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MURDER UNDER WRAPS

A Baffling Complete Novel

By **NORMAN A. DANIELS**

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SHAVES
CLOSE**

A Joe Bunt Novel!

By **LAURENCE DONOVAN**

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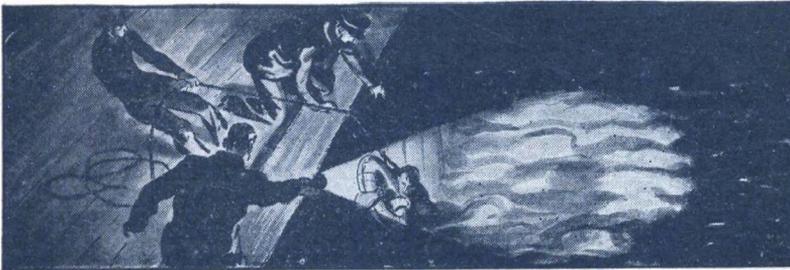
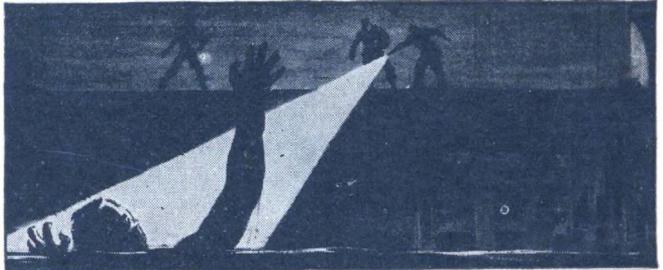


A true experience of special policeman FRANK HAHNEL, New York, N. Y.



"IT WAS STILL DARK...and bitter cold on the waterfront...when I finished my night patrol," writes Mr. Hahnel. "I had paused for a moment to say hello to a couple of friends when above the dismal sounds of the river came a piercing shriek and a heavy splash. Then there was silence.

"WE RUSHED FOR THE WHARF. I yanked out my flashlight and turned it on the water. There in the icy river 14 feet below we saw a man struggling feebly...clawing at the ice-sheathed pilings as the out-racing tide sucked him away from the pier.



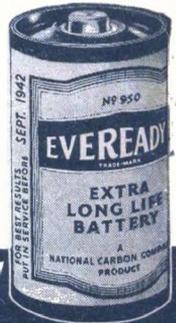
"QUICKLY I DARTED my light about and located a length of line on a nearby barge...and a life preserver on an adjoining pier. In an instant the preserver splashed in the water beside the drowning man. Dazed from shock and cold, half clinging to the preserver and half lassoed by the line, he was dragged to safety. Thanks to my 'Eveready' flashlight and its dependable *fresh DATED* batteries the river was cheated of its victim. (Signed) *Frank J. Hahnel*"

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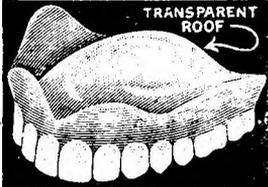
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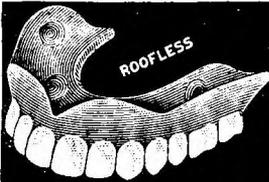
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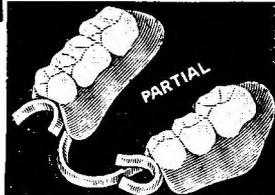
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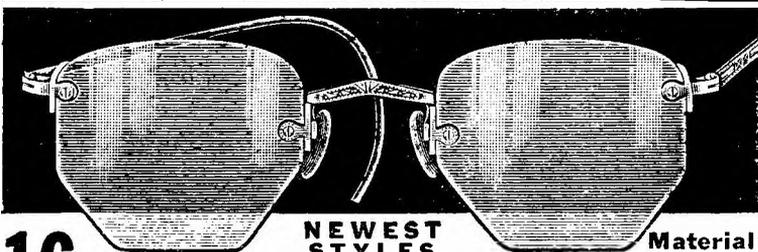


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POPULAR DETECTIVE

Vol. XXII, No. 3

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April, 1942



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POPULAR DETECTIVE, published every other month by BETTER PUBLICATIONS, INC., at 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription yearly, \$6.00 (six issues); single copies, \$1.00. Foreign and Canadian, postage extra. Re-entered as second-class matter April 14, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1942, by Better Publications, Inc. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

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For several years I have been in business for myself making around \$200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field.
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Operating Naval Radio Station
I am now operating the Radio Range Station, one of the new simultaneous types, here at the Naval Air Station. Glad to give N. R. I. its share of credit in the success I have had thus far.—**GRIFFITH SCHOLER, Radioman First Class, U. S. Navy.** (Address omitted for military reasons.)

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MAIL THE COUPON! Find out about the many opportunities Radio offers you to make more money quickly and to prepare yourself for a good-pay job after the War. Whether you're eligible for military service or exempt, you should get my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's FREE. It tells about Radio's present and future opportunities and how I train beginners at home in spare time to be Radio Technicians and Operators; how I teach operating principles of Army, Navy, Civilian Defense Radio equipment.

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(1) *The Radio Repair Business Is Booming.* Because of the shortage of new sets, and increased interest in Radio programs, fixing Radios offers many extra new opportunities for Radio Technicians. (2) *U. S. Government is calling for thousands of CIVILIAN Radio Technicians, Operators and is paying well for their services.* (3) *Government Orders for Radio Equipment,* amounting to millions of dollars, are creating opportunities for men with Radio training to earn good pay, overtime. (4) *Radio Is Ready to Expand After the War.* Television, Frequency Modulation, Electronic Instruments and Controls will offer new opportunities in the future. (5) *Extra Pay in Army, Navy, Too!* Radio Training offers men likely to enter military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, many opportunities to win extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty and earn up to 6 times a private's base pay.



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Part time Radio Technicians have more opportunities now than ever before. In fact, many men I train prefer to hold their regular jobs, and make extra money fixing Radio sets in their spare time. I give you special training and show you how to start fixing Radios early. You also get my 6 *Big Kits of Radio Parts* and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments which give you valuable, practical experience. My fifty-fifty method—half working with real Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

Find Out How I Train You for Good Pay in Radio — Mail Coupon NOW!

MAIL THE COUPON BELOW! I'll send my big 64-page book FREE. It tells about my Course; the types of jobs in the different branches of Radio today; Radio's opportunities for the future; shows letters from more than 100 men I trained so you can see what civilian and service men are doing, earning. You owe it to yourself to get these facts NOW. **MAIL THE COUPON** in an envelope or pasted on a penny postcard.

J. E. SMITH, President
Dept. 2D09, National Radio Institute
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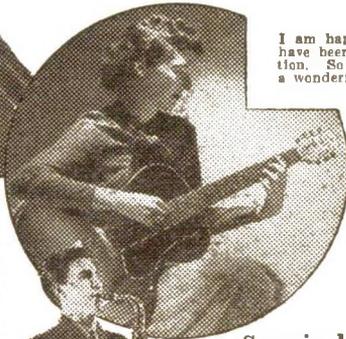


Learned Quickly at Home

I didn't dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. Now, when I play for people they hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time.
*H. O. S., Calif.

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Plays on Radio

I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio station. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course.

*W. H. S., Alabama.



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Enclosed is my last examination sheet for my course in Tenor Banjo. This completes my course. I have taken lessons before under other teachers, but my instructions with you were by far the best.
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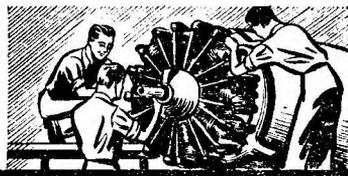
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"What can I do—here at home?"

"What can I do—while Americans are fighting and dying in the far reaches of the Pacific for freedom and for me?"

"What can I do?"

"I've looked in my shaving mirror for an answer—and found none.

"I've seen only the perplexed face of a middle-aged man—a man too old to bear arms.

"I've glanced at my hands, too,

a thousand times, only to learn a brutal truth.

"They are soft and white—strangers to the production line where only skilled hands are wanted now."

"What can I do?"

"Only last night I found the answer as my eyes fell on my wife's knitting bag and my ears caught the click of her knitting needles.

"I could give to the Red Cross. I could answer its urgent call for funds, now so sorely needed.

"I could give to the limit of my means to aid and comfort those who are giving so much more.

"Yes—I could do something. Not much—but something.

"And I have—today."

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Results Come Quickly

Get the Facts

(No Cost) All you have to do to find out about this type of training, to get the details and the outline of study, with histories of the successes of other men, is to write us or send the coupon. There is no cost and no obligation of any kind. Let this great school, one of the pioneers in the home study field, explain the methods which can do so much for you. Get this information now so that you can make up your mind quickly to get started on the road to the fulfillment of a real ambition, and so that you may be of the greatest possible help in this present emergency.

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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

A DEPARTMENT FOR READERS

NEXT issue of **POPULAR DETECTIVE** brings you a wow of a long yarn featuring a benevolently sinister character, Dr. Zeng, the terror of the West Coast underworld. And is it a timely story—about a blood plasma mystery! The blood plasma was destined for part of the all-out aid to Britain, material to be used for the valiant British tommies in hospitals and on battle fronts.

Dr. Zeng, that uncanny Oriental who is really a white American, gets into the case when he seeks to clear a Chinese interne from a serious charge—murder! And before he knows it, the wily doctor is up to his neck in deadly intrigue and blood.

But why should we spoil the story for you? Get your copy of next issue and read this amazing, fast-action yarn of spies and sabotage and crime in San Francisco for yourself. Read of just one of the many ways we are supporting our allies in this world-wide struggle for right and freedom.

With the Yellow Peril rearing its ugly, hissing head out there in the Pacific, you'll enjoy reading how the Chinese American, Dr. Zeng, cleans things up in San Francisco!

A Transcontinental Jump

When you've digested this hunk of literary meat brace yourself for a lightning trip across three thousand miles of the greatest country on earth and dip your nose into **EARFUL OF MURDER**.

This zestful novelet by Laurence Donovan heralds the return of little Joe Bunt, the New York Greenwich Village barber.

This time Joe gets tangled in a

symphony of death and trouble. It all begins when Professor Tramovich enters Joe's shop for a haircut, and Joe discovers that somebody has already tried to put the Delilah coiffure to the professor—even to the ears! From this point things get wilder and tougher, and Joe has to read his book on detective psychology from cover to cover before he can find the right answer to this one.

You readers take it up from here; you'll get a mental shampoo free of charge.

Detective At Work

Jumping from one type of detective to another, next issue also brings you a hilarious yarn about Willie Klump, the fumbling, grumbling private trouble-shooter for the New York Police Department. This time Willie runs up against **THE KNIFE THROWER**, and he has a lively time of it to keep from getting his own gizzard skewered.

What with his feud with Satchel-foot Kelly and his troubles with Gertie Mudgett, Detective Klump chases madly from one distraction to another until he brilliantly stumbles through another case for the archives. **THE KNIFE THROWER**, by Joe Archibald, is one of the best Klump yarns to date.

And there'll be other short stories calculated to make you gulp and bat your eyes a couple of times. You're going to like our next issue even more than this one!

Ways to Help

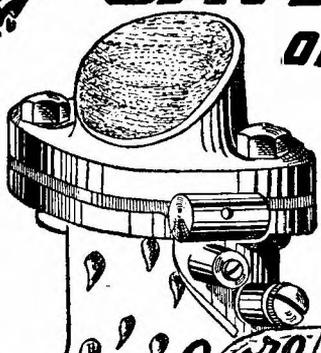
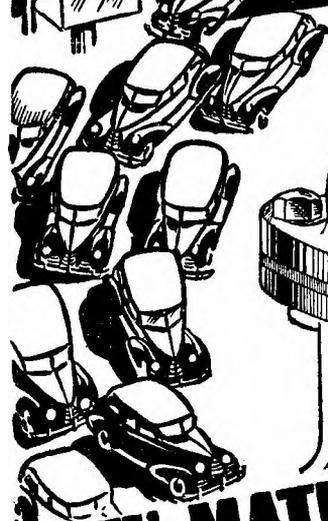
Many patriotic, loyal readers have asked us what they can do to help make things more pleasant for the

(Continued on page 12)



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A MYSTERIOUS DISCOVERY SAVES UP TO 30% ON GASOLINE! OR COSTS NOTHING TO TRY



Scores Again

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 EXPERIMENTAL AUTHORITY CHICAGO
 (Mail to owner)

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This certifies that I have carefully read 300 original letters received from Vacu-matic users testifying to gas savings up to 30%, many reporting added power, smoother running, and quicker pick-up. These letters are just a small part of the larger file of enthusiastic user letters that I saw at the company offices.



Signed *Maxwell J. Blau*
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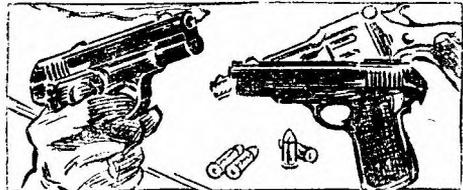
(Continued from page 10)

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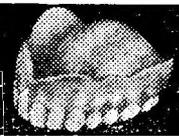
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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Continued from page 12)

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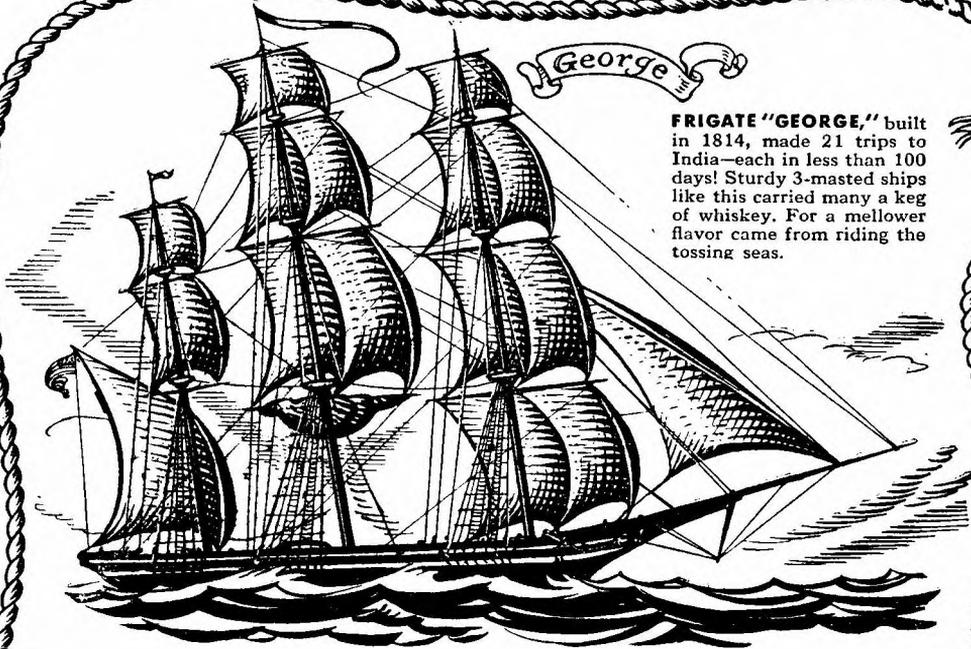
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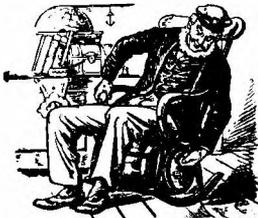
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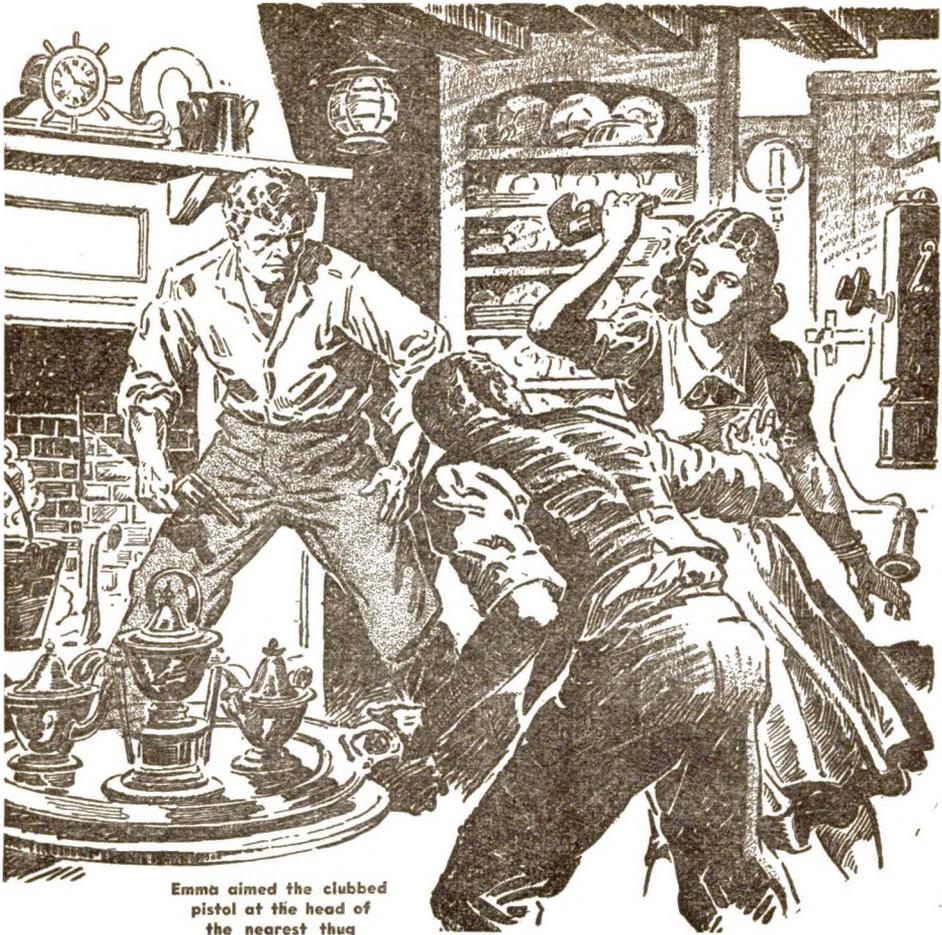
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Emma aimed the clubbed pistol at the head of the nearest thug

GAME of DEATH

By BENTON BRADEN

Author of "The Missing Bride," "Double Steal," etc.

The Farmhouse Was Expensively Furnished—With Bank Loot—But Some Richly Baited Lanes Lead Only to the Death House!

IT DIDN'T look like the parlor of an ordinary farmhouse. The furniture was surprisingly expensive. The rugs on the hardwood floor had a deep nap and the chairs in which the old man and the girl sat were heavily upholstered.

The girl in the house dress was

neat and prim. But the old man looked exactly like what he was—a dirt farmer. His face was red and leathery, beaten by wind and sun. His overalls and big rough shoes were in violent discord with the furnishings of the room.

When the knocks came at the door

the girl looked up from her knitting and the old man got to his feet. "Neighbors droppin' in, I guess," he said as he moved toward the door, and opened it. He seemed perplexed at sight of the two men who stood there. They weren't neighbors but they acted like neighbors, coming inside without invitation.

"Good evenin'," the farmer said. "Somethin' I can do for you?"

"Yeah. There's somethin'. Your name is Tucker, ain't it? Sam Tucker?" The man who spoke was short, stocky, dark-faced except for a curious pallor on his cheeks. That same pallor showed in the face of his companion who was slim and sharp-featured. Both men were dressed in new but cheap clothes.

"Tucker's my name," the farmer confirmed. "I don't recollect that I've seen you before."

"You haven't," the short man said. "But we've got some business to talk over with you. So you might as well sit down and make yourself comfortable. It may take a little time."

"All right," Tucker said agreeably. He glanced at the clock on the fireplace mantel as he backed to his chair. "I guess these men want to talk business with me, Emma," he said to the girl. "It's gettin' a little late so maybe you'd better go on to bed."

"Nix!" It was the thin man who uttered the word. "She ain't goin' no place. She's going to stick right there in that chair. This business is very important and we might want to talk to her too. Your daughter, is she?"

"My niece," Tucker corrected. "She lives here with me and keeps house for me."

"And a mighty nice house it is," the stocky man said as he looked about the room. "I been in a few farmhouses but I don't remember seeing any furnished like this. This stuff cost some dough. It's new, too, isn't it?"

"I bought it last spring."

"It's a new house, too, ain't it? A nice two-story house with big rooms. And you got a big barn out there that's new too. You must be doin' pretty well. Most of the farmers claim they can't even make day wages."

"That's right," Tucker admitted. "Farmin' just makes a livin' now."

"Then where did you get all the dough to put in this place, Tucker?"

"I inherited it," Tucker replied slowly. "From a relative that died in Texas. He had made a lot of money in oil."

The stocky man grinned wisely as he turned to his pal. "Did you get that, Mike? He inherited the dough—from a relative."

"I got it, Rocky!" the thin man said in clipped words. "You're lyin', Tucker. You never built this layout with any dough you got from a relative. You built this house and bought this furniture—with our dough!"

SAM TUCKER stared at them with his mouth open for a moment and rubbed his big hands together nervously. "I—I don't know what you mean," he stammered.

"You know damn well what we mean," Mike lashed at him. "There's a big oak tree on the creek about two hundred yards north of your barn. Four years ago there was a metal box buried between a couple of the roots of that tree. That box ain't there now."

"And the fifteen grand that was in that box is gone too," Rocky added viciously.

"—I don't know nothing about that," Tucker faltered.

"You're lyin', Tucker! You stumbled on to that cache—while we were doing a little time in a certain stir. You dug the box up, got our money. That's where you got the dough to buy this fancy junk," he waved his hand at the room, "and to build this big house and barn."

Sam Tucker's face had paled a little. He gulped but said nothing.

"Now we'll get down to tacks!" Mike snapped. "You gonna admit you dug up that box—or are we gonna have to beat you up till you tell the truth?"

Sam Tucker sat there, looking at them, twisting his hands nervously. He shifted his eyes toward the door as though with the forlorn hope that help might come from there. Mike whipped a gun from his pocket and took a step forward. He raised the gun and bared his teeth.

"I didn't dig that box up!" Tucker suddenly burst out. "I didn't have to. The creek flooded and washed the dirt out from those roots. The box was exposed. I couldn't help but see it. I picked it up and brought it up to the house."

"And you opened it?"

"Yes. I—I opened it. I didn't have no idea what it was. I thought it might have been washed down the creek and lodged in those roots. So I opened it—and saw—all that money."

"Our money," Mike said bitterly to Rocky. "And this hick invests it, of all places, in his farm. That makes it easy. You carry the house and I'll carry the barn. We can hock it at Ziggy's."

"But I didn't know whose money it was," Tucker explained jerkily. "I could see it had been buried for some time. The box was soldered tight but the water had hit it and it was a mass of rust. If I hadn't found it the money would have been ruined. I got the box in the basement. You can look at it yourselves and see that it wouldn't have lasted this long."

"What did you do with the dough when you first found it?" Rocky asked.

"I didn't know what to do with it at first. I just hid it in the barn and waited. I inquired around a little but there didn't seem to be any money

missing in this part of the country."

"It didn't come from this part of the country," Mike said thinly. "You didn't ask any cops about it, did you?"

"No," Tucker said, rolling his eyes a little. "I didn't make no direct inquiries of anybody. I just—just sat tight. I kept the money a year—just waitin' to see if anything would happen—if anyone would ask about it. Nobody ever did. So I figured it was free money, that the parties that had owned it would never come back. I began to spend it. Then I decided to build a nice place for Emma here, a place where we could live in comfort and she could have when I was gone."

"You spent all that dough?" Rocky asked in a tone that was almost a moan.

"No. I got eight hundred dollars left in cash in the bank."

"Eight hundred," Mike groaned. "He's only short fourteen grand. He's sunk fourteen thousand, two hundred of it, in this damn farm. What we gonna do about it, Rocky?"

ROCKY'S face was stormy. "You mean what is he gonna do about it, Mike," he said grimly. "You blew our dough, old man. You better start thinkin' fast. What you gonna do about it?"

Sam Tucker rubbed his chin. "Well, I got eight hundred in cash in—"

"You said that before!" Mike cut in nastily. "You got a crust if you think we'd call it all square for that."

"I got this farm clear," Tucker added. "Not a scrap against it."

"We ain't farmers. What good does that do us?"

"I can borrow on it. I don't know just how much, but I know I could get somethin' on it. My credit's always been good. The bank at Center City, that's the county seat, would make me a loan on it."

The eyes of the two men brightened. "How much?" Mike demanded.

"How much dough could you get on it quick—tomorrow?"

"Six-seven thousand sure—maybe more. I couldn't tell till I put it up to Mr. Thurston at the bank. But whatever he'd let me have I could get in an hour after the bank opens. I'd just have to sign a note and mortgage and he'd give me the money. He knows I've always been a little queer about making deals in cash."

"We can believe that," Rocky said sarcastically. "The only objection we got to the system is that you were making deals with our cash."

"But I bet you wouldn't have liked it a bit better," Tucker said pointedly, "if I had taken that money in to the county seat and turned it over to the sheriff."

The two men grimaced at that. "You got us there, old man," Mike admitted. "I guess we ain't got too much kick comin'—if you play ball with us from here on out. So we'll make you a proposition. You go into that bank in the morning and borrow enough so you can hand us seventy-five hundred dollars in cash and we'll call it all square. You can do that, can't you?"

"I think so," Tucker answered after a moment's deliberation. "Me and Emma will go in to town the first thing in the morning. It's only twelve miles."

"Fine," Mike grinned wisely. "Except that Emma will stay right here with us. She'll be our security that you're dealing on the level. Get that straight right now, Tucker. We keep Emma right here while you're gone. We play for keeps. If you try to pull a fast one on us it'll be just too bad for your niece. You'd better both understand that right now."

The two men and Sam Tucker turned and looked at the girl who had sat quietly in her chair during the conversation. She returned their stares with hardly any expression on her face.

"You see how it is, Emma?" Tucker said awkwardly. "I told you there was a chance that someone might show up some day to claim that money. I hope you won't—"

"I understand how it is," she said in a dull voice. "I'll stay here with them while you go to town. It shouldn't take you over two hours."

"That's right, Emma," Tucker said. "I'll leave about eight-thirty. Bank opens at nine. I ought to have it all fixed up in an hour or so. Now you might as well go on to bed."

"Nix!" Rocky vetoed. "It'll be a lot easier if we all stay right here to-night. You've got nice comfortable chairs here and you can sleep well enough in them. That'll make it easy for Mike and me to keep an eye on you both and we can take turns napping. We just want to play it safe, that's all."

Tucker shrugged and settled in his chair. Emma went ahead with her knitting after a minute. Rocky took the chair that was nearest the front door. Mike went to the other side of the room and took a chair that sat in front of the rural phone that was attached to the wall.

THE night dragged slowly along. Sam Tucker seemed to sleep soundly in his comfortable chair. Once Emma asked permission to go to the kitchen to get a drink of water. Rocky arose and went with her while Mike stayed in the room to keep an eye on Tucker.

When day broke they all trooped into the kitchen and Emma got breakfast. Mike's keen eyes missed nothing, watched every move that she made as she fried bacon and made the coffee. Later they all ate together at the kitchen table.

At exactly eight-thirty, after a few minutes discussion of the details, Sam Tucker left the house and went out to his garage in the back. He backed the small sedan out, turned it around,

and drove out on to the main highway, turned toward Center City. Rocky watched until he was out of sight.

Then he sat down and both men watched as Emma tidied up the kitchen. Rocky's eye glinted as she reached up and opened the door of a high cupboard. He pointed.

"Pipe the bottle, Mike," he said. "How about us takin' a little snort while we're waiting?"

"Uncle Sam keeps that on hand for medicinal purposes," Emma said a bit stiffly.

"Well, I ain't feelin' so good myself," Rocky said. "Hand it down."

"Leave it there!" Mike ordered flatly. "You can do your drinkin' when we get that dough and are clear away from here. You'd drink half that quart and get us in trouble. So forget it."

ROCKY grunted and looked disappointed. Emma closed the cupboard door.

"I'm through in here," she told them.

"Okay," Mike said. "We'll go back into the parlor and sit in some of them soft chairs. Take it easy while we're waitin'."

Mike went into the living room first and took the same chair by the phone. Emma and Rocky followed him in. Emma started knitting again. Rocky walked up and down the room, showing signs of nervousness.

At ten o'clock he glanced at the clock on the mantel for the fiftieth time. "He might be gettin' back any minute now," he muttered. "The bank opened at nine and if he didn't have no trouble gettin' the loan he might—"

It was the phone bell that interrupted him. Rocky whirled and frowned.

"That's Mrs. Rumplin," Emma explained. "A neighbor down the road. She always calls about this time."

"Let it ride," Mike said. "We ain't

talkin' to no neighbors this mornin'."

Five minutes passed and the phone shrilled again. "It's Mrs. Rumplin again," Emma said. "Maybe I'd better answer it. If I don't she'll come up here to see what's the matter."

"We ain't answerin' no phones," Mike said suspiciously. "If she comes up here you can tell her you got people here on business and slam the door in her face."

"It might be Tucker callin'," Rocky suggested anxiously.

"He's got nothin' to call about," Mike said decisively. "Either he brings us that dough or he don't. Anyway we ain't answerin' no phones. Tucker ought to be back any minute now."

Emma raised her knitting from her lap and dropped it to the floor at the right side of the chair. Her face was suddenly hard, stony.

"Tucker isn't coming back," she said in a clear voice.

Mike leaped to his feet. What was that?" he demanded.

"Tucker isn't coming back," she repeated.

"How do you know?"

"The phone bell was the signal to me," she said steadily. "The signal that this house is surrounded by a large posse. Tucker didn't build this house with the money he found in that box. He built it with money he got from his royalties on the oil wells on an eighty he owns down the road. He took that money to the cops the minute he found it."

"So it's a cross, huh?" Mike said. "You and Tucker were set here waitin' for us to show. I guess you know what this means for you, don't you?"

"I know what it means for you," she retorted. "You got that money when you robbed the First National Bank of Ridgeville. The cashier was shot down in that robbery. He died. You're both murderers."

"Murderers, are we?" Mike bared

his teeth and his eyes were green and vicious. "And there's a posse outside! A lot of good that's goin' to do you. You don't think we're going to let you get away with this, do you?"

SHE rose to her feet and leveled clear blue eyes on Mike. "It doesn't make any difference what happens to me," she said evenly, fearlessly. "I don't care what happens to me. If you kill me—you'll never leave this house alive. That would even the score—make it two for two."

"Two for two?" Mike repeated a little stupidly.

"Yes. Two for two. The cashier who was killed was my Father. That's why I've been sitting here night after night with Sam Tucker—waiting for you to appear and claim that money. I've only one purpose in my mind. To see that you both die for the murder of my Father."

Her words were spoken coldly, yet there was a bitter intensity in them that made the two killers take a step backward. Their eyes shifted to the window. The shade was halfway down. Mike stepped over, hugged the wall, reached out with his left hand and raised the shade a few inches.

Almost instantly the shade jerked and a rifle roared from the vicinity of the barn. Both men jumped a little and the pallor on their faces deepened as they stepped back.

"You see," Emma said. "There are at least fifty men around this house. You can't show a hand without being shot at. You haven't got a chance."

"The hell we ain't!" Rocky said hoarsely. "We know how to handle this. We'll walk right out of here with you in front of us as a shield. They won't dare shoot then."

"They will shoot!" she declared positively. "They promised me that. They promised me they wouldn't let you get away no matter what happened. They'll avoid hitting me if they can—but they'll start shooting the minute

we go out through a door. No matter what happens to me—you'll die."

"I don't believe it," Mike said but there was no assurance in his tone. "I don't believe you'd put yourself on the spot—just to get us."

"I had hoped that it wouldn't go this far," she admitted with a wry smile. "But my trick didn't work. That bottle of whiskey you saw in the cupboard was doped. I thought sure you'd want to drink—and pass out before the posse got here. But you didn't fall for it. So—" She shrugged as though it didn't matter much now.

"So now you're tryin' to make us believe that posse will fill you full of holes before they'll let us get away?"

"You want proof that they will?" she asked coolly. "Well, come on!" She took a step toward the door. "We'll start. I'll walk in front. We'll see what happens."

She took two more steps toward the door. Mike whipped a gun into his hand.

"Wait!" he ordered fearfully. "We'll give the orders when to go and how to go. You sit down in that chair till we figure this out."

She stood there for five seconds, then moved back to her chair and sat down. "Maybe you'd prefer the safest way," she said contemptuously. "Maybe you'd prefer that I call one of the sheriff's men down at Mrs. Rumplin's and arrange for you to walk out with your hands up. You might live a year longer that way. But you wouldn't like the long wait in the death house while your—"

"Shut up!" Mike cut in viciously. "We're running this show and we don't need no advice from no dame about what to do. I know what'll make that sheriff sweat. I'll make him come to terms. We can sit right here all day long. Then walk out of here at night so they won't be able to tell who they're shootin' at for sure. I'll tell him we'll torture you all day long—if he don't come right to terms

right now and let us walk out and give us a start. I'll put the fear in him." He moved toward the phone. "How do you call that Rumplin place?"

"Two longs and a short," Emma answered. "But you'll find that the sheriff won't deal with you unless I agree. He promised me that."

"He may change his mind when he hears what we're plannin' for you!" Mike said grimly. "I'll put the fear in him!"

HE REACHED the phone, put his right hand up at the side of the long box, rang two longs and a short. There was an immediate answer.

"I want the sheriff," Mike rasped. "You'd better get him on the wire—what's that?" He listened for a moment, then tried to talk again but the instrument was dead. He cursed and hung up.

"What's the matter, Mike?" Rocky said anxiously.

