiths had congregated there.

Matt O'Doole had been the regular patrolman on his present beat for the last six years, first on a night shift and finally on the daytime detail. He had become a fixture. He was the sort of cop who seldom attracts attention. Only once since joining the Force as a rookie had he got his name in the papers.

In two years he would come up for retirement. He hoped he could last it out that long. He was white-haired and had begun to feel old. His feet troubled him more than formerly, and he was careful to dress warm and keep dry in bad weather.

Once he had hoped he would get a station job so he could take it easier for the remainder of his term of service. But he had given up that hope now. No soft chair job in the precinct station or a sergeancy for him! He was just an ordinary good cop.

But he was fairly content. He never had been very ambitious, never had resented the promotion of others. It had been a good life. He would have a pension and finish his life at ease with his wife. They had no children and could face the sunset together.

If he had to finish his career pounding a beat, he hoped Captain Jim Shane would let him keep the one he had now. In the 23rd, nicknamed Santa Claus Precinct because coppers got so many presents at Christmas, O'Doole's beat was the best.

He chuckled as he got into his uniform and turned the key in his locker door. He had learned what the day before Christmas would mean for him.

Sol Burns, who ran a little haberdashery store, would give him a shirt or necktie. Eddie Link, the friendly Negro who ran a shoeshine stand, would treat him to a free shine. Hans Brenner, who had a delicatessen, would whisper for

him to return after checking out for schnapps to take home along with a few delicacies.

THEN there would be Joe Alden, who was bald-headed but ran the neighborhood barber shop, would give him a box of good candy for his wife and a bottle of after-shave lotion for himself. And Tony Doniletti, the fat little Italian who owned the Italian lunch counter and grocery, would have a basket stuffed with good things to eat. And others would have cigars and other presents.

The people on the beat liked Matt O'Doole because he mixed kindness with duty. He had put a few tough, straying youngsters back on the right track. He had rescued Lina Doniletti, Tony's daughter, when fire had broken out a few years before in the grocery, dashing through the flames to find her unconscious from smoke and carrying her to safety—the only time his name ever had gotten in the papers. Because of Patrolman Matt O'Doole, Lina was a pretty young woman of twenty now instead of only a memory.

Yes—life hadn't been so bad. The gifts he would receive today as usual on the day before Christmas wouldn't amount to very much in real money. But they would be given cheerfully because the donors appreciated O'Doole for the man he was, and not because it was good policy to stand in with a cop.

When Matt O'Doole lined up in the assembly room with the others and a sergeant called the roll, O'Doole saw that Captain Jim Shane had come into the room to take over, as he did when he had special orders.

"Keep a sharp lookout for pickpockets today," Shane told them. "Watch for window-smashers around jewelry stores late in the afternoon. Keep an eye out for drunks. And here's a special for some of you—Muggsy Darle is reported as having been seen in this part of the city again. You know him. He killed a cop and he's still at large! The dicks and plainclothesmen are looking for him. If any of you men run across him use

great care—Muggsy Darle will shoot to kill if he has to do it to make a getaway. That's all."

As he hurried from the station house, O'Doole was thinking of Muggsy Darle. He had come from O'Doole's beat, had played around the streets there as a kid. As he grew older, he was the bully and bad boy of the district.

His father was dead, and everybody seemed to think Muggsy Darle's actions sent his mother to the grave long before her time.

After her death, Muggsy had identified himself with a notorious gang, and was seen in the district no longer except on infrequent occasions when he showed up to flash money, exhibit expensive clothes and brag. Then, when the gang was caught robbing a loft, Muggsy had shot and killed a cop.

That set the whole Force after him. In some strange manner, Muggsy had escaped them. Hidden out by friends, probably, O'Doole thought. But the cops would never quit. They never did when a criminal killed a cop. Some day they would get Muggsy.

On several occasions, Muggsy had been reported seen. But no cop ever set eyes on him. O'Doole had watched with the others as far as his beat was concerned, for he knew Muggsy well. But it was reasonable to assume, O'Doole told himself, that Muggsy would not revisit his old territory now.

