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By RICHARD DEMING

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By J. LANE LINKLATER

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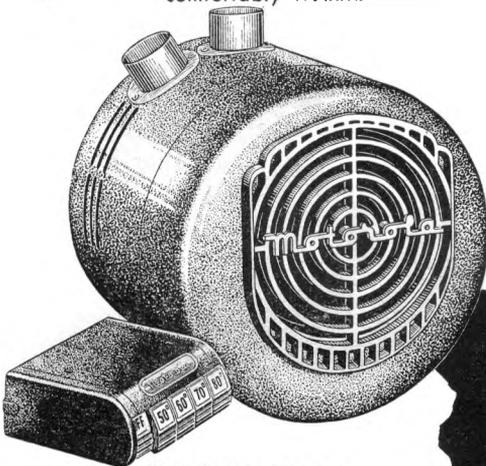
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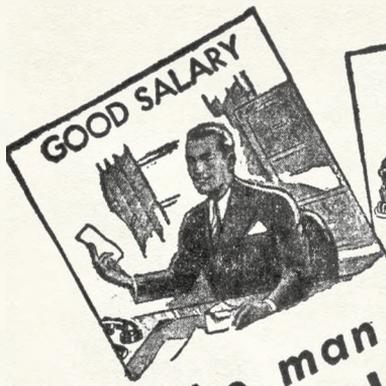
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POPULAR DETECTIVE

Vol. XXXIV, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

January, 1948

COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVEL

The Juarez Knife

by *Richard Deming*



When Lawrence P. Randall, attorney-at-law, is stabbed to death, all the clues point one way—and that is just what makes private eye Manville Moon turn his gaze elsewhere! 13

TWO COMPLETE NOVELETS

- A COLD NIGHT FOR MURDER**..... *J. Lane Linklater* 44
Grains of glass on a dead man's thumb point the way for Bill Treat when he takes the trail of a grim and baffling mystery!
- I'LL TAKE THAT RAP**..... *Robert Leslie Bellem* 68
Joe Ryan was dependable and had a big heart—so big that he let himself in for a murder charge when lethal crime stalked!

SHORT STORIES

- STALLING ALL CARS!**..... *Joe Archibald* 59
When Willie Klump takes Gertie for a spin, mobsters go along
- OLD DOC**..... *George Metcalf Johnson* 83
Willie Stone had everything all set—including a good alibi
- BULLETS FOR FREE**..... *Robert Sidney Bowen* 88
Chet Lacey had to take the case when his old flame called him
- SANTA THUMBS A RIDE**..... *Johnston McCulley* 97
Deputy Burke battles to solve an odd case of Yuletide crime

AND

- OFFICIAL BUSINESS**..... *The Editor* 6
A friendly department where our readers and the editor meet

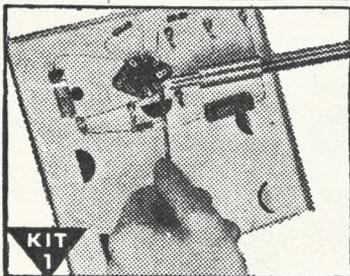
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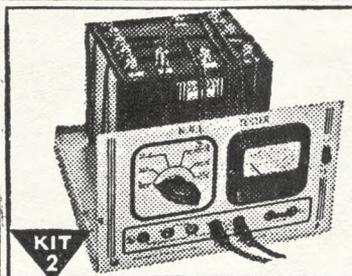
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by Practicing in Spare Time

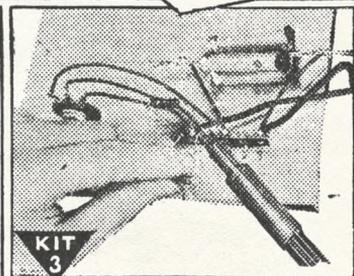
I Send You Big Kits of Radio Parts



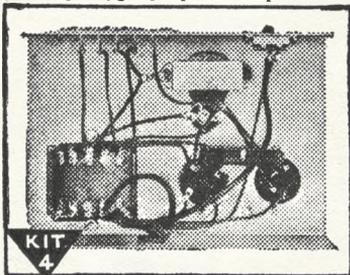
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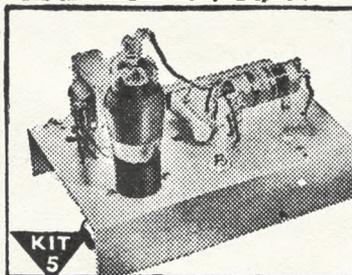
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Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



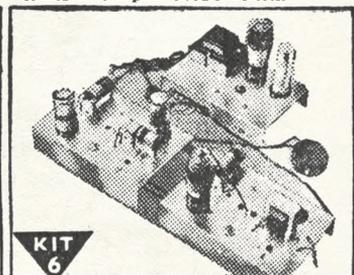
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A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

GET ready for thrills! The next issue of POPULAR DETECTIVE will be chock-full of them—from first page to last! And it will open with a bang-up mystery novelet featuring that two-fisted, yet deeply sagacious gentleman, private eye Moody Hackett in:

THREE FINGERS OF DEATH

by
Roger Fuller

We introduced quick-tempered Moody in "The Dead Don't Write" and gave you an encore in "Death Wears Kid Gloves." Your response indicated considerable demand for more of the same—and here it is!

At first, Hackett is extremely chary about taking this particular case. It's a "shadow job" wished on him by the irascible multimillionaire, Chester A. Carnes. Carnes is of the opinion that his pretty wife Camilla has been indiscreet. It is agreed between Hackett and Carnes that should the two meet anywhere, they are to act as if they are perfect strangers to each other.

When Hackett is invited up to the exclusive Hillenrock Country Club, the entire problem seems to be a simple matter. The more intricate the case is, the simpler it always appears—in the beginning.

At the club, Hackett finds that pretty Camilla is usually squired by one of three ardent suitors. First, there is Prince di Covinnicci, a lady's man, purported to be rather agile with his fingers when it comes to playing cards. There is Mason Kerr, polo-playing scion of Society. In spite of his crème-de-la-crème listing in the Social Register, his fingerprints are familiar to the police. Then there is Bertram Pritchett, actor, ostensibly on the downgrade financially as well as histrionically. He'd be glad to marry for money.

Carnes is forbidden by his doctor to drink, yet he indulges quite frequently. He is forbidden to play golf, but plays almost daily. He is warned not to lose his temper or get

into arguments—but he's always spoiling for a fight. You see—all this comes under the heading of a "bum ticker" or bad heart.

In the locker-room, after a strenuous round of the ancient Scotch pastime, he goes to the locker for a shot of his favorite brandy. This he pours into a glass, but apparently does not drink it. Delafield, his brother-in-law, chides Carnes about disobeying the doctor's orders. In a huff, the millionaire stomps out of the room and goes up on the veranda. Here he finds his wife, her suitors, and his own son and daughter by a previous marriage. He proceeds to give them all a vicious tongue-lashing. Much dirty linen is washed in public.

Moody Hackett, arriving on the scene, sees hate flash in six pairs of eyes. Six people undoubtedly hate Chester Carnes enough to kill him!