"That guy said the sheriff wouldn't talk to anyone but Emma," Mike said sourly. "He said the sheriff wouldn't talk unless Emma herself told him she was alive and hadn't been harmed. All right, Emma. You'll talk to that sheriff, tell him you're okay, and repeat what I say. Come on."

Emma hesitated a moment, then got to her feet and walked to the phone.

"Ring that two longs and a short," Mike commanded.

Emma rang, then lifted the receiver from the hook with her left hand and put it to her ear. "This is Emma," she said a second later. "Yes—I'm quite all right. . . . Yes You might as well talk to this man, Sheriff. . . . He's right here beside me and is going to make me repeat what he says. . . ."

Mike was standing close to Emma. He had his gun in his left hand and was leaning his head close to the receiver, trying to hear what the sheriff was saying. He heard the sheriff say,

"All right, Emma. I'll talk to him if you say so."

"Gimme that receiver!" Mike said. He shifted his gun from his left to his right hand and reached his left hand up for the receiver, motioning for Emma to get out of the way.

But Emma didn't get out of the way. Her right hand flashed from beneath the telephone box and came up in a vicious swing at Mike's jaw. Mike didn't even see that hand coming. The gun in Emma's hand met Mike's jaw with a sickening crunch. The forefinger of his right hand closed convulsively on the trigger of his gun and it went off as he went backward. The bullet thudded into the wall and the back of Mike's head slammed against the floor.

Rocky was frozen with surprise for a second. Then he reached wildly beneath his left lapel for a gun. Emma aimed quickly, fired. She fired again as Rocky staggered backward. His gun slipped from his hand as he struck the wall and skidded to the floor. Emma moved swiftly until she had kicked those two guns into a far corner of the room. With due caution she removed two more guns from their holsters and tossed them after the others. Rocky, his shoulder shattered, rolled over on his back and groaned. Mike made funny noises as he sat up and held his jaw.

"I had a hard time getting to that phone," Emma told them. "The gun was taped against the bottom of the box, out of sight. I thought sure I'd have a chance to get to it last night. But Mike sat right in front of the box. He watched every move that I made. I had a gun in the kitchen, too, but I couldn't get a chance to grab it. Then that call that came from Rumplin's, the signal that the posse was set. I thought sure you'd let me talk rather than have a gossipy woman come up here. But you crossed me on that. So I had to talk fast and bluff hard."

"You—you handled that gat—like a cop," Rocky gasped.

"Quite naturally, Rocky. I am a cop, a policewoman. I sprang that yarn about being the cashier's daughter to make my bluff sound good. You were ready to believe that the daughter of a murdered man might take desperate chances for revenge. When I dared you to walk out with me you were convinced. If you had guessed that I was a cop you wouldn't have fooled around a minute with me."

The two men on the floor glared at her, hate in their eyes.

"When Tucker brought that dough in to the cops," she went on, "it wasn't hard to figure that it came from the First National Bank of Ridgeville job.

We thought it was you two men who had done the job. But you were in stir on another charge. You got out five days ago, waited to be sure you weren't being watched before you came on up to get your buried loot. I came here immediately to wait for you.

"We could have set a trap where the stuff was buried, of course, but we didn't know when you'd arrive. So we worked it this way, permitting you to trap yourselves. And you certainly did do just that. This time when you go back it'll be to the death house."

Men were calling loudly to Emma from outside now. She pulled her lower lip back hard against her teeth and whistled shrilly three times.

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Willie made a flying tackle and got the bogus beauty's evening gown

STEAL TRAP

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Author of "Alibi Bye," "No Place Like Homicide," etc.

With a Pekinese Pup Pinch-Hitting as a Police Dog, Willie Klump Has a Chance to Grab a Lot of Lettuce—and an Absconder!

WILLIE KLUMP, president of the Hawkeye Detective Agency, Inc., was very discouraged and told his girl, Gertie Mudgett so over a bowl of chili. For seventeen days now, Willie had been as idle as a grasshopper with gout,

and consequently was getting just about as much scratch.

"It is the war that is putting people like me out of business," Willie complained. "I guess most crooks find that defense factories pay more than crime, don't you think, Gertie?"

"Satchelfoot Kelly seems to do all right," Miss Mudgett sniffed. "He caught them two counterfeiterers from Trenton last week and arrested a suspect in the Paramount Peppermint payroll robbery."

"He has the city behind him," Willie said. "I think I will leave it behind me. There is small towns like Oshkosh that I bet has not even one detective. I should do very good there."

"Lissen, Willie," Gertie said. Everybody's lettuce looks greener than what you get. I read about a man who left his home in North Dakota to go lookin' for gold in Alaska. While he was lookin' the wolves got him and the day his wife got the news she was diggin' holes to plant petunias in her backyard and she struck a mother lode. That is a big vein of gold. So you see how silly it is for you to go any other place, Willie."

"Did you see that in the movies?"

"I did not," Gertie said. "It was in a magazine. Now you stop talking like that, Willie."

Willie let his chili get cold and ran his big bovine eyes over the last edition of a big town paper. A headline needled him. It said:

**PHILLY PHIL FUNANGO CONFESSES
TO PAYROLL HOLD-UP**

Detective Aloysius Kelly Praised
by Police Commissioner For Solving Case.

Willie turned the page hurriedly and all the chili soured inside of him. If there was anything in the world Willie disliked more than Satchelfoot Kelly, he had not met up with it yet. On page three there was an interesting item of news. Willie passed it over for Gertie to read:

Enoch J. Brash, the police of Chicago believe, will try to leave the country. Brash, who absconded with \$450,000 dollars in cash and negotiable securities from the Jackson Park Trust Company, where he was cashier, might have disguised himself, the authorities believe. Police from coast to coast have been given his description and all airports, steam-

ship ticket offices and railroad terminals have been ordered to watch for Brash.

Brash was considered a trusted employee by the South Side Bank. His wife claims she had not seen Brash since the morning of the day he committed his crime. Reporters who spoke with her found her prostrate.

"That is not hay," Gertie said. "But so what? That is too big for you, Willie. Anyway, that guy is on his way to China right now."

"There is a war there," Willie scoffed.

"A guy with four hundred an' fifty grand could stop a war as long as it suited him," Gertie said. "Maybe his wife is in on it. They keep watch on her an' some day they'll tag Enoch. I should have been a detective. Well, I must run to a beauty parlor."

"So long."

Willie sighed. He forgot about Brash and all the citizen's ill-gotten gains. When you are a pitcher in a minor league, you don't plan on how to strike out DiMaggio.

WILLIE read about a terrible run on the silk hosiery counter at a big department store. The story also said that now raw silk would not be coming in from Japan any more since the country was at war with Japan. There were characters in the U. S. who might try working their own silk worms.

"That is silly," Willie told himself. "How can you make them work?"

He left the chili chateau and ambled over to his office where he found a circular letter reminding detectives that they should never be without clients. Willie could have a list of citizens who were in need of a sleuth for twelve fish. There were cobwebs forming on Willie's telephone.

Willie gazed at the little safe in the corner. Not so long ago he had solved a case of murder and he had realized fifteen hundred smackeroos as a result of his ingenuity. He had considered the scratch safe enough over night in the steel can. The next

morning he had found it open and his fifteen hundred had been lifted.

Willie had never been more indignant, and had immediately thought of calling the police. But that would have been silly. Willie Klump telling Kelly and the boys to help him as he had been robbed. A detective had some pride. He told Gertie he had the fifteen hundred invested in Morgan's firm.

Willie took some old bread out of a drawer of his desk. He also found an egg there and set about poaching same to lay on the bread that would be toasted. There was a smidge of coffee in a can in the closet. The chili had not appeased his appetite as he did not like it anyway.

Someone knocked on Willie's door.

"I'll pay you Monday," Willie shouted. "I am only two weeks behind. Everybody is trusting people nowadays as look at the lending and leasing goin' on. I—"

The door opened. A female entered and she was in mourning from the top of her hat to the soles of her shoes.

"Uh—er—how do you do? "Willie gulped. "Have a chair."

The visitor lifted a veil. Willie choked on a piece of toast and clutched at his throat. The woman had lines on her face that Father Time had had nothing to do with. There were dark circles under her eyes and Willie could see that they were made by lamp black. Some of the doll's hair hung down from under her hat and it looked like stuffing out of an old chair.

"Scare you, don't I?" The mysterious woman smiled. "I'm not so bad without the make-up, Mr. Klump. Tell me, you are a detective? Or maybe you take care of the office while Mr. Klump is out. You look no more like one than a banana looks like a pineapple."

"That is the idea," Willie said. "Now what can I do for you?"

"You must keep everything secret. Why didn't I go to the New York Police Headquarters? Because I will

have no publicity about any of it."

"About what?"

"A certain blonde, Mr. Klump. You are going to be the first person to know about her. If you find her, you will get five thousand dollars."

"What's her name, huh?"

Willie wondered if he should call for help. The phone was at his elbow. Maybe he should contact Bellevue first.

"Yvonne Delvray. She was an entertainer in a hotel cocktail lounge here. At the Ritz-Belvedere. Find her, and there will be Enoch."

"Enoch?" Willie asked. At first the name did not sink into Willie's noggin, then it went through his skull like a Stuka and rocked him on his number eleven brogans. "Who are you?" he asked in a voice as thick as taffy.

"I am Mrs. Enoch Brash."

WILLIE hurried to the cooler and got a drink and he downed it before his dizzy spell could get worse. He groped his way to his desk and hung on.

"But—but—"

"Nobody followed me, if that is what you mean," Mrs. Brash said. "I sneaked out of that house in Chicago dressed like my housekeeper who just lost her husband. For keeps, I mean. I made up like her and put on her veil and weeping ensemble. So like I said, I want a private detective, Mr. Klump. I want to grab Enoch dead to rights with that blonde. He used to get excuses to go to New York and I wondered why he went so much. I followed him one time. He was with this Delvray snip."

"But even the best detectives in the country cannot find him," Willie groaned.

That was his luck, getting an offer of five grand to do something harder than threading a needle with a ship's hawser. He would tell the doll to look elsewhere for a patsy.

"Of course I realize that there are

one hundred and thirty million people in the country and seven million of them are in and around New York," Mrs. Brash said. "I would not expect you to find Enoch and Yvonne without something to go on."

"You got a clue?" Willie asked.

"At the hotel—the Ritz-Belvedere," said Mrs. Brash. "Name of Sandra." "Another dame?" Willie gulped.

"She's my Pekinese, Mr. Klump. She will know Enoch anywhere. Every time she saw him, she took a nip out of his leg. She will know that shin-bone in seven million, I can assure you. We will go to all the hotels, Mr. Klump. I will act like your mother all the time. Like the papers said, Enoch will have his mustache shaved off maybe, and will be wearing a gray toupee. Anyway he will be with a blonde. Nobody knows that but me and you, Mr. Klump."

"**W**HEN do we start?" Willie asked, still wondering if he should not try and get Bellevue.

"The quicker the better," Mrs. Brash said. "You are hired, Mr. Klump. In two hours you will meet me at the Ritz-Belvedere. For heaven's sake, though, not in those awful clothes. I will leave you a retainer fee and please get yourself a white coat and some tuxedo trousers and ask the clerk what goes with them, won't you, as you wouldn't know. At ten o'clock sharp in the Ritz-Belvedere."

"Yes, Mrs. Brash," Willie said sickly, staring at the bunch of scratch that his client tossed to his desk.

"The Ritz-Belvedere at ten, Willie mumbled as she went out. "In Bellevue at eleven. This would not happen to me and I know it. Mrs. Enoch Brash is still in Chicago and I know it. I will make out she is kiddin' me and when I see a cop, I will turn her over. Oh, I have a half hour to get to a store."

Willie ran into Gertie Mudgett on his way out of Stearn's.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you, Willie," Gertie said as she eyed the bundles in the private detective's arms. "No wonder the place looked bare today, what with all them things you got there. Now, Willie, you take this little package here as I bought it for your nerves. You have been so depressed lately and I was worried over you. Look at the new silk stockings I have on, Willie."

"Snazzy," Willie admitted and thanked Gert for the nerve soother.

"Ha," Gertie said. "They ain't stockings. I had my legs sprayed in a beauty salon. Don't they look natural?"

"I have to hurry," Willie said. "What they won't think of next, hah?"

Willie Klump arrived at the Ritz-Belvedere on time and he was sitting in a big easy chair in the lobby waiting for his client when Satchelfoot Kelly spotted him.

"Why, at first I did not know you, Willie," Kelly gulped. "You look as sweet as an éclair. Why—"

"You still do not know me," Willie sniffed. "I never saw you before in my life. Do not try any skin games on me, my smooth friend. Perhaps you better go or I will call a house detective. It is getting so riff-raff are allowed everywhere. Be off with you."

"Well, I am sorry," Satchelfoot mumbled, scratching his noggin. "I was so sure, but Klump never would mix in café society. Mistakes happen."

"You was the worst," Willie said, then shut up lest his repartee become too familiar.

Detective Kelly moved toward the door and once he looked back and kept shaking his noodle. Satchelfoot hovered outside for awhile.

Fifteen minutes later, Mrs. Brash arrived in her widow's weeds and she threw her arms around Willie Klump and hugged him. Willie got a whiff of perfume that did not belong on a sob sister, and a Pekinese under Mrs. Brash's right arm began to nibble at

Willie's ear. The doll talked fast in the clutch.

"Now, Mr. Klump, if you are to be my son for awhile, you must call yourself Harold Lusk as I am registered here as Mrs. Letitia Lusk," Mrs. Brash said. "You look just too distinguished in your evening clothes, dear boy. Now we will just sit here and wait for Sandra to spot that snake in the grass. Hotel bars do not close until about four in the morning, and that should give us time to cover three hotels this evening. Isn't she the cutest thing?"

"Yeah," Willie said. "My ear must look an awful mess though."

Mrs. Brash and Willie sat and watched the human current sweep through the lobby of the Ritz-Belvedere. If there was a fish in the stream, Sandra would retrieve it. Willie tried to think up an excuse to get to a telephone so he could call the uptown booby hatch. He picked up a newspaper and tried to act nonchalant, for his new black shoes were not of the last his feet had been accustomed to. In ten minutes his wing collar would be severing his jugular.

SUDDENLY the pooch gave a pleased yapping cry and leaped off of Mrs. Brash's lap. It set sail for the entrance to the cocktail lounge and Mrs. Brash clutched at Willie's arm.

"She has found him!" she called out. "Come on, Mr.—er—Harold. Oh, here is where I get myself a blond scalp. And I will put Enoch in the hands of the law."

There was a commotion near the hat-checking concession and a big, broad-shouldered customer was trying to shake of the Pekinese that was climbing his leg. Sandra clipped the painted nail of a female citizen that tried to pluck her loose and then the woman screeched and brought a house detective and a bouncer to the scene. Willie was all set to run for the street but he tripped over a foot and nearly

got trampled to death at the bottle-neck in front of the giggle-water grotto.

"Now Sandra, you stop," Mrs. Brash called out. "Why, Albert! It is you, here in New York."

"There is a mistake here," the big character said, as he rubbed his leg. "I—why, I never saw this women in my life. This is an outrage and I demand you take that flea factory out of here."

"But Albert, she called you by name," a tall angular-faced woman said to Albert. "Don't tell me you deserted this poor woman? You are unfaithful, you—you bigamist!"

"Oh!" Mrs. Brash gulped. "Come on, Mr. Klump, I mean, come on, Harold. We—"

"What's the idea, hah?" the house detective yelped at Willie. "You tell your ma to keep holt of that pooch or I'll take it out and toss it over the dock. You want us to have law suits? Maybe you want we should lose customers like Mr. Buzzell here? You got a leash?"

"Huh?" Willie said in a scared voice. "No, we are only here over night or possibly a day or two so do not need to sign one. Er—come on, Ma. Just let me get you over to a chair and—"

He saw Mrs. Buzzell still cross-examining Albert and by the looks of things, she was not going to let up on him for days. Willie wondered what went on. He asked Mrs. Brash when the Ritz-Belvedere got back to normal.

"Why, Sandra knew Buzzell, as he used to come and take me out in Chicago. He travels for a big wholesale house and I met him in a night-club out there. Seeing as I knew Enoch was a two-timer, I should sit at home and crochet, Mr. Klump?"

"Harold," Willie corrected.

"I hope Sandra does not recognize anybody else she saw in Chicago," Mrs. Brash sighed. "Buzzell knows the dog, Harold, and he knows it be-

longs to me. I must leave town at once."

"Maybe he will think twice before letting on," Willie said, the worry ooze coming out through his pores getting iced up. "You would spill it to his wife. This is all mixed up and I wish I had paper and pencil with me to make some notes. Why, look! There goes Sandra again. Here, doggie! Here doggie! Oh-h-h-h-h!"

WILLIE saw the pooch heading for the elevators and it was using its over-drive. A lift door slammed shut and just missed taking off the nose of the yapping Pekinese. Willie saw the canine turn tail and head for the stairs and it traveled so fast it was only a blur. He also saw the great big house detective bearing down on Mrs. Brash and himself.

"He spotted something, Harold," Mrs. Brash said. "He saw Enoch go into the elevator, I bet."

"Huh?" Willie gulped. "Maybe it was another traveling salesman. Here is—"

"You go after Sandra," Mrs. Brash yelled. "What are you hired for?"

"You tell me," Willie said, and looked up into the face of the burly Ritz-Belvedere sleuth. "Okay, we will go quietly after I capture that mut, Mister. We will even check out."

"Awright, don't just sit there, dopey," the hotel snooper growled.

"Don't you dare talk to my son in that manner," Mrs. Brash said indignantly. "Harold, get Sandra and we will leave this place immediately."

Willie Klump walked up eleven flights of richly carpeted stairs and meandered all over the Ritz-Belvedere corridors. There was no sign of the Pekinese. He finally got back to the lobby and told Mrs. Brash so.

"She has to be in here somewhere," the woman in the sombre scenery yelled. "We must find her, Mr. Klump."

"Harold, I've hunted every place." Willie groaned. "My feet are killin'

me. If she found Enoch, you would hear her all over the hotel. She has got a soprano voice as loud as Lily Pons! Look, maybe we should give up as if more detectives come, they will start seein' through your veil and one of them will recognize me."

"I stay here until I find my precious," Mrs. Brash said, without soft pedal. "I don't care if Enoch and the blonde get to China or some place, as Sandra is worth more than both—"

"Sh-h-h-h-h," Willie said. "I will hunt some more."

"Get that pooch," the detective howled, stabbing a finger as big as a spigot into Willie's white shirt front. "Get it outa here, see? You an' me will go together an' find her. Won't that be fun? And when I find that mobile flea circus, I'll wrap it around your neck, see if I don't!"

"I—er—I'll be back soon, Ma," Willie mumbled, his noggin awry. "It was a great fight, huh? Oh, yeah, together we should find it, shouldn't we?"

"Somebody better," Willie's client said in no uncertain terms. "Or I will sue the Ritz-Belvedere."

"Come on," Willie said.

THE house detective and the private detective scoured all the floors of the hostelry for a sign of the pooch. No soap.

"Maybe it fell into an elevator shaft—I hope," the burly hotel sleuth snapped. "Or jumped out a winder from the twentieth floor, thinkin' it was the first one, hah? Let's—"

"Ee-e-e-e-e-e-ek!"

"What was that?" the house detective asked. "It was a scream down the hall there somewhere's, huh?"

"It wasn't mice," Willie sniffed.

Just as he got his words out, a chambermaid skidded around a corner and her eyes were bulging out as if they were being aggravated by a goiter.

"What's eating you, sister?"

"In the linen closet there," the

boudoir manicurist choked out. "Somethin' is dead."

Willie and the big boy peered into the linen closet, and it was the big boy who reached down and picked up a defunct Pekinese that would not answer to the name of Sandra any more.

"I don't blame somebody," the house detective yelped. "This pooch most likely tried to eat a piece of veal ag'in, Mr. Lusk. Got hold of another calf. Ha-ha. Well, you better break the news to Mother."

"She will sue the hotel," Willie said, and knew he was not guessing. "What did they use on it?"

"Looks like somebody wrung its neck. I s'pose your ma will want the homicide squad to take charge, won't she? Well, let's go."

Willie and the house sleuth went down into the lobby and Willie put his arm around Mrs. Brash and asked her to be brave and not to cry out and expose herself when he gave her the news.

"Somebody murdered Sandra," Willie whispered. "Look out now. Git hold of yourself, Ma. It means either Albert got hung with Sandra, or Enoch is right in this hotel himself."

Mrs. Brash, alias Mrs. Letitia Lusk, made a very disagreeable scene. She wept and railed and threatened, and Willie tried to tell her to spare the horses or her make-up would run down her chin and give her away.

"You will hear from my lawyer," Mrs. Brash told the manager of the Ritz-Belvedere. "I will sue to the hilt. Oh, my poor precious darling! Harold, see that my bags are brought down from my rooms. We will leave this terrible place immediately."

"All right, Ma—just git hold of yourself, Willie forced out. "I will go up with the bellboys and help pack. Just sit there and don't wipe your eyes no more. Here, give me that hanky, Ma. Now I'll be right back."

Willie went upstairs with the key and when he got into Mrs. Brash's rooms, he sat down and tried to figure

how he could get out of the hotel without being seen. The handkerchief he had in his pocket was smeared with lampblack and grease paint.

"I wonder what she really looks like?" Willie asked himself. "She is no Daughter of the Revolution by the looks of that blue negligay there on the chair."

There was writing paper and a pen on the desk. Willie wrote:

It is either Enoch did it or Albert. If Enoch is still here, what? He must have some disguise. Mrs. Brash didn't see the blonde yet, so Enoch is maybe at some other swanky hotel. I wonder if the sleuths in Chi have missed Mrs. Brash? I must work fast if they have.

Willie quickly pocketed his notes when a bell-boy came in. He thought of something else he did not have time to put in writing. He would forget it in the next five minutes.

AN hour later, Willie came down in the lift and it was crowded. Another couple evidently was checking out. They were dark-complexioned citizens. The woman made Willie's eyes roll in their sockets, as she was a Latin with hair as black as a raven's camisole and she had lips like Dolores Del Rio. She wore a black velvet dress and her eyes were two good reasons why soldiers of fortune generally include South America in their itinerary.

The senor with her wore a wide-brimmed panama and his dark skin was ornamented by a black mustache and goatee. He wore a dazzling dornick on a finger of his left hand as big as a Tokay grape.

Willie got a squint at a couple of pieces of luggage. They were battered and covered with labels. Willie deciphered one or two. One said:

HOTEL DON AVACADO, ARGENTINE
Another was

U.S.S. CASABA

Willie wished he could see the Argentine and sip Tommy Collineses under swaying palms with a Carmen

Miranda. He thought of Gertie and found the comparison very drab. Thinking of Gertie made him think of the nerve tonic she had slipped him that afternoon. First chance he got, he would give himself a slug.

The senorita stepped on Willie's foot getting out of the lift. "So sorree, senor," she said in a voice that made Willie think he had been drinking for three straight days. "Eet was so clumsee of me, *si?*"

"It was a pleasure," Willie mumbled.

The senor glared machetes at Willie, and Willie suddenly realized how jealous the Latins could get. He brought up the rear leaving the lift and he watched the foreigners as they headed for the cashier's cage to pay their stint. The senor was walking with a slight limp, Willie noticed.

"Looks like he was in one of the revolutions down there, once," Willie told himself.

He went over to his client who was still in something of a temper. The manager was trying to quiet the doll.

"You are going to sue, madam," the Ritz-Belvedere maestro said acidly. "So I will sue you for disturbing the peace and losing for me two very rich clients. Look at them, Manuel deSalvo and Senorita de-Salvo, rich people from Argentine. Checking out, and they only arrived this morning. Well, are you still going to sue?"

"I am," Mrs. Brash, alias Mrs. Lusk, snapped. "Oh, there you are Mr.—I mean, Harold. Call us a taxi. We will go to a respectable hotel like the Waldorf."

Willie asked to be excused as his nerves were about ready to snap on him.

"I will be back in a few moments—er—Ma. Then I will get a taxi."

He slipped away to the privacy of the men's lounge and took a package from his pocket. He unwrapped it and looked at the label on the bottle. Willie shook his noggin and tried to

figure things out. Nerve tonic? On the bottle it distinctly said:

FLESH TINTFLIT

Removes Spray in a Jiffy
Seventy-five Cents

"Oh, my," Willie groaned. "Isn't nothin' what it should be? Gertie give me the wrong bottle as this is the stuff she has to use to git her stock-in's off. And just when I needed a stimulant. Funny color Gertie had on. Saw one like it—"

Willie kept pleading with his brain. There were things that should add up if he could put them together. Enoch, Sandra, the blonde, the deSalvos!

"Heavens!" Willie yipped. "Could be!"

HE BARGED out of the lounge and galloped to Mrs. Brash's side.

"Oh, have I been dumb?" Willie said to his client.

"You can say that again, Klump."

"Harold. Did you forget? Look, I got to work fast and will be right back."

Willie ran out to the front of the Ritz-Belvedere and grabbed the doorman. "Did you see two foreigners?" he howled. "A doll with more curves than Lefty Gomez? The male citizen had a little goatee. He—"

"They got in a cab twenty minutes ago," the doorman said. "Went to the Waldorf."

Back to his client galloped Willie Klump, working on a hunch that would land him in a padded cell if it happened to be wrong.

"Come on, Ma," Willie gasped. "We must hurry."

"Please do," the house detective said, wiping his brow.

Willie got the female character in the weeping weeds in a cab and headed for the Waldorf.

No sooner had William Klump, alias Harold Lusk, left the Ritz-Belvedere when Satchelfoot Kelly and a brother bloodhound rushed into the lobby of the aforesaid pueblo. Satchel-

foot was in a terrible state of something bordering on hysteria and he clutched the big house detective by the arm and demanded to know the whereabouts of a couple of the guests.

"A dame in black and a silly lookin' goon wearin' evenin' clothes," Kelly yowled. "Where are they at? That hayshaker won't kid me no more, Riley. Where are they?"

"They left," the detective said, falling into a big chair and taking a deep breath. "Now what did they do? After turnin' this joint upside-down, I—s'pose they are on the way to wreck—"

"Come on, Riley," Satchelfoot said and went to the desk. "The radio said the Brash dame slipped out of Chi. In a widow's get-up. She is goin' to join her spouse who has almost half a million fish. Somehow, don't ask me how, Willie Klump got in right with her. Where did the widow go? The one in black?" He threw his demand at the clerk.

"Why, her?" said the clerk. "Oh, we are glad to lose those two, pal. Of all the trouble we had . . . I think they went to the Sheldon. I bet you are a detective. What did they do?"

"They killed a beer," Satchelfoot sniffed, and clutched Riley. "Come on! That Klump will make the cops look like maroons. Imagine him with Enoch Brash's ball and chain?"

Now while Satchelfoot Kelly and Riley went wild-gooseing to the Sheldon, Willie and his client entered the Weldorf at one in the morning. Willie was gratified to see that the Weldorf bar was still doing a big business and he told Mrs. Brash to join him in the bar as soon as she had signed the register.

"Me—in a bar?" Mrs. Brash tossed at Willie. "A bereaved widow sipping cocktails, Klump? Don't be silly. If you have got any of the retainer left, go in and get boiled and forget you ever saw me. Out of seven million people, I picked you out as a detective. Oh, what is the use?"

"Oh, I have an idea or three," Willie assured his client. "Anyway, you better not fire me, as I am the only one who knows who you are, Ma. Ha! I will leave you for a spell."

"How many do you get in one night?" Mrs. Brash asked. "One more and you will be an absolute imbecile. I will be sitting out in the lobby near the bar, Harold."

WILLIE went to the men's room and he took the stopper out of the little bottle of tint remover. The stuff was amber color when he dropped some in the palm of his hand. It smelled good enough to drink.

"It is a long chance, but there is a chance I am right," Willie said in a huddle with himself. "You can paint a whole house with somethin' if you can paint a gatepost with the same stuff. If I am wrong, I will maybe get out of the hospital in three weeks. Then out of jail in about ninety days. I will still have some future ahead of me."

Willie spruced up, dragged a comb through his locks, and set forth for the famed Weldorf oval bar. Once in the air-cooled oasis, he let his eyes wander. He did not see what he wanted to see. He sat down and waited.

An accordion player did her stuff and then a female canary with a voice that was half bass and half falsetto warbled a torch song. After a number by an orchestra, the patrons got down to more serious imbibing. Other characters from the snooty side of the tracks trickled in. Suddenly Willie stiffened in his chair as he saw the deSalvos weave their way to the bar.

The doll had a low-cut evening dress on and Willie knew there would be a riot in the Weldorf if somebody said something to the senorita that would make her shrug. Her dark skin looked as soft as a rabbit's ear. Willie did not blame all the males for staring, nor did he blame the distaff side in the place for getting green in the

peepers. Senorita deSalvo was more pleasing to the eye than a million-dollar bill.

"Maybe it wasn't a revolution he was in south of the Border," Willie thought.

He was dressed as good as the other customers so he strode up to the bar and picked himself a big red stool close to the senorita. Willie ordered a Manhattan and the gorgeous Argentinian cupcake swung her eyes toward him. Her clipped brows slid up to her hair roots, then settled again.

"Ah, ze senor I step on, *si*? You are ze bad boy an' maybe follow Carmencita?"

"No, I am just a playboy makin' the rounds," Willie said. "I do every hotel every night, senorita. Can I buy ze dreenk. See?"

"You cannot," Senor deSalvo bristled. "I weel thank you, *amigo*, to keep ze place by yourself. I do not lak you so moch."

"I ain't in love with you, neither," Willie said. "She spoke to me first anyways. Let's fergit it, senior."

Willie killed his Manhattan, and surreptitiously poured his glass half full of Gertie Mudgett's tint remover. He toyed with his glass for awhile, then picked it up. He swung on his upholstered stool to get a gander at the orchestra leader and half of the stuff in his glass splashed against the bare shoulder of Carmencita.

"Oh, I am clumsy," Willie apologized. "Why, pardon me at least a thousand times, senorita. I—"

"You stupid son of ze mule!" Senor deSalvo yelped. "*Valgame Dios. Caramba!* I weel have ze satisfaction as you did zat on purpose. Ah, let me help you, my leetle Carmencita, *si*. Zen I weel deal weeth thee—"

The citizen with the goatee dabbed the girl's dark epidermis with a big hanky and Carmencita drew away from him.

"No, Father. I—"

"Too late," Willie howled. "The white is showin' through. Yvonne

Delvray and Enoch Brash, the jig is up! Grab them somebody. Help!"

Satchelfoot Kelly and Riley crashed the oval bar just as Willie Klump's voice drowned out all other sounds. Satchelfoot saw the big character with the dark skin pick up his stool and rush at Willie. The senorita headed for an exit, and Willie made a diving tackle and got a piece of the bogus Argentinian beauty's evening gown. It was enough. The doll walked right out of it and for the first time in the history of the Weldorf, the bar clientele was treated to a strip act. Somebody threw a table-cloth over the beauty and somebody else got a half-nelson on her.

WILLIE KLUMP was on his hands and knees and Senor deSalvo was riding him and trying to bash Willie's brains out with a water carafe.

"Get him, somebody! I am William Klump, private detective! He is Enoch Brash who stole four hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The dame is a blonde. Oh, my head! If he hits me once more, I—"

Satchelfoot Kelly, recovering from the first shock, wiped the spurious Spaniard from Willie with one sweep of his big hand, and then into the mêlée came Mrs. Brash with her veil thrown back and she went right at Enoch.

"So, you doublecrosser!" Mrs. Brash screeched. "Got the dough and came to pick up that blond dish, didn't you? Mr. Klump, how did you ever unmask them?"

Before looking for an answer, Mrs. Brash hit Enoch with a bowl of salted peanuts.

"Hello, Satchelfoot," Willie said, a little groggy. "I am glad you are here. How did you know?"

"It come over the radio," Kelly choked out. "Look, they are tearing the black wig off the blonde. I said to myself after I met you awhile ago, I was a sucker to fall for your gag. But

in them glad rags, I was fooled for awhile. Wait, Enoch is ownin' up."

"All right. I'm Brash. The dough is in my room upstairs. If you had had to live, any of you, with that human saber-toothed tiger there, you would steal as much as me so's to get that far away from her. If you had had to live with a pooch that bit you every time you walked into the house . . . Yeah, I wrung its neck in the Ritz-Belvedere."

"But it got you first," Willie said, cleaning himself up a bit. "That's why you limped. So you two got scairt then, as you knew Mrs. Brash was around some place disguised like you was. You checked out in a hurry after knocking off Sandra."

"You know everything," Brash said. "So let them ask you the rest. Oh, I don't care no more. But how in the world did you suspect us with our skins all dark like—"

"My dame uses tints instead of stockings," Willie said. "After awhile I got to thinking couldn't a citizen spray himself all over just as easy. And seein' as how I had the antidote with me, I just poured some into my glass and accidentally on purpose spilled it on the senorita. Look at her, Kelly. Did you ever see a doll carry on worse? She is Yvonne Delvray and used to work in the Ritz-Belvedere cocktail lounge. She and Enoch were going to Argentina and git themselves a hashienda. They fixed up

Next Issue: THE KNIFE THROWER, a Complete Willie Klump Novelet

some luggage or bought some with labels on. They were smart, but not enough to make crime pay. But they dyed trying. Ha!"

Satchelfoot Kelly staggered to the bar and ordered a bottle of straight rye. He wanted to be unconscious for three days so that he would not have to read about Willie in the papers. Kelly was well on his way to a sweet coma when Enoch Brash and Yvonne were ushered out.

Willie appeared on a radio program the next night. They asked him to tell how he captured Brash.