O'Doole reached his beat to find the shops already crowded. He reported in and began his rounds. The walks were jammed, and the holiday spirit was in the air. On the corners, men dressed as Santa Claus rang their little bells and thanked those who threw coins into the pots.

The same old day before Christmas, O'Doole told himself.

He was smiling as he walked slowly along the fronts of the buildings, nodding to acquaintances who greeted him, calling a "Merry Christmas" frequently in reply to a like hail.

He went into Joe Alden's barber shop, there to leave an old-fashioned razor to be honed.

JOE ALDEN had always greeted him cordially, but today he merely nodded. However, O'Doole thought nothing of that. Alden and his two barbers were busy, with customers awaiting their turns in the chairs.

"No rush, Joe. I'll pick up the razor in three or four days," O'Doole told him. "I'll use my other one meanwhile."

Eddie Link had his shoe shine stand a few feet from the barber shop, and was busy.

"Mornin', Eddie! Merry Christmas!" O'Doole greeted.

"Yassah," Eddie replied, merely glancing over a shoulder and then bending quickly over the shoe he was polishing. That wasn't like Eddie, either. Eddie had always greeted O'Doole with a wide grin.

Sol Burns was standing in front of his haberdashery shop motioning to a clerk inside who was arranging a window display. O'Doole stopped beside him.

"Nice shirts," O'Doole complimented. "You ought to sell 'em fast."

Sol Burns seemed to be very nervous. He gulped and gestured wildly at the man in the window as he nodded.

"'Scuse me," he said, and hurried inside his store.

Everybody busy, O'Doole thought. Trying to make the most of the last shopping day before Christmas. Trying to profit by a few dollars. They wouldn't be so distant and grouchy later in the day.

At the corner, O'Doole crossed the street and a few minutes later stopped in front of Hans Brenner's delicatessen. O'Doole had saved Brenner's young nephew from starting a life of crime a couple of years before, and Brenner had been grateful to O'Doole for steering the boy into the right path.

Whenever Brenner was busy waiting on customers but caught sight of O'Doole through the window, he always smiled and waved. He looked up now and his eyes met O'Doole's squarely. But, his face like a mask, Hans Brenner looked away again quickly without the least sign of recognition.

O'Doole strolled on, watching the

crowd. He wondered what had happened to everybody. The men he knew seemed strange, almost unfriendly. O'Doole was sensitive to the behavior of people. But he tried to shake off the feeling that something was wrong.

He was nearing Tony Doniletti's Italian grocery. Tony, whose daughter O'Doole had saved from the flames, never failed to greet him regardless of how busy he might be. His eyes would glisten when he looked at O'Doole. He and Mrs. Doniletti—they lived above the delicatessen with Lina—could never forget that their pretty daughter, holding down a good typist's job now, would not be alive today but for what O'Doole had done.

Already Tony's store was a busy scene. People were rushing in and out, buying food for the Christmas feast the following day. As O'Doole neared the store, Mrs. Doniletti waddled through the door to put something on a vegetable stand.

"Mornin', Mrs. Doniletti!" O'Doole greeted. "Merry Christmas to you!"

Mrs. Doniletti turned around quickly. O'Doole could see she had been weeping. She and Tony had been having one of their emotional spats, he supposed. Her eyes bulged when she saw O'Doole, and she gulped and nodded her head at him, but the usual smile did not appear on her face.

"Is Lina all right these days?" O'Doole asked.

"All right? Why—why not?" Mrs. Doniletti said, in a voice that did not have the usual tone. "She taka da day off—her boss tella her go buy her presents."

"That's nice," O'Doole replied.

"Excusa please." Mrs. Doniletti hurried back into the store as if glad to get away from him.

What was troubling her? O'Doole wondered. What was the matter with everybody this morning? Mrs. Doniletti had been crying, and she really had looked frightened.

Within the next hour, Officer O'Doole found the puzzle growing. His old friends did not want to talk to him.

They got away from him as quickly as possible when he addressed them. One thought flashed into his mind—were they actually wishing to avoid him because they did not want to give him their usual modest Christmas presents? He could not believe that. He had done nothing to offend any of them. And they had been beamingly cordial toward him only the day before.