Back in the locker-room, Carnes breaks his promise and tells everyone present that Hackett is a private detective. That nasty temper of Hackett's gets the best of him and he furiously scolds the millionaire. Carnes chokes frantically and his face turns purple. The glass that holds the brandy drops from his hand and shatters on the floor. Slowly Carnes drops lifeless into Hackett's arms.

"Mr. Hackett—you have just killed Chester Carnes!" Thus Oliver Delafield accuses.

Hackett does feel rather creepy about it as the quarrel could have brought on a fatal heart attack. But—he picks up the pieces of the shattered glass and sends them to a laboratory. To protect himself, he insists upon an autopsy, which procedure is violently opposed by the wife, the daughter and the son.

Then—the test proves there was strychnine in the glass! There was, however, none of the poison in the flask from which the brandy was poured. Therefore, one of the gathering on the veranda could have put the poison in the glass.

Which one of them, if any, did it? Was
(Continued on page 8)

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*J. T. Mancelona, Mich.



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*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.



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*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.



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I am finding a new joy that I never experienced before. For I have always wanted to play, but had given up hope until I heard of your course.

*C. S. Lucien, Okla.



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*E. T., Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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OFFICIAL BUSINESS (Continued from page 6)

Chester Carnes poisoned? Did he die of a heart attack?

Let your old friend Moody Hackett solve this one for you. You'll find he does it brilliantly, cleverly and at considerable risk to his own skin!

Next—another grand novelet coming up:

42 KEYS TO MURDER by Edward Churchill

This mystery concerns Nick Burney, Rock City correspondent of the Las Verdes Sentinel, and his pretty wife, Sue.

It is three o'clock in the morning when the Burneys arrive at Las Verdes. Sue goes into the restaurant. Burney, seeing a light in the newspaper office, enters by the back door.

Burney figures the light belongs to Homer Hansel, the "scandal" correspondent of the paper. Old Hansel has all the "dirt" on everybody in the town as well as on many a prominent person throughout the country. It is Hansel's light right enough, and he is seated at his typewriter. Only the old columnist is quite seriously dead. Some one has bashed in the back of his head!

Burney takes a long envelope from the dead man's pocket. Then, rummaging through the filing cabinet, Burney finds it in a complete state of disorder. He looks on the floor and sees a pair of red spectacles with harlequin frames. They are also encrusted with rhinestones and have a faint odor of feminine perfume. He puts them in his pocket. He next goes to his mail-box and finds this note from George Ashton, managing editor of the paper:

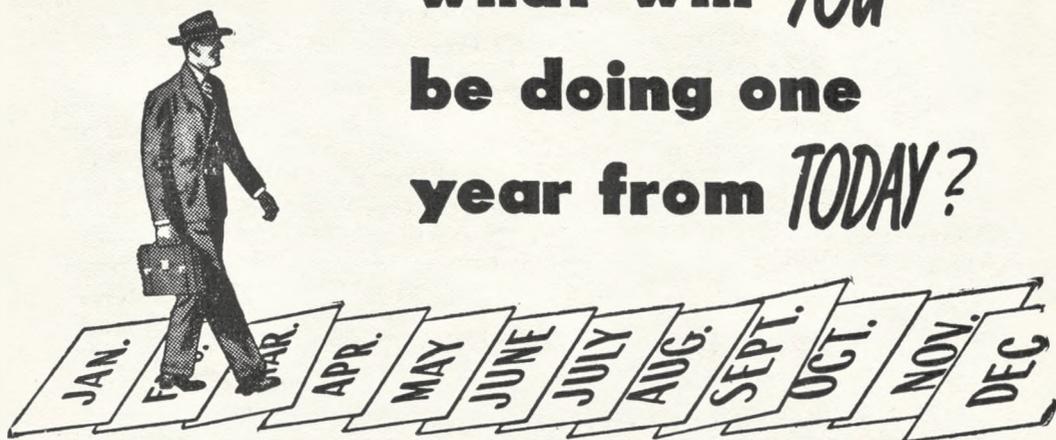
Carol Crane, the movie star, at Rock City Hotel with her son Bobby. Divorce? Interview her.

Burney is wondering what it is all about, when there is a blinding flash and he knows nothing. When he comes to, Sue is there, and with her is Joe, the night watchman. They have been an hour trying to get in. Also arriving at this time is Ashton, along with the sports editor, Bill Hackwood. Skeeter Sims, Hansel's "leg man," shows up too, and Burney tells them all about finding Hansel's body.

To his great surprise, they give him the merry ha-ha! There is no body to be seen now and Burney finds everything cleaned up

(Continued on page 10)

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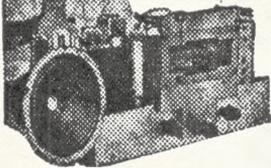
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FREE BOOK

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Continued from page 8)

and the filing-cabinet in perfect order. Burney begins to doubt the testimony of his own senses until he feels the sizeable bump on his head where he has been hit. There is nothing imaginary about that!

Now Burney must not only find the murderer, he must prove that there has actually been a murder!

In the envelope he has taken from the dead man's pocket, he finds a "scandal sheet," containing enough dynamite to set the whole town by the ears. Practically everybody there has some sort of skeleton in the closet. The whole thing fairly reeks with the nasty word—blackmail!

Feeling it to be his best bet, Burney calls on the movie actress, Carol Crane. He wants to know if she is planning a divorce from her husband, Greg Gallery. He suddenly confronts her with a part of Hansel's scandal sheet. Carol claims she cannot read it because she has lost her glasses.

"I've found them," Burney says, suddenly handing her the red-rimmed spectacles. Momentarily forgetting herself, she seizes them eagerly—then denies they are hers. Of course they are hers, but she claims they were planted at the scene of the crime.

Carol Crane isn't the only one with many very good reasons for killing Homer Hansel—or wanting him killed. So when they finally do find his body—

Now you don't expect us to tell you that, do you? We wouldn't dream of spoiling your enjoyment of a thriller that will keep you nailed to your seat until the very last page.

Incidentally—what are the 42 keys? That's the \$64 question that solves the mystery!

Lo—third novelet for next issue, another humdinger!

KNOWLEDGE OF CRIME

by

Wyatt Blassingame

How would you like to drive up in your own car to your uncle's house, walk into his bedroom and find him dead on the floor? And that's not all what happens to young Jasper, wealthy playboy, and heir to the estate, who becomes thoroughly convinced that he has split his Uncle Norton's skull with a poker!

Jasper can't explain how the body got

(Continued on page 111)

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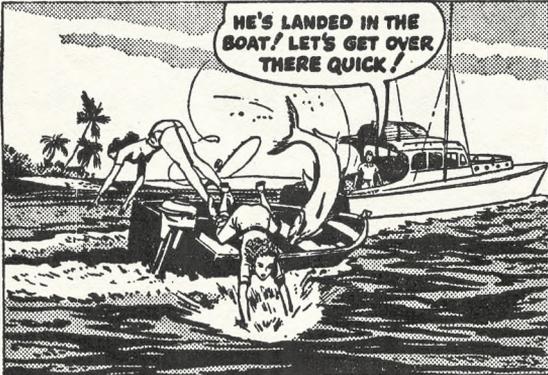
LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING



THAT'S AN AWFUL LOT OF FISH FOR A GIRL TO HANDLE!