"It was because of the shortage of silk stockin's," Willie said. "Elst would they spray stockin's on dolls? It'll be a great savin' to people like Gertie, though. An' she won't get her seams all crooked no more which always burned me up. The Hawkeye Detective Agency is located at—"

"Er—thank you, Mr. Klump. H-m-m, it has been a pleasure to have you with us. This is the Knylon Hosiery programme. Knylon—"

"I guess you will be out of a job if that spray sells much more," Willie cut in. "It is the best—"

"I said it has been a pleasure, Klump. Ha, he is a comedian besides a detective, folks. Ha-ha! He—"

"Hello, Ma," Willie said. "I'll be right home. So have the bacon ready. Five rashers of it, Ma."

"Good-night, Mr. Klump. Ladies and gentlemen, the Knylon . . ."

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Murder Under WRAPS

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

Author of "The Mailed Fist," "Specialist in Murder," etc.

CHAPTER I

GRIM WELCOME

THE ticket office in the railroad station at Port Royal wasn't meant for privacy. Its low windows commanded a full view of the train platform. Leslie Kane pretended to study his newspaper until train time, but his eyes were on the girl who paced up and down outside the waiting room.

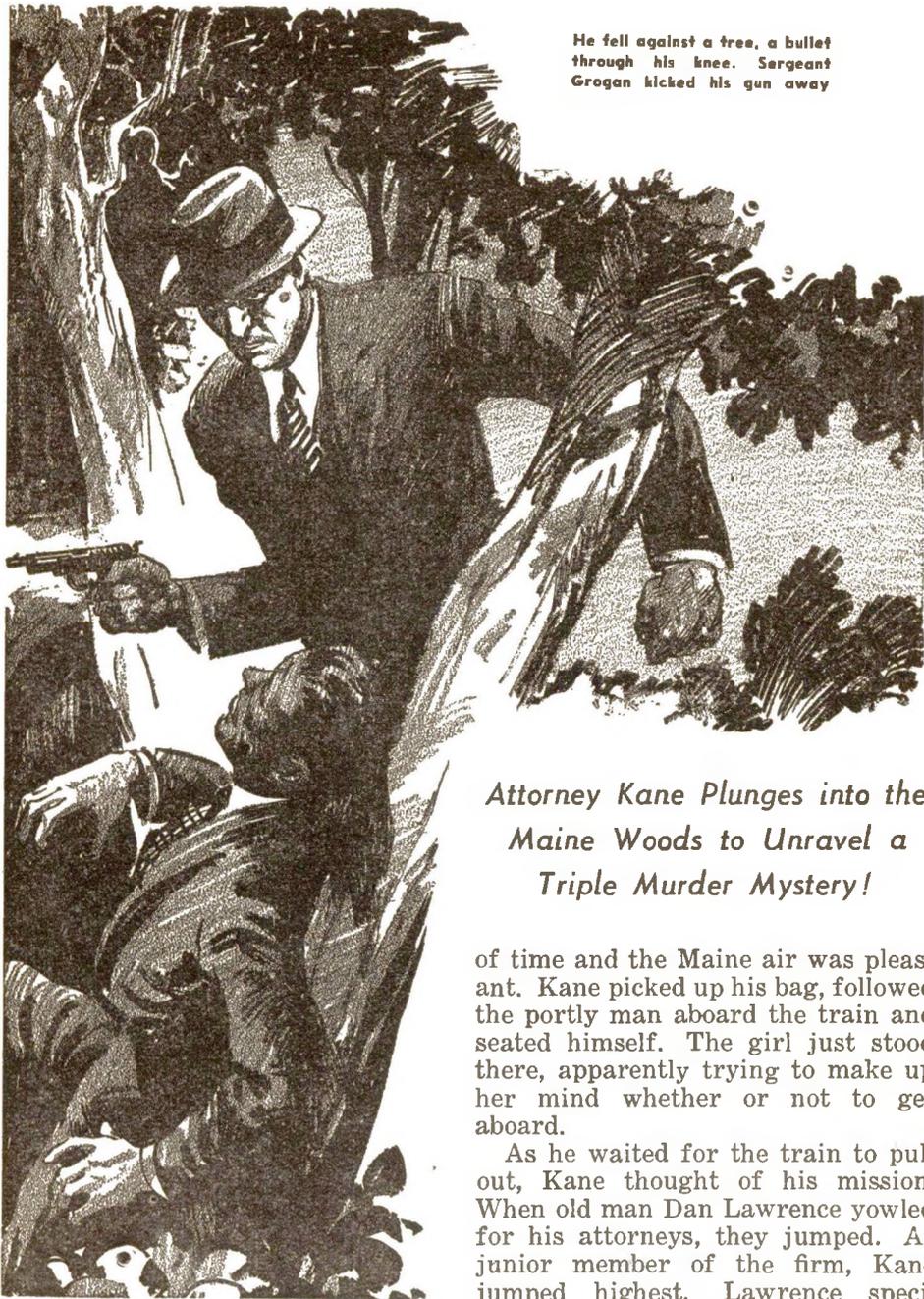
She was agitated about something,

but that alone wouldn't have aroused Kane's interest. He was young, single and susceptible.

The girl was definitely attractive and neatly dressed, although Kane imagined she must be cold because of the light weight tailored suit she was wearing.

Another pair of eyes also watched her—those of a portly, bald-headed man with a ruddy complexion and little eyes.

He and the portly man both had



He fell against a tree, a bullet through his knee. Sergeant Grogan kicked his gun away

Attorney Kane Plunges into the Maine Woods to Unravel a Triple Murder Mystery!

of time and the Maine air was pleasant. Kane picked up his bag, followed the portly man aboard the train and seated himself. The girl just stood there, apparently trying to make up her mind whether or not to get aboard.

As he waited for the train to pull out, Kane thought of his mission. When old man Dan Lawrence yowled for his attorneys, they jumped. As junior member of the firm, Kane jumped highest. Lawrence specifically had asked for him—probably because Kane had a mild reputation for ferreting out problems not altogether concerned with law work. In fact, he was considered something of a detective and trouble spotter.

Then the girl swung aboard at the

purchased tickets, but so far the girl had not.

The train to Rumford rolled in—twenty minutes late—but Kane didn't care much about that. He had plenty

last minute. The train was traveling fairly fast when she lurched down the aisle. The swaying of the coach made walking difficult. As she came abreast of the portly man, she lost her balance and practically fell into his lap.

SHE smiled and apologized, walked to a seat across the aisle from Kane and sat down. Kane knew the portly passenger had stuck his ticket into the slot of the seat ahead of him. Now that ticket was gone.

Kane saw the girl glance around covertly and then slide a ticket into the slot of her seat.

"Well, I'll be—" Kane muttered. "She swiped that ticket and is using it herself. Just shows you never can tell about appearances."

The conductor entered the coach and started collecting tickets. The portly man was unaware of the theft until the conductor spoke to him.

"Ticket?" the portly man bent forward to examine the slot. "I put it right there a couple of minutes ago. It couldn't have fallen out. I—wait a minute. That girl back there—she stumbled against me. I saw her at the railroad station and she didn't buy a ticket, I'll bet she took mine."

Kane saw the girl flush and her hands tightened into fists.

Kane bent down and sent his own ticket skittering along the floor of the car. Finally he arose and ambled forward.

"You need glasses, friend. I was at the railroad station too. I'll bet you'd say you saw me buy a ticket too."

"You did. I watched you. You're just sticking up for that girl. She stole my ticket!"

"Look here," Kane said frigidly, "I'm an attorney. Your accusations can get you into trouble. She did buy a ticket, and I didn't. I forgot all about it. And before you go leaping at conclusions, why the blazes don't you look on the floor? You might have dropped it."

The conductor reversed a couple of

seats, stooped down and came up with the ticket.

"Looks like you made a mistake, Mister," he said. "I'd apologize to that girl if I were you."

"And I'd sue you," Kane said.

He glanced at her just as he settled back in his own seat. She'd lost that strained expression and was attempting to smile. Kane paid his fare in cash, took a receipt and then pretended to look out of the window.

When a waiter announced dinner the girl remained seated. Kane could tell that she was hungry. He arose, walked over beside her and bowed.

"I'm sorry about all that nonsense," he said. "My name is Leslie Kane, from New York. Under the circumstances our fat friend should have asked your pardon and taken you to dinner. Because he didn't, and due to the fact that I respect my own sex, I'd like to make up for his deficiency. Will you have dinner with me?"

SHE looked up at him. "Thank you. I'm from New York too. Also I'm broke and I did steal that man's ticket. I know what you did for me and I'm grateful."

"That's better," Kane smiled. "Confession is good for the soul. We'll forget all about that. The dining car is forward."

An hour later Kane escorted her back to her seat. He had been unable to learn her identity, why she was broke, and why her trip was so important that she'd resort to theft to accomplish it.

When darkness descended Kane closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were at Rumford. The portly man was alighting. The girl was not in her seat.

Kane glanced through the window at the deserted wooden station, and hoped to thunder Old Man Lawrence hadn't forgotten to send a car.

As he swung onto the platform he saw a flash of trim ankle, heard the slamming of a car door as the girl

was driven away. Kane sighed and headed for the other side of the depot. There was a car parked there, but no one was in it. He waited five minutes and watched the portly man trudge down the road in the opposite direction. Then he saw a tag tied to the wheel of the machine. It read:

Attorney Kane:

Sorry can't supply driver. You know where my place is. Come up.

It was signed in Old Man Lawrence's crabbed handwriting. Kane got his bag, started the motor and pulled away from the station. The left headlamp was dark.

Kane knew the roads fairly well and as he continued to drive, recognition of landmarks became even clearer. The car started to climb now, negotiating the high mountain at the top of which Dan Lawrence's estate sprawled. There was even a private lake with some of the best fishing in the world. Kane looked forward to that.

On his left was a flimsy highway fence and beyond it a drop of about two hundred feet into a valley. On the right hand side a cliff rose, stark and jagged. If Kane had not rolled down the window he might not have heard the start of that avalanche.

First there was a loud cracking sound, like a tree being mowed down by a heavy tank. Then bits of loose stone and earth rained on the roof of the car. Kane squirmed over to the right and peered up. He saw a gigantic boulder roll off the edge of the cliff.

THERE was no time to manipulate the car. Kane threw the door wide and crouched in the comparative safety of the cliff. The huge rock hit the rear end of the car, dragged it through the fence and both plunged over the precipice. Kane shivered, then frowned. Had it really been an accident? A killer, planted high up on those cliffs could have dislodged the

boulder at a given moment. He'd have known that Kane was in that car too —by the darkened headlamp.

Kane risked his life to go down the almost sheer wall and reach the smashed car. His bag was intact. He opened it, reached to the bottom and brought out a flashlight and a thirty-eight caliber automatic. The gun felt comfortable and reassuring in his grasp.

Kane heard a car come to a stop on the road above.

"Don't leave," Kane yelled. "I'm coming up and I need help."

He looped the grip around his neck, using his tie to do so. This left both hands free to scale that wall.

A slender young man with an ashen face and wide, staring eyes met him. He was about twenty and there was something akin to terror in his eyes.

"There was an accident," Kane explained. "A boulder took my car over the cliff. I have to reach Lawrence's place as quickly as possible. I'll pay you five dollars for the ride."

"Don't have to pay me," the young man said sullenly. "That's where I'm going. Get in."

Kane watched the lad narrowly during the ride and kept his left hand buried deep in the side pocket of his coat where he could caress the gun. It seemed to him that this boy had come along almost too coincidentally.

"Were you in town?" he asked.

"Yup!"

"Funny that I didn't see you," Kane went on. "In fact, I didn't see another car and everything in town was closed up tight."

"I was seeing a friend."

Kane was far from satisfied. It was possible that the young man had hidden his car, climbed to where that boulder had been previously prepared for an easy push that would send it down and then hurried back to his car and stopped to see what actual damage his murderous act had accomplished.

CHAPTER II

THE BANDAGED PATIENT



HE winding road passed between tall rows of birches and cedars. The smell of them had long since gotten into Kane's soul. He was glad to be back, despite the grim welcome he'd received. His driver brought him directly up to the front door. The car immediately pulled away toward a servant's cabin about half a mile to the rear.

A light flashed on the porch. The door opened and a woman admitted him. She was tall, straight as one of the birches on the estate and there was no sign of welcome on her face.

"You must be the lawyer. We expected you long ago. I kept something warm for you. Come in."

Kane walked down the long, wide reception hall. This was a two story log building containing sixteen rooms.

Ted Essex, Lawrence's confidential secretary, came out of the study. Essex greeted him with outstretched hand and a broad smile.

Kane immediately told him about the accident.

"Rock? Car left for you?" Essex looked puzzled. "I don't get it. I assigned the housekeeper's son to go after you. He's a skinny, pale kid."

"Well," Kane grunted. "He did bring me here, but I didn't meet him until after the accident. I could have sworn the note had been written by Lawrence. There must be a mistake. How is the old boy?"

"Not particularly good," Essex said. "He and I were out driving yesterday morning when he crashed against a tree while making a sharp turn. The car caught fire. I dragged him out, but he's badly burned. There's a doctor from the village with him now. Lawrence looks like a mummy. He's swathed in oil and bandages. Lucky though. If he'd been alone, he'd have roasted to death.

Look at my hands and arms. That's just a small sample of what Lawrence got."

ESSEX carefully pulled up his sleeves and exhibited raw, sore looking burns. "Lawrence has been afraid he might die and there are some changes to be made in his will," the secretary went on. "That's why he called for you.

"Supposing you eat while the doctor finishes up. Then I'll take you to see him. After that you can meet the twin vultures."

"Exactly who are they?" Kane laughed.

Essex shrugged.

"Lawrence's step-daughter is one. Probably you never met her, but we let her know about the old man's condition and she flew here, landing at the nearest airport. The other is the old man's niece, equally attracted by the savory thoughts of his death and the estate he'll leave. She arrived a short time ago. Here—I'm talking my head off, and you're starving. Come along."

Kane ate in a small alcove. The dour housekeeper served him with food. She answered Kane's every comment with a curt yes or no.

She stiffened suddenly and seemed to almost flee from the room. Kane looked around. A tall, slender girl in a brocaded housecoat and elaborately designed slippers, approached.

"Hello," she extended a slim hand, "you must be the lawyer whom Daddy sent for. My name is Ann Deering."

"Charmed." Kane motioned to a chair on the other side of the table. "Won't you sit down?"

Kane knew a great deal about Ann Deering. Lawrence had married her divorced mother and the union lasted about a year. Then Lawrence settled a sum on her. Kane's firm had handled the divorce. The mother died and Ann Deering went on to become a second line chorus girl, a hat check girl, a restaurant hostess and in the

process managed to attain an unsavory reputation.

"We were so afraid Daddy might die," Ann said, watching Kane like a bird scrutinizing a morsel of food.

"I understand he's much better now," Kane said. "Where is Lawrence's niece?"

"You mean Mag—Margaret Stanforth. Oh, she's around, figuring what she'll do with the things she falls heir to when the old—when Daddy does leave us."

KANE patted his lips with the napkin, arose and helped Ann from her chair. They walked across the hall into the living room.

"Mag—Margaret, you know. She's filthy rich."

"She's pretty, I suppose?"

"Well—in a way. I suppose you might call her that," Ann answered.

Kane consequently prepared himself to meet a ravishing beauty. Yet he didn't steel himself enough—because Miss Margaret Stanforth turned out to be the penniless girl who'd stolen a ticket on the train.

She extended her hand to Kane as though he were a perfect stranger.

"So glad you're here," she said coolly. "Mr. Essex told me to find you. Mr. Lawrence is ready now. He's upstairs. Dr. McCormick will show you where. He's waiting at the head of the steps."

Kane grinned at her and climbed the stairway. Dr. McCormick was a burly, bearded giant of a man and his handshake felt something like the grip of a bear.

"You may talk to the patient for ten minutes—no longer. He isn't completely out of the woods yet, but I expect we'll have him around again soon. He can talk only in a whisper and he mustn't do too much of that."

Kane knew he'd find something rather grim looking in that bed, but Lawrence's appearance shocked him profoundly. The elderly millionaire was swathed in so many bandages

that only his eyes were visible. He raised a thickly bandaged hand and Kane just touched it.

"Shut the door," Lawrence whispered and the bandages muffled the words. "Nosy doctor. Don't trust him. Don't trust anybody."

Kane closed the door. Lawrence certainly hadn't changed much. Same old irascible disposition, same feeling of mistrust in everyone.

"Now keep quiet and listen," Lawrence whispered. "There's a lot going on around here I don't like. I think the accident wasn't quite that. Somebody tampered with the steering gear. I don't know who it could have been. I'm pretty bad, Kane. Worse than you think, or that fool doctor lets on. They can't trick me. I know!"

"I'll have Essex get my will. I wrote a new one myself and I want you to be sure it's airtight. Essex is all right—trust him. When you've finished with the will, find out who monkeyed with my car. You have a reputation as a detective of sorts."

"I'll get busy at once," Kane answered. "Essex can tell me everything I need to know."

KANE left the room and walked slowly over to the stairs. He was halfway down them when he heard a wild shout. It came from Lawrence's room. Reversing his steps, Kane rushed to the door, threw it wide and saw the face of the pale, skinny youth who had driven him to the house at the window. The boy held a gun in his hand. Lawrence was propped up on one elbow.

Kane seized a vase and flung it at the face. It missed, but the youth disappeared. When Kane looked through the window, he saw that the boy had climbed a tree and crawled out on a thick limb to reach the window. To make his escape, he merely dropped to the ground and scampered away.

Kane eased the old man back to his pillow.

Lawrence whispered hoarsely: "He

had a gun. He was going to kill me. His mother told him to do that. As soon as I get better, I'll kick both of 'em off the place. Kane—I'm probably the most hated man in this neck of the woods."

"Bosh," Kane locked the window and lowered the shade. "Why would anybody be sore at you?"

"Because I won't be a good fellow and die, that's why!" Lawrence hissed.

Kane took Dr. McCormick aside and told him what had happened. "You'd better stay close to him for the rest of the night," he added. "There is something cockeyed with this whole house and I mean to find out what and who is behind it.

"If it wasn't for the fat fee I'll soak this old buzzard, I'd go home right now," McCormick grumbled sourly.

Downstairs Kane met Margaret Stanforth again. She was alone. He took her arm and piloted her into the study.

"You can imagine my surprise at seeing you here. Who brought you up?"

"Bruno came for me," she said. "He's the caretaker. If I'd known you were coming here, I'd have certainly asked you to ride with us. After all, you are a friend."

"Would you mind taking a little walk with me—friend?" Kane grinned.

THEY strolled around the north wing and paced the driveway leading to the servant's quarters. He held her arm, drawing as closely as he dared.

"Just between the two of us," he said, "a couple of strange things have occurred tonight. First of all, I'm certain somebody tried to kill me. Then, a few minutes ago, Mrs. Webster's boy tried to take a pot shot at your uncle."

"Is—is Uncle all right?"

"Yes—but that boy had murder in

his eyes. Why should he hate your uncle."

"I don't know, Mr. Kane. I've known Joey—the boy—about three years and he's always been very shy. Uncle treated him well."

"And while we're on this deep investigation," Kane said, "why not tell me how come you're considered a very wealthy young lady, yet you were obliged to chisel a railroad ticket up here."

She lowered her head slightly.

"I suppose you think I'm a thief. I had to get here—tonight—because I feel that something is going to happen. But I'm not rich. I work for a living and when Uncle Lawrence sent for me, I happened to be dead broke. The boss was away. I couldn't even get an advance. I pawned something that belonged to my mother. The money got me as far as Port Royal. I saw you in the depot and I was tempted to ask your help because—well you looked like a man who wouldn't take advantage of such a situation. Then I decided against it and I—took that awful man's ticket."

"Ah—now we're getting down to pay dirt," Kane smiled. "It's rather refreshing to find someone who will tell the truth. Such instances are rare in my profession. Now supposing you tell me why Lawrence sent for you."

Margaret never had to answer that question. The complete silence of the mountain was broken by a single shot. It came from the vicinity of the lake.

CHAPTER III

BOATHOUSE MURDER



KANE seized Margaret's wrist.

"Come on."

They reached the lake and made a futile search of the south shore. Kane went to the first boathouse, stepped inside and lighted a match. There was nothing. With Margaret beside him, he went to the second,

scraped another match, held it high and instantly blew it out. But Margaret had a glimpse of the grisly object that stared unwinkingly, unseeingly up at the roof. It was Mrs. Webster, the housekeeper. There was a bullet-hole in the middle of her forehead.

"Go outside and be on the alert," Kane told Margaret.

Kneeling beside the limp figure, Kane felt for a pulse he knew wouldn't be there. He looked around the place, using one match after another. There was no gun.

Then Kane heard Margaret's shrill warning. He snuffed out the match and dropped flat. There was a sound of breaking glass and two shots rang out. Both bullets plowed into the worn floor at Kane's side.

"You killed her! You're a big city gangster and he sent for you to kill her!"

It was the sobbing voice of Joey, the son of the dead woman. There was frantic bitterness in his grief-stricken words. His emotions were running riot in blind revenge.

Kane slithered to the door and cursed himself for not carrying his automatic. He felt pity for the boy but realized the youth might murder anyone he met. He had to be restrained.

Margaret was crouched against the outside wall. Kane went up to her when he heard Joe flee through the underbrush.

"It's all right," he whispered. "He's gone. The poor kid saw me kneeling beside the body of his mother and thought I'd killed her. Now why should he think Lawrence would even consider doing a thing like that?"

"I don't know," Margaret clutched his arm tightly. "Let's get away from here. I'm afraid. He might return and—kill you."

Ted Essex, carrying a baseball bat in one hand, ran up.

"What the devil—" he panted.

"The devil is right," Kane said.

"Mrs. Webster was murdered. She's inside the boathouse. Her boy just took a couple of pot shots at me, too. We'd better round him up before he goes berserk in his grief. Also it might be a good idea to notify the police."

"Police? There aren't any—just the state troopers about fifty miles away. We can't even phone them. Lawrence wanted phones installed, but the telephone company asked the price of a new power plant to put them in up here. Unless we send someone—"

"Not on your life," Kane snapped. "It would be just our ill luck to send the murderer. Dr. McCormick had better come down here and take charge."

"I'll see to it," Essex said. "Watch yourselves on the way back to the house. I don't trust Joey—never did—and he's apt to be utterly mad after what's just occurred."

MMARGARET clung tightly to Kane's arm as they made their way to the lodge.

"This Bruno—the caretaker who met you at the train," Kane said. "I'd like to meet him. I know he's been here a long time and Lawrence must trust the man, but Bruno may know something to help us."

"Bruno is as faithful as an old watchdog. I'd trust him anywhere. He likes me too. May I see him first and arrange things. He isn't fond of strangers and their questions, but I'm pretty sure I can make him listen to you."

"That will be fine. Just one thing, Margaret, be careful. There's a killer loose on this estate and he won't stop at one murder."

He watched her hurry away into the darkness. Bruno's dark cabin was illuminated. Kane hurried to the lodge.

Ann Deering was in the library, idly thumbing a book.

"Essex told me what happened.

Who do you think killed that nice old lady?"

"Why do you speak of her like that?" Kane asked bluntly. "She hated you—I could see it on her face when you walked into the dining nook."

Ann's smile faded.

"I—well just because she didn't like me is no reason why I should have hated her. Truthfully, I don't think Mrs. Webster liked any of us."

"Maybe," Kane agreed. "You've been in the house all of the time?"

"Right in the study. Nobody seems to care much whether I'm lonesome or not."

Kane went upstairs. Dr. McCormick sat beside Lawrence's bed and he motioned Kane that it was all right to approach.

"Stay with him until I return," he said. "Essex told me about Mrs. Webster. I'll go right down. He's waiting for me at the back door."

KANE took the doctor's chair. Lawrence turned his head slowly in Kane's direction. A hoarse chuckle came from his throat.

"So the old hag is done for at last, is she? Good! Excellent! Find the man who killed her, Kane."

"I intend to. It was a brutal murder. The man who did it must be punished."

"Never mind the punishment," Lawrence whispered. "Find him and give him ten thousand dollars with my compliments. The old woman got what she deserved. Listen to me, Kane. You don't know what she was. Domineering, sly and clever. She used to examine all my books, read my mail. Do you suppose that alabaster-faced kid of hers came to kill me of his own volition? Not so you'd notice it. *She* sent him. I'm glad she's dead. Now get out of here and let me get some sleep."

Lawrence didn't sleep and Kane didn't leave. The old man kept muttering her name, interspersed with

some of the vilest curses Kane had ever heard.

When McCormick returned Kane went with him into the doctor's bedroom. He closed the door, lighted a cigar and then took a hypodermic needle from his kit.

"I'm going to give Lawrence something to make him sleep," he said. "Excitement is bad for him. About Mrs. Webster—a very gruesome piece of business. She was throttled into unconsciousness first and then shot. Whoever did it was a very strong person—her neck was almost broken. I covered the body, but of course I didn't move it.

"Fortunately the law is taken care of because I happen to be the medical examiner for this district. In fact, I'm pretty much of everything, including health officer, keeper of vital statistics and even a justice of the peace. We have a tendency to concentrate authority in these parts. Now I'll give him a shot in the arm."

"That's all right, Doctor, but he must be watched. Joey Webster is still on the loose and he's got a gun. When you get tired, Essex and I will take shifts. He must not be left alone."

He watched McCormick depart and leaned back in his chair, thinking.

DOWNSTAIRS, Essex was sprawled in a chair talking with Ann. He arose when Kane asked him to lead him to the study. There he moved back a sliding panel in the wall, exposing a small safe. He spun the combination expertly. From the opened safe he removed a long, sealed envelope and handed it to Kane.

"Lawrence gave this to me a couple of days ago. It's his revised will—the one he wants you to check over. I'll go out if you want to be alone."

Kane slit the seal.

"You're practically in charge here and Lawrence trusts you. He told me so. Now let's see. . . ."

Kane whistled long and softly as he laid down the one page document. "He

certainly made some changes. I know the contents of his original will. In fact I have a copy in my bag. He had provided for Mrs. Webster and Bruno, but this new version never even mentions them. Nor you, Essex. And he originally left you ten thousand if you were still in his employ when he died."

Essex grinned.

"I had an inkling of that. Lawrence is a very changeable person. He pays me well and he mentioned the other day that I was a fool if I expected to gain by his death. If it's not too confidential, who does get the money?"

"Margaret is mentioned. Twenty-five thousand dollars goes to her. He maintains she has enough money and more only would burden her. The bulk of his estate goes to Ann Deering—and I'm appointed executor. Well—I guess that's that. I'll have to make a legal version of this and have him sign it first thing in the morning.

"Tell me about Margaret Stanforth—where did she get this wealth of hers."

Essex lit a cigarette and leaned back.

"Well—her mother and the old boy upstairs were sister and brother. She married some rather insignificant scientist. The old boy didn't like it, but he was mollified when he learned that his sister was well off financially. Seems this scientist made a pot of money. He died, and so did his wife. Margaret inherited their estate. I think the old boy is rather fair about it all, don't you?"

"I suppose so," Kane said, going outside.

Ann started to arise when he passed the library door, but Kane kept on going. He wanted to see Margaret, find out about Bruno and other things. Then, with a smile, he told himself he wanted to see her mainly because he enjoyed her company. She had a little explaining to do however. Everyone believed her to be rich and Margaret

maintained she was so destitute she had to resort to a pawnshop for money.

CHAPTER IV

KNIFE THROWER



BUT Margaret was nowhere in sight. Kane frowned and hurried toward Bruno's lighted cabin.

He stepped up on the tiny porch. From it he could look into a window and see half of a room. A big, ungainly man sat in a chair and ran a cleaning rag through one of the biggest revolvers Kane had ever seen. This must be Bruno, but Kane decided he'd hate to meet him in the dark. He looked big enough to handle any two ordinary men and he had a harsh, uncompromising face. The way he cleaned that gun made it seem as though he fully expected to use it soon.

Kane rapped on the door. Bruno started up and Kane heard him fussing around for a minute or two. Then he opened up and greeted Kane with a scowl.

"I'm Mr. Lawrence's attorney," Kane said. "Margaret told me she was coming to see you and I thought—after what happened near the lake—that I'd escort her to the lodge."

"She left ten minutes ago," Bruno declared.

He started to close the door, but Kane put a firm hand against the panel, slipped inside and walked into the room where Bruno had been working. There was no sign of the revolver. Had he been cleaning it because he expected to use the gun—or to remove all traces that it had been used recently? Kane wondered about that.

"Well?" Bruno growled.

"Look, Bruno," Kane said softly. "There's been a murder. The killer is still loose and everyone is open to suspicion. I've questioned the others and

they've accounted for themselves. What about you? Where were you?"

"Right here—where I belong. I know my place which is more'n that old witch did. I ain't sorry she's dead, but I didn't kill her."

Kane's eyes roved over the room. In a back corner he spotted a leather jacket—much too small for Bruno's big shoulders and exactly the type which Joey Webster had worn.

Kane said nothing. He went to the door, murmured a formal apology and walked out into the night.

Twenty yards from the cabin he ducked behind a bush. Bruno had been too anxious for him to leave. A murder suspect—who is innocent—courts an investigation, is eager for it and will answer questions. Bruno had been highly reticent and now—it seemed that young Joey was hidden in the cabin.

Kane was worried about Margaret and he hoped she'd reached the house safely. He wanted to find her, but this opportunity to seize Joey was too good to abandon.

Minutes crawled by and then all the lights in Bruno's cabin winked out. Kane moved forward. Someone emerged who moved softly toward the servants' quarters.

Kane was no woodsman, but he maintained an even, steady stride and made little sound. He got ahead of this mysterious person and, selecting a dark spot beneath the concealing branches of a birch, prepared to leap on Bruno's visitor.

KANE saw a shadow emerge from the gloom. All his attention was directed at the man who came down the path. Kane didn't hear a sound from behind until a man fell upon his back. Kane, dropping under the impact, twisted his head as he fell. He had a glimpse of an arm raised high and there was a dagger clutched in the hand.

Desperation surged strength into his muscles. With a mighty effort he

dislodged the man, wriggled from his embrace, and attacked. The assailant was crouched, apparently waiting. The knife loomed big and definite in Kane's eyes, but it didn't stop him. With a rush he started for the man.

Instead of waiting for Kane to reach him, the knifer dropped to all fours and rolled toward Kane's legs. The lawyer went upward and forward and fell with a thump that shook the breath out of him.

He started to arise. The killer eight feet away, snapped his arm forward. The knife went wide of Kane by a foot as the killer melted into the darkness.

Kane cursed his luck bitterly. Now both mystery men had escaped. Certainly Bruno hadn't seized him because nothing short of dynamite would have dislodged that brute. Then who could it have been? Essex? Dr. McCormick? Joey?

Kane fumbled around in the darkness and finally found the knife. It was a peculiar weapon, curved slightly and with its keen edges notched to inflict a ragged wound. The fact that it wasn't perfectly balanced probably had saved Kane's life.

Dan Lawrence had two of these blades as ornaments in his study. They came from some little known tribe on an island off Africa. Lawrence was a collector, and knew how to throw knives.

Kane found a stump and sat upon it. His mind was confused with conflicting ideas. Lawrence himself had come into the picture. What if he wasn't quite as badly hurt as he pretended? No one seemed to hate Mrs. Webster more than Lawrence did—excepting, possibly, Bruno.

Kane shoved the knife between his belt and trousers. Still contemplating this strange turn of events he headed toward Mrs. Webster's quarters in the servant's building behind the lodge. Joey might have fled there.

The door was wide open. Kane drew the knife and felt a little better

with some sort of a weapon in his hands. He made up his mind not to venture out again unless he had his automatic along. He moved into the place and frowned in puzzlement. The state of wildest confusion existed. Drawers had been opened and their contents spilled on the floor. A sewing basket was inverted. Even the small book case had been practically torn apart and the volumes lay in a heap, each one apparently examined to see if they contained what the intruder sought.

KANE started toward the rear of the place and then stopped in his tracks. The floor had squeaked some place near the kitchen. Determinedly, Kane approached the kitchen door which was of the swinging type. He gave it a kick, banging it open, and leaped into the room. Someone crouched in a corner.

"Come out of there," Kane snapped.

Then Margaret moved forward and stopped a few feet away.

"Great heavens!" Kane cried. "What in the world—"

The friendly expression on her face was gone. Open animosity shone in her eyes.

"I—was afraid," she said hesitantly. "I—I have felt you were my friend, but I—I'm not so sure now. Put that awful knife down."

Kane thrust the blade into his pocket.

"Margaret—what on earth is the matter? What are you doing here—in this house? Who tore the place apart?"

"I don't know," she said. "I—I looked in to see if—if Joey was here. I—I wanted to help him. Someone came and I hid. Whoever it was searched every room, but the one where I was hiding. Then something frightened him away. I was afraid to move. I—thought you were the same man coming back. I—"

She turned suddenly and fled out the back door

As Margaret crossed the front porch Essex and Ann Deering stood up. They stared after Margaret and looked puzzled when Kane approached them.

"She looks as though she's seen a ghost," Essex said. "What's wrong with her?"

"Nerves," Kane soothed the pair. "Been on the porch very long?"

"Since about five minutes after you rushed out," Ann said with a pout. "I didn't think I was quite such bad company."

"Of course you're not." Kane sat down beside them. "Seems to me you two are the only ones on the place who have any sense. However, I think it might be best if you went inside. Our killer just tried to hurl this into my heart."

Essex looked at the knife Kane balanced in his hand. "With that?" he gasped. "Why that belongs to the old boy. He'd have a fit if he knew it had been taken. Ann," he faced the girl, "you'd better go inside. Please."