SOMETHING had happened, O'Doole felt. But what? Had some malicious rumor regarding him been circulated? It was something to be looked into later in the day, he decided. Just now he had his work to do.

At the proper moment he made his box report and continued on his beat. A small fire in a side street occupied him for half an hour. He stopped a fight between belligerent neighbors who had begun a wet Christmas celebration even this far in advance. The crowds went back and forth along the walks, in and out of the stores. It was the usual daily scene, except that the holiday spirit made it a bit more feverish.

Emerging from a side street on a corner where a branch bank stood, O'Doole came to an abrupt stop. He had caught sight of a small, overdressed man of perhaps thirty who was known to him and to the police generally. His name was Lefty Newton.

Lefty Newton had done six months once for petty theft. That was all the official part of his record. But he was a known gangster, though his activities had never been proved sufficiently for the police to move in on him. He was a sneak, a lookout, an official messenger for the head of the gang—that much was known. But Patrolman Matt O'Doole knew more. He knew that Lefty Newton was the particular pal of the much-wanted Muggsy Darle.

Lefty was seen seldom in this locality, where he had spent his boyhood with Muggsy and others of their kind before they had been admitted to official gangdom. His presence here now, O'Doole decided, was not due to any overpowering desire to return to his home district

because of the holiday sentiment.

O'Doole watched him, obscured by the throng of passersby. Lefty Newton seemed to be keeping an eye on the front door of the bank, and O'Doole began wondering if the gang was going to attempt a daylight bank robbery. That wasn't exactly in this gang's line.

As he watched, he saw Hans Brenner hurry down the street and enter the bank. The delicatessen man seemed nervous and worried. He emerged and returned to his shop. Sol Burns came to the bank, too, and he was not his usual self.

A couple of other merchants visited the bank and hurried out and away. Lefty Newton seemed to watch them all.

O'Doole pushed through the crowd and stopped behind Lefty.

"Fancy seein' you here," he said.

Lefty whirled toward him, his manner suddenly nervous as his eyes glittered. He smiled sheepishly, then he gulped.

"Hello, Copper!" he greeted finally.

"Haven't seen you around for some time," O'Doole suggested.

"I don't get up here much."

"Wanted to see the old street on Christmas, huh?"

"Yeah, Yeah, that's it!" Lefty seemed relieved like a man who has received a welcome suggestion. "Wanted to see how many of the old-timers are still alive. You—you've been poundin' this beat for a long time, O'Doole."

"That's right, Lefty. Long enough to know a lot about the folks here, and their lives. How's Muggsy Darle these days?"

"Muggsy?" Lefty Newton's eyes narrowed and glittered again. "Ain't seen him for some time. He got into trouble—"

"He killed a cop," O'Doole broke in. "And the cops will get him for it one of these days. He can't hide out forever."

"I've heard tell around that some of the boys think he's lit out. Gone to Cuba, somebody told me."

"If he has, they'll pick hi up down there," O'Doole declared. "Well, behave yourself on my beat, Lefty. It's a pretty

clean beat, and I like to keep it that way."

"Can't a guy come around to see the old street?"

"Sure, Lefty—sure. Look around all you like. It's a free country. But, behave yourself."

O'DOOLE strolled up the street through the crowd. A few more friends got nervous when he tried to talk to them. He failed to even commence to understand it. And Lefty Newton—his presence in the district might mean something. He had an idea of reporting that he had seen Lefty, simply because Lefty was a close friend of Muggsy Darle's. But he decided against it. He didn't want to make a fool rooky move at this stage of his career.

Tony Doniletti, in addition to his grocery, served coffee, soft drinks and sandwiches. It was that kind of a neighborhood. O'Doole frequently had a small luncheon there—he always waited until he got home after the day's work for the big meal of his own wife's cooking.

So, a few minutes after the noon hour, O'Doole wandered into the store, hung his cap on a peg and sat down at the little counter. Only a couple of customers were in the shop now. Mrs. Doniletti waddled up to serve him.

"Coffee and ham on rye," O'Doole ordered.

Generally, she talked and laughed with him after shouting the order to her husband. But this time she nodded and walked over to the counter and gave the order after Tony had disposed of his customers. And, as Tony prepared the sandwich and poured the coffee, his wife talked to him in whispers.