AND IT'S JUMPING MIGHTY CLOSE!

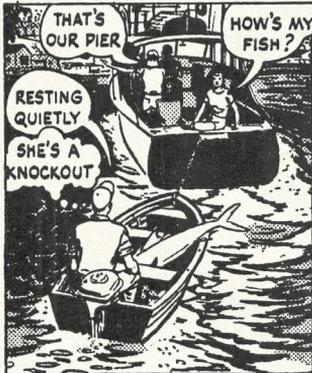
JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM, WHEN . . .



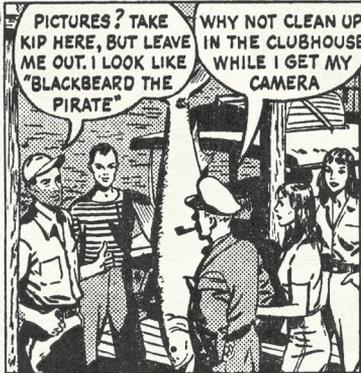
HE'S LANDED IN THE BOAT! LET'S GET OVER THERE QUICK!



HE'S FOULED THE LINE AROUND YOUR MOTOR. WE'D BETTER TOW YOU IN



THAT'S OUR PIER
HOW'S MY FISH?
RESTING QUIETLY
SHE'S A KNOCKOUT



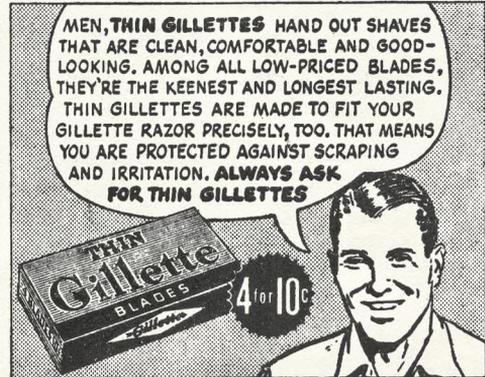
PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"
WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA



SAY, THIS BLADE'S A MONKEY. I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE
LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN



NEXT TIME YOU AND HELEN WANT TO GO TARPON FISHING, MY BOAT'S AT YOUR DISPOSAL
THAT'S A BARGAIN!
H-M-M-TALL, DARK AND HANDSOME!



MEN, THIN GILLETES HAND OUT SHAVES THAT ARE CLEAN, COMFORTABLE AND GOOD-LOOKING. AMONG ALL LOW-PRICED BLADES, THEY'RE THE KEENEST AND LONGEST LASTING. THIN GILLETES ARE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, TOO. THAT MEANS YOU ARE PROTECTED AGAINST SCRAPING AND IRRITATION. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETES



4 for 10c

A Mystery
Novel



I planted my aluminum foot under Caramand's chin with enough force to kick a field goal

THE JUAREZ KNIFE

By RICHARD DEMING

When Lawrence P. Randall, attorney-at-law, is stabbed to death, all the clues point one way — and that's just what makes private eye Manville Moon turn his gaze elsewhere!

CHAPTER I

Personal Danger

IT TAKES a long time to grow used to having your right leg end in a stump below the knee. When the phone blared me into semi-consciousness, I automatically raised myself in bed, swung my legs over the side and tried to stand. I wound up lying half under the bed on a bruised right elbow.

That knocked me awake. I had fallen on the cork, aluminum and leather contraction I use for a leg during waking

hours, causing it to skid under the bed out of sight. I started to grope after it, but the steady nagging of the bell so rattled me that I gave up and precariously hopped across to the phone on my remaining foot.

"Moon," I said.

"This is Alvin Christopher, Mr. Moon. Secretary to Mr. Lawrence Randall. Mr. Randall would like you to call at his office this afternoon."

People who have their secretaries make phone calls for them irritate me. "Tell him not to hold his breath," I said, and hung up.

I was on my knees fishing under the bed for my leg when the bell sounded again. Dragging the leg by its leather straps, I crawled back to the phone.

"Moon," I said.

"Lawrence Randall speaking. You have an independent nature, Mr. Moon."

I waited. He waited. Fifteen seconds passed.

"Are you still there?" he asked sharply.

"Yes."

His voice developed an edge of suppressed resentment. "I'd like to employ you. Can you drop in at my office this afternoon?"

"Employ me at what?"

"I'd rather not discuss it over the phone."

"Suit yourself," I said. "I don't take jobs you can't mention on the phone."

"Don't hang up!" he said quickly. "This is a delicate thing, Mr. Moon." His voice became a struggle between vexation and tact. Anger nearly broke through his restraint, but tact won out. "I chose you because of your reputation for integrity and also because—ah—for some other reasons. There is nothing illegal about the work I wish you to do, but it is confidential, and a great deal of money is involved. That's the only reason I'd prefer not going into details until we can talk privately. This matter also involves personal danger to me and I understand you effectively discourage persons from—ah—harming your clients."

I grunted and waited.

"I'm willing to pay a retainer of one thousand dollars if you agree to handle this for me, and an additional fee of five hundred if you satisfactorily complete the assignment. The work involved should take no more than a day or two."

THOUGHT this over. The private investigation business is not good enough to ignore fifteen-hundred-dollar windfalls.

"You mentioned personal danger," I said. "Have you been threatened?"

"No." There was a pause. "I said the matter involved personal danger to me. If you settle it properly, there will be no danger."

"Except for me," I said.

"That doesn't necessarily follow."

"I know," I said. "You want to pay me fifteen hundred for two days of perfectly

safe work. I'll see you at one-thirty."

"Then you'll take the assignment?"

"Maybe," I said noncommittally. "We'll talk about it."

The clock on my dresser registered ten, which is two hours earlier than I normally rise when unemployed. But once awake, sleep is finished for me, so I grabbed a quick shave and bath. Afterward I wrestled my trick leg into place and tried some tentative tap steps to check my control. It seemed to be improving.

For a moment I thought ruefully of the original I had left overseas, remembering the ghoulish humor of the ward boy who had established an amputation cemetery immediately behind the huge hospital tent where I lay. I re-experienced the morbid fascination with which I watched his elaborate ceremony, complete with flowers, when he gave my leg a proper funeral. Afterward he had asked how it felt to have one foot in the grave. He was a little battle-happy.

I shook my mood by grinning in the mirror, and proceeded to dress. Clothes are my main extravagance. I have nearly as many as I would like. I chose a plaid sport suit and a maroon necktie to blend with it. The effect was not bad, I decided. My trouble was lacking the face to match the clothes.

All ready, I looked around for what I might need before keeping my appointment.

Maintaining an office would be needless expense in my erratic profession. What files I possess are kept in my bedroom. My cards read, "Manville Moon, Confidential Investigations," and give my apartment number as a business address. I can be found there sometimes.

I found Lawrence Randall's name in the index of my cross annotated "Who's Who" and turned to the proper page. It gave his age as fifty-four, birthplace St. Paul, marital status, single, occupation, attorney, and the schools he had attended. No hobbies were listed. Of more interest was the reference to a card in my crime file I had inked on the margin some time in the pre-war past.