SHE didn't like it, but she went. Essex sat down with a grunt and studied Kane's features.

"There's something running through that brain of yours," he said. "I wonder if I'm smart enough to be thinking the same thing."

"About Lawrence?" Kane queried. "And this knife of his? Yes—I'm wondering along those lines. I'd like to be sure he's as sick as Dr. McCormick indicates. Just how bad was he after the accident?"

"Half conscious, and well—you've seen the bandages. And as for Dr. McCormick, he's been in practice at the village for years. Holds about every public office there except Town Warden. Of course the doctor may be perfectly on the level and Lawrence is putting one over on him too. He's a rugged soul, the old man. I've seen him tear a deck of playing cards in half and he swings an axe like a born woodsman."

"I'm going up and have a look at him," Kane arose, "just to satisfy myself."

Ann Deering blocked his way in the hall and led him into the library.

"Maybe you wouldn't mind telling me what's the matter with Margaret?" she asked, "I just went into her room and she practically ate off my head."

"She's just upset." Kane was unaccountably bothered that he had not immediately been able to see Lawrence. Perhaps Ann had deliberately drawn him into the library for a purpose. . . .

"Look, attorney, do you have to treat me like dirt? Haven't I the littlest bit of appeal for a guy like you? Essex seems to think I have, but you pass over me as if I were just a blank space.

"I'm sorry," Kane said. "But things have happened so darned fast I—well—frankly, I've been more interested in trying to protect people's lives on this estate. We're all in danger, Ann."

Ann stepped back and he went upstairs. He found Dr. McCormick occupying a chair tilted back against the door to Lawrence's room. The doctor was dozing, but he jerked to attention when Kane walked toward him.

"Oh," he blinked sleepily, "it's you again. Don't worry about Lawrence. He's sleeping like a baby. They can be tough as ancient oaks, but a needle full of morphine puts them away."

"I'd like to look in on him."

McCormick removed the chair, opened the door and Lawrence's monotonous, loud breathing filled the room. He lay on his back, bandaged face carefully propped against the pillows. Kane went out, closed the door and asked:

"In your opinion, could Lawrence get up and walk around, exert himself physically?"

McCormick wagged his head solemnly from side to side. "I don't know what you're getting at, but Lawrence

is a mighty sick man. I doubt that he could leave his bed."

KANE walked down the hall to the last door and rapped softly on the panels. When it was opened, Margaret tried to close it in his face. Kane wasn't to be put off now. This affair had reached a state where he had to know the entire truth.

"Please sit down," he told her. "First I want to know what made you change your attitude toward me. You saw no one but Bruno and, possibly young Joey, because he was in Bruno's house."

"No—you must be wrong," Margaret said. "Bruno was going to look for Joey. He thought he'd gone crazy. Joey wasn't there."

"All right—he wasn't," Kane answered. "You still haven't told me why I'm suddenly poisoning the atmosphere when you're around."

She looked at him and there was no fear in her eyes, just reproach.

"I've been told you're not exactly what you pretend to be. I can't forget how you watched me at Port Royal, how you interceded for me about the ticket. You took me to dinner and cross examined me as though I were on the witness stand. You watched me get off the train. I've wondered if all that came about by sheer accident or whether you knew who I was and deliberately seized an opportunity to ingratiate yourself."

"Of all the fool ideas," Kane blurted. "I'm Leslie Kane, New York attorney. I came here because Lawrence trusts me, knows me. What more proof do you want?"

"That still doesn't make you Leslie Kane. I heard what Joey shouted when you were kneeling by his mother's body. He called you a gangster, sent to kill Mrs. Webster."

"Look, Margaret, use your head. When Mrs. Webster was shot, I was standing right at your side, hundreds of yards away from the boathouse. Now how could I have murdered her?"

You and I happen to be the only two persons here who have a perfect alibi."

Margaret was silent, her eyes expressionless.

HE WALKED to the door and said stiffly:

"If you should need me—call. Good night."

Essex still was sitting on the porch, puffing a pipe and deep in thought. Kane didn't bother him. He went to the study, locked the door and tackled his job of making a legal document of Dan Lawrence's handdrawn will. He typed steadily for almost an hour, filling in the whys and wherefores until he'd converted the one-page letter into a five page document.

His task completed, Kane placed both papers into the still open safe, closed the door and spun the dial. A glance at his watch told him it was two-ten, but he felt no fatigue. There was a growing anger in his heart.

All that he had learned so far was that Lawrence hated the murdered woman. Bruno hated her, too, but not with the complete venom that Lawrence displayed. Kane put his cigarette case away, went up to his room and transferred his automatic from valise to hip pocket. He donned a top-coat and hat, and softly made his way along the reception hall.

He glanced in the study and almost gave himself away by his start of surprisa. Essex and Ann Deering were deeply engrossed in one another and in a tight embrace. He tiptoed the rest of the way and opened the door silently.

Margaret's room was illuminated, he saw, and was glad. He didn't mind things half so much when he knew she was safe. No matter how she felt about it, Kane's attitude hadn't changed. She'd accused him of being an impostor. She'd apparently lied to him, but nothing seemed to make any difference. He wondered if that could be love.

CHAPTER V

THE SMEAR ON THE WALL



JOEY had to be found and Kane realized that this pale, wan boy probably held the solution to the whole affair. Despite his obviously weak body, Joey Webster still was dangerous. There was nothing fragile about that gun he possessed.

Kane tramped through the night, one hand gripping his automatic tightly. He had no idea where Joey might be. There were dozens of good hiding places on this estate and Joey must know every one of them. He might shoot from around any tree or gulley.

Kane searched the garages behind the house first and to insure against anyone's leaving stealthily, he removed the keys from the three cars.

The obvious thing to do was to ask someone in the house to drive for help. A detail of state police would round up Joey and Bruno in jig time, but Kane was by no means satisfied that the murderer of Mrs. Webster wouldn't seize an opportunity to run for it. He discounted the theory that Joey would have slain his own mother and Bruno—from what Kane had observed of him—didn't seem the type to kill a woman he'd worked with for years.

Bruno's cottage was unlocked. Kane searched the place. In the tiny kitchen he found a table which had been set for two people. Obviously Joey had been fed here and Bruno's denial of his whereabouts was a lie.

Mrs. Webster's house was in darkness when Kane entered. Some attempt had been made to straighten up the place. Books had been replaced, a table turned upright and the contents of the sewing basket gathered and carefully placed in a corner of the davenport.

Kane heard a noise like someone moving a chair. It came from one of

the bedrooms at the rear of the cottage. He kicked open the door, pressed an electric light switch and kept his gun ready.

Joey Webster stood in the middle of the room. One hand pressed down on the back of a chair and the other held the big gun Kane had last seen in Bruno's possession. Joey had a peculiar smile on his lips and he seemed paler than ever.

"Put your gun down, Joey, Kane snapped. "Put it down. I'd hate to have to shoot you."

JOEY'S fingers relaxed their grip on the huge pistol. It clattered to the floor. Joey let go of the chair too and took a couple of slow, hesitant forward steps.

"I . . . was . . . wrong about . . . you," he said thickly.

"Very . . . wrong. Should have . . . known . . . better. Glad you . . . weren't . . . killed by . . . the stone."

"Good," Kane said. "I'm glad you're finally admitting your guilt. Now keep on talking. Why was your mother killed? Who murdered her? You know! You must know!"

"Sure . . . I know." Joey's face was beaded with sweat. "Should have known . . . all along. Found out . . . too late now. Fine stepfather . . . fooled everybody. Hated my mother. Hated . . . me. I . . . I . . . I . . ."

Joey stumbled closer and then his knees seemed to buckle under him. He pitched forward into Kane's arms. The attorney dropped his gun, slid his arms around Joey to pick him up and then he felt his fingers become wet—wet with blood.

Kane eased him to the floor. Joey had a sardonic grin on his face. He'd been stabbed in the back. He'd tried to explain what had happened. Perhaps his mind wasn't properly oriented because his agony must have been excruciating. He'd done his level best, but Joey had been racing with a contestant who never loses.

He'd learned that Kane wasn't a

gangster hired to commit murder. How? Who had finally convinced him? And who had driven the blade into his back? Kane took a closer look at it. This was the twin of that knife that had been hurled at him only a short time before—Lawrence's knife!

Stepfather!

That was the answer. Old Man Lawrence must have married Mrs. Webster. It wasn't to be wholly unexpected. Lawrence had spent many months on this lonesome estate. Perhaps she'd used her feminine wiles on him with his money as her ultimate reward. Then he'd become aware of what she was really after, and Lawrence's love became hate.

Perhaps that hatred had been mutual. Could she, with Joey's help, have rigged that car to crash? It was possible.

"The answer," Kane told himself half aloud, "rests with two men—Bruno and Lawrence himself."

Kane picked up his gun and Joey's and headed for the house. It would soon be daylight. The case must be closed by then.

Essex and Ann Deering were still in the study, seated side by side now and holding hands. Ann actually seemed to have lost her harshness of expression.

"Come in, Kane," he welcomed the attorney. "Be the first to know that Ann has promised to marry me."

"I'm glad. But wasn't it rather sudden?"

Ann laughed lightly.

"No—not really, Mr. Kane. I've known him for ages, but I never thought—well—I'm as surprised as you are."

"Would you mind," Kane asked, "if I broke it up for the moment? Something has happened and Essex should know about it. I need his help."

"Not if you'll both escort me upstairs," Ann countered. "This has been a rather ghastly—and wonderful—night." She held Essex's arm. "Just the same I'm still terribly frightened.

Haven't you caught that foolish boy yet?"

They walked upstairs. Kane said: "Don't worry about him. I promise you he'll not harm anyone."

DR. MCCORMICK, parked against Lawrence's door, blinked owlishly. Kane let Essex take Ann to her room while he stopped to talk with McCormick.

"How is he?" he asked and pointed at the door.

"Sleeping like a child," McCormick answered. "I looked in on him about half an hour ago. Say—you look worried and—good heavens, man—what's that on your left hand?"

Kane glanced down at the dark stain across the back of his hand.

"Blood, Doctor. Joey Webster's blood! He's dead!"

"But—but I thought—"

"So did I. Joey was our best bet as the killer even if the victim was his mother. The boy seemed mentally unbalanced to me. He confessed that he was the person who dislodged that boulder which almost finished me off. Now it seems we were both wrong and there is another killer on the loose."

"What about Bruno?" McCormick queried. "I've seen the man once or twice. Looks like a slow thinking brute and perfectly capable of any outrageous act."

"Bruno is missing, and that's what worries me. He's powerful enough to handle any two men like you and me. Keep a sharp eye open, Doctor. By the way, have you seen Miss Stanforth?"

McCormick jerked a thumb in the direction of Margaret's door. "She's been in her room since the last time you were up. I'll watch out for her too. You'd like that, I think, judging from the way you're so concerned about her welfare."

Essex came back then and he and Kane went down to the library. Kane walked straight over to the wall where the knives had been hanging.

They were both missing, but what interested Kane mostly was an oily smear on the wall paper. He put his nose close to it and sniffed.

"Not petroleum anyway," he said. "It's quite odorless. Essex—Dan Lawrence was smeared with oil, wasn't he? That's one treatment for burns."

"Covered with the stuff. Sweet oil, I think it was. Why? Don't tell me you believe the old boy was down here and smeared some of the stuff on that wall. It's impossible! I—Kane—both those knives are missing. You had one of them. Where is the other?"

"In Joey Webster's back," Kane replied. "Sit down, Essex. This thing is getting out of hand. As soon as it's daylight and I consider it safe, you'll have to take one of the cars and drive to the village for help. Joey was murdered, but when I reached him, there was a spark of life remaining. He made it fairly clear to me that the killer was Joey's stepfather. That could mean only one man—Dan Lawrence!"

ESSEX stared, eyes wide and mouth hanging slightly agape.

"I don't believe it," he said flatly. "It isn't possible. The old boy would have told me. Somebody got next to Joey and convinced him that was true, but I'm not convinced. Why Lawrence detested the woman."

"Then why didn't he drive her off the estate? Fire her?"

"I—don't know, Kane. I suggested that to him once a while back and he nearly bit my head off. I wonder if there could be a germ of truth in what Joey told you? But no—it's utterly fantastic."

"Well, he's going to tell us," Kane said with determination in his voice. "Things point to him as the killer. I don't believe he's quite as badly hurt as we think. It's even possible that Dr. McCormick is being paid a little something to lend a helping hand. I intend to find out about that too."

Essex sat on the edge of his chair, nervously tapping one foot.

"The more I think of it, the better a possibility it seems to become. The way Mrs. Webster used to boss him around. 'Don't do this, don't do that. Wear these clothes or those.' She practically dominated his life and yet it wasn't always like that. I remember when she'd take orders and obey them without a word. Kane—you've stumbled on the truth. It's a ghastly thing to say, but it looks like—"

"We'll soon know." Kane stopped short for he heard soft footsteps descending the stairs. "Who's that?"

"Relax," Essex smiled wryly. "It's just some of Ann's work. She thought that because she's so darned happy, everyone else should be, too, and—well, she went to Margaret's room and sort of squared things up for you. She told Margaret you had asked her to come down. Of course if I knew anything like Joey's death had occurred, I wouldn't have agreed—"

"It's all right—and thanks for your thoughtfulness. I'll admit I was a bit envious when I learned about you and Ann. Make sure McCormick is still parked in front of the door and watch the house. Bruno is still on the loose and I don't exactly trust him."

CHAPTER VI

SUBSTITUTED DRUGS



MARGARET came in slowly. She nodded to Essex, sat down in a deep leather chair and smiled at Kane.

Ann said you wanted to see me."

Essex left so unobtrusively that Kane wasn't even aware of his departure for a couple of minutes. He walked over and stood in front of Margaret.

"I didn't ask to have you sent down," he said. "That was Ann's happy thought, but I'm glad you're here. Things have happened. Joey's dead."

Margaret's face became pale and one hand clutched at the smooth leather arm of her chair. Kane went on:

"He was murdered, but before he died, Joey told me a few things. Among them was the fact that he thought of me as a killer—"

"Les," she arose quickly. "Bruno intimated you might not be Leslie Kane, but of course you are. Otherwise Uncle Dan wouldn't have accepted you. I think that Joey told him. Joey was in his house that night. Bruno was hiding him."

"Now there is another thing. I have recently prepared Lawrence's will. His original left you the bulk of his estate—a great deal of money. The new will provides that only twenty-five thousand be granted you because Lawrence indicates that you are independently wealthy and not in need of his fortune. That doesn't quite jibe with what you told me and I've got to learn the truth."

"Yes," she said slowly. "I understand that and I'll tell you. My mother married a scientist, who worked in a research laboratory for small pay, but he was always on the verge of discovering something. All he ever developed was hope.

"Mother was extremely proud. She didn't want Uncle Dan to know she'd married a failure. She'd have spurned Uncle Dan's efforts to help us financially. And there would have been trouble. So you see how it was. Uncle Dan was given to believe that we were wealthy and, of course, he thinks I was left a sizeable fortune. The truth is—it took every penny I could manage to scrape together for funeral expenses.

"I've lived a lie, so far as my uncle is concerned. I'm not sorry. His money doesn't make the slightest bit of difference to me."

"I'm going up to see Lawrence now," Kane said. "If he really did murder Mrs. Webster and Joey, he must be out of his mind and therefore

any new will he has made can probably be contested."

"Just a moment, Les," Margaret said. "Before you go through with this, I want to tell you that Uncle Dan never killed anyone. Such things just aren't in his make-up. He's a good hater, yes, but that's as far as he goes. Please believe me."

KANE stepped close to her. "I wish I could. I hope it turns out the way you hope it will, but if it shouldn't, don't feel too badly toward me."

Dr. McCormick was still on guard duty. Kane took his arm and piloted the physician into his bedroom.

"Just to be certain about things," he said, supposing we take a look at your medicine kit, especially the bottle of morphine with which you drugged Lawrence."

McCormick bristled.

"Are you insinuating that I—"

"Doctor, I'm looking for facts. Now are you going to open that kit or must I do it myself?"

McCormick shrugged and obeyed. Kane picked up the slim vial labeled *Morph. Sulph.* $\frac{1}{4}$ gr. He unscrewed the top and poured several tiny pills into his hand. Kane moistened one finger, permitted it to rest for a moment against one pill and then touched it to his lips. He grimaced.

"I thought morphine had little or no taste, Doctor."

"It's slightly bitter."

"Then you were bamboozled," Kane grunted. "This stuff tastes sweet. Do you carry saccharin?"

"Yes—yes, of course. There's a bottle of quarter grain pills . . . Kane, has someone switched medicines? Let me taste one of those pills."

McCormick did.

"Saccharin!" He gasped. "Why that means I gave Lawrence an injection of saccharin. It wouldn't make him sleep, yet he's been snoring away in there making more noise than an army barracks. Let's go in and have

a look at him. Nobody is going to trick me and get away with it."

"You stay in the hall," Kane said tartly. "I'll look in on Lawrence alone. What's the best way to test him and see whether or not he's feigning a drugged sleep."

McCormick passed over a small surgical flashlight. "Open his eyelid and shine this right on the pupil. You can tell by its dilation whether or not he's drugged."

Kane took the light and walked briskly into Lawrence's room. The man, thoroughly swathed in bandages lay on his back, breathing deeply and regularly. Kane bent over him, reached toward his right eyelid and turned on the flash. Instantly the eyes opened.

"What kind of a silly stunt is this? Oh, it's you, Kane. What's up?"

"You've been up—or I'll surrender my reputation as a legal detective," Kane retorted. "Look here, Lawrence, it's time to put an end to all this nonsense. You're not as sick as you pretend to be. You've been out of bed. You went downstairs and got those knives of yours. There's a smear from your oil-soaked bandages on the wall. I'm warning you—talk to me or to the State Police."

Lawrence must have realized that all necessity for pretense was gone. He sat bolt upright.

"All right, Kane. Supposing I have been shamming. What of it? I'm privileged to do as I please. I've been badly burned, yes—and hurt too. I faked my true condition to you. Even that fool McCormick thinks I'm worse than I really feel.

"Why? To see how these doting relatives and employees of mine would take it. I wanted to find out if they'd fight among themselves for a share in my estate. Well—nothing happened. I'm satisfied. I'll make a complete explanation to anybody."

"Even about the murder of Mrs. Webster and her son, Joey?"

Kane expected that Lawrence

would be speechless with surprise, but the crabbed old man just waved a bandaged hand.

"There's just one stipulation. First of all you're to go downstairs and open my safe. Remove the new will you typed. Bring it up here and I'll sign it—make the thing legal. You'll also find an envelope containing twenty thousand dollars. I want that too. Get them, do you hear me? Or I'll freeze up on you and every policeman in the country."

After hesitating, Kane decided to take a chance. Lawrence gave him, verbally, the combination of the safe.

Kane opened the safe, found the will and the envelope of currency and returned to Lawrence's bedroom.

"Where's that idiot of a doctor?" croaked Lawrence.

"Outside—near the head of the steps," Kane said. "Here is the will—my fountain pen and your money. Now sign it and give me the whole truth about this affair. Remember, I'm no prosecutor or police officer. I'm here in the capacity of your lawyer. I want to help you, but I can't unless I have the truth."

Lawrence managed to wriggle the fountain pen beneath his bandages as he scrawled his signature on the will. Kane glanced at it. Hardly much question about the writing. Few people had such a crabbed hand.

"Now help me up—into a better sitting position," Lawrence said. "Put your arms around me, you nitwit. That's better. Now hoist me up."

CHAPTER VII

FLIGHT OF THE SICK MAN



WRAPPING both arms around the man, Kane gently raised him.

Suddenly one bandaged fist drew back, snapped forward and collided with his jaw. Kane slumped across the bed, trying to dust the cobwebs out of his brain. He was vaguely

aware of Lawrence shoving him aside, quietly getting out of bed and seizing a flower vase. The vase smashed across the side of Kane's head.

A door banged. Someone shouted and then a man screamed. The sound of someone rolling down the steps forced Kane to get to his feet.

He found McCormick at the bottom of the steps. Margaret was kneeling beside him.

"It was Uncle Dan," she cried. "He went out the front door and he took a rifle with him. He's gone mad, Les. He's stark crazy."

Kane tried to walk to the front door, but his legs were as uncertain as cooked spaghetti stalks. He sat down, cursing his futility.

"How is McCormick?" Kane mumbled groggily. He felt for his gun and Joey's. Both were gone.

"He'll be all right. Uncle Dan pushed him down the stairs. He's waking up now. Les—don't go after him. He'll kill you."

Kane, reeling slightly, was walking to the open door.

"Warn Essex and Ann to be on guard," he said, and disappeared into the night.

Lawrence, with all his bandages, should be an easy mark to spot, but Kane didn't see him. It would be light in half an hour, but a lot of things could happen in that short space of time.

Kane's head throbbed, but the fresh air revived him, and he broke into a trot.

Kane searched until the sky was hazy with light. He stood on the banks of the big lake, wondering if Lawrence could have chosen the easy way out. There was something afloat about a hundred yards offshore.

Then Kane saw what looked like an arm, suddenly jut up. It took him less than a minute to remove his clothing down to shorts. He waded into the icy water until he was chest deep and then he plunged forward.

Swimming with long, powerful strokes, Kane rapidly overhauled the object he'd seen. It was a boat, down to the gunwales and in danger of sinking. Kane reached the side of the craft and looked into it.

Burly Bruno lay there, his arms and legs securely tied. He'd been placed in a rowboat and huge rocks piled on top of him. The sides of the boat had been stove in to admit water slowly. It wouldn't take much more ballast to sink her.

Kane clawed at the ropes and had loosened Bruno's arms when he heard the sharp crack of a rifle. A bullet smacked against a rock. Another followed and sent several chips of wood flying.

Whoever the marksman might be, he was good. He had the range and the next bullet might do the trick. Kane took a quick look shoreward. It was light enough now so he could plainly see an overcoated figure standing on a huge stone and taking aim with a rifle.

THERE was only one thing Kane could do. He seized the boat and deliberately tipped it over. Then he dove, down and down until he thought his lungs would burst. When his head bobbed on the surface the same crack of a rifle reached him and he went under again.

The whirling eddies caused by the sinking boat, rocks and men smoothed themselves out after a short time.

It seemed that the lake had taken its full toll.

As Kane reached the surface again, he heard a shout. Essex, McCormick, Ann and Margaret were on the landing, waving frantically. Essex was peeling off his coat.

Kane started to swim toward them. Willing hands pulled him ashore and he stood there shivering until Margaret brought his clothes. Essex wrapped a topcoat around his soaking body.

"Bruno may have drowned," he panted. "Lawrence must have known just where to find him, sneaked up on him and clubbed him. Bruno's head was bloody."

"Listen," Essex barked. "It's a car—in the garage."

Essex began running madly toward the house with Doctor McCormick at his heels. When Kane and the girls reached them, Essex stormed out of the garage.

"The limousine—it's gone! Lawrence must have been watching us and seized the opportunity to escape."

Kane groaned.

"Of course it must have been Lawrence. I removed the keys from all cars in the garage, but he probably had another one. We'll have to go into the house to get the ones I left there. I need a change of clothing and besides, *if that was Lawrence*, he's got the fastest car and a mighty good start on us. Still he'll never get away."

[Turn Page]



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Essex dropped into a chair and mopped his forehead. McCormick and the two girls were downstairs. Kane swiftly changed to dry clothing.

"What did you mean," Essex queried, "when you said 'if that was Lawrence getting away in the car'?"

Kane shrugged.

"Nothing—of course it was Lawrence. Who else could it be unless there was someone on the estate nobody knew about? Mrs. Webster is dead. Joey is dead. Bruno is in the lake and Lawrence has run out. There's you, McCormick, Ann, Margaret and myself left."

"How do you think you can stop that man?" Essex demanded. "Don't forget, we're not so far from Canada."

"If he goes that way," Kane slid his knotted tie into place, "he'll be caught in no time at all. The border is watched carefully these days. He won't have a chance. Here's my idea. We'll take the other cars, head for town and notify the state police to set road traps all over the area. They'll also send out a nine state alarm which ought to hem Lawrence in pretty well."

Essex got up.

"Well I'm not content to sit here doing nothing while that killer gets clear. Where are the keys to my roadster? I'll take Ann and McCormick too, if you like, into town. We'll meet at the post office. By the time you get there, I'll have state troopers functioning."

Kane opened a dresser drawer and handed Essex two keys. "Take your pick. I've forgotten which is which."

Essex took the proper key, laid the other on the dresser and fled. Kane went downstairs to find Margaret waiting for him.

"Come to think of it," he said, "that note in town was an odd piece of business. I could have sworn it was written by your uncle."

"How could it have been?" Mar-

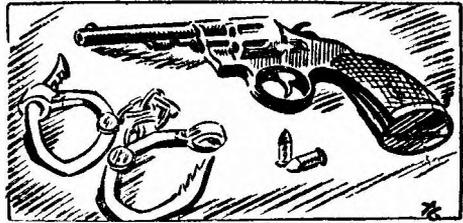
garet challenged. "He wouldn't know what Joey was up to."

"Granted," he said. "That note is still to be explained. When Joey's little trick didn't work, he decided he'd better take me to the estate, especially when he knew I had a gun in my pocket. Later he tried to gun out your uncle and he darned near succeeded too."

"Don't you think we ought to hurry, Les? Essex will be furious and what will the state troopers think?"

Kane grinned.

"They won't get there for a while yet. Anyway Essex will take care of the details—about the alarm and such. You know, Margaret, there's a brand new angle connected with this case. Before I explain it, I want you



to know how I feel about things. You, I mean. I—well—hang it all I'm not going to let a thing like this prevent us from seeing each other again. Not unless you wish it that way."

"I don't, Les. Of course I don't. I was an impressionable little halfwit to have believed you weren't exactly what you said you were. Now what are those new angles?"

"Simple, my dear. You see, if your uncle is insane, then this new will which he signed before he bopped me on the head, is invalid. No court would hold it the act of a sane man—and so the original will still is good. That leaves the most of your uncle's fortune to you. Of course Mrs. Webster—or Mrs. Lawrence, as you will—was plentifully provided for, but she and her logical heir are both dead—so you get it all. The figures are going to make you dizzy. That's why

I wondered about—ah—you and—me.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE KILLER UNDER WRAPS



HE sat very close to him as he nursed the sedan along that narrow, winding road. Kane didn't say much. He was on the alert for trouble and save that it might have worried Margaret, he would have put his automatic on the seat beside him.

They rolled into town to find the whole village clustering around the post office. Four state troopers, three in uniform, were there, talking to Essex and Doctor McCormick. Essex saw Kane approaching and his features grew dark with anger.

“What did you do on the way down—park?” he growled. “Can't you realize this is a murder case?”

“I saw the bodies,” Kane reminded him. “Hello, officers. I'm Leslie Kane of New York. This young lady is Dan Lawrence's niece.”

“Sergeant Grogan,” the trooper in civilian clothes nodded. “I'm technically off duty. For a guy who has just seen three killings, you're certainly calm and collected, Mr. Kane. But then I guess that's just your training, eh? Heard about you. Regular big city trouble shooter, aren't you?”

Ann Deering approached Essex rather timidly and tried to insert her arm beneath his. Essex pushed her away. Ann looked as though she was ready to burst into tears.

Kane grinned at Essex.

“Well—looks as though you might not marry an heiress after all, Essex. Tough going—to win a fortune and lose it all in the same few hours.”

“I know what you mean,” Essex snapped. “Lawrence will be adjudged crazy and the first will stands. Well at least I'll get ten thousand he willed me there.”

“I don't know,” Kane said slowly.

“It's a point of law. We'll get around to that later on. I—what's wrong, Essex? You look as though you're staring at a ghost.”

“Les,” Margaret huddled close to him. “Les—it's Bruno! I—I thought he was—dead.”

“Well, well.” Kane patted Margaret's hand and moved over toward the hulking form of Lawrence's caretaker. “Strange things will happen. New ones every day. Last time I saw Bruno he was in the water. Have any trouble, Bruno?”

“Hey, what is this?” Sergeant Grogan elbowed his way closer. “I thought you said this bird was on the bottom of the lake.”

“Oh, yes, so I did.” Kane turned his most disarming smile on the sergeant. “Seems I made a slight mistake, but all in good faith, Sergeant. Bruno—you haven't answered my question.”

Bruno handed over a piece of folded paper. “I got it all right, sir, like you told me to do when we were in the water. Had a bit of trouble with Doctor McCormick's hired man. You'd better send someone out there. You can find him tied up in the hen house. I took Mr. Lawrence's limousine, went right to the doctor's and broke open his desk. I found it all right, but I don't understand what it's all about.”

“What's the meaning of this?” McCormick howled. “Why did you tell this man to invade my home and break into my desk?”

KANE went back to Margaret's side.

“I'm afraid, my dear, that you'll have to face something. Your Uncle Dan is dead. Has been for a couple of days. He didn't survive the accident. McCormick buried him—filed a death certificate—a copy of which Bruno got for me.

“He stated that a tramp had been burned to death in a shack well out of town. Everyone knew the shack

burned down and a corpse was found in the ashes. That was—Dan Lawrence. Bruno told me what he knew while I cut him loose in the boat. So I sent him to town to look through McCormick's records. The doctor had to account for the corpse some way."

SUDDENLY Essex lowered his head and tried to drive through the crowd. Like a flash Sergeant Grogan was after Essex, leaping past the excited men and women. Essex reached for his hip pocket, but holsters were made for fast draws. Grogan's big service pistol barked once and Essex fell against a tree near a car with a bullet through his knee. Grogan kicked the gun out of his hand.

"And there you have your complete confession," Kane said softly. "Essex was behind it all. He simply took advantage of the accident which killed Dan Lawrence. McCormick helped him, seeking a nice juicy cut in the fortune Essex would get. First of all Essex showed up at the estate and told about the accident to satisfy Mrs. Webster, Joey and Bruno.

"Then he slipped back to the village and McCormick fixed him up with bandages that could be quickly removed. Like a cast with hinges, I suppose. Just open it up and—there you are in the flesh. Ann Deering always had been sweet on Essex, so he knew she'd be a pushover. He returned to the estate as Dan Lawrence, but so bandaged that he couldn't be recognized. However, Mrs. Webster had her suspicions and for that reason she was murdered."

"And he told Joey, Mr. Lawrence was sending for a professional killer to do away with Mrs. Webster," Bruno added. "Even I fell for it—and, believe me, Mr. Kane—I was set to wring your neck more than once."

Bruno's grim face almost managed a smile.

"Thanks," Kane grinned, "for not trying. Anyway Essex sent for me so I'd be there when things happened

and I could draw up a new will which left everything to Ann instead of Margaret. I noticed that whenever I saw the bandaged man, Essex was never there. It made me wonder, but naturally, I didn't dream he was taking Lawrence's place. Not until he signed the will—a perfect forgery. He must have practiced Lawrence's handwriting for days.

"Well—he gave himself away when he signed that will. He had to use a pen and he loosened the bandages. They fell away from his forearm a bit and I noticed a peculiar burn mark. I'd seen it before—on Essex's arm when he showed me how he'd been burned in the accident too.

"Essex had a perfect idea. He'd kill Mrs. Webster and Joey to prevent them from claiming any part of the estate which would have been large because Mrs. Webster was really Mrs. Lawrence. He also tore her house to pieces looking for a copy of the marriage certificate. I presume he got it. McCormick issues licenses here and I'll wager he drew up the one for Dan Lawrence. Probably married them, too, so Essex needed his services badly."

"Bruno got in the way so he was staked out for a rough finish too. Essex planned to let me watch him sign the will, hand over twenty thousand dollars in cash and then he slugged me, ran out of the house and removed the bandages temporarily. He got rid of Bruno easily enough."

"Sneaked up on me when my back was turned, he did," Bruno affirmed with a malignant glance at Essex.

"Yes," Kane said. "Then it would appear that Lawrence had committed the crimes and ran out with money enough to hide forever. Later on Essex would have married Ann, claimed Lawrence's fortune according to the new will and after he made sure all the estate was in his hands, Ann would have gotten the bounce.

"Only Essex was not an attorney. He didn't look forward and when the

thought struck him that Lawrence might be adjudged insane and the will invalid, he showed his true colors by thrusting Ann aside. Everything he did was calculated to be the work of Dan Lawrence, who would never be found—of course—because he was buried in an unnamed grave. Well—I guess that's all."

There was an express running through Rumford Junction and an excited and obliging station agent flagged it down. Margaret and Kane occupied a drawing room on the way back to Boston.

"You know," Kane said thoughtfully, "Essex made a very sane and lucid statement back there in the lodge. He said that Lawrence decided not to give you all that money because a big fortune and one small girl are dangerous. Now we can't let a situation like that go on forever. You'll hold the moneybags, but I'm a smart lawyer. I'll hoodwink you every time you turn around and pretty soon that fortune . . ."

"You can have it," Margaret put her head on his shoulder. "Every penny. I'll trade it—for you."



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CHAPTER I

SHAVING THE LAW

LITTLE JOE BUNT, best known to his neighbors as "The Mad Barber," was glumly unhappy. He wished he had been satisfied to shave faces—instead of the law. It would have meant less wear and tear upon his inherently honest soul.

As he honed a razor the slight grinding of the fine edge on the oily stone kept saying, "You're a gyp—you're a gyp—you're a gyp."

The neighbors were starting to avoid his one-chair shop. Gilt letters on his window read,

HAIR CUT TO FIT ANY FACE

Fitting some of the faces in Greenwich Village required an artist.



Little Joe was that artist.

Yet Little Joe was far more than a mere manipulator of tonsorial shears. He had ambition to be a great detective. His five foot height and an even hundred pounds in weight barred him from the Force.