O'Doole began getting angry. He did not like mysteries when he was concerned in them himself. When Mrs. Doniletti brought the food to him, he said to her: "Tell Tony I want to talk to him."

Wiping his hands on his apron, Tony went to the counter. A strange expression was in his face; it seemed to

O'Doole to be almost one of fear.

"Tony, what's wrong around here today?" O'Doole demanded. "All you folks treat me like I was an outcast or something like that."

"We—we are ver' busy, Officer O'Doole."

"So I know. Hope you have a good Christmas trade, Tony. Now, Tony, I've always treated you right, and I think you trust me—"

"Always we trusta you, Officer O'Doole! Ever since you save da life of our Lina—" He gulped. "Our Lina—" he repeated as emotion choked him.

"What about Lina, Tony? Is she sick? Has she eloped with some young scalawag?"

Tony shook his head. "She's-a alla right."

There were no customers in the store now. From behind the counter came Mrs. Doniletti's quavering voice: "Tony!" Warning was in the word. "Say nothing!"

O'Doole looked at Tony sharply. "What's goin' on around here, Tony?" he demanded in the voice of authority. "Maybe you'd better let me know. Maybe it'll be a mistake if you don't. If Lina is in trouble—why, I'd do anything I could to get her out of it!"

"No, no trouble, Officer O'Doole."

"What did Mrs. Doniletti mean by telling you to say nothing, Tony? You can talk to me, whatever it is. I'm your friend."

"I'm afraid to talk—afraid!" Tony said, like a man on the verge of hysteria. "Do notta ask, Officer O'Doole. Excusa, please."

Tony was shaking as he hurried away toward the rear of the little store. O'Doole became thoughtful. None of these persons were acting naturally. The entire district seemed to have a fit of the jitters.

He went a short distance up the crowded street and made his box report. There were no special orders for him. Something was bothering the people on his beat, he felt, especially those who were in business. Perhaps it was the old gang shakedown, the old "protec-

tion" racket. He decided to make a written report of his suspicions when he went off duty.

Then he saw Lefty Newton again.

Lefty was waiting on a corner, leaning against a building with his hands in his pocket, chewing gum vigorously, a show of nervousness on his part. O'Doole took cover and watched Lefty.

After a few minutes, he was surprised to see Hans Brenner, the delicatessen man, approach Lefty furtively. He stopped for a moment, said something to Lefty and handed him a large envelope. Then Brenner hurried back to his establishment.

Almost immediately, Sol Burns appeared and went through the same act. And then Joe Alden, the barber—and it was surprising that Alden would leave his shop on such a busy day.

The old shakedown under threat, O'Doole decided. He certainly would make a phone report about his suspicions.

NOW the officer saw Lefty straighten, glance around, and hurry into the cross street. Officer O'Doole played detective—he tailed his man. He wanted to see whether Lefty would take transportation to some other district of the city or dodge into one of the numerous lodging houses in the neighborhood.

Lefty did the latter. He went up a flight of steps and into a building the upper two floors of which were rented suites. The place was operated by a middle-aged widow known as Mrs. Mulvaney, and it was known to the police that Mrs. Mulvaney, with two school-age youngsters to support, did not question the social standing of her guests too much if they paid in advance.

O'Doole waited a few minutes, then went up the steps and into the building. In the dingy hall, Mrs. Mulvaney was putting a clean towel on a little stand table which held a vase and a letter tray. Her eyes widened when she saw O'Doole.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Mulvaney," he greeted. "Merry Christmas!"

"The same to you, Officer O'Doole,

and many of them. Have I been breakin' any law? I left my garbage can out a little later than usual this mornin', because I was so busy."

"Nothin' like that." O'Doole chuckled to make her feel at ease. Then he got serious. "Mrs. Mulvaney, the police have been kind to you and will continue to be if you do your part."

"Whatever do you mean, Officer O'Doole?"

"Lefty Newton just came in here. Has he rented a room from you?"

"Not him. I saw him go up the stairs. He's maybe visitin' a friend. He used to live hereabouts."

"So I know. What friend might he be visitin', Mrs. Mulvaney?"

Alarm came into her face. "I—I know nothin'," she said.