I closed the volume and pulled out the card. It read:

Randall, Lawrence P. September 1936 indicted for blackmail of Mrs. Whitney Forrester, oil widow. Case dismissed for lack of evidence. No previous trouble. Background: front (or partner) of Louis Bagnell, race

track operator and manager of El Patio gambling casino.

I get interesting clients. . . .

Vance Caramand, Louis Bagnell's Number One hood, turned into the main entrance of the University Building a step before I did. Ducking his bullet head, he pushed by without even a grunt of recognition. When I entered the same elevator behind him he faded to the rear, still pretending not to see me.

At the fourteenth floor I moved aside to let a woman off first, and Caramand followed her out. Stepping out immediately behind him, I studied the room numbers across the hall to determine the direction of No. 1408. Caramand turned a corner at the right of the elevator bank and I decided 1408 lay in the opposite direction.

I passed a stairwell next to the elevator bank and made a left turn into a short hallway which had but a single office on either side. The glass to my left read "1408," and below that "Lawrence Randall, Attorney at Law."

The entrance led into a large reception room overfurnished with plush chairs and two settees, all empty. Thick rugs and Venetian blinds impressed me only because they emphasized the apparent lack of business. Behind a heavy-set blonde maple desk at the far end of the room sat a heavy-set blond young man with his back to a door labeled, "Private." The rug's nap was so deep it bounced you like a mattress when you walked on it. I waded through it to the muscle-bound blond and announced:

"I'm Moon."

He stared at me as though I were a waiter who had burned his soup and tried to get my goat with:

"I see you decided to come after all."

"Tell Randall I'm here," I said.

HE WASTED a few seconds superciliously looking me over to show what he thought of people who hung up phones on him, then flipped the switch of the interoffice communication box on his desk.

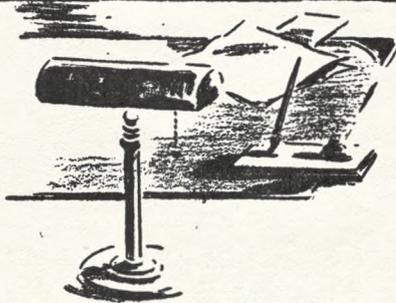
"Mr. Moon for an appointment."

The box squeaked back half intelligibly. "Ask him to wait until I see Miss Garson. She here yet?"

"No, sir."

"Send her in soon as she arrives."

Blondie switched off. "You'll have to



The body was sprawled in the chair with a silver-shafted knife in the chest

wait," he said in a satisfied voice.

"You wait in my place," I suggested. "I never learned how."

I started for the door. My jerk on the knob caused the girl who had just grasped the handle on the other side to plummet through and crush against my chest. Before the collision I caught a fleeting glimpse of startled black eyes and curved firmness and, never one to sidestep opportunity, I let my arms tighten across her shoulders until she stared up.

"Hello," I said.

She moved her head like a kitten shaking off a fly, causing dark hair to tickle my nose. I sneezed, dropped my arms and stepped back.

Sun-browned and sleek, she was assembled with ball-bearing grace. She was beautiful in an intangible, non-photogenic way. You could not have analyzed her beauty, could not have reconciled it with a too small, slightly aquiline nose and over-full lips, but it was there. Perhaps it was the aura of fire invisibly shimmering around her.

"Mr. Randall?" she asked, and ice gleamed through the fire.

I shook my head.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

The ice vanished and she flashed small white teeth in a smile designed to make my toenails curl. They failed to curl, but I liked the smile anyway.

She moved past me to the male secretary's desk while I admired the smooth shift of her hips in walking, and the perfect taper of her legs. The secretary rose at her approach.

"Go right on in," he said, and opened the door marked "Private" for her.

I regarded the door thoughtfully. I could hardly blame Randall for preferring such a lovely woman's company to mine. I shrugged off my anger, sank into one of the soft sofas and lit a cigar.

"Who was that?" I asked the tallow-headed secretary.

"Joan Garson."

"I've seen her picture somewhere."

"Probably rotogravure," he said indifferently. "She came out about two years ago."

"Came out?"

He looked up impatiently from what he was doing. "In society. She's a two-year-old debutante."

I decided to wait. Randall's crack about my having an independent nature

was more accurate than I like to admit. I am probably more arrogant than I can afford to be. I badly needed a fifteen-hundred-dollar fee, but the prospect of again seeing the brunette in Randall's office had more to do with my waiting than the money did. I dislike waiting. I dislike it so much I would not have waited for fifteen hundred dollars. Maybe that catalogues me as a booby hatch candidate, but that's the way I am.

I picked a magazine from the stock lying on a table and was studying pictures when a buzzer sounded at the big blond's desk. He pressed the intercom switch. A rasping cackle, unintelligible from where I sat, issued from the speaker.

"Yes, sir," said the secretary. He took a file folder from his desk and entered the door marked, "Private."

I started a story in my magazine and had finished five pages when he returned. Two pages farther the buzzer went off again. Lawrence Randall's voice over the intercom was incoherent as usual, but louder and apparently excited. Unable to make out what he said, the change in tone nonetheless startled me into raising my eyes.

"Yes, sir," said the burly blond. To me he said, "Miss Garson is leaving by the back door. Mr. Randall will see you in just a minute. He'll buzz."

"Back door?" I said. "Why?"

"His office has a rear entrance closer to the elevators than this door."

I smothered my disappointment at missing a second look at Joan Garson.

"I'll give him two minutes," I growled.

CHAPTER II

The Corpse in The Private Office



WHEN I finished my magazine story and punched out my cigar, I suddenly realized I had been waiting a long time. I rose and started for the door marked, "Private."

The white-topped secretary said, "No, you don't!" and scurried in front of me.

When he bounced back from the wall, I stepped over him and went on through the door.

Instead of leading directly into the inner office as I had expected, the door opened into a short foyer at the opposite side of which was a stained glass door repeating, "Private." I took two steps and opened that door.

I had seen too much death in battle for a cleanly murdered corpse to stir even an eyelash. But this body, sprawling sideward in its chair with a silver-hafted knife glittering from the center of its chest like an oversize shirt stud, made anger course through me. I felt that this blob of flesh which had been a man had no right to make a murderess of the loveliest girl I had ever seen. I also felt it was inconsiderate of him to become a corpse before he had a chance to write my retainer check.

I moved across to the body and gazed down at it. Randall had been a paunchy, fiftyish man with thin gray hair. He made an ugly corpse. His head lolled back at an acute angle, causing the eyeballs to roll upward so that only whites showed. Thin lips sagged loosely under a beak nose. He looked like a dead buzzard.

The knife handle protruded upward and to the right from the center of his chest. Leaning over the body, I breathed gently on the smooth metal. It misted over evenly and before the mist faded I could see there were no finger marks. It had been wiped clean.

I surveyed the room in one quick glance. Three windows, all open from the bottom, let in still autumn air from behind Randall's desk. A door was on either side of the room. Opening first the one on the right, I looked into a closet. A lone coat hung on a hook and the shelf contained a hat, a few papers and a bottle of ink. Otherwise it was empty.

The other door, the rear entrance referred to by the secretary, closed with a spring lock so that it could not be opened from outside. Setting the lock so I could get back in, I followed a short corridor and came out into the main hall.