So he read a book, an immense tome. It was Applied Criminal Psychology and Persuasion. It lay beside him now, opened to the chapter entitled Power of Suggestion.

Little Joe hoped a customer or one of his long-haired neighbors would

Little Joe Delves Into Mining Stocks



Little Joe's fist connected under Potter's ear where he had trimmed away the hair

drop in. He repeated a phrase from the chapter he was reading.

"The projected will of subconscious thought may act as a magnet to attract and draw the individual upon whom the conscious processes of the brain are directed."

The words were no more than uttered than the bell above the door tinkled. Big Jim O'Grady barged in. Little Joe shivered. Something was

wrong either with the book or his mind.

He hadn't been thinking of Jim O'Grady. For O'Grady was attached to the department as a first grade detective.

Little Joe averted his bleak eyes. He felt that any good detective automatically would realize that he had been shaving the law—shaving it too close—even if his intentions had

and Strikes a Rich Vein of Mystery!

been and still were of the very best possible.

"Hiya, Joe!" boomed O'Grady. "Still at the book, huh? Now I was thinkin' of a case. We have the goods on this guy. His wife took poison by mistake. This guy rushes out to buy an antidote, havin' only a few minutes, when he ought of called a doctor.

"It's a half hour trip. On the way home he falls down and breaks the bottle of antidote. Before he can get more, his wife dies. He had a girl friend, so we think it's murder by absent treatment. Now what do we do?"

"You bring the guy in and you beat the tar out of him until he's ready to tell you he's guilty, even if he isn't," said Little Joe. "But it isn't legal, and if he has a good mouthpiece he'll make you look like monkeys at the trial."

"And according to the book, Joe, what do we do?"

"First you leave the guy alone in an empty room a long while. Then you leave him alone still longer. And when you come in you don't say anything, just look at him, and go out and leave him alone again. You keep on doing that. It is what is known as the Power of Suggestion."

BIG JIM O'GRADY nodded.

"You keep right on readin' that book, Joe. You'll go places—but what places, I don't know."

He clumped out of the shop after a hasty shave.

The little bell rang 250 pounds of smiling, exuberant confidence into the shop. Mr. Merton Jolly exuded good humor. His fat face was a real life study in optimism.

"And it's a good morning, Joe, good morning, a very good morning!" he chortled. "An' I grabbed old time by the foreleg an' got Merkle, the artist, on the dotted line for most of his picture check. Two hundred down, an' here's your split, Joe, my boy!"

The ebullient Mr. Jolly was riffling greenbacks from a wallet. Little Joe glanced quickly at his window. None of his neighbors must witness this transaction. Some already suspected him.

"I've told you, Jolly, we must be more circumspect. Come into my back room."

He turned firmly away from the offered greenbacks. He took them from Mr. Jolly only when they were in his sleeping quarters in the rear of the shop.

"It's workin' out swell!" enthused Mr. Jolly. "You keep on settin' up the sheep, an' I'll do the shearin'. At that, we may be opening the way to fortune for many in Rolling Ridge Gold Company stock. Who knows?"

Little Joe had his qualms, but he accepted \$100 of the money offered by Mr. Jolly. His qualms were not sufficiently strong to refuse.

This had been going on for some time. The genial Mr. Jolly had been clever. He had selected the neighborhood barber as the one most likely to know the rise and fall of the small fortunes of his neighbors.

Mr. Jolly had proposed to make it fifty-fifty on all money obtained for Rolling Ridge gold stock in the neighborhood. Little Joe had been reluctant to enter such a nefarious partnership until an altruistic idea had come to him.

Mr. Jolly was the kind of a shearer who would find his sheep, anyway. And he would trim them. Knowing this, Little Joe had decided to play ball.

And when the sheep had all been sheared, and Mr. Jolly had departed, Little Joe reasoned, a bit obliquely, that he would be considered a Santa Claus when he restored at least the half of his neighbors' loss.

Moreover, he was working upon an idea of his own for the entrapment and the probable confinement in the clink of the optimistic Mr. Jolly. It was to be regretted that Little Joe's

book on Applied Criminal Psychology and Persuasion lacked a chapter on the simple subject of compounding a felony.

Having handed Little Joe his unlawful share of the morning take, the smiling Mr. Jolly was about to depart. Out in front the little bell rang.

Mr. Jolly poked his fat face into a crack of the door. He ducked back quickly. His gay manner abruptly vanished.

"Darn!" he muttered. "Old Suydam! An' he's been on the warpath! Seems he wrote out to Denver about Rolling Ridge gold, an' he's wantin' his two grand back! You'd ought to have known better than to steer me onto a miser, Joe! Besides, he's got some tough eggs for friends."

Little Joe did not argue that. In the shop Professor Suydam was removing his collar and thumping on the floor with his cane. He was tall and thin, and his long face ended in a pointed Van Dyke beard.

Little Joe was sure he wore the beard so that a trim twice a week, instead of a daily shave, would be sufficient. Professor Suydam had his hair cut once every two months. He owned a pawnshop.

Little Joe had short changed him ten cents once by mistake. He had returned two hours later for his dime.

PROFESSOR SUYDAM thumped his cane and complained.

"Joey! I haven't got all day! You know I allow myself only seventeen minutes for a trim! Joey!"

Mr. Jolly's fat face was sweating. Little Joe said:

"Stay in here until I get through with him."

"If you let the razor slip, it will be okay with me," growled Mr. Jolly. "Imagine an egg with all his dough writin' all the way out to Denver about a measly two grand. It's disgusting."

Little Joe clipped Professor Suydam's beard carefully. Suydam's eyes

were small and pinkish. They reminded Little Joe of a ferret he had once owned.

"You seen that gold brick swindler around this week?" Heard he'd been in your shop for a haircut."

Little Joe uttered a noncommittal sound, glancing at the rear door. He saw that Mr. Jolly had it partly open.

"Hope you haven't bought any of that phony stock of his," said Professor Suydam. "I'm only waitin' to catch up with him. I'll put him where he belongs. Denver investigators report the mine is only a small producer without a single rich vein."

"Close today, Professor?" said Little Joe weakly.

"Certainly!" snapped Suydam. "You know I always have it close!"

Little Joe's shears snipped busily. Suydam was suspected of fencing stolen stuff.

"You thinking of going to the police about that stock, Professor?" ventured Little Joe, sure Suydam would not risk that.

"I've already reported it!" snapped Suydam.

His Adam's apple jumped. Little Joe's hand slipped. A neat, red nick was gouged out of Professor Suydam's throat.

"Look out!" raged Suydam. "What is the matter with you?"

He pushed Little Joe roughly aside. He reared up in the chair to inspect his nicked throat in the mirror.

Little Joe felt his spine buckling all the way to his toes. For he had looked into the mirror, too. And Mr. Jolly had picked that unfortunate interval to poke his head out of the rear door, looking at Professor Suydam.

It was impossible for Little Joe to follow the succeeding explosion in detail. For a man of his age, Professor Suydam was spry. His anger made him quick.

"Swindler! Thief! Robber!"

The words popped from Professor Suydam on a high key. Little Joe

did make one grab at his violent client when Suydam landed on his feet. For Suydam had seized one of Little Joe's pet razors from under the mirror.

Then Little Joe was forced to make a flying tackle for Professor Suydam's legs. A heel kicked out two of his teeth and all of his concern for the safety of Mr. Jolly for the ensuing few seconds abruptly departed.

There were crashing sounds and oaths in the rear room. Little Joe was arising dizzily as Professor Suydam rushed past him, grabbed his hat, collar and cane on the fly, and departed with the barber towel still attached to his neck.

Little Joe thought desperately that he should call the police. But no alarm appeared to have been created in the street.

"Maybe it would be wiser to see if Mr. Jolly is still intact," mumbled Little Joe, moving toward the rear door as if walking in a bad dream.

His steps became slower and uncertain when a glistening red trickle of blood snaked forward to meet him.

CHAPTER II

DAMNING NOTEBOOK



MERTON JOLLY'S head lay close to the barber shop door. Blood still trickled from under one fat jowl.

Little Joe was very sick. Even so, he saw that Mr. Jolly's pockets had been turned inside

out. Murderer or not, Professor Suydam evidently had not overlooked collecting from a corpse.

Little Joe pushed heavy feet out into the shop toward the telephone. Now that it was murder, he was sure that his rôle of Good Samaritan to his neighbors would be greatly misunderstood by the unimaginative police.

"Joe!" gurgled a voice. "Don'tcha call anybody! Joe!"

Little Joe swung around with fascinated horror. The "corpse" was sitting up. A large and ugly slab of Mr. Jolly's fat cheek lobbed over his jaw like a sirloin steak.

When Little Joe got weakly back into the rear room and had closed the door, he was all but talking to himself. He tried to employ the Power of Suggestion upon himself, but his words failed to make sense.

"The next time you get yourself murdered, Mr. Jolly, you've got to go somewhere else," he said angrily. "I'll get a towel and fix that slash, and then I'm quitting. I'll give back all of the misgotten gains I have received."

Mr. Jolly talked out of the intact corner of his mouth.

"No you don't, an' it wouldn't do you any good if you did," he said. "That miserly skinflint! I'll get him! He took all the money I had, and the cash book. That's why you can't quit."

"Cash book?" gulped Little Joe. "What's that got to do with me?"

"It has the name of the gold stockholders and of the other sheep you have suggested shearing," stated Mr. Jolly. In it I have noted various amounts paid in cash to Joseph Bunt. I am an honest man, Joe."

Little Joe still had a razor in his hand. It required all of his will power to resist the temptation to complete the decapitation of Mr. Jolly, so neatly begun by Suydam.

He could see his honorable career as a barber blighted. His hopes of ever becoming a sleuth went glimmering. As soon as Professor Suydam, who played with crooked gents and tough eggs behind the camouflage of the three golden balls, discovered what was in the notebook, Little Joe had an idea it would be suicide to remain in his shop.

Mr. Jolly was twisting a towel around his face.

"I'll get that money and my notebook back, if I have to skin old Suydam off his spine!" promised Mr. Jolly.

A few numbed lobes of Little Joe's brain started to pick up.

"You're a dead man, Mr. Jolly," he said, waving his razor.

Mr. Jolly took an alarmed step backward. But Little Joe was merely emphasizing his point.

"You're a murdered man, Mr. Jolly," he said. "And by Christmas, you're staying dead! Don't you get it?"

"I have not been murdered, as you can see," said the perplexed Mr. Jolly. "How can I get that notebook back and keep us out of the hands of the law if I am dead? Answer me that one?"

"And how will Professor Suydam, as he is known, explain that notebook or what he thinks is phony stock to the police when he is a murderer on the dodge?"

"Heck an' glory!" spouted Mr. Jolly. "I hadn't thought of that one! But how do I stay murdered?"

HE EDGED suddenly farther from Little Joe and his waving razor. He did not like the gleam in Little Joe's eye. It came to Mr. Jolly there could be a way for him to stay murdered permanently, and all of his unfortunate demise might still be laid to the fugitive Professor Suydam.

"Now, Joe," he said placatingly. "Let's talk this over."

But Little Joe's vagrant thought was upon Applied Psychology, rather than personally applied homicide.

"Suydam would be expecting me to call the police, or perhaps he would imagine I am in a panic and will lock up the shop and leave the corpse here to be discovered later," mused Little Joe.

Mr. Jolly shivered. "Stop talking like that, Joe," he pleaded. "I was thinking of cutting you in for a bigger share—"

"I am through with gold mining stock, Mr. Jolly," interrupted Little Joe. "We will return all of the money. Rather, I will give back the money and explain that was your last wish as you died in my arms."

"But—Joe—if you call the police, you will have to have a body—s-a-y! Let's quit this! What do we do?"

Little Joe was thinking fast.

"I will now call the police for the kids that smashed my window," he said. "It will be all the same to Professor Suydam, who doubtless is hiding out somewhere, with some of his tough eggs watching to see what is happening. Or possibly we should send you to the hospital—"

"I will not go to a hospital—"

"Or the morgue. If I can get in touch with my friend, Jim O'Grady, that might be arranged. Anyway, you stick right here in this room until I have time to think."

"I wish you would quit thinking, Joe. You don't keep your mind on pleasant thoughts—"

Little Joe closed the door to his room upon Mr. Jolly, and turned the key in the lock. He lifted the phone receiver in the shop and said:

"Give me police—quick!"

He reported that his window had just been smashed. Then he went outside to smash it. That was a grave mistake. For as he was looking for a loose brick or something, a coupé pulled up.

The coupé had not come far. In fact, Little Joe had a dimly conscious thought that the little car had been parked only a few yards away and had simply moved to the front of his shop.

Two persons climbed out. Little Joe forgot all about smashing the window. A slatty, scholarly young man, and a luscious dish in the shape of a tricky brunette with a square-cut, blue-black bob crossed the sidewalk to his door.

Little Joe's heart skipped, then steadied some.

The young man was Potter Suydam, the poetic nephew of Professor Suydam, of the pawn shop. The girl was Landa Carter, an unpoetic blues singer at the Black Rabbit Café, where Potter Suydam often read his unsalable verse to defenseless villagers who listened only because they also wished to read their unsalable verse to Potter Suydam and others.

"I'll have a haircut, Joey," cooed little Miss Carter. "And Potter needs his ears trimmed. They're lost in the bush."

Little Joe nodded, glancing fearfully up and down the too quiet street. He could not now smash his window on the sly, and already he could hear a police squad car raising merry Hades with its siren a couple of blocks away. He was almost tottering as he followed Potter and Landa into the shop. Landa seated herself in the chair. Little Joe eyed the rear door to his room.

He saw that Potter Suydam also was scrutinizing the door or perhaps it was only as the Power of Suggestion had said: "The nerves of a guilty man are like the taut strings of a violin, to be played upon by the suggestion of a calm mind."

LITTLE JOE made an effort to restore a calm mind. The squad car wailed to a stop. Two uniformed men came in quickly. Little Joe saw Potter Suydam start up in his chair.

The luscious Landa said:

"Goodness! I was *afraid* going around with a poet was against the law!"

The two coppers said other things, harshly, like:

"Well, where is the riot?" And, "Didn't you report your window was smashed?"

"The operator's mistake," said Little Joe. "I said kids were throwing things, and the window might be smashed."

Potter Suydam took Little Joe's breath away by verifying the lie.

"Sure, I saw the little rats as we drove up," said Potter. "They beat it."

"What's the matter with your mouth?" a cop asked suspiciously.

"Had a couple of teeth pulled," Joe blurted.

Potter looked at Landa and grinned tightly.

The squad car went away. Little Joe began shearing Landa's hair. He did a fast job, but the minutes dragged.

He had Potter Suydam in the chair, rediscovering his ears by cutting circles in his long hair. He noticed that Potter had mean, pinkish, ferret eyes like his uncle, Professor Suydam.

It was a long time to Little Joe before Potter got out of the chair. Twice he heard creaking noises in his rear room, but Potter did not seem to notice.

Then, when Little Joe hoped everything was clear, Potter said:

"Funny, Uncle Roger should have left his necktie here, Joe? That's the polka-dot I gave him for his birthday and he's worn it ever since."

"Your uncle was in a hurry," said Little Joe weakly.

He was sure that Potter Suydam was staring at the door to his rear room. What was young Potter thinking? Had he already contacted his Uncle Roger outside? Had he been parked in his coupé in the block with Landa Carter, when Professor Suydam had rushed madly from the shop.

"Okay, Potter, let's get goin'," said Landa from behind Little Joe. She was over by the shelf under the big mirror. "I'm still a workin' gal, so what are we waiting for?"

Little Joe was convinced that Potter could not have missed the dried red blood on the floor near the rear door. It looked very much like bright, red paint.

But young Potter blinked behind his owlish glasses and said, "A'right, darling. Joe handed you a hair trim

that makes your eyes as green as zircons."

Landa laughed a little nervously. Little Joe was nervous himself, inside. Landa hung back as Potter reached the sidewalk.

"You know I like you, Joe," she said quickly. "If you happened to show up at the Wellington, in Park Street, this afternoon, I might give you some interesting information."

"What the—"

"Darn!" exploded the blues singer, evidently for the benefit of Potter outside. "I'm losing my heel, Joe! Hold my hand while I kick it on!"

Little Joe was somewhat dazed. He had more information now than he could digest mentally. It came to him that Landa had seen Professor Suydam, and knew something she wanted to pass along.

He held her hand obligingly. She kicked her heel down hard on the floor.

"Apartment two-C, after three o'clock," she said between her teeth.

Then Landa went out. Pondering it a moment later, Little Joe got nowhere. Then something halted him. He had laid out seven sharp razors this morning. Now there were but five.

Two of his razors were missing.

CHAPTER III

REDHEADED MENACE



LITTLE JOE made swift mental addition. He had laid out seven sharp razors this morning. Professor Suydam had grabbed one to work on Mr. Merton Jolly.

There should now be six razors.

There were but five!

Only Potter Suydam, Landa Cotter and two policemen had been in the shop since the assault upon Mr. Jolly.

"The razor Professor Suydam took must be in the back room," muttered Little Joe. "Anyway, I'll have to get Mr. Jolly out before he is seen. I wonder why Landa Carter wants me to visit her?"

His eyes cocked toward the front window. Sudden goose pimples chased each other around his skin. He was far from alone. A delightfully appealing redhead was looking, like the famed butcher boy of the song, into his window.

She was not trying to appear delightful. Her red mouth was a straight line. Little Joe did not have to be close up to know that her eyes were blazing.

"She'd have to come along just now," groaned Little Joe.

The red-headed girl was Della Corcoran, of the corner lunchery. She had certain invested rights in Little Joe's affections. She showed every sign of having been near enough to see Little Joe support Landa Carter while she did or did not kick on a loose heel.

The redhead undoubtedly was several degrees hotter right now than the simmering August day. She was a menace to blondes, brunettes or other redheads who fooled around Little Joe.

Little Joe turned away from the rear room door. He did not dare to expose Mr. Jolly.

"Well! Well!" spoke the redhead, walking in. "Maybe you was just having a close look at Landa Carter's wrist-watch, an' maybe you got her address. You're twenty minutes late showin' up for lunch. Or maybe you ain't hungry?"

"Listen, sweetheart. I was held up by a customer, an' I'll be along. Right away."

"Well? What're you waitin' for? This is Thursday, or wouldn't you know that either? An' we was dated for Coney, seein' it's an old custom to close your shop Thursday afternoons."

"Yes—yes—sure, Della, I'll be along," said Little Joe. "Just as soon as I use the phone, sweetheart, and change into my other trousers."

"I'll be right here," she said firmly. "Go on and use the phone. I dare you."

Little Joe turned back toward the rear room. He expected at any minute to have the partly decapitated Mr. Jolly hammering on the rear room door. He thought he could slip in without the redhead spotting his furtiveness.

Then, right across the street he saw them!

"Murch Lano and Hoppy Bragg," he muttered. "An' they're not just sun bathing."

Of all the nefarious, strong-armed eggs of the Village, Murch Lano and Hoppy Bragg were rated the most dangerous. They were known to be linked with some of the uptown jewel gypers who were said to do their fencing with Professor Suydam.

Little Joe added it up in his mind quickly, twice. Both times it came out the same answer.

"Up to here and now I am the only living witness to what old Suydam believes to be the murder of Mr. Jolly," ran his thought. "As such I am so much poison to Professor Suydam. So that makes the unexpected business of young Potter and Landa Carter match up."

BRIEFLY, Little Joe judged he was right in the middle of one homicidal spot. And that in addition to Professor Suydam having a little notebook from Mr. Jolly that of itself was a mighty club over Little Joe Bunt.

"You got the jitters, or what?" demanded the redhead. "Don't tell me that blues dame promised to blow back as soon as she ditched her boy friend? Now put on your other pants, Joey!"

Little Joe never before had squeezed through so little space be-

tween a door and its jamb. He had fingers on his lips for the benefit of Mr. Jolly. The gold stock promoter being back here with his throat partly cut would be only a little less serious than a blonde or a brunette.

Then Little Joe gulped hard. A breeze blew through the window at the back of the room. The window opened into a little yard.

Mr. Jolly was no longer playing the part of a corpse. He was gone.

"Sa-ay! You seen a ghost? Y' try to run any—for the luvva Pete! Joey! Who'd you kill?"

That was the redhead. She was staring at the dried blood on the floor.

"A fellow had a nose bleed," mumbled Little Joe weakly. "Had it bad, an' I let him lie down in here."

Then Little Joe straightened up. He would always go just so far with the redhead, then he cracked down. The time had come.

"Sweetheart," he said firmly. "You will go back to the coffee joint. I will be there when I get darn good an' ready. I am not going to Coney today, but it would be a good idea if you get out of here quick before I lose my temper."

"Yes, Joey," said the redhead meekly, and she backed toward the front doorway, still staring at the spilled blood.

Because the redhead was leaving, Little Joe slammed the door of his little room. Thus he missed seeing Della Corcoran walk backward into two pairs of hands.

The hands of Murch Lano and Hoppy Bragg were quick and quiet. The redhead was not going to Coney Island this afternoon. She was going away on the floor of a sedan, with Hoppy Bragg driving.

And Murch Lano was clumping heavily into Little Joe's barber shop and toward the rear room.

Little Joe heard the heavy feet. He had been looking around the floor and elsewhere in the room for a razor.

He thought that perhaps Professor Suydam had dropped the razor before rushing from the shop.

There was no razor. That could mean only that Suydam had pocketed the weapon, or Mr. Jolly had taken it with him as he departed.

Hearing Murch's heavy tread, Little Joe slipped the bolt inside the door. Murch rattled at the knob. He found the door was locked.

"Listen, Joe," he said with quiet deadliness. "Do you open up or do I kick my way in? The professor sent me."

LITTLE JOE had never gone through a window or over a wall faster than just now. He dropped into an areaway and glided toward a side street.

"Mr. Jolly would do one of two things," he murmured. "He will get himself in the clear, or he will take a chance and go after the notebook and the money that Professor Suydam took from him. But Suydam would be afraid to go back to his pawn shop, and Mr. Jolly would not know of the quiet address that Landa Carter supplied. Mr. Jolly will deserve all the trouble he encounters."

Nevertheless, Little Joe made straight for the Suydam pawn shop. There was just a chance that he might overtake Mr. Jolly.

Only a few minutes later Little Joe was in a taxicab headed for the Wellington Apartments, named by Landa Carter. For a pimply-faced clerk in Professor Suydam's pawnshop had said that Mr. Jolly had been there. The clerk had known that Mr. Jolly had done business with Suydam.

He also knew of an address where Professor Suydam might be reached on occasions of absence from his shop. And Suydam had not warned him against supplying that address.

Little Joe had almost choked when the clerk had said:

"I guess Professor Suydam is at the Wellington Apartments where he

often goes. And I guess Mr. Jolly is on his way there, for I guessed it was all right to tell him."

Little Joe guessed the dumb clerk had guessed everything into one heckuva mess.

The taxicab went eastward. It was abruptly blocked by jammed traffic at a corner of the Wellington Apartments block. Little Joe hastily paid the driver and eased out.

He squirmed through a sidewalk crowd. First he saw the flame of the red-headed menace. When he was close enough, Joe saw that Della Corcoran's face was bruised. She was looking vacantly at two men who were supporting her.

Little Joe resisted an impulse to go to the girl. Something, and it was not Criminal Psychology, told him he had best remain unobserved.

"Who was the driver of the hit-and-run car, sister?" one of the men supporting the redhead demanded.

"Was I ridin' in a car, Mister?"

The redhead said it dumbly, as if she really did not know.

"A'right, sister!" snapped her interrogator. "Keep playin' it that way! You tumbled out when the car took the sidewalk an' hit this guy! The way it was done it was a deliberate bump-off! The cops won't like it, sister!"

Little Joe made himself smaller than he was. He saw the man on the sidewalk. The man was undoubtedly a corpse. His eyes were staring horribly at nothing. One of his wounds was a lacerated cheek that looked like a raw beefsteak.

Mr. Merton Jolly was all finished, completely murdered this time. Little Joe's brain seemed to shrivel until it felt like a loose, dried kernel in a peanut shell.

A woman spoke up.

"I saw him come runnin' out of the Wellington Apartments," she said. "That car jumped the curb to get him and the door flew open. I saw this red-headed dame standin' up in

the sedan just before it came out of the street. She was waving her hands an' pointin' at this man. It was her put the finger on him, but the man in the car didn't wait to pick her up when she fell out."

Little Joe thought desperately of Hoppy Bragg.

The corpse of Mr. Jolly lay as it had fallen, untouched.

Little Joe heard a police whistle. Then he saw the open razor. It had slipped out of Mr. Jolly's inside coat pocket. No one appeared to have noticed it.

Little Joe took a long chance. That was one of his missing razors. He cried out, darted to the corpse.

"By Christmas!" he exclaimed. "I think I know him!"

He bent over, as if to make sure. Then he said, "No, I guess he isn't the fellow I'm thinking about."

He eased back into the crowd. He kept on easing away. The redhead seemed to have been too dazed to recognize him. He was almost to the Wellington Apartments before the police had reached the dead man.

Little Joe judged Della Corcoran would be able to explain. As for himself he had an immediate date with Apartment 2-C in the Wellington.

CHAPTER IV

TOO MANY RAZORS



THE Wellington downstairs employees were watching the crowd up the street. Little Joe ignored the elevator and took to the stairs. Apartment 2-C was on the second floor.

Little Joe tried the door. It was unlocked. He wished he had a gun as he slipped inside. Window shades were down in a sitting room. The door of a bedroom was open.

Little Joe did not have to enter the

bedroom. All the information he wanted was on the floor beside a divan. This was none other than Professor Suydam.

"G--gloree!" gulped Little Joe. "It can't be possible!"

It was though. Professor Suydam had totally ruined a Persian rug. It was a blue-patterned rug. If it had been red, the expensive weave might have been saved.

Nearly all of Professor Suydam's blood must have leaked out. There was a clean slash across his throat. There was but little evidence of a struggle. It was easy to determine how Suydam might have been murdered without a fight.

For Professor Suydam had been sitting in a chair. There was dried lather on the corpse's face. And he had one of Little Joe's barber towels tied behind his neck. Any policeman would have said that Professor Suydam had been having a shave.

"In any critical moment, if you have time, always close your eyes for ten seconds before acting."

Little Joe murmured the words. That was from a chapter of Applied Criminal Psychology entitled, Mind Over Matter.

The repeated words did Little Joe no good. Panic engulfed him.

His barber towel! And his razor!

For the razor lay where it had fallen. Its blade was gory. All the psychology that he had absorbed became a dead loss. He snatched up the fallen razor. He tore the barber towel from the dead man's neck.

Icy terror started his heart pounding hard.

"And I made it worse by taking that other razor off of Mr. Jolly," he said thickly, for he now had two razors, and both were stained with blood. "If I'd left it on him, they'd have pinned the rap on him. How could Mr. Jolly do this to me?"

He was wasting precious time. He thought: I am framed. Mr. Jolly would take his notebook off Suydam,

and he would have been in the clear if he had not finally got himself killed.

A more horrific thought stopped his breath.

"They will find that notebook with my name in it on Mr. Jolly now, and I had to take the razor off of him," he muttered.

At last it came to Little Joe that his presence here would count against him. They would get him, he had no doubt, but he must have time to thaw out his frozen brain.

Right now his mind was all stopped up. That was bad, very bad. He might even become incoherent if the police turned on the heat before he was ready. In his desperation the wheels of thought finally began to turn.

Professor Suydam had run from his shop. He had been seen by Potter Suydam, his nephew, and Landa Carter.

Della Corcoran had seen the blood where Mr. Jolly had been almost murdered in his back room.

He had called the police on a phony report that his window had been smashed. He had dashed from his shop the back way, leaving his place unlocked.

He had been given Professor Suydam's address by the dumb clerk at the pawnshop. And—worse than all else—Della Corcoran was on the spot, it having appeared that she had directed the hit-and-run murder of Mr. Merton Jolly.

So far as Little Joe Bunt was concerned, the state executioner might as well be readying up the hot seat now. Every circumstance was damning in detail.

Even Jim O'Grady, his friend, would not believe him.

And with the thought of Jim O'Grady, Little Joe came at last to a degree of sanity.

He, Little Joe, alone knew that he was not the murderer. So he alone must solve this case. Once he landed

in the clink, his chance was about as good as trying to cross Hades on ice.

STEPS sounded in the corridor outside. Little Joe acted. He gambled that he had not been seen entering the Wellington.

"I've got to find Landa Carter and Potter Suydam," he said between clenched teeth. "That's the only hope."

He ran into the bedroom. The window was open on a fire-escape. With two bloodstained razors in his pocket and his barber towel stuffed inside his coat, he slipped down the iron ladder, causing it to tilt slowly with his weight.

The ladder gave him an exit through a narrow space between buildings. If he could slip through to another street, he believed he might hide out until he could contact Jim O'Grady.

There was one flaw in this plan. This was a big, red-faced Irish copper standing at the foot of the fire-escape ladder as it slowly swung down.

The policeman was looking up. He had his revolver held casually in one hand.

All of Little Joe's accumulated psychology fled from his muddled brain. That left what is commonly known to science as the thalamus, or primitive lower section of the mind. His cerebrum went dead.

Little Joe acted as would any trapped jungle animal. His lips even drew back in a snarl from his teeth, exposing the orifice where Professor Suydam had kicked out a couple of molars, undoubtedly another count against him.

Little Joe jumped. The policeman had just growled a command.

"Come down with you! An' keep your hands in the air!"

Little Joe did both. Head foremost, diving, his hands outspread, he made the ten foot drop as a flying projectile. The policeman tried to duck and to shoot at the same time.

Little Joe's light weight hit him before he could do either. The corpulent copper's stomach cushioned his fall. It did the policeman no good. For his head cracked the concrete.

Little Joe's next move was instinctive. He grabbed the fallen copper's gun and ran. The policeman was out cold.

Little Joe came to a wooden gate onto the cross street. This street was reasonably quiet. There were shrill whistles over in front of the Wellington.

He saw one parked car, with a driver vaguely outlined in the front seat. His thalamus was still running the works. He had only the instinct of the jungle animal to escape.

Gun in hand, he jerked open the door of the car.

"Get going, fast!" he grated. "It's life or death! But I won't shoot if you're smart!"

His head jerked, as he glanced behind him. And a mighty hand gripped the back of his neck and slammed his head down and his face into the front seat.

"Okay, Joe! I never thought I'd have to be puttin' the pinch on *you!*"

IT WAS big Jim O'Grady's booming voice. O'Grady had arisen from concealment in the rear of the sedan. Little Joe got some fog out of his brain. He then saw the car's driver evidently had been waiting for just this move, and that O'Grady had commandeered the sedan.

"Where to, Officer?" said the driver.

"Precinct station! Get back here with me, Joe! Lordy! I'd as soon put the pinch on my own brother!"

The car started away. Little Joe's brain slowly thawed. He heard O'Grady talking.

"You don't have to talk, Joe. But it looks bad, awful bad. Potter Suydam an' that Black Rabbit singer, Landa Carter, tipped us off! Seems they found Potter's uncle, Joe. That

was after old Professor Suydam had showed 'em a gold stock book that they say ties you up with this. An' they said you first attacked old Suydam in your shop and must've cut him up some, 'cause there was blood on the floor."

Little Joe's cerebrum was percolating now.

An extra razor had been stolen from his shop. Landa Carter had invited him to Apartment 2-C in the Wellington. But who would ever believe that. There was Mr. Jolly's blood in his barber shop.

"Whassay, Joe?" O'Grady asked mournfully. "You're only mumbling."

Little Joe gripped O'Grady's arm. Ideas were coming now. They were but a forlorn hope. And only convincing O'Grady could give him a chance to try them out.

Little Joe never talked faster. O'Grady flatly refused at first.

"I knew that darn book would get you sooner or later," he muttered. "You keep on tellin' what you're tellin' me, and maybe some good mouth-piece can make it insanity."

"Look, Jim," pleaded Little Joe. "If it misses, it can't make any difference. I've got the two razors right here. There isn't a chance they'll show the prints of the killer, but I'll stake my life that these two razors will turn the trick."

"Tarnation!" exploded O'Grady. "Maybe you've got something! An' you're namin' it! You're stakin' your life on it! You gimme them razors! It ain't regular, but the whole setup's so screwy, it could be true!"

"You'll give me the break, Jim?"

"Yeah, an' if it's a trick, I'll maybe break your neck myself," said O'Grady. "Okay, driver, turn right at the next corner and I'll tell you where to stop. Keepin' your mouth shut for an hour or so gets you ten."

Ten minutes later the car pulled up before a stoop. The basement of this was O'Grady's own bachelor apartment.

O'Grady called the precinct station on the phone and asked that Potter Suydam be put on the wire. When he had him, he said:

"Potter? You and the girl take a taxi over here."

O'Grady gave the address. Then he added:

"I've got Joe Bunt, but keep quiet about it. I had to knock him cold. It's open and shut when he comes around, but I want you to be with me when I bring him in.

"Makin' the pinch alone is a notch up for me, so I want to get it all straight and I want you to identify a barber towel and a razor he tried to sneak out of your uncle's place. They've got only one set of prints, and they're his, so all you have to do is make sure they are the same ones you saw."

Little Joe stretched out on a cot and closed his tired eyes. If this failed to work out, even Jim O'Grady would never be convinced of the fantastic truth.

CHAPTER V

POWER OF SUGGESTION



"I'LL wait until he comes around," said big Jim O'Grady. "You an' Miss Carter wait in here. You say that's the barber towel you saw Little Joe put on your uncle's neck an' then you an' Miss Carter went out?"

Young Potter Suydam ran his fingers through his poetical long hair.