"The way you act tells me you do, Mrs. Mulvaney."

"I—I'm afraid to say anything. No tellin' what'd happen to me. I've got two kids to think of—"

"You'd better talk, quick, Mrs. Mulvaney. Want me to phone and have the place raided?"

"Don't do a thing like that! I'd lose all my lodgers," she said. "It's hard enough as it is to make both ends meet. When they rented the room, I didn't know—"

"Didn't know what?" O'Doole demanded, as she ceased speaking. "Talk up, and be quick!"

"I've made sure the young lady isn't being harmed, only kept a prisoner—"

"What young lady? A prisoner where?"

"Lina Doniletti. And a prettier, more decent girl I never knew! Her folks must be frantic. Last night they brought her here, after rentin' the rooms in the afternoon. Two rooms on the top floor, Officer O'Doole. Oh, what am I sayin'? I'll be killed for it!"

"You'll be protected. What rooms?" O'Doole demanded.

"Top floor, at the end of the hall at the back on the right. Officer O'Doole, don't go up there!"

"Be quiet! Want to warn 'em?" he snapped at her. "Stand right where

you are!"

There was a slot phone in the hall. O'Doole used a nickel and called the 23rd precinct station and got Captain Jim Shane. He spoke softly into the transmitter and gave his news and suspicions and asked for a squad to approach cautiously and without sirens screaming.

CAUTIOUSLY, Officer Matt O'Doole brushed Mrs. Mulvaney aside with the injunction to keep quiet and go down the street and do some shopping, and not come back until the fuss was over. Service revolver in hand, he ascended the creaky stairs slowly, trying to make as little noise as possible.

Nobody was in the hall on the next floor, nor did he see anybody when he reached the top floor. He tiptoed along the hall there and stopped at the door of the room Mrs. Mulvaney had indicated when he heard subdued voices.

So, somebody had kidnaped Lina Doniletti, he thought. Perhaps she was being held for the ransom Tony could pay. There was something behind the fact that she was held here, and that Lefty Newton had collected money from some of the reputable small business men of the district.

O'Doole put his head closer to the door.

"That's all they could dig up—four thousand six hundred," he heard Lefty Newton saying in the nasal voice O'Doole knew so well. "Doniletti even made a touch loan at the bank. I watched everything."

"How about cops?" another voice asked.

"No dicks in the district. Everything normal. I met old O'Doole and he gassed a minute and went on half asleep wanderin' up the street—"

Outside the door, O'Doole tensed as anger surged through him.

"Any other time, I'd make 'em dig up the whole five thousand," the other voice said. "But I've got to get away from here tonight, and I need quick getaway money. The gang won't come through with any more, as you know."

"It was smart for you to come here," Lefty declared. "Last place anybody'd expect you to come. And to put the bite on these old geezers in the neighborhood—"

"Slip out now and get me some grub," the other man interrupted. "Be mighty careful about it. Don't go to Brenner's delicatessen. Go around to the other street somewhere. Get a couple of cartons of black coffee and some sandwiches. Might as well get some milk and sandwiches for the girl, too. And me some cigarettes."

"What about the girl?" Lefty asked.

"After we get away from here tonight, you'll phone and tell Doniletti where she is. Get that grub."

Outside the door, Officer O'Doole tensed again and gripped his service revolver. He heard steps coming toward the door. It was pulled open cautiously for a few inches. Then O'Doole's heavy bulk was hurled against it, and the door flew back to crash against the wall.

"Watch out, Muggsy!" Lefty Newton yelled.

Muggsy Darle, the cop killer, was sprawled in a chair near a window. Sight of O'Doole's uniform brought him to quick action. Lefty Newton had darted aside and was fumbling at a shoulder holster. O'Doole, who had done plenty of clever shooting on the police pistol range, snapped a shot that hurled Lefty back against the wall and floored him.

Crouched near the window, Muggsy Darle had a weapon out. He fired quickly, and a slug burned across O'Doole's fat upper left arm. Another brushed the hair over his right ear. O'Doole swerved aside and began shooting.

He could hear yells up and down the hall and from the stairway as he shot. The neighborhood would be aroused quickly enough. And the squad should be there soon.