Directly across from me was a mirror-topped door marked, "Men." To my right the hall came to a dead end where there was a fire door. About ten yards to the left the hall made a ninety-degree bend and the only other door in sight was a storeroom next to the men's room. I pulled open the fire door, glanced at the empty stairs and let it swing back

into place.

The men's room was empty. I noticed with surprise that the glass of the door was the type transparent from inside, but opaque from the hall.

Four cigarette stubs, all carefully flattened, lay on the floor. One I would have passed, but four indicated someone had spent some time here. That, added to my realization that the one-way transparent door looked directly into the narrow corridor leading from Randall's office, made me pick them up for examination. The brand was El Toro, imported from Cuba. I found an old letter in my pocket, flushed the pages down the drain and dropped the butts into the envelope.

All this had taken no more than a minute and a half. Next I tried the storeroom door and found it locked. When I turned the hall corner and arrived at the elevator bank, the center car was just opening its door. A middle-aged, too-powdered woman wearing expensive clothes stepped into the car without glancing up at my approach. While her back was still toward me I flashed my tin badge and motioned the operator out. Simultaneously I punched the signal buttons of the other two cars. The woman had moved far back in the car and when I drew the operator to one side we could not be seen.

"Did you take down a sleek, beautiful brunette any time recently?" I asked.

"I haven't seen a beautiful dame in two days," he said.

I let him go and he disappeared with his middle-aged passenger just as the other two elevators slid to a stop. More came of these conferences. One operator positively remembered taking down Joan Garson.

"If she's beautiful as you say, this must be the dame," he said. "There couldn't be no two dames that good looking. She was sort of hot-looking, kind of."

"She's the one. How long ago?"

He thought a minute. "Quite a few trips back. Maybe ten minutes. Maybe half-hour. Not more than a half-hour."

I had to be content with that. I let them go.

Randall's office was as I had left it. I went on through and said to the secretary, "Hey!"

He swiveled in his chair and threw me a baleful glare. His jaw was begin-

ning to swell. "Your boss is dead," I announced. "Ring the police."

I LEFT him to absorb that while I returned to the inner office. This time I made a more careful examination of the room. Aside from the desk, a row of law books on the window ledge, a small safe and an extra chair, the office contained no furniture. The windows and two doors were the only possible means of entry. The file folder the secretary had taken in to Randall lay open on the desk in front of him. Its tab was marked simply "Garson" and it was empty.

Leaning across the law books on the window ledge, I stuck my head out the middle window. A six-inch flat stone coping ran horizontally beneath the window at floor level. Dubiously I filed this in my mind as a possible means of entry to the room. An acrobat could have worked his way along the outside of the building from another office on the same floor. But fourteen floors above the street no ordinary person could have maintained balance on that six-inch shelf of stone.

On my second examination of the closet I noticed nothing new except a six-volt dry cell in one corner of the shelf. I had not seen it on my first hurried look.

The battery furnishing juice for the buzzer on the secretary's desk was mounted over the outer door. This apparently was a spare.

The office door opened and the secretary came in.

"What's your name?" I snapped.

"Alvin Christopher." He wet his lips when he saw the body. "Did you do that?"

"Yeah. I always kill clients who offer me thousand-dollar retainers before they can write the check. I don't like money. You phone the police?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long you worked here?"

"Three years."

"Tell me everything you know about this Garson girl."

"She phoned for an appointment and I made her one," he said. "I don't know what her business was."

"Didn't you normally know what business your boss' clients had with him?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes not."

"And this was one of the not times?"

"That's right."

"Then how'd you happen to have a file marked 'Garson' in your desk?"

He didn't even blink. "Mr. Randall usually kept it in the safe. This morning while getting something else from the safe, he kept out the Garson file and told me to hold it until he needed it later in the day. I never saw it before."

"Didn't you ever see it in the safe?"

"I never saw anything in the safe. Mr. Randall never gave me the combination." He added with a tinge of resentment, "Being private secretary to Mr. Randall was sort of an office boy job."

"What was in the file?"

"Just some checks. Four, I believe."

"To whom, by whom and for how much?" I said.

"They were for a thousand dollars each, made out to cash and signed by Judith Garson."

"Judith? I thought her name was Joan."

He let his eyes shift from me to Randall's body without saying anything.

"Well?"

"Her name is Joan," he said. "I don't know who Judith is."

I changed direction. "Why did Randall want to hire me?"

"I don't know."

"For a private secretary you knew very little about your boss' business. Why do you think he wanted me?"

"I don't know."

I tried another switch. "What's Joan Garson's address?"

"Six-one-o-one Pershing."

"How do you know that?"

A sullen look began to creep into his eyes.

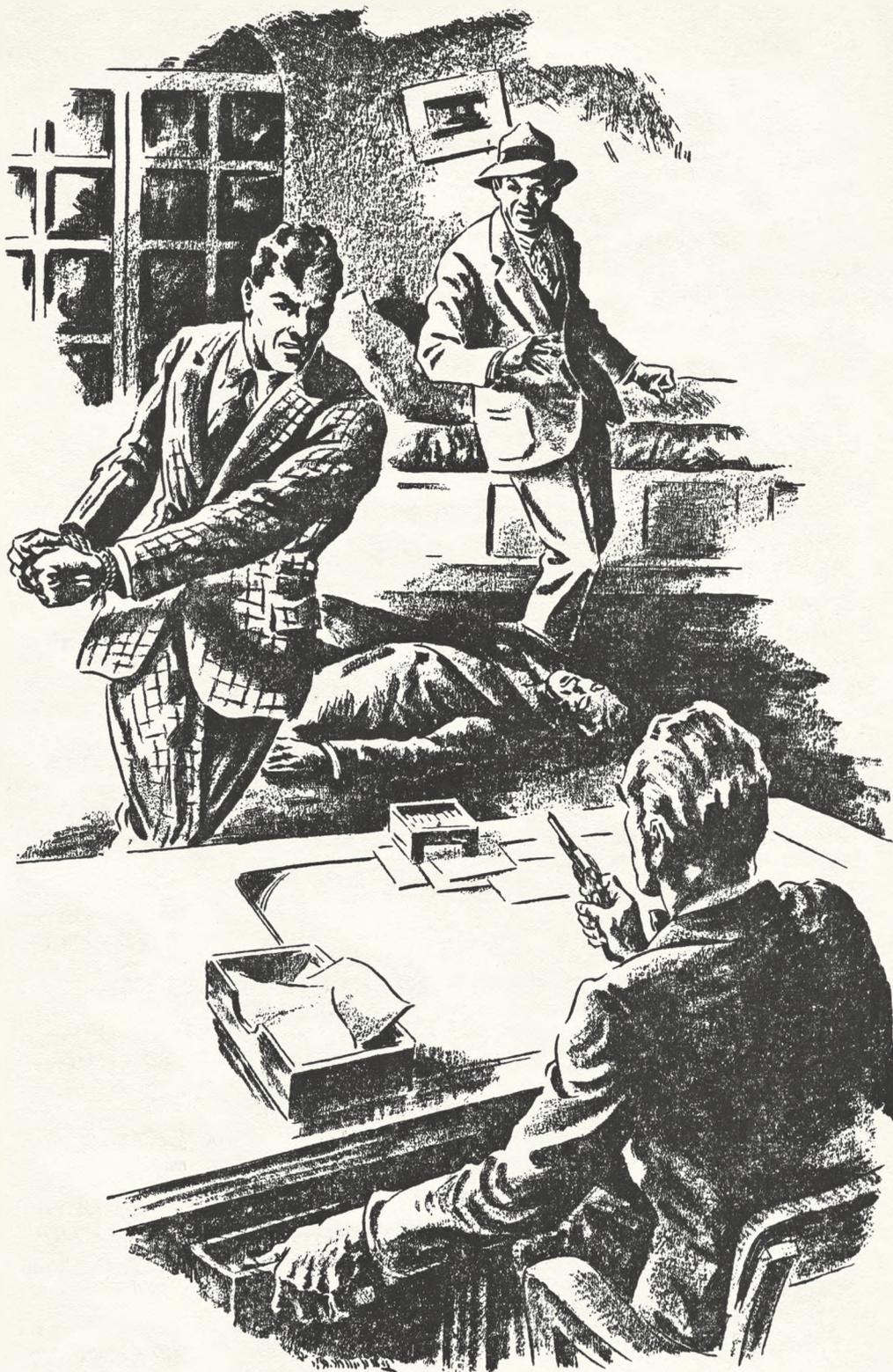
"I was in school with her. I don't have to answer your questions, you know. You're not a policeman."