"That's the towel, Detective O'Grady," he said calmly. "It was on Uncle Roger's neck. Uncle Roger was mad, but he wanted Little Joe to finish shaving him, even after Little Joe followed him from his shop. I guess Uncle Roger didn't imagine Little Joe had the nerve to try and get that notebook away from him again. An'

that Merton Jolly must have walked in after Uncle Roger was killed, and took the notebook with him."

"Then they say that Little Joe's sweetie, that red-headed dame, sent the car onto the sidewalk an' killed the Jolly guy," said Landa Carter.

"It fits okay," said O'Grady. "An then Little Joe must have tried to get away, an' that's when you saw the body. But he cooled down, an' went back to remove his towel and the murder razor. Awright, the two of you, just wait in here until Little Joe comes out of it. I wouldn't handle that towel, either of you. I'm thinkin' there's only one set of prints on it."

O'Grady walked out. He closed the thick door. The room was small. He bolted it noiselessly on the outside. He went over and sat down where Little Joe was stretched on the cot, apparently unconscious.

"We don't talk, Joe," he whispered. "I haven't much faith in the thing. I'm still sayin' if it's a trick, I'll beat you to a pulp for makin' a monkey out of me. Anything they say in there will come through that ventilator. I used to put my radio in it so it wouldn't wake the neighbors, an' listen to it out here."

Little Joe felt as if his spine had congealed. If what he believed were true, it was an even chance that young Potter Suydam and Landa Carter would have the cold nerve to carry out what he believed to be one of the cleverest murders of circumstance that had ever been committed.

Landa Carter's red lips wore a shrewd, little smile. She said very loudly, "I would never have thought Little Joe could pull a fast one like that. According to that notebook your Uncle Roger had, why he's been rookin' his best friends on that phony gold mine stock."

Then she whispered something quickly to Potter. If there had been a dictagraph, it could not have picked up her words.

Potter spoke loudly.

"I'm almost sorry I have to do this, sweetheart," he said. "I've always liked Little Joe. Who would have thought he had a streak like that. I guess though him being called 'The Mad Barber' hasn't missed it much. He must have gone off his nut suddenly."

THEY stood for a moment. Then they sat down in the two chairs O'Grady had placed in the room. Potter was smiling a little, but he glanced at the single window. Being a basement room, this was provided with heavy iron bars against prowlers.

Neither Potter nor the girl spoke again for a little while. Landa Carter kept watching the door expectantly. The minutes dragged. Something seemed to turn her eyes toward the bloody barber towel lying upon the table.

There was a slight hump in the middle of the towel. It had the shape of a razor, one with an open blade.

The girl put her finger to her lips, then she spoke loudly.

"I wonder if the publicity will be good or bad for my act?" she said. "Even if it is bad, I suppose we have to tell the truth about what we know?"

"Certainly!" exclaimed Potter. "That's the law! Only I wish we had waited and not left Uncle Roger alone! I was rather fond of the old boy, you know!"

"Yes, I know!" said the girl.

Potter, she saw, was looking at the stained towel. His fingers ran nervously through his long hair.

"Oh, quit that, darling," hissed the girl, whispering again.

Potter's pinkish little eyes went to his wrist-watch. He was silent for a minute or two. Then he glanced at the door impatiently.

"I wish O'Grady could snap it up," he said. "It's hot in here."

He was sweating a little. His ferret eyes strayed to the barber towel

again. And suddenly the girl heard him draw in a deep breath.

He got up and tiptoed across the room. He looked closer at the bloody barber towel, at the irregular hump under it. He shook his head and looked again.

"Landa," he whispered hoarsely. "Come here."

She stepped softly over beside him. He pointed with one finger at the hump under the towel.

"Do you see what I see?" he whispered.

The girl looked closely. She suddenly reached out her hand. Potter caught her wrist.

"You fool, don't touch it," he said, still whispering. "But wait."

He took a handkerchief from his pocket. He enclosed his thumb and forefinger in the handkerchief. Landa Carter drew in a deep breath that seemed to be rasping in her throat.

"I wouldn't, darling," she whispered. "You don't think—"

POTTER cut off her words with his hand over her mouth. He was watching the door. He caught the barber towel between his covered thumb and finger and lifted it carefully.

Neither Potter nor the girl spoke. Their eyes went to each other and back to the table.

Two identical razors lay under the towel. Their handles were of the same black bone. The sharp blades were of the same size. And both were marred by dried brown stains.

"Potter?"

It was a single, gasping word, and a question. Landa seemed to be fascinated, almost paralyzed by the two razors.

"Shut up!" he said low, huskily. "There's something—"

Outside, Little Joe looked at O'Grady and nodded, after a glance at his wrist-watch. Ten minutes had passed.

O'Grady got up. His feet shuffled heavily toward the door of the little

room. But he stopped just before he reached it. Little Joe's sharp, black eyes gleamed at him, and Little Joe nodded again.

O'Grady tiptoed back to his chair, and sat down.

Inside the little room, Potter dropped the towel back into place. He made his chair in one quick jump. Landa stood still, and Potter said venomously:

"You fool! Sit down!"

He was staring at the door. Doubtless he expected O'Grady to open it and walk in. But O'Grady's steps had paused just outside. And apparently he had not moved away.

Landa looked at Potter, and sidled nervously to her chair. A minute passed. Landa was looking at the barber towel. Her curved red lips moved soundlessly.

"There was only one razor. O'Grady must know something."

Potter watched the door, but his eyes kept shifting to the barber towel. He got up and moved softly to the door. He whispered:

"I'm going out and see O'Grady. This is nuts."

Then he turned the doorknob. The door did not move. He looked over at the barred window. Sweat globuled on his forehead and trickled down his nose.

"Potter! Sit down! It's a trick! We're all right!"

A whisper can be very loud. It was not loud enough for the words to pass through the ventilator, except for sibilant sound that could not be understood.

Little Joe nodded again at O'Grady. The detective got up and again shuffled heavily to the door. He stopped, turned, and went back on tiptoes to his chair.

Inside the little room, Landa Carter sprang to her feet. Her red tongue flicked over her red lips. She was staring at Potter. He tiptoed from the door to the barred window, but turned back.

Both turned once more toward the table, with the two humps that were puzzling, bloodstained, identical razors.

Perhaps Potter saw it coming. Landa Carter's red mouth flew open as a woman's mouth will only when there is a scream growing in her throat. Potter sprang toward her.

But he was too late by half a second.

"Anyway—I didn't do it—I wasn't there when you—"

"You fool!"

Potter's fist smashed out. The girl's red lips crushed on her small white teeth. The blow was a stiff one, but not hard enough.

She screamed out as she fell.

"I didn't do it! I didn't know you intended to—"

Potter's pinkish eyes were pinpoints of hate as he sprang. His fingers gripped the girl's white throat.

"As if you didn't egg me into it!" he shouted. "Well, I'll kill you too—" O'Grady jerked the bolt of the door. He was big and slow. Little Joe's lighter figure shot past him, and his small, hard fist connected under one of Potter's ears where he had trimmed away the hair only that morning.

BIG Jim O'Grady was talking to the inspector.

"It's what you would call a murder by opportunity. Undoubtedly Potter Suydam and Landa Carter had been trailing Professor Suydam. The girl had been playing Potter for a sucker. She didn't hesitate in taking part in a killing that would give Potter old Suydam's thousands."

Little Joe nodded.

"Yes, and when old Suydam dashed out of my shop, Potter and the girl came in. They made the mistake of thinking I had fought with Suydam. My mouth was bleeding and I had lost two teeth. They saw the blood on the floor."

"But they must have talked to Professor Suydam first, just after he ran

from the shop, and learned about the book of gold mine stock sales," said O'Grady. "How about it, Potter?"

Landa Carter's throat was blue and bruised. She hated Potter with her eyes.

"I'll spill it," she said. "His uncle saw us, and showed us the book. He said to get Little Joe to the Wellington apartment, because he had murdered Mr. Jolly and he had to shut Little Joe up with that notebook or some other way.

"He trusted Potter to help him. It was the big chance Potter had been waiting for. So he talked me into the rest of it. As for Mr. Jolly, Hoppy Bragg had been told that he had been murdered by his boss, and when he saw the murdered man running from the Wellington, he just up and run the car over him in his dopey way."

"She was the one who planned all of it!" raged Potter. "She can't squeeze out by singing!"

Landa Carter put on her best smile.

"I wasn't even in the room when it happened, darling," she said. "So they can't do anything about me."

"Sister," said O'Grady, "you'll be singing for many a year upstate, and not in the Black Rabbit."

THERE was the redhead again. She was fully recovered.

"You see what that fishology thing got you into, Joey!" she said. "An' you was rookin' your friends. And all the time, Mr. Jolly was kidding me

along, until he sold me enough of that gold mine stock to take all the money I've been saving."

"You?" exclaimed Little Joe. "You bought some of that gold mine stock?"

"Yes, darling, and that's what this letter is all about I got in the mail today," she said, producing a folded sheet. "It says here that all Rolling Ridge Gold Company mining stock will be redeemed, whatever that means, for two to one."

"Let me see that letter, sweet-heart," said Little Joe.

A minute later, he spoke:

"Jim O'Grady, it's too bad you didn't buy some of that Rolling Ridge stock. By Christmas! Poor Mr. Jolly. He thought he was a confidence man, and here it says they have struck a high-grade vein in the Rolling Ridge mine, and they will pay two dollars for every dollar's worth of stock that is out, as they wish to make it a closed corporation."

"Joe," said big Jim O'Grady, "I'm wantin' to borrow that book of yours. If readin' that has anything to do with bein' a dead open an' shut murderer, and then having your friends cash in because you played around with a crook, I'm throwing away my badge and then I'm going in for psychology."

"Joey," said the redhead. "You ain't lendin' that fishology book. You're goin' home an' change your pants. You're takin' me to Conev. an' we're startin' now before something else happens."

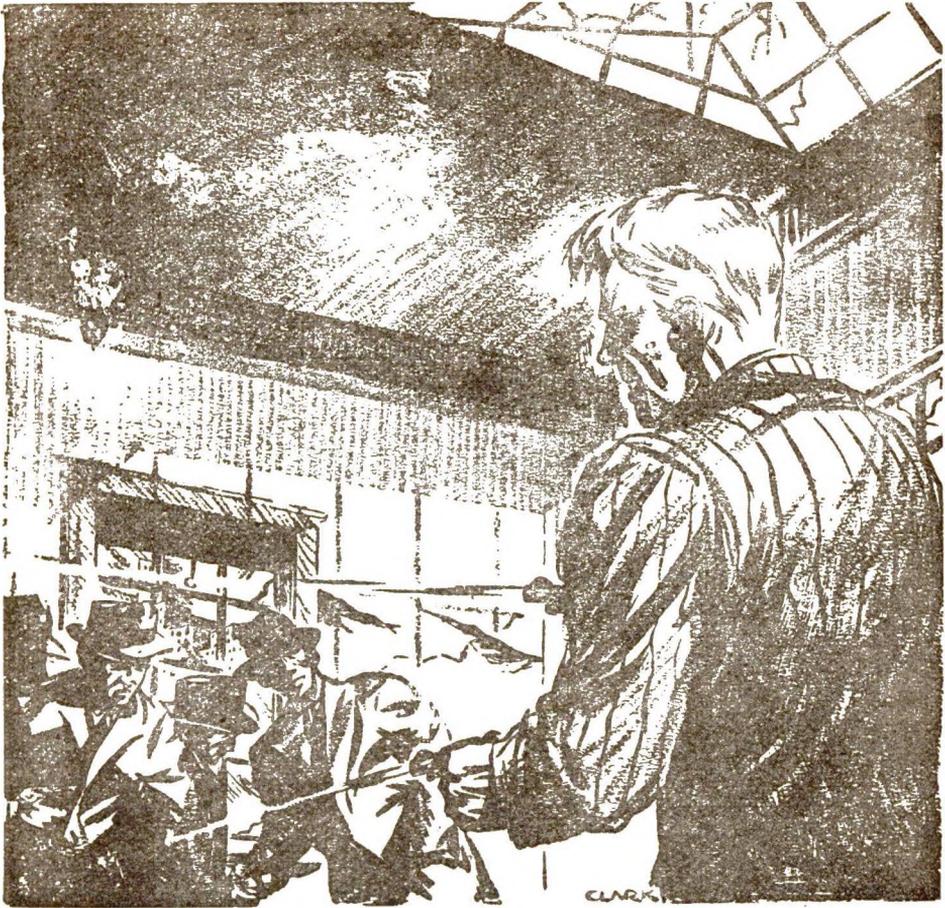
FOLLOW THE FURTHER EXPLOITS OF LITTLE JOE BUNT
THE BARBER AS HE SAVES A GREAT SYMPHONY
CONDUCTOR FROM A TERRIBLE DISCORD IN

EARFUL OF MURDER

Another Gripping Complete Novelet

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

COMING NEXT ISSUE



Jon Ruth dropped through the skylight, carrying a gat in each of his hands

Get Mad and Play Sucker

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

Author of "Sons of Suicide," "Survival," etc.

Mike Lawson Thought He Was a Hard Customer—Till a Soft-Voiced Gent Showed Him How to Turn Wrath Inside Out!

I'M a tough guy and my name is Mike Lawson. I run the Lawson Private Detective Agency to suit my character. I'm tough, so it's tough. Or, anyway, it was and I was. What

with all the trouble that's around these days, I usually had about all the work I could handle and no time at all for being polite. I always had the idea that a swift punch on the nose got

more results than a simple question. I was careful to slug a man I thought might have a gun, before he could remember he had it.

A man doesn't die for punching another man. He may die for forgetting to. That was my philosophy. But then, before I went into the detective business, I was a Marine Corps drill-master and a blasted good one. I'd take my sergeant's chevrons off for anybody, unless he was smaller than me. I never took a chance on a little guy making me look foolish.

Anyway, I needed help in my business, so I put the usual ad in the newspapers. I set forth the qualifications, making it plain that I didn't want anybody who was afraid of getting the warts knocked off his nose, or wherever else he may have had warts. Being tough, I wanted tough eggs on my team.

I was busy in my office next morning after I'd run the ad. I made it clear to my secretary that I would interview anybody who had gumption enough to find me and show the ad. It was a "blind" ad, and I figured that any man who couldn't find the advertiser couldn't find tea in a box with the directions written on the outside. I was busy planning my day, and trying to guess how much money I had in the bank, when a soft masculine voice with a laugh in it spoke up.

"Mr. Lawson, I'm here about the ad."

I looked up and saw Jon Ruth for the first time. Can you tie a monicker like that? At first glance the fellow looked as though he didn't have any eyebrows. He was one of those corn-silk blond guys. His almost white eyebrows were so nearly the color of his skin that you could scarcely see them. He had blue eyes that danced, thick lips, and a grin from here to there.

He stuck out a big hand at me, but I've made it a rule not to fraternize with the help. I did look at the hand, just to let him see I knew he had one.

But I sat back and didn't ask him to sit down, so he sat on the edge of my desk.

I REMEMBERED how tough I had been when I'd got to be a second lieutenant of marines, easily the most responsible job—except bossing a private detective agency—that's in the power of the President to bestow. No shavetail would take the President's job without feeling he was demeaning himself.

When I was a shavetail, and an ordinary enlisted man dared to grin or let his eyes dance or sit on the edge of my desk, I got real soft with him, just to see how far he'd go. When he'd gone as far as I could stand, I jumped down his throat, doing double somersaults the whole way.

I did that now, without waiting.

"Get off my desk, you buzzard! Who the devil do you think you are? And wipe that grin off your face! My business is serious."

"Ah!" he said. "Another leatherneck shavetail."

Yeah, he seemed to have the rudiments of the detective racket down fairly well. Nobody could have guessed, without knowing beforehand, that I had been a leatherneck shavetail.

"Yes," I said. "And I'm the toughest man you ever met. I can whip any man my weight anywhere. I'll forget my position any minute—"

"I'll go out behind the barracks with any recruit who thinks he can knock my block off," said Jon Ruth softly. "I'll make him wish he'd stayed at home, following a mule's tail up a furrow. I'll take him apart and put him together again, so his mother won't know him. But when I'm done, he'll be a man, and what's more, a good marine—or else I'll start all over again."

Now how had the buzzard ever learned that old spiel of mine? I didn't know, but I was so sore that I didn't care. He'd wiped the smile off

as he talked, and had therefore obeyed me. Also he had slid off the desk and stood before it, strictly at attention. That was sort of silly in a pair of civilians, when you came right down to it, which made me even madder.

Exploding once in awhile is good for any man, if he can back his own plays with authority, and Jon Ruth was big enough to make me feel that I wasn't robbing a crippled squirrel of peanuts. So I went over the desk after him, aiming to knock his block off.

When I landed the first time, he wasn't there. When I landed the second time, it was on a part of my anatomy that's nobody's business but mine. It hurt like the devil, not only there but on my jaw. My office was spinning. The floor had become sort of plastic, rocking and rolling, and I was what is known as "on the verge." But since things were sort of blurred, I didn't know "on the verge" of what.

I got up on that portion of me which had hit the floor first, and looked at Jon Ruth. He wasn't grinning, but he still had those colorless eyebrows and his eyes were dancing. I started to get up and fell on my side, so he hoisted me like a sack of air, as though I didn't weigh anything. That didn't improve my morale any. He put me in my own chair, brushed me off, clucked to me like a mother hen to her only chick.

I swung one at his jaw when he wasn't looking, just to let him know this hadn't ended anything. Oddly enough I didn't hit anything. There wasn't anything to hit. I put myself to rights, just in case Mary Hass should come in and see how things were, and glared my best at Jon Ruth.

"**L**ISTEN, Boss," he began, "it's bad to lose your temper. It makes a sucker of you."

"Listen yourself!" I bellowed. "And I'm not your boss and never will be.

I've been working at this racket for—"

"Four years, three months, fifteen days, four hours and twenty-seven minutes," said Jon Ruth.

I didn't know whether he had just told me the exact truth or not, but I somehow suspected that he had.

"Well, anyway," I began, "just because a man can use his fists, to knock a guy down when he isn't looking—"

"You didn't," he interrupted softly.

"That's no sign he knows enough to be a private dick," I said without stopping. "A private dick has to be everything. He has to be able to wear white tie and tails—"

"Can do," he cut in. "Did well at it, before they washed up the escort bureaus."

"And how to handle a gat—"

I had just got the "g" out of my mouth when I was gaping into the muzzle of one of the most efficient-looking automatics I had ever seen outside the Marine Corps. I didn't see it move. I just watched and there it was. I lifted my eyes to Jon Ruth. He looked mask-faced, all except his eyes, which were dancing. I twined my fingers together in my best professional manner, and went to work on this freak.

"A guy in my business has to be tough. What makes you think you can handle it?"

"Two being evenly matched in the ring," he said promptly, "which one gets whipped first, all other things being equal? The one that loses his angora. When gambling for millions in Wall Street, who gets the gravy first? The gent who doesn't take it seriously, but doesn't miss a single bet. I never get mad. It started when I was a kid. My mother insisted I always count to ten before I slug anybody, even Dad. I got into the habit. But I became so interested in counting that I forgot what I was mad about and kept right on counting."

Well, you can see how screwy it was. I pressed a button on my desk.

I'm strong on playing hunches. Mary Hass came in.

"Miss Hass," I said, "this lug is on the payroll. He's to get sixty bucks a week—"

"Hundred," he broke in quietly.

"Hundred," I said, not noticing how I had been tricked until Mary gasped. Then I recalled that nobody got a hundred a week in my outfit, up to and including myself. For the hunch reason, I let it ride. "His name is Jon Ruth."

"What's your first name, honey?" asked Jon Ruth.

"Mary," she said. "Not that it's any of your business."

But she was giving him the double-o plenty. I figured right then that I'd dropped a lot of dough down the drain, though I could can the guy tomorrow if I wanted to. I wasn't sure that I should keep a man around who could knock me down when I was looking the other way.

"I'll take five dollars on account," said Jon Ruth, "so I can take Mary to dinner tonight."

Before I realized it, he had the five dollars. I'd had Mary working for me for two years and had never got up nerve enough to ask her to dinner! What's more, she actually went out with Jon Ruth, and I'm afraid she had a good time.

But I knew one thing. A drug store cowboy might get by nicely with the women, yet get all tied up in knots by the tough eggs who played around in my business, only on the other side of the fence. Jon Ruth was from somewhere out of town—Texas, I think—and Texans aren't supposed to know their way around New York City.

NEXT morning he was sitting on the steps, so to speak, when I got to the office. Mary wasn't in. I got sore and said something about it.

"I kept her out late last night," Jon Ruth said. "I told her she didn't have to come in until noon."

I glared. "Are you a partner in the business or something?"

"Thanks all the same," he said. "I'd like to look you over a bit longer before I accept any such proposition."

He was a wisecracker with a witty fist, but how would he stack up in a tight place? He could do things, I guessed, and he was clever. But did he have the heart that he needed in our business? I found out a lot sooner than I expected to.

I had no sooner pushed into the office and sat down than I had visitors. I'd just got a kidnaper indicted, and he had a bunch of friends. I knew these were some of the friends the minute they showed up. They were tough torpedoes, paid guns. The leader and spokesman was Ruddy Titch, a torpedo without a record, but suspected of enough killings to burn him seven times in succession.

"You Lawson?" he asked between his teeth.

"As you know already," I said, "and I didn't hear you knock."

"You'll be lucky if you get time to knock yourself at the Pearly Gates."

I don't like anybody to talk to me like that, and I started over the desk again. This time I gawked into the muzzle of a gat that looked just as big as the one Jon Ruth had shown me, only this one meant a lot more business.

"Don't make me use it, Lawson," said Titch, nodding to his boys. There were four of them, all mugs and hoods. I knew this was the old high-pressure stuff. "Now take our pal, Joe Lucas. It don't seem right that a nice guy like Joe should have the book throwed at him, especially as the kid come home without even a button off his playsuit. You got all the stuff to send him up, but we're figurin' you won't use it."

"What makes you figure that?" I asked.

"Only that beginning right now, if we don't get the right word from you, we beat you up every day, each day,

a little more. See? We know better than to offer you dough, even if we didn't need it all for Joe's rap."

"No dice," I said. "I don't scare easy."

"How easy do you bruise, though?" asked Titch.

I'd forgotten all about Jon Ruth until he opened the door and came in, grinning. Titch glanced at him.

"Beat it, hick. This isn't your style."

"You mentioned somebody bruising, fella," said Jon Ruth. "What did you mean by it?"

Titch nodded slightly at two of his men. They closed in on Jon Ruth, while I watched with a lot of interest. They'd smear him, of course. He was out of his class. He was smiling a little, looking at me, and I'll swear his eyes were dancing. The guy just couldn't know what this was all about. He rose lightly on the balls of his feet. In his place, any smart dick or hood would have crouched.

"I said for you to beat it," Titch repeated. "And keep your mouth shut outside or I'll bend a gat around your dumb skull."

THIS time, watching things closer, I got some idea of just what happened. Jon Ruth stepped forward, like a snake striking. His left hand fastened in the collar of one of the hoods, and the right in the collar of the other. He shook the left one, and pushed the right one with plenty of force straight into Ruddy Titch.

Titch banged against my desk so hard, he pushed it into my middle, almost pinning me to the wall behind it. And the desk was a heavy one.

The hood Ruth held in his left hand was snatching for a gat. He yanked it out. It was so fast that I thought Jon had missed. He missed nothing. The other two men had gone down in the mess around the desk. Jon Ruth shifted the armed guy into position and slapped his face on both sides, across and back, in a way that even I

could feel, pinned where I was. The rat's head bobbed. He began to yell. A bullet plugged into the floor of my office. Jon Ruth finally closed his fist and knocked the hood cold.

The fourth man was drawing a bead on him by this time, and Ruth kept right on moving. He caught up the dropped gat of the man he had cold-copped and fired it, all in the same movement. I heard the bullet hit the man's hand and the gat it held. And then the man was holding his hand instead of the gat, and blood was spurting between his fingers.

Two men were out of the running, and I was being entertained no end. And yet I'd have felt better about all this if Jon Ruth had stopped grinning and got mad. He was doing plenty of damage, but he should have been acting the part. There still were two men left. They were untangling themselves from each other, cursing blue streaks, coming out fast with their rods swinging around to burn Jon Ruth down. This would be the end. It was time for me to snatch out the rod I kept in the right-hand drawer of my desk.

I needn't have worried. Jon Ruth kept right on grinning, but he lifted one hood with a right uppercut that hurt the soles of my feet just to see it happen, and kicked Ruddy Titch under the chin.

The office was a shambles. Jon Ruth looked at the mess he had made, rubbed his hands together. His eyes kept right on dancing.

Yeah, I decided, the guy was nuts. He didn't know what he was doing, didn't know when the going was dangerous. I had to hand it to him for results, but he had simply diverted the anger of four torpedoes from me to him. Next time they'd come for him with guns blazing before they were close enough for him to use his fists.

"Such company you keep," said Jon Ruth to me. "I sure was wise not to let Mary come in this morning. It

would be awful for her to see anything like this, wouldn't it?"

"She's seen worse," I retorted. "She's been with me a year or two."

"Better start training another girl," said Jon Ruth. "She won't be with you much longer, except in spirit. We like each other."

While he talked to me, he glanced occasionally at the four hoods. And what got me going worse than ever was that he carefully put everybody's gats right back where they belonged, in their pockets and holdouts.

"You fool!" I snapped at him. "They'll be gunning for you now."

"I know," he said. "I'm saving them the expense of buying new rods."

One by one, the four hoods roused from their lethargy and began cursing Jon Ruth steadily. Grinning, he told them to shut up, or he'd have to do it all over again. He didn't have the time, he said, because we were a busy office and they were wasting our most precious commodity.

"You'll hear from us again, hick," grated Titch. "No hayseed hands me a fistful of fives without paying for it."

"I didn't hit you," corrected Jon Ruth. "I kicked you."

"You'll wake up in the river in less than twenty-four hours!" promised Titch.

WELL, the result of this was funny. None of the four went for a gat, even when Jon Ruth got busy again. He gathered up the two lightest hoods and threw them out into Mary's office. He was a bit rough, so they sprawled on the floor. Then he heaved the third one out in time to knock down the first two again. For Titch, who was easily fifty pounds heavier than Jon Ruth, he reserved something special. He slapped the top hood silly. Then he somersaulted him over and over with a kick in the seat of the pants that cracked out like a toy balloon exploding.

That was the mess in the office into which Mary walked. She hadn't dared to stay away until noon, after all. Now what do you suppose Jon Ruth did? He let everybody know, of course, that he was nuts about her. But more than that, he started begging her pardon all over the place for filling it with hoodlums with bloody noses and vile vocabularies.

When Titch got to his feet and used another word from his vile vocabulary, Jon Ruth knocked him down again. Then he started apologizing all over again to Mary for doing it in front of her. I couldn't make the guy out. One thing was obvious, though. He had taught the hoods a lesson. Their language was okay the rest of the time they were there, though what their eyes said to Ruth and me would have fried sole leather.

"My answer," I said to Titch, "is no."

They went out. Ruth followed me back into my own office, and I let loose on him.

"The detective racket," I told him grimly, "is not a children's playground. Those gats those guys had were real ones, capable of shooting hot bullets that burn their way right through whatever the victim has had for breakfast. And when they promise you further attention, they're not fooling. You humbled Titch before his gang. He's got to wipe out the insult, or eventually he wiped out himself. So watch yourself."

"I diverted attention from you, didn't I?" said Jon Ruth.

"Yeah, but I don't want to be responsible for you diving into the river twice and coming up once. Titch wasn't joking. He's head hood for Joe Lucas, who snatched the Dillon kid."

"I didn't know that," said Jon Ruth, "or I'd have altered the treatment a little. Kidnaping is bad stuff."

"Yeah." I tried to make it sound sarcastic. "So I've heard."

His eyes still danced. He was the

happiest fellow I ever saw. He was the picture of health, too. He had so much of it that it sort of bubbled over all the time. If I could make him mad and keep him mad, I might make something of him. I said as much.

"Remember that the fellow who gets mad gives the opposition all the best of it," cautioned Jon Ruth. "I have fun out of life. I've always said that if I ever had to kill a man, I'd do it with no hard feelings. He'd deserve it so completely that I'd even enjoy it, though I don't hold with killing as a rule."

"Darn nice of you," I said. "Now I've got a real job for you. It'll keep you busy away from the office until Titch has time to cool off. He's bound to get hotter and hotter for awhile, and your luck can't last forever."

"No work," said Jon Ruth, "until I take Mary to lunch."

HE WENT to the door and called out to her. There was no answer. He called again, and I got a queer sinking feeling in the place where I thought my heart was. I followed him to the door and looked out.

Mary's coat and hat were on the clothestree, but she wasn't anywhere in sight. We both went into the office to look it over. There was a piece of paper under the door. Jon Ruth picked it up and read it first, though it was addressed to me. Without a word he handed it over.

If she's not valuable enough for you to talk turkey with us, we don't need to worry about what happens to her, do we?

I didn't need a blueprint. Neither did Jon Ruth. And yet when his eyes met mine, his were still filled with high good humor. I could have slugged him. I guessed, after all, that he wasn't much interested in Mary Hass.

"Titch, I suppose," he said.

"You suppose right. So what?"

"So we do something about it."

"How?" I asked sarcastically.

"Who knows where the lug hangs out? I don't."

"But he wants me, doesn't he?"

"If he's holding Mary, he can bide his time with you. He can use her to make me talk softly on the Joe Lucas case."

"How can he be sure you're that much interested in her?"

"The underworld knows I stand by my own people," I said stiffly.

"Then let's get going!" he yelled. "Don't stand there like a portrait!"

He was the most exasperating gent I ever saw. That Mary Hass was in danger of a good roughing up, if not a lot worse, he couldn't help knowing. Yet he hummed "Darktown Strutters' Ball" just loudly enough for me to hear, looked at his fingernails, and didn't seem to have a care in the world.

"Even if we can find his hideout," I explained nastily, "he'll be barricaded so that Hades wouldn't have it. Besides that, he'll have more hoods in the place than anybody has any idea. Don't get the notion that next time he'll give you a chance to lay your hands on him. He knows better now."

His eyes danced. That was his only answer.

"I've got some thinking to do," I said, disgusted. "I'm going out for some coffee and a cigarette while I do it. They won't abuse Mary much right away, unless she screams. Then she'll probably be missing a few teeth. You hold down the office until I get back."

He nodded. If I were a dame, and a man who seemed to like me was no more bothered about my being kidnaped than Jon Ruth was, I'd have dropped him mighty fast. I was thinking of that when I went down to get some grub, and it made me less alert than usual.

Two gats were in my ribs before I could guess what was up. On either side of me were two men with eyes rapidly going black, and murder in their hearts. Their gats did their talk-

ing for them. They jerked their heads toward a car, which looked entirely too much like a hearse. I got in.

There was Mary Hass, sprawled on the floor between the seats, a gag in her mouth, her wrists and her ankles drawn together and tied. I started to ask how it happened when I got conked on the back of the skull with a pistol butt. I went out, swimming in the dark.

When I came to in a strange room, my head roared like Niagara and ached until I knew I couldn't stand it five minutes more. And that wasn't going to be all there was, either, I knew.

"I figured," said Titch, "that you and your punk would come out hunting together and we'd bag the both of you. But you and the skirt are worth something. We'll pick up the punk later."

"What's it all about, anyway?" I asked. "And why fool with the girl? She's just a paid stooge."

"Knows all about the evidence in the Lucas case, doesn't she?" said Titch. "We mean to find out just what we're up against. This here feller is Mike's mouthpiece."

He pointed out Yance Dupre, the worst shyster that ever slid through a loophole in the law. Then I had some idea what Mary and I were in for. I certainly wished with all my heart that somebody besides easy-going, eye-dancing, careless Jon Ruth had some idea of what had happened to us.

"Going to let us have the stuff, or tell us where it is, without us getting rough?" asked Dupre.

I knew he wouldn't let me see his face if he had any idea that we were going to live to talk about it. This was the end of the trail, unless I could do some tall Houdini work. But Mary was there, and she had a bruise over her right eye that didn't look exactly like a mascara smudge. She was scared. That was unusual for her. Nothing fazed her very often. She

read the signs, though, as well as I did.

These were the gents who would have done the Dillon kid in, if I hadn't moved fast. If they didn't mind killing a kid—and they were suspected of having killed a couple in unsolved snatches—they certainly wouldn't mind killing Mary and me. It didn't look good, all right.

But at least the D.A. would have something to work on, when he got a paper I had left with an associate. I always took that precaution in case I came up missing when an important case was pending, not that it would be any good to Mary and me. If either of us talked, the paper could be picked up before it got to the D.A.

"Nix, Dupre," I said. "I don't deal."

He got sore about being recognized and went about it in the hard way. He knocked loose a couple of my teeth, but I could take that. He quickly saw I could, so he turned on Mary. He slapped her so hard with his open hand that he knocked her over on her side. She was tied in a heavy chair, too. It fell and her head hit the floor pretty hard. She couldn't keep back a whimper.

"Look, boys," I said, "the skirt don't know anything. Let her go and I'll spill."

"No, Mister Lawson!" cried Mary Hass. "Don't tell them anything. You know that even if they pretended to let me go, it wouldn't mean anything. And if they really did, they'd end by killing you. Don't talk!"

"I can't stand by and watch 'em put the slug on you, honey," I argued.

There was a terrific crashing sound of glass, and a body dropped through the skylight. The body belonged to one Jon Ruth, and each of the hands carried a gat. His lips were twisted a little, but not in fury. He seemed to be intending to have a pretty good time for himself.