He saw Muggsy Darle cough blood, drop his gun and sprawl. He darted

[Turn page]

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forward and kicked Muggsy's gun to a corner of the room. He whirled and sprang over the fallen Lefty Newton, who was breathing but seemed to be unconscious. O'Doole picked up Lefty's gun and held it in his left hand.

He ran to the door which opened into the next room and wrenched it open. Her eyes and mouth taped, Lina Doniletti was tied to a single bed so she scarcely could move. O'Doole ran to her.

"It's Matt O'Doole, darlin', he said. "I'll have you loose in a minute. There's nothin' more to fear."

IN SPITE of the fact that his left arm was commencing to pain him, O'Doole worked feverishly at the ropes which held her a prisoner. Finally he had them off, and helped her to sit up on the edge of the bed. He peeled the tape from her eyes first, and she groaned a little when it came away, bringing eyelashes with it.

O'Doole stripped the tape off her mouth. She gasped air, gulped, and saliva trickled down her chin.

"I was!—so afraid!" she muttered.

"Out of here we go, darlin'," O'Doole said. "You'll be home in a few minutes. Did they harm you?"

She shook her head. As O'Doole raised her and put a supporting arm around her and began leading her to the door, she spoke in spasms of whis- pers:

"Two men grabbed me—last night, as I was walking home and brought me

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here. Lefty Newton—was one. Muggsy Darle was here and said they were holding me for ransom so he could grab getaway money—”

“That’s enough for now, darlin’. Tell it to the cap’n when he gets here.”

Captain Jim Shane got there as they reached the hall door, Lina shuddering as she glanced at the sprawled bodies. Shane came at the head of a bunch of men with guns held ready. O’Doole tried to salute as he reeled against the wall.

“I got—Muggsy Darle, sir,” he reported.

Squad men took charge. They led Lina Doniletti away and prepared to transfer Muggsy Darle and Lefty Newton to a hospital prison ward. O’Doole they sent to the emergency hospital, where the flesh would on his arm was dressed, and then they took him home.

Captain Shane telephoned him later and explained. It had been Muggsy’s scheme. His gang had turned him out because he had killed a cop and was a menace to them. And he had thought

[Turn page]

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up the scheme of grabbing Lina on the street and demanding that Tony Doniletti and his friends gather five thousand ransom money. He had threatened to kill the girl if his demands were not met, or if the police were notified.

That was why O'Doole's old friends on the beat had treated him coldly and tried to avoid him. They feared for Lina, a girl who was loved by them all, as well as for her parents. They were afraid that Muggsy and his possible watchers would believe the cops were being notified if they talked to O'Doole.

The morning papers had O'Doole's name smeared in heavy headlines. Muggsy Darle would live to swing, the papers said, and Lefty Newton would live also to spend years in prison for his part in the scheme.

In the middle of Christmas morning, Captain Jim Shane sent a police car to get O'Doole. He was to be taken to the hospital and his wound dressed. But, instead, O'Doole found the police chauffeur taking him to his old beat.

"Orders, Matt," was all the chauffeur would say.

The car stopped on a corner. Captain Jim Shane, grinning, was waiting with a couple of men from the precinct station.

"Parade your beat, O'Doole," Shane ordered. "The medical examiner says you've nothin' but a scratch."

O'Doole obeyed. And now he found his friends beaming upon him, and the presents were forthcoming.

"We'll have 'em sent up to your place," Shane assured him.

For there was an abundance of presents. Sol Burns made in three shirts and as many neckties this year. Hans Brenner gave him a huge basket loaded with things, including a bottle of schnapps, Joe Alden came from his barber shop with a package for Mrs. O'Doole and two bottles of after-shave lotion for O'Doole himself.

Eddie Link, at the shine stand, polished O'Doole's heavy brogans while he rested for a few minutes, and said the

shines for an entire year were strictly on him.

And finally they came to Tony Doniletti's place. Lina hugged and kissed him while the crowd cheered. Mrs. Doniletti cried on his shoulder and patted his cheek. Tony, his eyes filled with tears, pointed to a huge packed basket for a cop to carry to the car that would take O'Doole home.