I heard the outer office door slam.

"Tell the cops they can reach me at my apartment," I said.

AS the police entered the front door, I went out the back and caught a down elevator. Running out was pure impulse. I knew the police would foam, and I had no good reason for skipping. For that matter I had no good reason for examining the murder room and questioning Alvin Christopher. It was not my case.

My connection was only that of a witness, yet I was acting exactly as



I started at Bagnell, but stopped short when the muzzle of my own pistol appeared

though I had been employed to solve the crime.

I think I must have wanted an excuse to see Joan Garson again before the police caught her. Or maybe it was venom at having a thousand-dollar retainer and a five-hundred-dollar fee snatched from under my nose. I am not given to analyzing my impulses. All I know is that I broke my rule about working only with cash on the line and took a taxi to 6101 Pershing. . . .

The house on Pershing was a rambling stone building surrounded by a low rock wall. It looked like money and I expected a butler, or at least a maid to answer the door. Instead a middle-aged, expensively dressed, too-powdered woman opened to my ring. She was the same woman who had stepped into the center elevator at the University Building just before I questioned the operator, but there was no recognition in her eyes.

"Is Joan in?" I asked.

"No." I sensed her running a cataloguing eye over the cut of my clothes. Her glance touched the hundred-and-fifty-dollar wrist watch I affect and sudden friendliness showed in her smile. "I'm Joan's mother. I expect her shortly. Won't you come in?"

I told her my name and followed her along an expensive but worn carpet to an enormous living room. She motioned to a sideboard and told me to mix myself a drink. Two decanters, respectively labeled Scotch and Bourbon, mingled with a siphon and glasses on the sideboard. Lacking rye, I am not particular what I drink. I chose the bourbon at random and mixed one for myself and another for Mrs. Garson.

The living room was beautifully furnished to a point, but the point was beginning to dull. I noticed that a silver vase on one side of the mantle threw the fireplace out of balance because the other side was bare. I got an impression of similar lack of balance from the oils on the walls, until I detected faint markings on the paper where two paintings had once hung.

"Broke," I thought. "No servants, and selling the heirlooms."

Mrs. Garson set down her glass after a preliminary sip.

"Have you known Joan long?" she asked.

"Not long," I said, and set my glass

down also. The bourbon was vile.

"I suppose you and Joan have special plans for this evening," she said brightly.

Apparently she assumed I had an engagement with Joan. I saw no point in correcting her.

"No. Nothing special."

SHE sighed. "I didn't know Joan was intending to go out this evening and had planned for us to have dinner together at El Patio. Not," she added hastily, "that I'm in the least put out."

She smiled her bright company smile at me and I smiled back just as brightly.

"I can easily cancel one of the reservations," she went on. "I don't mind dining alone."

I contributed another bright smile and began to feel like a Cheshire cat.

"You get used to being alone a lot when you have a pretty daughter," she said.

"Yes. I suppose so."

"Of course I could add a reservation as easily as cancel one, and you children could have dinner with me. That is, if you don't mind dragging along an old lady."

"Not at all."

"Joan loves the El Patio band and they have the best drinks in town."

"Gambling, too," I remarked.

"Well, yes. If you care for that sort of thing."

The conversation lapsed. Mrs. Garson puzzled me. She seemed eagerly friendly, even fawning, yet all the time I was conscious of her guarded appraisal. Adroitly working herself into what she thought was a dinner party, and even picking the place, El Patio, where the food was as famous as the gaming, looked like petty angling for a free meal. And though I was convinced the family was broke, I could not reconcile Mrs. Garson with this apparent high school type of gold-digging. I gave it up.

"You expect Joan soon?" I asked, looking at my watch.

"She should be here any minute. She had a hairdresser appointment at two. She phoned not five minutes before you arrived and said she was all through at the hairdresser and would be home shortly. What time is it now?"

"Four."

"She won't be long then. She goes to Russard's, downtown, you know. She's probably taking a bus home."

CHAPTER III

Up to Your Neck In Murder

THIS bit of conversation left me as puzzled about the daughter as I was about the mother. Normally, amateur murderers either jump town or turn themselves in immediately after the crime. I never before heard of a murderess calmly keeping a beauty appointment after making a corpse.

For a moment I entertained a faint notion that Joan might be innocent, after all, but only for a moment. I had all but seen the crime committed. Then a shrill whine in the distance turned my thoughts in another direction.

I stood up. "Think I'll walk down to meet Joan at the bus stop. Which way is it?"

"Three blocks east. The Lindell bus."

As the siren grew louder I said something polite about the horrible drink I was leaving unfinished and abruptly made for the hall. At the door I broke into her chattering reminder about the three of us having dinner at El Patio—"And I insist that it be all on me, simply insist"—by handing her one of my cards.

Before she could read it I said rapidly:

"The police are on their way to arrest Joan for murder. I may be able to help her. Don't tell them where she is, and especially don't tell them she's getting off that bus. I'll head her off."

Her mouth was still open when I went down the steps. I was a block from the house when a police car slammed to a stop in front of it.

Two busses passing at five-minute intervals gave me time to organize what thoughts I had. I was still not sure why I concerned myself in a case which was none of my business. Joan Garson was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, but that was no explanation. I am notorious for charging fees, and my regard for cash on the barrel head far outweighs my chivalry.

I think I was as much fascinated by the thought of a lovely murderess having her hair set immediately after her crime as I was by the murderess' loveli-

ness. It made me want to delve into her personality and find what made her click. It also suggested a chance that by some incredible circumstance she was entangled in a tight web of evidence over a crime she had not committed. In either event the situation promised an unusual problem, psychological on the one hand or material on the other, and I am a sucker for problems.

When the third bus stopped Joan Garson alighted. I stepped in front of her, blocking the way.

"Miss Garson, I've been waiting at your home and your mother told me I could catch you here. May I have a moment?"

She looked up puzzledly. "I don't believe I know you."

"You ran into me at Lawrence Randall's office. I'm Manville Moon."