"What's the idea of calling her 'honey?'" he demanded good-natur-

edly. "She ever give you permission, Boss?"

Tie that one, will you? All I could do was say feebly:

"So you got good ears, too. You ought to be a columnist!"

POOR guy, he was just stepping into a coffin. The hoods of Titch's gang were getting under way, and their gats were coming out. I'd seen Ruth's eyes dancing, even when he saw the bump on Mary's face and the way she was still sprawled out.

Dupre was the first mug to make a move, and Jon Ruth stopped it square in the middle. His first bullet took the little shyster between the eyes. Titch yelled for the other hoods to close in on Ruth. Against four in my office he had had an outside chance. There were seven big, tough hoods here.

Titch wanted the fun of giving Jon a going-over himself. I couldn't figure Ruth out, anyway. Without turning a hair, he'd burned down Dupre, which somebody should have done when he was born. Apparently he just didn't have sense enough to realize that one man with two gats couldn't get to first base against eight men with two gats apiece.

"If you'll surrender without a fuss," said this eye-dancing boob, "I'll ask the boss to go easy with you."

Titch laughed. His right hand came out of somewhere in a blur of speed, holding a pistol in it. This time it was Ruth's left-hand gun that did the business. Ruth wasn't kidding, though he hadn't taken that smile off his face. The slug cut neatly through the bridge of Titch's nose, and went right on through.

By now I had flung my chair over. I started dragging along the floor toward Mary Hass with the idea of shielding her body with mine.

Through it all I was interested in the way Jon Ruth did things. He kept talking to the rest of those hoods, whom he'd sent into a frenzy by burning their mouthpiece and their sec-

ond-in-command, even while they tried desperately to fill him full of lead. His lips were parted in a grin and he was moving about like a ballet dancer. His eyes didn't miss a thing.

His third bullet hit one of the hoods in the pantry. It sounded as though it were a baseball bat instead of a bullet. The lug dropped his rod and put both hands over his tummy. Blood gushed from his mouth as he fell flat on his face.

"The pantry," said John Ruth, "is easier to hit. I wonder if I can put a slug in each of you, before those who are still whole decide to surrender."

"You fool!" I muttered, though not out loud. "They can't surrender. There's probably a murder rap against every last one of them somewhere. You know they're Joe Lucas' men."

But he kept on talking, anyway. I saw a bullet part his hair, watched the left leg of his pants jerk. Then I glimpsed the bullet hole in it, which had missed his knee. I saw his clothes rip in several places, and couldn't for the life of me figure how it could be like that. How could he have his clothes filled with holes, while his body stayed whole? Besides that, in four seconds or less, he had put four bullets into four more of the gangsters.

The floor of the hangout was pretty well smeared with gats and men by this time. But there still were bullets to be fired and hoods to fire them.

Finally Jon Ruth began talking to me. He figured that there was no use talking any further to the hoodlums.

"Almost didn't think to look out the window, Boss," he said. "But when I did think of it, I saw them put the rods in your ribs."

He fired twice and missed. I didn't hear the slugs hit anything. I gathered from that, since he was so good with the pistols, that he was a bit dizzy in the upper annex. In short, I figured he'd been hit pretty hard.

Well, I guess maybe he had. All at

once it wasn't the surviving torpedoes who threw down their guns, but Jon Ruth himself.

"I NEVER did like guns," he said. "I think I'll finish this job off in the way nature intended. Gentlemen, I prefer to use the Marquis of Queensbury rules, unless I am forced to become rough."

He started for the two men who were left. They drew together for a mutual assistance pact. Their pistols seemed to be fresh out of slugs and they couldn't pick up any of the guns of their pals, because Jon Ruth was in the way. So they prepared to receive him properly. Neither of them had been with the expedition that had already seen what he could do with his dukes. Their hands moved fast, and their right ones suddenly wore brass knuckles.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," Jon Ruth said. "I wish you didn't have backgrounds that make you prefer unfair tactics to nature's own remedy. Ready, boys?"

He simply walked into those two gazabos. When they flung themselves at him, he caught them and flung them back hard. But there was nobody to fling them back to him, except the wall, and they hit that so hard they bounced.

By that time the coppers, hearing all the shooting, were knocking on all the doors leading into this place. A few of the more zealous ones were shooting away locks and smashing against the panels. They started boiling through just as Jon Ruth came back, yanked off Mary's ropes and took her in his arms.

After that neither of them showed the slightest interest in anything else. You'd have thought I'd staged the whole show, just to give them a chance to find each other and go into

a clinch. And I'd sort of hankered for Mary myself, though I had never seemed to get around to telling her so.

After the cops had gathered up the garbage, I took a gander at Jon Ruth and Mary Hass. They'd walked away from the scramble and were leaning against a wall, holding on to each other and looking at nobody else.

That blasted ape was talking baby talk to Mary Hass, soothing away her black-and-blue spots! And she was eating it up, though I personally remembered her saying, several times, that she'd shoot dead any man who ever tried to hand her that line.

I tapped Jon Ruth on the shoulder. "As your boss—" I began.

HE LOOKED at me as though I were a stranger—a particularly repulsive stranger.

"As your boss," I went on, "I'd like to inquire, if you'd be so kind as to answer, just why you pulled that grand stand stunt of throwing your pistols away, when there were two thugs left."

"They'd emptied their weapons," he said patiently, as though any fool should know the answer to that.

"Yeah, but they were still murderers!"

"I threw away my gats," said Jon Ruth, "because I had already killed several people, and I was beginning to fear I would lose my temper. I couldn't allow that. A man who loses his temper gives the advantage to the opposition."

I tried to tie that. It was no use.

"Hurry back from the honeymoon," was all I could think of. "Maybe by that time I'll have a case that's important enough for you to work up a peeve over!"

And the more I thought of it, the more I wanted to see what it'd be like if Jon Ruth ever did get mad.



WHITE Heat

By

SAM MERWIN, JR.

*Author of "Talent for Trouble,"
"Murder in Miniature," etc.*

*When Pete White Kicks the
Eight-Ball Around, It's Blackout
for Any Gangsters in the Way!*

PETE WHITE was disobeying orders in following the girl. He had a familiar and not too pleasant eight-beat in his diaphragm. It warned him plain as day that he was going to get into trouble. But something about the set-up smelled—and besides, the girl herself intrigued him.

"I must be off my nut," he told himself as he watched the trim, hatless figure.

He eyed appreciatively the flowing black hair that had proved so photogenic on the society pages, as the girl swayed gracefully across the sidewalk toward the side entrance of the hotel. The futility of falling for the most beautiful girl in the world—and one of its six richest women—appalled him.

Ronnie Darrow, his one and only glamor girl, didn't know Pete White existed. At least, he hoped she didn't. He was being paid a good fat fee by wealthy Tom Channing to follow her around without being noticed. Fee or no fee, he wished perversely that she were aware of his presence.

The whole arrangement was screwy, he reflected. Rich people had

Channing went for a gun, and Pete put a bullet through his thigh

odd customs. He tried to imagine himself hiring a private detective to shadow the girl he was going to marry. He couldn't. Even though his experience as a private operative made him cynically aware that such a move might be a smart one. But if he were in love with a girl, White reflected, he'd want to take her a hundred per cent for granted.

So, like a wet-eared kid on his first case, though Pete White had fallen for the girl, even while engaged in reporting her daily doings. Now he was punishing himself, remaining on the job when he'd been told to go home. And Ronnie Darrow was about to slip through the side door of Channing's Savoy Hotel for a rendezvous with her fiancé.

Knowing and disliking Channing as he did, hanging around was pure torture. So wrapped up was Pete White in gloomy flights of imagination that he almost missed the prowler who slipped up from a basement entryway.

The man looked rough, tough and nasty, and the gun in his hand didn't make him any the more attractive. His intentions were all too obvious as he whispered to the girl to halt, reached for her handbag.

She made an instinctive motion to pull it away; snarling, the gunman lifted his arm to give her a gun-whipping. She cried out then, not loudly, but with a note of absolute anger in her voice. It was loud enough, however, to cover the quick patter of Pete's footsteps as he caught the stick-up artist from behind with a clout behind the ear.

The man went sprawling into the gutter. His gun flew in one direction, Ronnie Darrow's pocketbook in another. As Pete sped to pick up the weapon, the bandit, with a squawk of alarm and a quick look over his shoulder, got to his feet and sped off, disappearing around the corner.

The handbag had fallen open, and there was money all over the sidewalk

—more money than Pete had ever dreamed of seeing in his whole life. He gave the girl her bag, scooped up packets of thousand-dollar bills. Ronnie Darrow stood there, holding the bag open, saying nothing till he'd returned the bills to her. Her lovely, alert face was enigmatic.

When the job was completed, she broke one of the wrappers, gave Pete a bill. Her dark eyes looked squarely into his.

"A poor way of thanking you," she said, "but the best I can do at the moment—Mr. Private Detective."

She vanished into the softly lit side lobby of the hotel, leaving him there gaping like a fish. Pete felt humiliated, like any man who has played the hero when he wanted it to show and been tipped like a hired hand.

Then his sense of humor came to his rescue. If he wasn't a hired hand, what was he? Falling in love with something unattainable just didn't make sense. And the crackle of the bill in his hand felt solid. Pete stuffed it into his pocket, walked over to Joe's on Sixth Avenue and ordered a double brandy in one of the booths.

THE whole business seemed thoroughly unreal. Which made him wonder about the bill. He pulled it from his pocket, studied it. It was no counterfeit. He began to realize that he'd made himself a thousand bucks in about eleven seconds. And then he noticed the little notch of green on the white border of the note.

He scowled as he stuffed it into his watch pocket. He'd seen those green notches before. On impulse he pulled out his wallet, sheafed through the expense money he carried. Yes, two of the twenties bore similar marks. He scowled, put his wallet away, studied the thousand again. It was obviously fresh from the bank, but it bore the same sign.

The money was marked, all right. But why? And, come to think of it, why should Ronnie Darrow be taking

at least fifty thousand dollars to Tom Channing? It was the old coals-to-Newcastle business—or was it?

Not even a private detective could find out much about the condition of inherited estates. Perhaps Channing's assets were tied up for the moment, and he needed cash. Engaged couples have been known to help one another out. And fifty grand wouldn't mean much to a girl who counted her fortune in millions.

Pete gave it up, decided to go on home and get some sleep. At least his bankroll hadn't suffered as his ego had. He was still wool-gathering as he reached the sidewalk—and came within two inches of playing clay pigeon for the bullet that smacked into the wooden door frame beside him.

The flash had come from a sedan parked across the street, Pete noted as he dropped flat, pulling out his own weapon. He fired twice at the rear window as more bullets spat the concrete around him. He heard the tinkle of glass and a hoarse yell of anguish. Somewhere in the middle distance, a woman screamed as the sedan pulled away and took the corner on two wheels.

Pete got up and walked away, not too rapidly, trying to figure things out. He was in no mood for a lengthy inquisition by the police. If the money in his pockets were marked, he'd be in for trouble. And it certainly looked as if the money were ablaze. If his would-be assassins had been ordinary hold-up men, they'd have tried to take the money before firing at him.

In another bar in the next block, he tried to dope it out. Then, for the first time, it occurred to him that all of this added up to trouble for Ronnie Darrow. Feeling panic he couldn't explain, Pete White went to the phone booth, covered the mouthpiece with a handkerchief and hurriedly dialed the private number Channing had given him.

"Yes?" Channing answered in his usual cultured tone.

The man was a smoothie, all right. Able to hold his own, and then some, with the assorted refugee noblemen from Europe who seemed to be his constant companions.

"I have an urgent message for Miss Darrow," Pete said. "May I speak with her, please?"

"So sorry," said his employer. "Miss Darrow isn't here. I'm expecting her any moment. If you'll leave your number, I'll have her call you when she arrives."

What a slicker! With grudging admiration, Pete gave a phony number, hung up and ran strong fingers through his thick blond hair. Then panic returned. Something must have happened to Ronnie, all right. She'd reached the hotel safely—*he'd* seen to that.

He still didn't get it, but anger flooded through him. The attempt first to hold the girl up, then to gun him down meant something plenty big was stirring. Crime, which had taken a holiday since the Axis war declarations, was back on the job. And Ronnie and Channing and he himself were all mixed up in it, though Pete didn't know just how.

There was only one thing to do. He walked hastily back to the hotel, bought a tabloid and grabbed a chair in the center of the lush lobby, where he could keep an eye on all the exits. If something were afoot, his call to Channing would have stirred up a hornet's nest. No one likes unidentified phone calls, especially folk engaged in illegal practices.

HE'D barely opened the paper when, out of a corner of his eye, he saw Channing emerge hurriedly from an elevator. Unobtrusively, like the trained bloodhound he was, Pete White moved after him. Shortly thereafter, they were both in cabs moving through Central Park.

Channing left his vehicle at a large

apartment house on West End Avenue, and Pete was hot on his heels. This address, an odd one for a confirmed Eastsider like Tom Channing, meant things were on the move. Pete watched the indicator above the elevator. The arrow stopped at seven, and Channing was the lone passenger. Pete walked up the six flights.

There were, he discovered, six apartments opening off this segment of the hall. Other apartments were reached by other elevators. Pete studied the names on the doors—Palmer, Donovan, Lewis, Johnson and Craig. The sixth door bore no card over its bell.

The big detective frowned. It might be a vacant apartment, it might be housing his quarry—and it might be the living quarters of a person or persons who merely wanted privacy. Pete determined to find out. He located the service entrance in a short hallway adjoining the main one.

The door was locked, but not for long. Pete carried a fat ring of passkeys with him for just such emergencies. He breathed a soft sigh of relief when the door opened without noise. He found himself in a kitchen pantry. It was dimly lighted by moonlight, and he made his way into the kitchen. Growing accustomed to the gloom, he noticed that there were but a few dishes around, that they were piled in the sink unwashed.

From nearby Pete heard the hum of voices. They were talking some alien tongue, and he was able to make out only the name "Darrow." Which was enough for him.

He moved warily across an uncarpeted dining room, peered into a lighted hall. The furniture was ghostly under linen dust covers, the rugs rolled against the walls. The talk was louder now. Pete felt sweat break out across the bridge of his nose.

Well, he wasn't the Sherlock Holmes type. Action was his meat. So action was what he took. He pulled his gun from his pocket, loosened his

tie, in case somebody got a hold on it, and strode across the hall and into the living room.

Two men were sitting there. Another pared his nails with a knife against a side wall. One of them, holding Ronnie's pocketbook and jabbering excitedly, was Tom Channing. He was talking over a bottle of cognac to a sleek-looking individual with a monocle, who glared at him angrily. The man against the wall was a gorilla.

He didn't look fast, but he was. Before a cry of warning left his lips, the mobster had hurled his knife at Pete. It missed him by a whisker, quivered in the wall just over his shoulder. Channing went for a gun, rising as he did so. Pete put a bullet through his thigh, bringing him crashing down full length to pound the floor with his fists.

The man with the monocle shot without rising, as coolly as if he were potting grouse. The bullet entered Pete's arm just above the elbow, spinning him around. He himself put a bullet through the monocle and the eye behind it.

The spin caused by the shock of the bullet alone saved Pete from the gorilla, who had drawn another knife and charged. As it was, the viciousness of the attack ripped his coat clean off him, so that it hung from the wall supported by the knife. Pete recovered first and clubbed the gorilla over the head with the flat of his revolver.

A MOMENT later, he heard a yell from behind a closed door. Ignoring Channing's howls of anguish, Pete crossed to it and jerked it open. Ronnie Darrow was sitting on a bed, alternately screaming her head off and smoking a cigarette. Her wrap removed, revealed a two-piece red dress. When she saw him, she shut up.

"I didn't want to be forgotten with all this going on," she said calmly.

Then, "Oh, you're hurt, Mr. Detective!"

"Not as bad as some others," Pete said, though his arm throbbed like hades.

Ronnie got up, examined the injury. Pete liked the way her hair fell over her shoulders.

"Okay there," said a hard voice. "Take your hands off her and drop that gun."

"You so-and-so!" Pete swore, seeing red.

THEY were surrounded all at once by a group of leather-faced men carrying pistols and one submachine-gun. How many of them did he have to kill to get this girl free, Pete wondered.

"It's all right," said the girl unexpectedly. "Mr. Detective has saved my lily-white neck twice tonight. What's your name, friend?"

"White," said Pete, bewildered. "Pete White."

"Well, Pete," Ronnie said, "meet the boys. Uncle Sam's boys."

"Somewhere in all this," Pete observed plaintively, "I seem to remember a bottle on the table out there. I guess I need a drink."

They brought it to him. Ronnie bound his arm while he explained his actions that evening. When he was through, the G-man leader, a fellow named Graves, shook his head.

"We couldn't figure you," he said. "We knew Channing had hired you to watch Miss Darrow. That's why we couldn't keep the tabs on her we needed. I don't mind saying you've been just about our biggest headache—until tonight, of course."

"Look," said Pete. "I'm just a dumb detective. Will someone tell me what gives?"

"Your man Channing," explained

Graves, "is key man in a whole group of upper-case refugee Axis agents. Ronnie offered us her services to help smoke him out. These spies have been having a tough time getting money since the war started. The Darrow dough looked like manna from heaven. We were feeding Channing marked bills to see where they were going. You got some of them. He hired you to make sure Miss Darrow didn't contact us."

"You're telling me!" Pete said.

"Tonight was the night we cracked down. Miss Darrow was to deliver fifty grand. And Channing needed twice that much. So he arranged the hold-up you spoiled so thoroughly, figuring he could get the money twice. And when you did that, he figured you were hep. Hence the Sixth Avenue shooting episode."

"I get it," said Pete. "And when I spoiled his double rake-off, he and his pals figured a snatch was the only way out. How'd they work it?"

"With a gun in my back," Ronnie told him. "Ever try it?"

"No," said Pete.

His arm was hurting, and he was a little embarrassed by the fuss they were making over him. He was thankful when Ronnie had her car summoned and rode home with him.

"Between you and me," she admitted, "you were pretty swell. Maybe the boys will put you on Uncle Sam's payroll. They can use fellows who stick their noses into trouble and slug as hard as you seem to. Why'd you do it?"

Pete blushed, not wanting or knowing how to tell her.

"Lady," he began unevenly, "when you paid me that gee-note, you hired yourself a man."

"You know, Pete," she said, "I was thinking the same thing myself!"

●

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CHAPTER I

THE GIRL ON THE STONE STEPS

"CHICAGO WILLIE" took up one week of my time, in his home town, before I found him and handed him over to the local gendarmes. My going to Chicago to identify him was strictly a gesture of professional courtesy, and it was Acherson's idea, not mine. Being my partner and twice as old as I am, Acherson had the habit of treating me just as if I were his personal chattel.

I got back on Tuesday, the day the Crackett case broke. Acherson wasn't in our office on the fourth floor of Headquarters when I dropped my bags, so I went looking for him.

This was at ten o'clock of a lovely spring morning, and he should have been in.

Sig Salzburg, the gnome who runs ballistics for us, told me about it.

"The master," he said, "is out on a homicide job, purple in the face and popping around the gills."

I grinned. "Acherson always considers a crime in this precinct as a personal insult. These mugs will never learn to steer clear of his back yard."



"It isn't that," Sig said, shaking his head and peering at me through thick bifocals. "Among other things, he called you an immature baboon, a political drone, an irresponsible adolescent wasting the taxpayers' money in Chicago, a cavorting Fifth Columnist undermining the morals of the force, a—"

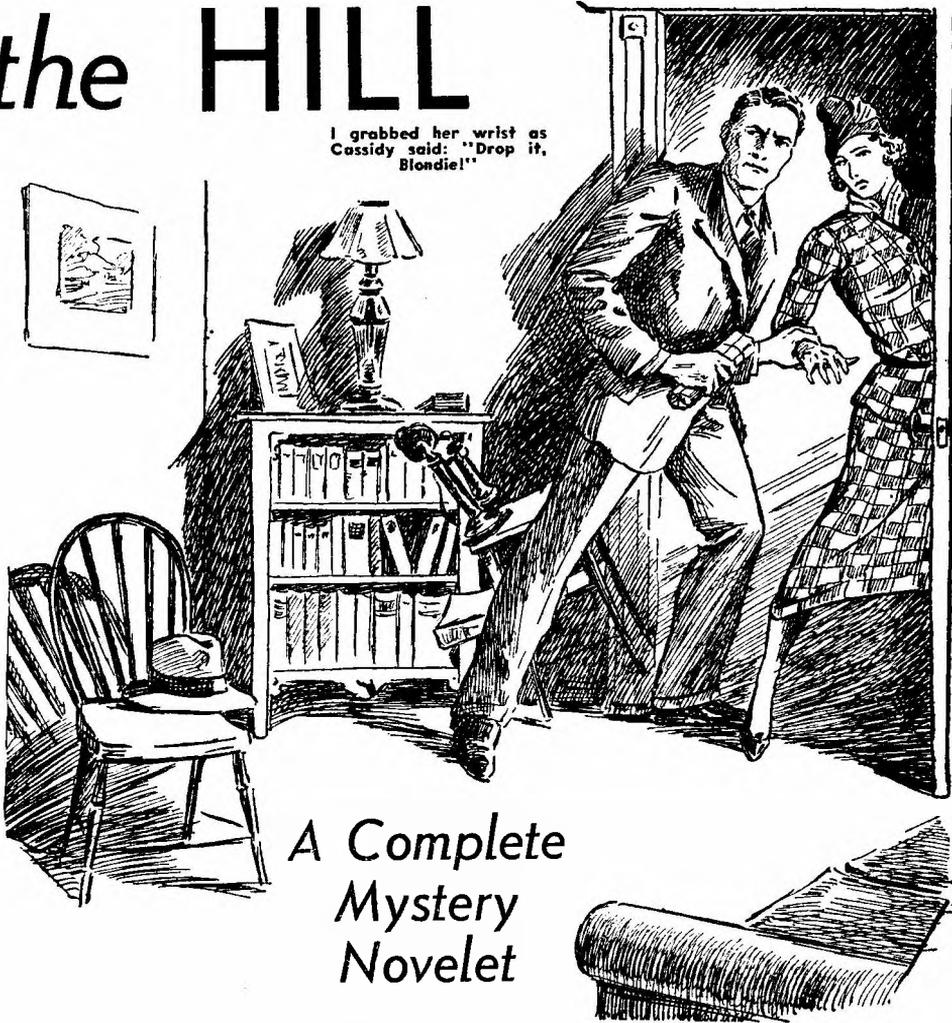
I held up a hand. "I get the general idea. But he sent me to Chicago himself. What's his kick?"

"You know the old master. He wants you when he needs you, even if he did send you out of town himself."

I put on my hat. "Where is this

the HILL

I grabbed her wrist as Cassidy said: "Drop it, Blondie!"



A Complete Mystery Novelet

homicide, and when did Acherson pull out of here?"

Sig Salzburg dipped in my pocket and took my last cigarette.

"The Crackett estate—four and a half crazy acres of house, lawn, creek and pond smack dab in the middle of town. You know it. Acherson went out to brood over the remains an hour ago."

"But the Widow Crackett died two weeks ago," I objected. "An accidental death, at that."

"This is her heiress."

"I didn't know the old crone was human enough to have one," I said. "If I come back carved into gruesome

little pieces, put the finger on Acherson. He did it."

I WENT out to the Crackett place. It was too nice a morning for anyone to die. The morgue wagon pulled into the driveway just ahead of me, so I had a look at the girl before they took her away.

She was young. Too young, and much too sweet to have died like this. She lay on a flagstone path leading down to the pond, and budding hedges cast a pattern of golden sunlight on her face. Her eyes were wide open and as blue as the spring sky. You couldn't see the way the back of her

head was crushed in unless you got down on your hands and knees and looked. I did that, and immediately wished I hadn't. It was a horrible wound.

A couple of detectives were standing around waiting for the medical examiner to finish. I fished for a cigarette, found the empty pack Salzburg had left me, and threw it away.

"Is Acherson around?"

The detectives grinned. "He's been and gone," one of them said. "He's looking for you, Carter. He said you were a nincompoop and an irresponsible—"

"I heard that record already," I said. "Where did he go?"

The detectives pointed across the pond. Over the treetops on the other side of the water were a couple of gables.

"Acherson is visiting the neighbors. Name of Northrupp. This girl, here, was named Dinah Lester. She was the Widow Crackett's only living relative, a second cousin, I think. The kid took possession of this goofy place a week ago and had been living quietly and peacefully, getting to know the town and her neighbors. Nobody had any reason to kill her, but there was a burglary alarm here last night—at least, a vag was seen on the grounds, and he's the one we think done it. Must've smashed her head in with a rock. Shame, too. Looks like she was a nice kid."

"When was she found?" I asked.

"About an hour ago. She's been lying out here for about six hours, which means she was killed early this morning, about three. The housekeeper, Mrs. Seavers, found her."

I went looking for Mrs. Seavers. The Crackett house was an architectural monstrosity of oddly shaped wings and gables, scroll-work and galleries. Little balconies were tacked on everywhere, for no rhyme or reason. The whole thing was stuck on top of the hill, with lawns, driveways, and little sunken terraces sloping

away in all directions. The place had a general air of neglect.

I walked up the steep stone pathway, away from the pond, and went through the front door into a vast living room. At the far end, huddled in a sunny bay window, was Mrs. Seavers and a red-headed young man.

Mrs. Seavers was a wraithlike little woman with pale hands and a tiny voice that quavered when she told me about Dinah Lester.

"She was such a sweet, dear child," she said. "Gentle and unassuming and modest. She treated me very, very well. I can't imagine why anyone should have killed her."

"Have you any idea," I asked, "what she was doing on the grounds at three o'clock this morning?"

"No, I haven't. I can't imagine."

"Had she been out last night—on a date, I mean?"

THE red-headed young man spoke sullenly.

"She was out with me. I'm Milo Barton. I was Mrs. Crackett's lawyer, and Dinah retained me to look after the estate as I've always done. She didn't know anyone in town, coming from Savannah as she did, so I took her out and introduced her to some friends to get her started."

I decided I didn't like Milo Barton. He had green eyes to go with his red hair, and puffy little bags to go with his eyes. He sounded too glib, and I didn't like to think of him, somehow, as any girl's mentor.

"What time did you bring her back?" I asked.

"Quite early—about eleven. She said she was tired. Mrs. Seavers was still up when we came in."

"How was she acting?"

"In the best of spirits. This thing is so horrible—"

I cut him off, because Mrs. Seaver's underlip began to tremble violently. The little old woman brushed her eyes with a lace handkerchief and pressed her lips tightly together, staring at

me. She was trying hard to stay under control.

"What about this vagrant who was seen on the grounds?" I asked her.

"Plato can tell you about that," she whispered.

"Plato?"

"The gardener. Plato Williams. He's the one who almost caught him."

"You'll find him in the kitchen, Captain," Milo Barton said. "He's tight."

It sounded like a hurried brush-off to me.

"I'm just a sergeant," I said. "I'll judge for myself if he's plastered or not."

I just didn't like this Barton guy. In the hall doorway I paused and added:

"By the way, Barton, you were the widow's lawyer. Who inherits the estate now?"

His eyes dropped and his mouth tightened and a muscle jumped and wriggled in his jaw. He looked up and said flatly:

"I inherit it now."

I grinned blandly. "Thank you, very much."

His voice shook with sudden anger. "I don't like what you're thinking. Mrs. Crackett was a peculiar woman in many respects. She had almost no friends aside from myself, and her will specified that if her cousin, Miss Lester, didn't meet the requirements, I was to inherit as payment for past services."

"Three million dollars," I murmured, "is a nice fee for past services. What kind of requirements were there for Miss Lester?"

Milo Barton's mouth went white.

"If you weren't a cop I'd—"

"But I am. Answer me, please."

He could have murdered me. I've seen murderers, and he looked like one.

"There was a provision," he rasped, "that Miss Lester was to have a clear record so far as the police were concerned, and she was not to be married.

As I said, the Widow Crackett was a peculiar woman."

"Very." I nodded. I looked him up and down. "In more ways than one."

I LEFT him, stewing in his own juice, and looked for Plato Williams, the gardener. Plato was full, all right. He was in the tiled kitchen, sitting at the table wearing a suede jacket and a cap, morbidly drinking tomato juice from a tall glass jar. He was big and woolly and his eyes were red. A bluecoat was standing in the kitchen doorway, doing nothing.

"Hello, Plato," I said. "I want to talk to you."

"Another cop," he grunted. He didn't look up.

"They say you got a look at the vag who was around this place last night."

"Yeah, I seen him."

"When?"

"'Bout two o'clock this morning."

That would make it about an hour before Dinah Lester was killed.

"Where was he when you saw him?" I asked.

"In the library."

"Alone?"

"No."

"With whom?"

"Miss Lester." He finished the tomato juice, wiped his mouth, and then leaned back in the chair and glowered at me. His eyes were fiery red. "Miss Lester was in there, talking to him. I seen 'em through the window when I snuck in. Las' night was my night off, see? They was in there arguin'."

I digested this for a moment. "Then she knew this tramp?"

"Sure, she knew him."

"What did he look like?"

Plato Williams shrugged meaty shoulders. "I only seen his back. He was a little peanut of a guy. He wore an old hat and old topcoat. I never seen his face. But Miss Lester was arguin' with him."

"What about?"

"I couldn't hear."

"You told all this to Lieutenant Acherson?" I asked.

"Who is he?"

I let it go, telling the policeman to haul Plato down to Headquarters to await further questioning. I went around the back of the house by devious footpaths to the stone steps leading down to the pond. The steps were cut out of the rock, a flat wall on one side and a sharp drop on the other. Trees made budding arches overhead.

About ten steps below the spot where Dinah Lester had been found, I stopped and studied a long white scar on the flagstone. It was a new scratch that hadn't been weathered yet. I angled off the sharp edge of the step toward the water below.

I went over to the Northrupps to find Acherson.

CHAPTER II FAMILY PARTY



THE Northrupp house was a gray stone affair on the other side of a ten-foot box hedge. The Northrupps were in. Definitely. Crossing the soft lawn, I heard a woman screaming, as if in a tantrum, and a man's voice bellowed in rage. I took longer strides and headed for the French windows and looked in. It was quite a sight.

There were four people in the room—two men and two women. One of the women—Mrs. Northrupp, I guessed—was struggling in the grip of a big, burly man who was trying to wrest a gun from her hand. The second man was circling warily behind the infuriated woman, trying to reach her without exposing himself to the gun muzzle. He was cautious about it. It was Acherson.

The other woman merely sat in a deep-cushioned chair, perfect legs

crossed, a long cigarette in her lips, and looked lovely, serene, and a little amused.

The first woman's breath came in whistling gasps.

"I'll kill you, Toby! I will, I will!"

Toby was the big guy trying to take the gun away from her. He was hanging on for dear life, and he was scared. I didn't blame him. Mrs. Northrupp was a homicidal maniac if I ever saw one. She was a small woman with pale, graying hair and bright black eyes that blazed with an insane rage as she panted and writhed in an effort to train the gun on her husband.

Acherson, big and solid, with light gray eyes and a shock of white hair, was still circling cautiously.

"Now, Mrs. Northrupp," his smooth, whipped-cream voice said placatingly. "Please, Mrs. Northrupp—"

"Heavens above, Lieutenant," Toby Northrupp gasped, "*do* something! She's a madwoman!"

"I'll kill you!" Mrs. Northrupp sobbed. "You've always said I was insane. Now I'll show you what that's done to me. You tried to put me away, shut me up as if I was a lunatic, so you'd have a free hand to make love to Lyla!" She made a spitting sound in his face. "But I'll kill you first! That's why I came back last night. To kill you!"

The gun pointed for a moment in my direction and I ducked. It went off with a thunderous crash. The bullet shattered a pane of glass in the window beside me. Toby Northrupp jarred backward, losing his grip on the frantic woman. Acherson, behind him, caught an elbow on the jaw and sat down abruptly, spitting blood.

The madwoman yanked free, ripping her sleeve, and crouched back like an animal at bay, her eyes blazing as she pointed the gun at Toby Northrupp. In doing that she also covered Acherson.

Northrupp went ashen. Even the other woman—the Lyla who had been

mentioned, I supposed—lost her poise and sat up stiffly in the chair.

"Ann, please, please!" Toby Northrupp pleaded. "You know I've always tried to help you, do what I could for you. Listen to me! *Listen!* Don't shoot! I—"

I figured it was time to break it up; and I was none too soon. She was going to fire.

I stepped inside, gun in hand.

"Drop it, Mrs. Northrupp," I said.

SHE whirled and pointed her gun at me. I squeezed the trigger and shot it out of her hand. The gun jumped from her fingers and thudded to the floor, while she stared dazedly at her numbed hand. She looked at me, then at Toby Northrupp and Acherson, then abruptly sank down on a couch and began to sob.

There were a series of long-drawn breaths in the room. Acherson ran stubby fingers through his shock of gray hair and stared at me.

"I am glad, Randy," he said, in a voice like velvet, "that you finally decided to return from Chicago."

Toby Northrupp turned to the cool, lovely goddess who had relaxed again in her chair, after a smile at me.

"Lyla," he said shakily, "you'll have to get out of here. The very sight of you makes Ann insane."

"If you say so, Toby, darling."

Northrupp turned to Acherson and me.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen. My wife hasn't been well. She—she's given to hallucinations, delusions. Been under the doctor's care. She escaped the sanatorium last night. I didn't even know she was hiding in the house this morning, until just now. I assure you—"

Acherson said it was all right. Getting shot at was his business. He stared curiously at the sobbing Mrs. Northrupp, then at Lyla Peterson, the wife's half-sister. He straightened his cuffs.

"Then you saw or heard nothing

last night that might give us the exact time Miss Lester was killed?" he asked quite calmly.