"Santa Claus precinct," O'Doole muttered, choking with emotion as he spoke.

Finally, he was in the car with the presents heaped around him and Captain Jim Shane poking his head through the window and talking:

"Take four days' leave with pay, O'Doole. Then report at the precinct. We need an old, experienced inside man. It's a desk job for you, O'Doole, for the remainder of your term, until you come up for retirement. And—just a whisper—you'll be wearin' a sergeant's stripes within a short time. Merry Christmas, O'Doole."

O'Doole gulped again. "Merry Christmas, cap'n," he replied.



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Good Crimes Are Coming

(Continued from page 9)

for some time, then had gone out together. That was all. But from the looks of that Panama, Thursday guessed that the Greek was dead and that the trail to the Whitney IOU's was going to be a long and hard one to follow.

There was no actual news of Papago until much later when his body turned up in an alligator farm. That touched off the weirdest sequence of events that Thursday had ever encountered in his hectic career. He found himself under police suspicion in a very short time because of his interest in Papago. And the closer he got to the heart of the blackmail ring the greater became his personal danger until another brutal murder turned him into a fugitive from justice, fleeing through the San Diego streets to save his neck and to beat the killer to a strange rendezvous. If he got there first it meant victory. If not, anything could happen. And, unfortunately, Thursday got there last!

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FROM OUR READERS

ONCE more Fredric Brown has shown a marked popularity among MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE readers. This has happened before in our experience and the pattern repeated itself shortly after publication of our Fall issue which featured the Brown novel "The Deadly Weekend." Typical of the many letters we have received is this one from Jeff Harlan of Louisville, Kentucky:

Dear Editor: Fred Brown's novel "The Deadly Weekend" was another swell job by a writer who never has let his readers down in his stories. And in this one his account of Sweeney the Chicago newspaper man and his adventures in the odd case of the screaming Mimi is a detective classic. It's the best yarn Brown has ever written and I don't care what you or anyone else may say to the contrary.

Well, Jeff, as publishers of "The Dead-
[Turn page]

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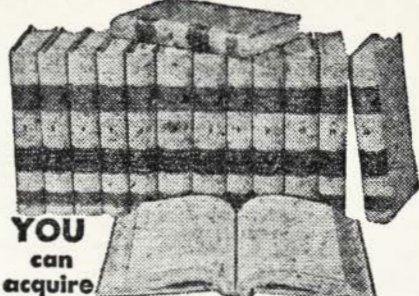
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ly Weekend" we certainly are not inclined to argue with you. We're mighty pleased to hear that you liked the story so much. It got terrific reports from our own editorial staff when the manuscript hit our office and that's why we lost no time in putting it in print.

Chris Dallem of Seattle, Washington, also found the Fred Brown opus exciting enough to take up his pen to write us a letter.

Dear Editor: It's not often that I sit down and write a note to a magazine editor to tell him that I like his magazine, but after reading a number of issues of MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE and particularly after reading "The Deadly Weekend" by Fredric Brown I just had to let you know that you deserve a round of applause for a nice job of publishing.

The Brown novel was excellent. It was exciting and very well written and sparked by a unique idea. The Bruno Fischer novelet was also fine and you were more than generous with short stories and features, all of which were fully deserving of attention.

Thank you, Chris. We've always tried to make MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE a well balanced magazine and that will continue to be our program in the months to come. Topflight novels by the best authors in the field and topflight short stories by equally high ranking writers.

We'll see all you folks here in our next issue. Meanwhile, if you have a spare moment, why not drop us a letter or postcard and say hello? Just write to: The Editor, MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE, Best Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thank you!