She looked again and recognition came into her eyes, quickly followed by disdain.

"Collision is not introduction." She started to walk around me.

"I'm not trying to pick you up," I said. "Randall has been murdered."

She stopped and turned her head toward me. If the startled expression on her face was assumed, the screen had missed a great actress.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Randall has been murdered," I repeated, "and police are waiting at your home to arrest you for it. You can go home and meet them, or you can talk things over with me. Take your choice."

"Who are you?" she demanded.

I handed her one of my cards and waited while she studied it. When she looked up again, in her eyes was a curious, startled look.

"I've heard of you," she said. "I thought you were killed in the war."

"You read the papers carelessly. I lost a leg."

"Oh!" Her glance involuntarily dropped to my feet.

"The right one."

She flushed. "I didn't mean to be rude. Why do the police want me?"

"They think you killed Randall," I said drily. "Did you?"

Her eyes widened indignantly. "Of course not!"

It is poor policy in my business to have convictions about character. You suspect everyone, even your grandmother, if the evidence points that way.

Yet, gazing down into Joan's tense, indignant face, I knew she was no murderess. "Let's go for a long bus ride and talk things over," I said.

WE could see Joan's bus two blocks farther on at the end of its circuit, swing about for the return trip. I took her arm and piloted her across the street. When the bus stopped I helped her on and we climbed to the nearly deserted upper deck, where we were able to find places ten feet from the nearest passenger. Joan turned sideward in her seat so that her back rested against the window, and stared directly into my face.

I started the conversation.

"Where did you go from Randall's office?" I asked.

"To Russard's. I had an appointment with my hairdresser for two-thirty. I left the University Building about two, took an Olive car downtown and arrived at Russard's about two-twenty. At least I think it was about then. I had to wait ten minutes, and they're always so prompt."

"Where have you been since?" I looked at my watch. "It's four-thirty now."

"Russard's finished me at a quarter to four. I phoned Mother from the shop to say I'd be home, then walked over to Washington Avenue for a bus. I imagine it was about four by the time I got a bus. But why all these questions? I don't even know what's happened except that Mr. Randall was killed and you say the police are after me."

I brought her up to date with a running account of everything that had happened after she left Randall's office.

"Which leaves me out fifteen hundred dollars and a client," I concluded. "And you up to your neck in murder. I saw the police arrive at your house just after I left. Your warrant may be for homicide, or merely as a material witness. But regardless of how your warrant reads, the cops will think you killed Randall and will hound you right into the gas chamber unless we work out something fast."

She paled, which made her dark eyes even darker and more luminous.

"What do you want with me?" she asked. "And why don't you think I committed the murder?"

I answered her questions in reverse order.

"I can visualize you sticking a knife in someone, but I can't see you doing it virtually in front of two witnesses and then casually keeping a beauty appointment. You'd be in the next state by now. What I want from you is lots of information. It may occur to the police that I had a wonderful opportunity to stick the guy myself. Besides, I don't like clients, or even almost clients, to be bumped off under my nose. I don't like to lose fifteen hundred dollars. I don't like to see beautiful girls executed. For those and a couple of other reasons I've decided to follow through on the case."

"I couldn't pay you much for helping me," she said. "I haven't much money."

"I know. Don't worry. I have a knack of finding someone to foot bills before I'm through with things. Until I do I'll consider you my client."

"All right. What do you want to know from me?"

"Everything. Why you went to see Randall and exactly what happened in his office."

She moved her back from the window to the rear of her seat and lowered her gaze to gloved hands.

"I can't tell you what my business was with Mr. Randall."

"Look," I said. "I'm not a cop. I'm a private operator. What you tell me never gets any further unless you authorize it. Also, I don't go in for blackmail. If you want to beat this, you'll have to unload everything. I can't get you out of trouble working in the dark."

She pulled off one glove and began twisting the fingers together.

"My business couldn't have anything to do with the murder."

I took a shot in the dark.

"Your mother's first name is Judith, isn't it?"

She said, "Yes," without looking up from her hands.

"She worked for Randall, didn't she?"

That staggered her. Her shoulders hunched and she looked at me sideways.

"How do you know?"

"Your mother mistakenly sized me up as a heavy money man and tried to steer me to that clip house, El Patio. She must be getting a percentage for luring suckers there. I know Randall had some kind of connection with El Patio and also that he held some checks against your mother. It requires little deduction

to guess that she uses her social position to pressure rich friends into patronizing El Patio, and that she probably started her pressuring at the instigation of Randall."

SHE had her back to the window again and was staring at me with wide, embarrassed eyes. I judged it was time to use forcing tactics. I stood up.

"But you want to keep secrets, so I can't help you."

I reached across toward the signal button, but she caught my wrist.

"Wait!"

"Why?" I said.

"I'll tell you about it. You know the worst part anyway. Please sit down."

I pulled back my hand, acting reluctant, and reseated myself. She required no more prodding, but of her own volition unloaded everything.

As I had guessed, the Garsons were broke. Joan's father had been chairman of the board of directors for a match corporation. When he died, the same year Joan had been presented to society, his death disclosed a state of mismanagement in the corporation which had nearly caused an economic scandal.

Mrs. Garson had averted scandal by covering some of the corporation's bad investments with the personal fortune her husband left. The whole affair had been kept from the public, but left the supposedly wealthy Garsons flat except for a tax-heavy home and a lot of expensive, but rapidly wearing-out clothes.

Having preserved the family honor, Mrs. Garson suddenly indulged in a spree of gambling at El Patio. And when her feet hit the ground a month later, the casino's proprietor, Louis Bagnell, held eight one-thousand dollar checks

signed by her and not worth the paper they were written on. Bagnell had known they were no good when he accepted them, but had insisted on undated checks instead of I.O.U.'s.

Suddenly Mrs. Garson's credit at El Patio stopped and Louis Bagnell politely suggested that she call on Lawrence Randall. At Randall's office Mrs. Garson discovered that he now held the checks. Randall offered her a proposition. If she would use her social influence to direct wealthy acquaintances to El Patio, she would receive ten per cent of the amount each one lost at the casino, all her earnings to be deducted from the amount she owed.

When Mrs. Garson indignantly refused, Randall coldly informed her that he would present the checks at her bank the following morning, and if they were not honored, she would be in jail by afternoon. Mrs. Garson dropped her scruples and yielded.

For the past year she had been taking friends and acquaintances to El Patio. In exchange for her services she had received back four of the checks. Then Joan had learned what was going on.

"I have a job starting next Monday," Joan said. "I majored in business administration and am really an accomplished secretary. Mother always insisted that it wasn't decent for a girl to work, or I would have started right after Dad died. When I found what she was doing to earn money, we had a terrible scene and immediately afterward I went down and got a job with Interstate Shoe Company for a hundred and fifty dollars a month. That's why I went to see Mr. Randall. I thought that if I agreed to pay a hundred dollars a month against the

[Turn page]

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debt, he might let Mother off her agreement."

"What did he say?"

"He said no, and then suggested that I work for him on the same basis as Mother, with my percentage applying against the checks also."

"Then what happened?"