"Nothing," said Northrupp.

He reached shakily for a decanter and poured three stiff drinks. Acherson turned his down, and so did I. Northrupp drank ours for us, one after the other.

Acherson looked again at the sobbing woman, lifted square, solid shoulders in a shrug.

"Very well," he said. "Come along, Randy."

"Where to?" I asked.

"Headquarters." Then he looked at me and snarled, "I want to hear all about your vacation in Chicago!"

We left the Northrupps to their cozy family circle. . . .

In our ivory tower on the fourth floor of Headquarters, Acherson slumped in his swivel chair and stared glumly at his big, square hands. Afternoon sunlight poked a few despairing beams through the dusty window glass. I found a pack of cigarettes on my desk, lit one, and sat down to wait for the master mind to finish brooding over the shape of his fingers. Down in the City Hall courtyard a patrol wagon clanged. Then silence, while Acherson sighed once or twice and finally looked at me from under beetling gray brows.

"Murder is a nasty thing, Randy," he said.

"Especially for the victim," I suggested.

"I must thank you," he went on, "for saving my life. That Northrupp woman is definitely insane."

"I rushed back from Chicago just to do that very thing," I said. "Can I tell you about Chicago Willie now?"

He sighed despairingly. "Levity at a time like this is unbecoming, Randy. I realize you are young, with boisterous spirits—"

"Like Mrs. Northrupp," I put in.

"—but certainly the death of a sweet child like Miss Dinah Lester should have a dampening effect on

your ebullieny. We are not suited temperamentally as partners, Randy."

"I put in an application for a transfer three months ago, maestro," I said. "You know what happened to it. You killed it. Stop kidding me. Tell me," I suggested, "who killed Dinah Lester. Just to while away the time."

ACHERSON sighed and stifled an impulse to shout at me.

"I wish I knew who killed that innocent child. I want you to do something for me, Randy. I want you to send telegrams to Savannah inquiring into Dinah Lester's background. Then get the file on the Widow Crackett's death and study it. And finally, get me a grappling hook."

"A grappling hook?" I asked.

"There was a deep scratch on the steps below the spot where Dinah Lester was killed," Acherson said gently.

"I saw it," I said. "And I catch." At the door I paused. "You can do one favor for me, Mike. Pin the kill on that lawyer guy, Milo Barton, will you? I don't like his eyes."

"Randy, you are beyond hope. You are the most—"

He was all wound up, ready to let go, but I didn't stay to hear any of it. I fled.

I sent off the required telegram to Savannah, then had dinner in the restaurant across City Hall plaza. It was growing dark when I returned to Headquarters. On the way upstairs I stopped in and got the file on the death of the Widow Crackett and read it before returning to the office. The report gave me plenty of food for thought.

The Widow Crackett's death was believed to be the result of an accidental fall. She had been an old woman in her late sixties, shrewish, bitter, with a flair for the sensational that kept her name in the newspapers. She had been found on the rocky little path leading down to the pond—the

same path on which we had found her heiress, Dinah.

I was reading the Savannah Chief of Police's answer to my telegram when Acherson stamped in. There was a spot of gravy on his tie and his face was flushed from his usual top-heavy meal. He stared morosely at my feet, which were propped on his desk.

"Go on, take your ease," he said grimly. "Don't mind the fact that an innocent girl's murderer is abroad."

I grinned. "Innocence is what you make it. Read it and weep."

I handed him the telegram and he whisked it impatiently from my fingers, glaring at me.

"Your sweet and innocent child," I went on, "has been married twice, divorced once, jailed five times for disorderly conduct, twice for appearing in an improper night-club show, was once accused of rolling a stewpot but discharged for lack of evidence. She was known to have a violent temper and to have been in jail at the time of the widow's death."

Acherson stared at me in astonishment.

"That girl was all those things?"

"So says Savannah."

He looked at the telegram, frowning.

"I don't believe it. You just had to take one look at her to know—"

"It's interesting," I interrupted, "when you consider that Mrs. Crackett's will specified that her heiress was to have avoided entanglements with the law, or the fortune would go to Milo Barton. If Dinah was in jail when Barton went down to fetch her, it means he's guilty of conspiracy to defraud."

CAPTAIN ACHERSON sat down heavily. He was badly shaken.

"Milo Barton?" he muttered. "But he was due to inherit if Dinah Lester was ineligible. Why should he conspire with her to conceal her record? It doesn't make sense."

For once I agreed with him without argument. None of it made sense. Acherson fumed like a latent volcano while I smoked two cigarettes and the twilight outside turned purple. That was when Cassidy, a third-class detective, knocked on the door and ushered in Plato Williams, the Crackett gardener.

Plato was sober now. He was drenched with water from head to foot and he was shaking from fright. Acherson looked disapprovingly at Cassidy.

"We had to turn a hose on him to wake him up," Cassidy said. "He'll spill what he knows now."

"We'll see." Acherson nodded. He turned to Plato. "What about last night?"

The big man swallowed and sank into a chair.

"I—I got full. I didn't mean to. I didn't realize what it was all about until your cops sobered me up. I'll tell you what I know."

And it was plenty. Plato had slipped out to get a couple of nips and had remained to get pie-eyed. When he returned, by way of the grounds, he had seen a light in the library and had gone over to look in the window. Dinah Lester and a stranger had been arguing in front of the open wall safe. Dinah had a gun in her hand. Plato had caught the man's name. It was Freemont—Fred Freemont.

Out of curiosity, Plato had followed Freemont when the man left. He had gone to a second-rate hotel, the Clarissa. Plato had then had a couple more drinks on his way home, and had returned to find Dinah Lester murdered.

"Then this Fred Freemont couldn't have killed her?" I said.

"Nope. I watched him all the way to the hotel and he couldn't have got back to the house ahead of me. Least, I don't think so."

Acherson signaled to Cassidy and the big guy was taken away. Then Acherson turned to me.

"The Clarissa Hotel, Randy."

I reached for my hat. "You're not coming?"

"You forgot to get my grappling hook," he said gently, "so I'll attend to that while you bring the man in."

I went out, swearing under my breath.

CHAPTER III

A LITTLE SHAKEDOWN



CASSIDY came along with me to the Clarissa. It was a five-story affair of red brick and had a dusty red plush lobby and a shady clientele. Cassidy went around to cover the rear exits while I tried the

desk and got Freemont's room on the third floor. I took the clerk up in the elevator with me before letting him go. I didn't want him to do any telephoning.

A slit of light shone under the door, and the muted sound of a radio came from behind it. I knocked, heard a chair creak and a man's voice muttering. The radio was turned off and footsteps approached the door. I loosened my gun in my pocket and stepped back a little and to the left.

He wasn't ready for anything. He opened the door wide and stood there, holding a newspaper and leaning on the door-knob. He was young, small, and dark, with an undernourished mustache and flat black eyes that stared at me and didn't wink.

"Yes?" he said.

I pushed his hand off the knob and he fell back, licking his lips. I went in and closed the door and leaned against it.

"Your name is Freemont?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"From Savannah?"

He nodded again. His eyes were as shiny and unblinking as a snake's. He

wore a purplish striped suit and his collar was open, without a necktie. There was a steady, nervous swallowing in his throat.

Finally he said, quietly and without surprise:

"You're from the cops. Okay. What do you want with me?"

"We just want to see if you killed Dinah Lester, is all," I said. I made it pleasant, imitating the ripe smoothness Acherson would have put in his voice. "We'd like to know what you were doing at the Crackett house last night."

He licked his lips.

"I won't tell you. I didn't kill that girl, and that's all I know. I didn't kill her."

"Get your hat and coat," I said. "We'll talk it over in Headquarters."

"No," he said flatly. "I've been expecting you mugs. You're not getting me in any back rooms."

"Get your hat and coat."

"No," he said again. Then he looked sideward and past my range of vision and called: "Baby—now."

And "Baby" was there, in the bathroom doorway, holding a gun that covered me. She was tall and blond and had a hard red mouth and her eyes were quick and nervous over the glinting barrel of her gun. I must have showed up just in time, for she had her hat on, ready to go out.

I HADN'T figured on his woman, or expected anyone else. My gun was in my coat pocket, inches from my fingers, but it might as well have been miles away. I didn't dare go for it. This girl knew how to hold a gun and her mouth told me she would shoot—maybe not to kill, maybe just a slug in the knee. I preferred to stay in one piece.

"This won't buy you two a thing," I said. "You're playing it like a couple of hay-hitting amateurs."

"Take his gun away, Freddie lamb," the girl said in a thick Southern drawl.

Freddie blinked his flat black eyes nervously and continued to swallow the fear in his throat. He came toward me.

"I didn't kill that girl, copper. Remember that. I just can't afford to answer questions. So if you behave we'll take your gun and tie you up and gag you and leave you here long enough for us to get away. That's all. If you behave."

"Shut up and get his gun, sugar," the girl drawled.

"All right," he said. "I'm doing it. I'll get his gun."

He was a clumsy amateur. The girl should have gone for my gun herself. She'd have known how to do it. But this little guy was clumsy, and his fear made him careless.

He reached across my chest from the left for the gun in my pocket. So I took him. I brought my left up in a hard jab into his armpit, caught his wrist with my right hand, and yanked him in front of me. He screamed in pain and terror—and then the girl fired!

I didn't feel anything—except my hat flying off. It landed in a chair. Freemont came alive in my grip and wriggled like a slippery eel. I could have put him away at once, but I didn't want to sacrifice my shield. The blonde began stealing along the wall, her face chalk-white and her lips twitchy. She was trying for a second shot at me. I kicked a chair across the floor and it smacked into her. She began swearing in a flat monotone, cursing both me and Freddie.

"Cut it out," I told her.

She kept on cursing and trying to circle me. Freddie tried to yank free, and I saw a chance. When he pulled away it gave my left arm room to swing. I swung it. My knuckles cracked hard on his jaw and he grunted, his head jerking backward. I yanked him close to me again, holding him between me and the girl. She was crying now, sobbing.

"Lay off it, Baby," I snapped. "It's

no good. Freddie's out and I've got him."

To prove it I held him up with one hand and drew my gun with the other. She tried to shoot my hand off. Her big revolver crashed deafeningly, the bullet burned across my knuckles, and my gun flew across the room. She knew how to handle a gun, all right—and I had none now, had no weapon but a wrapped package I yanked off a telephone table.

She wept. "You hit Freddie! I'll kill you for that!"

Then Cassidy stuck his red face through the window that opened on the fire-escape.

"Drop it, Blondie," he said.

The girl spun around to see where his voice came from and I let Freemont hit the floor like a sack of wet cement and dived for her, grabbing her wrist before she leaped through the bathroom door.

I smashed her against the wall and she gasped, tried to use her knee. I crossed her chin with the wrapped package and let her fall free to the floor. She bumped good and hard, and I liked the sound of it. She didn't play fair.

Cassidy climbed all the way inside, pocketing his gun, and walked around the girl, studying her as she sprawled on the carpet.

"Some babe," he said admiringly. "Some babe."

"Put her in your pocket," I snapped. "And let's go."

IT WAS after eight when we got back to Headquarters. Acherson was sitting at his battered desk, his square face shadowed above a goose-neck reading lamp that cast a sharp light on his snow-plow jaw and left the upper part of his face in darkness. He was twiddling his big thumbs and staring at the Savannah telegrams in his lap. A grappling hook and a coil of rope were parked in my chair.

I shoved Freemont and the girl, both conscious now, in ahead of me.

"Here's the vag and his ornament," I said. "The gal won't talk or say who she is. Freddie claims he didn't kill Dinah Lester, but he had a lot of objections to coming up here."

Acherson looked at me. His voice was round and mellow.

"What Freddie Freemont says is true, Randy. He didn't kill Dinah Lester."

I stared at him. "I suppose an oracle told you."

"No. A telegram from Savannah."

"How can they know down there who killed whom up here?" I demanded.

Acherson stared at the blonde.

"Because Dinah Lester isn't dead, Randy. She isn't dead at all. Is she, Miss Lester?"

The blonde drew in her breath hard. I shoved the grappling hook off my chair and collapsed into it.

"So you want to talk in riddles," I said weakly. "Okay. So you think you're so smart and like to show it. Okay. But if Dinah Lester isn't dead, who was the girl we looked at today?"

"Her name was Helen Ranch." Again Acherson looked at the blonde. "Isn't that so, Miss Lester?"

"This blonde is Dinah Lester?" I said incredulously. "And the dead girl is named Helen Ranch? Who the devil is Helen Ranch?"

"Miss Lester will tell us," Acherson said smoothly.

"The devil with you, copper," the girl said.

"We didn't kill her!" Freemont blurted suddenly. "We didn't know she'd be killed!"

"What do you know about it, Freemont?" Acherson demanded.

"Nothing. I didn't know anything about it—I didn't even know it *was* Helen Ranch until I—"

"Shut up, sugar," said the girl.

Freemont whirled on her furiously.

"No!" he cried. "No, I won't! I'm going to tell them everything. You—you're so smart! I wish I'd never laid eyes on you! I wish I'd never

seen you, or married you, or had anything to do with you!"

I began to see the light. "You're married to this gal, Freddie?" I asked. "You have my sympathy. Aside from that, was her maiden name Dinah Lester?"

"Yes, it was," he said.

"And she's the real Crackett heiress?"

"Yes, she is."

"Freddie," the girl said, "you sniveling, rotten little coward—"

"Shut up," he snapped at her. "I'm going to tell them everything about it. I didn't ask for any part of this, and I'm not getting framed into the chair for it."

"Yet you went to Helen Ranch last night to ask for dough," the girl said scornfully. "To shake me down. You thought I was in the money and you came back like a little sneaking rat to shake me down for dough."

FREEMONT appealed to Acherson and me.

"Listen! Believe me. This Helen Ranch was Dinah's roommate in Savannah, see? Helen was a photographer's model and Dinah was a night-club entertainer, in one of the rottenest dives down there. Dinah's got a record as long as my arm, see?"

"And I made it trying to support a rat I thought was a man," Dinah drawled.

"So then this Widow Crackett dies," Freemont went on, ignoring her, "and Dinah discovers she's rich. But the will says Dinah's got to be clean, see? No police record, no trouble, not even a husband. And Dinah's got all of those. So she tried to pull a fast one when this lawyer, Milo Barton, came. It was cozy, all right. She talked Helen Ranch, who was a dumb little bunny, into taking her identity and coming up north to accept the inheritance. Then later Dinah was to come up and live with her and they'd split fifty-fifty."

"Then what were you doing at the

Crackett house last night?" Acherson said softly.

"I read about the inheritance in the papers and I went to see Dinah. I thought it was Dinah who got the dough. Then I found out it was Helen Ranch, when I got there, and Helen told me all about it. So I went away. Dinah knew my address at the Clarissa, and when I got back, there she was. That's all I know. Next thing, when I woke up, I read that Helen Ranch had been murdered and I wanted to lam, but Dinah wanted to hang around and see could we salvage something out of the mess. She was thinking about putting the screws on Barton."

"Did Barton know Helen wasn't the real heiress?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Dinah, do you know?"

"I ain't saying." The blonde's mouth was hard and stubborn. "I ain't saying anything to you coppers."

"You're under suspicion of murder, you know," Acherson remarked gently. "I could pin this job on you two easily."

"The devil with you, copper."

Acherson sighed. He looked at Cassidy, lounging against the door.

"Take them away, Cass," he said. He sounded tired. "Lock them up."

Cassidy took the man and the woman away.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRAP AGAIN



WHEN Freemont and the blonde were gone I lit a cigarette, sat down, and watched Acherson. You couldn't tell what he was thinking, except that it wasn't pleasant. He kept twiddling his thumbs and there

was not a sound except the alarm clock on his desk. [Turn to page 104]

A THOUSAND YEARS OLD AND STILL LIVING!

A strange method of mind and body control that often leads to immense powers never before experienced is announced by Edwin J. Dingle, well-known explorer and geographer. It is said to bring about almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind. Many report improvement in health. Others acquire superb bodily strength, secure better positions, turn failure into success. Often with surprising speed, talents, ability and a more magnetic personality are developed.

The method was found in remote and mysterious Tibet, formerly a forbidden country rarely visited by outsiders and often called the land of miracles in the astounding books written about it. Here, behind the highest mountains in the world, Mr. Dingle learned the extraordinary system he is now disclosing to the Western World.

He maintains that all of us are giants in strength and mind power, capable of surprising feats, from the delay of old age to the prolonging of youth and the achievement of dazzling business and professional success. From childhood, however, we are hypnotized, our powers put to sleep by the suggestions of associates, by what we read and by various experiences.

To realize their really marvelous powers, men and women must escape from this hypnotism. The method found by Mr. Dingle in Tibet is said to be remarkably instrumental in free-

ing the mind of the hypnotizing ideas that paralyze the giant powers within us.

Our accepted ideas of old age and death, he claims, would prove utterly wrong if we could escape from their hypnotizing influence. He points to the exotic Joshua Trees of the California Desert, many of which are over a thousand years old and still living. Some are thought to be two and three thousand years old. Life and youth, he says, can persist several times longer than people think. In Tibet this is believed and certain methods, based on this belief, are employed. Incredible ages are often ascribed to sages there. "The methods are too new in the Western World," he says, "for us to have authoritative data. But they may be instrumental, meantime, in prolonging our youth and increasing our mental, physical and spiritual powers."

"The time has come," he declares, "for every enlightened man and woman to achieve the greater health, success and happiness possible through this ancient but remarkable method of mastery." His amazing 9,000 word treatise is now being offered by The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 97-L, Los Angeles, Calif. They offer to send it free to any readers of this paper who quickly send their names and addresses. Readers are urged to write promptly for the free treatise.

"I should of stood in Chicago," I said. "In bed. This is a tough one, Mike. It's a nasty business."

"Every murder is nasty, Randy. Our job is to solve them. If we could solve every one, there wouldn't be any more murders. I wouldn't like to miss on this one."

"Maybe we won't," I said hopefully. "But it's a mess. Either Freemont or the blonde could have killed Helen Ranch. Maybe Helen was double-crossing them, holding out on them. So they killed her."

"Freddie's got an alibi, of sorts," Acherson said.

"The blonde, then," I suggested. "She could do a murder, easily. She tried to murder me back in the hotel." I paused. "Anyway, how did you know the dead girl wasn't Dinah Lester?"

"She was just a sweet kid, Randy. Everybody verified that. But the Savannah telegrams gave a different character to her, and nobody could change like that overnight, even if it was a pose. So I guessed the dead girl was a ringer."

"What about Milo Barton?" I asked. "Was he part of the fraud? Maybe he found it out and killed her to inherit the dough himself."

"If he knew the girl wasn't Dinah Lester, he could have exposed her and inherited without going to the trouble of murdering her, Randy."

"Maybe she got something on him—something about the way he was running the Crackett estate."

"Possibly."

"And what about these Northrupps, the neighbors?" I said. "Something's phony there—the wife escaping from a private nut-house last night, roaming around trying to kill her husband. And that fancy cream-and-syrup dame, the sister-in-law. Maybe there's something there."

Acherson shook his head. "You're forgetting something very important, Randy."

"What am I forgetting?"

"The Widow Crackett. *She* was murdered, too."

My jaw dropped. "How do you know that?"

Acherson stood up heavily and gestured toward the grappling hook. "Carry that and come along. I'll show you."

We didn't say much on the way, and when we got where we were going it was so black dark it was hard even to think.

"When I was in Chicago," I said, "looking for Chicago Willie, they did things differently. They worked in daylight, when you could tell a tree from a man and look where you were putting your feet. A guy with a gun was there for you to see and shoot at, if you were faster than he was."

"This isn't Chicago," Acherson whispered. "And shut up, Randy."

We were on the Crackett grounds, circling the big, grotesque mansion on top of the hill. A cool wind whimpered in the trees that leaned over the pond below us, and shrubbery pressed in around us like a black wall. The grappling iron on my shoulder was getting heavier by the minute.

Acherson put his hand out to stop me.

"Look!"

WE STOOD at the head of the stone steps, dropping down to the moonlit pool. The stairway was steep, dropping precipitately into a black well shrouded with brush. This was ten feet above the spot where Helen Ranch and the Widow Crackett had met their deaths.

"I can't see anything down there," I said. "I can't even see where to put my feet."

"Keep your flash in your pocket," Acherson whispered. "No lights."

He looked beyond the little pond to the high box-hedge that divided the Crackett estate from the Northrupps. I thought of Ann Northrupp, the fugitive from an asylum, wandering these shadowed grounds; and I shivered.

"There was a scar on the steps a little below where the girl was found," Acherson said. "You saw it. These steps form a perfect murder trap. A trap that, after it is sprung by the unwitting victim, vanishes and hides itself."

"Maybe it's Chicago Willie," I said. Acherson ignored me. "It was a trap set on a trigger," he said. "A light thread was run across one of these steps, then continued with a heavier cord that was tied around a heavy rock suspended in the trees. When the victim came down these steps and broke the thread—"

I cursed softly. "The rock was released, swung down, hit the victim's head, and continued on over this little bluff and splashed into the pond. Neat."

"Exactly. That grappling hook is to find that rock, which will still have part of the cord tied to it."

"It's nice to know how it was done," I said, "but it makes our job twice as hard. It means nobody has an alibi, because the murderer didn't have to be present when the job was done."

Acherson started down the steps, feeling with his feet in the inky darkness. A spider-web brushed my face as I followed him. A night-bird twittered sleepily and something scurried away into the brush. Water made a trickling sound somewhere. There were a lot of whispered, unidentifiable noises. But the trap didn't make any noise when it was sprung.

I felt the wind of the thing as it brushed by my face with a deadly, downward rush. I saw Acherson, two steps below me, stumble slightly, then sprawl headlong into the dark stairwell. Something heavy, utterly resistless, scraped the flagstone and dropped with a splash into the pond. It seemed an eternity before I got my frozen vocal chords to function.

"Mike!" I yelled. "Mike!"

[Turn page]

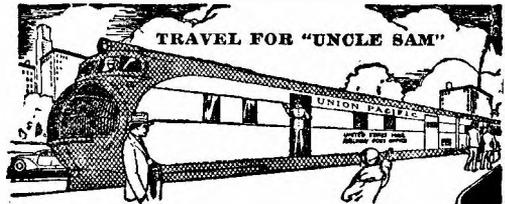


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I started down those inky black steps with my heart swelling in my throat, choking me. My legs trembled.

"If Mike is dead—if Mike is dead—" I kept thinking.

Halfway down I lost my footing and fell the rest of the way, sprawling, bumping and bruising myself. I landed on a dark, vague figure in the middle of the path.

"Mike!" I gasped. "Are you all right? Mike—"

His fist came out and clouted me on the jaw.

"Shut up, Randy!" he raged softly.

I JUST sat there, too stunned to think, facing him. He had a gun in his hand. His face was a dim, blocky square of whiteness, hard and utterly inflexible in the pale moonlight.

"Mike, I thought you were—"

"Somebody set up the trap again," he whispered. "I'm all right. I felt the cord just as I broke it with my foot and dived down the rest of the steps to beat the rock as it came after me. I'm all right."

"Then why sock me?" I protested angrily.

"Shut up," he said again. "Somebody's coming."

He was right, as usual. Somebody's footsteps were pattering up the path from the pond, around a bend. Whoever it was, he was hidden by the shrubbery.

I shoved Acherson to one side of the path, then scuttled to the other side and crouched there. I waited. He came around the bend with a rush, a dim hurtling figure that was past me before I knew it. I caught a glimpse of a white face above me, mouth agape in horror, and then I dived for him.

I tackled him just below the knees and he folded up like an accordion, grunting with surprise. He hit the gravel pathway with his palms and skidded along on them. I clung to his

legs and scrambled up on top of him as he wriggled around. His fist came out in a wild looping swing that caught the side of my head, then I straddled him and dug my knees into his biceps and let him have one or two across the jaw.

"Let go!" he gasped. "I didn't mean—I didn't know anybody was here!"

"I'll bet you didn't," I snapped.

Acherson stood up out of the brush and came over.

"Who is he, Randy?"

I grinned. "Little Milo Barton, our lawyer pal."

"Let him up," Acherson said.

"Okay, if you want the pleasure of knocking him down again. He almost killed you."

"I didn't mean to let that trap go off!" Milo Barton panted. "I didn't know anybody was coming down these steps!"

"You set up this trap?" Acherson said calmly.

"Yes, I—"

"You set it up last night, too?"

"No, no!" he cried. "I didn't! I figured it out today, wondering how the girl was killed, and I came back here just twenty minutes ago and experimented with it. I wanted to see if my theory was correct, that's all!"

He was shivering with terror. His hat had come off and his coat was ripped when I had tackled him. His red hair looked dark in the moonlight, and his puffy green eyes shone with a bright blaze of abject terror.

I felt satisfied about the whole thing. We had Barton, and I thought the night's exploring was over.

So I thought. The revolver shot, blasting across the pond from the Northrup house, almost jarred me off my feet with surprise.

Barton stiffened in my grip.

"Wh-what was that?"

There came another shot, like a slap in the face out of the darkness.

"Stay here, Randy!" Acherson snapped. "Keep your gun on this man and don't let him get away. I'll see what it's all about. That woman's probably loose again."

[Turn page]



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"Don't fall down any more steps," I called.

CHAPTER V

THREE-CORNERED MOTIVE



ACHERSON vanished fast. Barton and I were left alone on the moonlit path. I lit a cigarette and he asked me for one. I gave it to him.

"You police won't believe me," he said, "but what I told you is true. I got to

thinking about this murder trap when I thought about this path."

"What about this path?" I asked.

"It was used by a lot of people other than the Cracketts. Others are not allowed to trespass, of course, but they do. These four acres block off some big cross-town streets, and pedestrians often cut across the grounds diagonally, which takes them down this path and across the pond and around the Northrup house. I've had to prosecute several trespassers for the widow, but it did no good. It's almost a public thoroughfare."

I didn't like this news much. It widened the scope of our suspects to include just about the whole metropolitan population. But he was right about the public character of the path.

I heard more footsteps.

These came from below, and at first I thought it was Acherson returning. Then I recognized them as a woman's, her high heels tap-tapping hurriedly on the gravel as it sloped up toward us.

"Get up the steps," I snapped to Barton.

He obeyed without hesitation, scrambling up ahead of me. I kept my gun ready in case he got the notion of diving into the brush. We passed the spot where the murder trap had been and stopped on a landing, flattening against a little rocky

bluff. The scurrying high heels pursued us, rounded the bend—and then I stepped from the shadow, gun in hand, and stopped her.

“Hold it, Miss Peterson.”

It was Northrupp’s step-sister-in-law, the languid orchid who had been amused by Ann Northrupp’s wild hysteria this morning. I remembered her first name.

“What was all the shooting for, Lyla?” I said.

The moonlight made her look lovely, even in her terror. She stared at me, swaying like a long-stemmed flower—and then she screamed.

The sound ripped through the night before I could stop it, tearing from her throat. Then she launched herself at me, and she was no longer an orchid—she was a wild tigress, beating me with her fists and wrestling for my gun, panting and sobbing all at the same time.

There was nothing for me to do but hit her. She stopped dead when my knuckles made contact, stared open-mouthed at me, then moaned and sank to the earth.

I spun around and looked for Milo Barton. He was still there. He was patting his face with a handkerchief.

“Good heavens, what’s going on?” he was saying. “What’s going on?”

We weren’t through yet. A man’s voice, hoarse and throaty with alarm, came up the dark path from the pond.

“Lyla! Lyla, what happened?”

That was Toby Northrupp.

Through a gap in the brush I could see his big figure pounding up the steps, and behind him came Acherson, lumbering along with a gun in his hand.

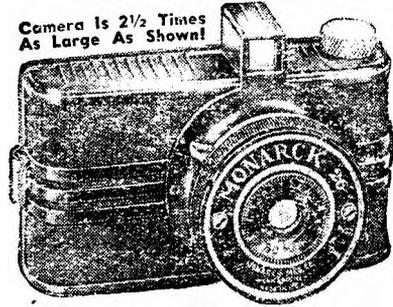
For a minute I couldn’t make sense out of the whole thing any more than Milo Barton could. I, too, wondered what was going on.

NORTHRUPP was at the foot of the steps and coming up fast when I got my idea. It was crazy, a hunch from nowhere, but there was no harm in trying it. I made myself

[Turn page]

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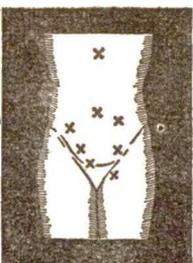
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visible to him as he pounded up the steps.

"Northrup!" I yelled. "The trap is set!"

He stopped dead and just stared at me, his square face upturned and white in the moonlight. Behind him, Acherson rasped:

"Go on, man!" Lyla screamed. "Go on!"

"No!" Northrup's face twisted in a sudden spasm. "No—no. He said the trap—the trap is set."

"Go on!" Acherson commanded. "Go on or I'll shoot you right here!"

"I—" Northrup stood rooted, looking up at me. Then he twisted his head and looked at Acherson. Acherson's gun drilled at his middle. "You—you don't understand. I'll be killed. It's murder! Sheer murder. Nobody can go up those steps."

"How do you know about it?" Acherson rapped.

Northrup made a choking sound in his throat. His whisper was hoarse and resigned.

"So you know all about it," he said wonderingly. "The whole thing was arranged to trick me!"

"You killed Helen Ranch," Acherson said. "You killed the widow. You knew about the trap. You've convicted yourself, Northrup, for a murderer. You killed two women on these steps, and you'll get the chair for it."

Northrup suddenly spun around with a snarl, smashed his fist down on Acherson's gun and drove Acherson back with a jar against a tree. It happened fast, before I could raise my own gun. Then he dived off the edge of the path and into the pond.

I yelled, and Acherson yelled, and then we stood together watching the moonlit water. It seemed an eternity before anything happened. Then a head appeared, almost at the opposite bank, and Acherson fired. The moonlit pattern on the water was deceptive. The bullets plunked all around the swimming man and missed him.

"If he gets across," I said, "he'll

escape into town. We'll have to hunt for him for days, maybe weeks. Maybe I'll have to go as far as Chicago for him."

I bent down and picked up the grappling hook and the line attached to it, and threw it. The thing was heavy, but it sailed. It whipped high over the pond, the rope burning through my hand, then splashed in the water a foot ahead of the swimmer. I yanked back hard on it. There came a scream of pain from the killer and I felt a jar as the hooks caught in his clothing.

Northrup's voice rose in a frantic, bubbling scream.

"Don't pull on it! It's caught in my arm! Please! I'll come back. Don't pull on it!"

I began reeling him in like a fish. Acherson stood silently beside me. When Northrup staggered up out of the water and I snapped the handcuffs on him, Acherson turned to me.

"You get an idea once in a while, Randy," he said. "You certainly do."

WE GOT the whole story from Northrup half an hour later, sitting in our office and listening to him confess. It wasn't a pretty story. Northrup, it seemed, never had loved his wealthy wife, Ann. He was in love with her half-sister, Lyla Peterson. But having no money save that of his wife's, he had hesitated to divorce her.

[Turn page]

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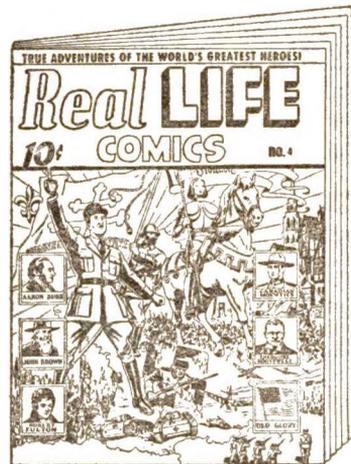
It was Lyla who had suggested the sanatorium and had maneuvered the helpless wife into it. That way gave Toby Northrup complete control of the house and fortune—and Lyla.

It would have gone well if the Widow Crackett hadn't learned, from spying and general maliciousness, what was going on while the wife was away recovering from her "nervous breakdown." The widow threatened to expose the whole thing and Northrup had decided on the murder trap, had lured her onto the path by a telephone call arranging a meeting in his house, and then had let the trap kill her.

But the widow had protected her knowledge with her diary. In it she had recorded the whole Northrup affair, in full detail. Helen Ranch, posing as Dinah Lester, the heiress, had discovered the diary in the safe and had warned Northrup she would make the affair public if he didn't release his wife from the sanatorium.

Northrup repeated the first murder, first stealing the diary, which accounted for the open safe. Then, setting up the murder trap again,

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he had lured Helen Ranch onto the path the same way he had lured the widow.

The shots Acherson and I had heard had been Mrs. Northrupp, on the loose again, filled with an insane desire to kill her husband. The shots drove first Lyla, then Toby Northrupp out of the house and onto the Crackett grounds, where I waited with Milo Barton—who, by the way, had told the truth, somewhat to my regret.

Acherson signed to Cassidy to take the broken man away and pushed the police stenographer out of our office after them. Then he sat down and stared at his empty hands. There was pain in his pale, sober eyes as he looked at me.

"That's that," I said. I knew what he was thinking. "It would be nice if we could prevent murders like this from happening, Mike. We can prevent some of them from happening in our district—crimes committed by gunmen and professional crooks. Your reputation scares them off. But something like this, done by an amateur—"

"Amateurs, yes." He sighed. "They never learn. We try to teach them the law, but every once in awhile something like this happens and you have to start all over again, investigating, capturing, punishing. I wish I knew what the answer is, but I don't."

I didn't say anything. I lit a cigarette and watched him sigh once or twice. Then the stiffness went out of his face and he relaxed. And I knew that the queer pain that hit him with every case was gone. He turned to me and grinned.

"Well, you're right," he said. "That's that. Now tell me, Randy—what were you saying about Chicago?"

I gave up.

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