—THE EDITOR

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Girls, women, ladies—all you lovely lassies with shapely shafts—don't miss this! Dating from right now you can have a sigh of relief and throw your hosiery problems right out the window! From now on, it's strictly *old-fashioned* to have runs or snags when you can get exquisite, sheer KENDEX NYLONS with an iron-clad guarantee, backed by the famous GOOD HOUSEKEEPING SEAL. Yes ma'am—no matter what the cause . . . hard use or deliberate abuse, whether it's the fault of hose or wearer—KENDEX NYLONS are replaced FREE if they run, snag, or become unfit for use within the guarantee period: up to 3 whole months

Now that's hard to beat, you'll admit. The stockings, too, are next to impossible to match for sheerness, beauty, and lasting qualities. Watch that gleam in the boy-friend's eye, or hear that lo-o-ong low whistle when Friend Husband's appreciative eye spots your KENDEX NYLONS! And just watch the other girls turn a deep sea-green with envy! Maybe you'll want to keep a good thing to yourself—OR, maybe you'll want to help your skinny budget along by selling KENDEX NYLONS to others! More details below if this intrigues you—if not, don't miss the news about the newest excitement in the hosiery world!

ALL THIS, AND 60 GAUGE TOO!

Absolutely the last word in flattery for you: 60 gauge, 15 denier—many of the biggest stores don't have them! If all you want is whistles, and the carefree feeling that'll have you humming to yourself when you hand over your stocking worries to KENDEX, just check the top box in the coupon below and mail it (or use a penny postcard). You'll enjoy the luxury of selecting from the complete line our representative will show you: every desired style and color, prices as low or lower than other standard brands—PLUS the unbeatable guarantee that gives free replacements!

SMART WOMEN—AND MEN—MAKE \$

Now there's a thought—if you have spare time and need more of the elusive green stuff (as who doesn't)—why not be our representative in your area? Just wave our free sales kit under their noses, spring that irresistible "Guaranteed against EVERYTHING" on them . . . and you've made a sale! KENDEX NYLONS are nationally advertised in LIFE, SATURDAY EVENING POST, etc.—an audience of nearly 100 million ready to see the samples and give YOU their orders!

BECOME A MANAGER!

If you know a good thing when you see it, you'll grab this chance to become a hosiery specialist—H. Armstrong of Tennessee made \$202.23 in 9 days; C. O. Watkins of Oregon sent in 92 Orders in 1 day! Be a manager and appoint your own agents—earn up to 40¢ on every dollar they bring in! It's a business without competition—KENDEX NYLONS are not sold in any retail store—the opportunity of a lifetime to insure yourself a profitable future! We supply complete kits with samples and order blanks; we fill the orders, deliver and collect the money for you. All you do is take the orders, then sit back in your easy chair and collect the commissions!

MENS' HOSE GUARANTEED ONE YEAR!



If any pair or pairs do not give satisfactory service within 1 year of purchase, they will be replaced FREE! The customer is the sole judge. Style-smart hose, carefully selected to match any color scheme. Buy your socks from one of America's most complete lines, including new DuPont Nylon; looks and feels like wool, yet 4 times as durable! Shrinkproof, moth-proof, instantly washable! Complete sales outfit sent FREE to Agents. Fill out coupon NOW!

FREE Sales Outfit!

We set you up in a 52-weeks-of-the-year, high-paying business of your own. RUSH YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS NOW!

KENDEX COMPANY

BABYLON 443, N. Y.

Gentlemen:

Date

Your Guarantee is good enough for me. Here's my part of the bargain—just the postage to make you prove your part. I am checking below what I want:

I want to purchase your hosiery. Please have your representative call.
 I am interested in a high-paying future as your representative in my territory.

Name

Street

City

Zone

State

Give
Sheaffer's

America's
FIRST Choice

(BY ACTUAL SALES RECORDS)*

magnificent
Christmas gift
greatly appreciated.
This Sheaffer is the set
I have always admired
and hoped to own.
Affectionately
John

Merry Christmas
to John
from Kay

Harry Shigeta, FPSA, © 1949

Few gifts can match Sheaffer's for dignity, richness...for the definite impression of unsurpassed quality. And in the limited group of gifts bearing the distinction of being the very finest of their kind, Sheaffer's alone are not costly. Genuine Sheaffer's writing equipment is priced to fit every purse and made to fit every gift purpose. Set Illustrated: Crest De Luxe model, 14K gold filled. Touchdown Pen, \$17.50; Pencil, \$6.00; Strato-writer Ballpoint, \$12.50. Plus fed. tax. W. A. Sheaffer Pen Company, Fort Madison, Iowa, U. S. A. In Canada: Malton, Ont.



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Easiest pen in the world
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