"I was so surprised at first, I didn't even say no. I just sat like a fool while he went on to explain that I had contacts with the younger set which Mother didn't reach, and that all I had to do was suggest El Patio when I had dates. I got mad then and called him an old blackmailer. He smiled coldly and said that was his proposition. I could take it or leave it, but he wasn't interested in my hundred dollars a month.

"I asked to see the checks he still held against Mother. He pressed a button, then pushed the lever of that little talking gadget he has on his desk and told Alvin Christopher to bring in Mother's file. Alvin came in with a folder and stood waiting while Mr. Randall opened it and removed four checks. He looked them over and dismissed Alvin, who went back out into the front office. Mr. Randall spread the four checks on the desk in front of him, facing me, but out of reach. He was not a trusting man. I asked him again if he wouldn't consider my proposal and let Mother go, and he just shook his head. I left then, and that's all that happened."

"Do you remember whether the spring lock on the back door was set?" I asked.

She wrinkled her smooth forehead. "No. Mr. Randall opened the door and closed it after me."

"Where were the checks when you left?"

"Still lying on Mr. Randall's desk."

"They were gone when I discovered the body," I said. "How long did you stay after Christopher went back to the front office?"

"Two or three minutes."

"You're sure of that? It couldn't have been five?"

"Oh, no. I just looked at the checks, asked one question and left. I'd say about two minutes."

We reached the downtown end of the bus line and circled to return.

"I'll get off shortly," I said. "You go home and get arrested. I'll have a lawyer at headquarters shortly after you get there. Don't tell the police anything

except your name. Say you refuse to make a statement without advice of counsel, and keep repeating that every time they ask a question. Got that?"

"Got it," she said, and smiled up at me confidently.

CHAPTER IV

Find the Motive



DROPPED from the bus at Eighth and Washington in front of a corner tavern. I used the tavern's telephone booth to phone Russard's. A treble-voiced female answered the phone.

"Has Miss Joan Garrison left yet?" I asked.

"Oh yes. She must have left about an hour ago.

I tried to sound disappointed. "I thought she had a late appointment."

"Her appointment was for two-thirty."

"Thanks," I said and hung up.

I dropped another nickel and called Inspector Warren Day of the Homicide Squad.

"Where in blazes are you?" he greeted me. "I've got a warrant out for you."

"I supposed you would have," I said ignoring his question. "I'd have phoned earlier, but I've been busy doing your work. Wait at your office. I'll be over in an hour."

"Wait, your grandmother! You get here in ten minutes or you go in the can as a material witness when you do arrive."

I made an impolite noise. "You couldn't hold me two seconds. Do you want the information I have free? Or must I bring a lawyer with me and make you pry it out?"

Day's voice sank to a low growl. "You'll spill everything you know, or you'll rot in jail till your grandchildren have beards. Your neck is out a mile, running off like you did. Get tough, and I'll make your warrant read 'on suspicion of homicide'."

"I'm already tough. See if your broken-down police force can find me. I'll drop you a card from somewhere."

"Hey!" he yowled. "Are you hanging up?"

"Sure."

"Now wait, Moon. You'll only get in trouble if you disappear. Be smart for once, instead of bullheaded."

"And rot in jail until the D.A. gets around to trying someone? No, thanks."

"I wouldn't hold you. Heck, you're getting touchy! Can't you take a riding?"

"Now I like you better," I said. "See you in an hour."

"Why so long?" he complained. "I got a dinner waiting at home."

"I've got one waiting here. I eat too, you know."

"Where's 'here'?" he asked casually.

"A tavern at Eighth and Washington."

My next call was to Eddie Duncan, the lawyer I use when I need one. I told him to be at Headquarters by seven with a writ of *habeas corpus*, just in case.

"Better be prepared to post some bond, too," I said. "You have a new client name of Joan Garson. She's in the jail house for murder."

I made my dinner from a bowl of chili and a hamburger, the tavern's total menu. Then I borrowed pencil and paper from the waitress and printed out:

Received of Mr. Manville Moon, one (1) P-38 pistol, numbered 42831.

I finished just as the squad car rolled up. Hannegan of the Homicide Squad and a uniformed rookie came in and planted themselves in front of my booth.

"Evening, boys," I said. "I figured you'd save me taxi fare. Does your boss trust his mother?"

"Let's have your gun," Hannegan said.

I pushed the receipt I had printed to the table's edge. "Sign here."

"Hand over that gun."

"You'll get it," I said reasonably. "Just sign the receipt."

His body leaned forward imperceptibly as he centered his weight on the balls of his feet. I shifted slightly in the booth and let my face go expressionless. Hannegan settled back on his heels. His face was pale with anger, but his voice was moderate when he spoke.

"You're talking to the law, Moon. Give me that gun."

"Take it," I said.

It was a stalemate, Hannegan standing over me with frozen, unrelenting eyes, and my expression yielding no more than his. The rookie broke it up.

"Shall I slug the punk, Lieutenant?"

Hannegan turned and looked at him

cynically. "We can't spare any men right now."

He picked up the pencil and scrawled his name on the paper. I gave him my pistol, butt first. . . .

WARREN DAY was chewing a dead cigar and squinting over horn-rimmed glasses when I was escorted into his office. He dismissed Hannegan and the rookie by bobbing his skinny bald head at the door, and peered at me furiously over his spectacles. I was not asked to sit down, so I dropped into a chair and helped myself to one of his cigars.

"Start talking," he said.

I raised my eyebrows. "Let's get something straight. I'm here because I want to be, not because your flat-tails could find me in a million years. Get civil and we'll swap information. Stay tough and you get nothing." I glanced at the time. "Eddie Duncan will be here in twenty minutes with a writ of *habeas corpus*."

He straightened, pain and outraged innocence struggling together in his face.

"*Habeas corpus!* I said I wouldn't hold you. Don't you trust anybody?"

Day is like that. We had snarled at each other for five years before I went in the Army, and we picked up where we left off the day I got out. I almost like him. He knows his job and neither takes nor gives favors. Under his crusty exterior I suspect he almost likes me too, but he would jerk the head off of anyone who accused him of it. When after information he has an astonishing technique of unexpectedly switching from sour rage to a sort of wheedling friendliness. He employed it now.

"Don't be touchy, Manny. I know you're working on this case for somebody, or you wouldn't have ducked my boys at the University Building. We're both after the same thing, so you tell me what you know and I'll tell you what I've got. It's a cinch case anyway. We've already arrested the murderer and all we need is clinching evidence."

"Who's the murderer?"

He looked surprised. "You know as well as I do. You were there. Joan Garson."

"Well, well," I said. "Joan Garson."

He regarded me suspiciously, but I made no further comment.

We started a session of information swapping then. It resembled a meeting of diplomats, each of us suspicious the

other would hold back, and neither willing to tell everything at once for fear the other would stop giving out if he thought there was nothing left to receive in exchange.

After much sparring the Inspector allowed me to examine the murder weapon, a heavy-hafted knife with a seven-inch tapered blade machine stamped, "Souvenir from Juarez, Mexico." The pewter handle was intended to resemble silver.

"Know whose it is?" I asked.

"Randall's. He kept it as a desk ornament."

"How about fingerprints?"

"Clean as a whistle."

That I expected, having examined the handle myself while the knife was still in the body.

"Have you figured out a motive?" I asked.

"Sure. That is, we know there was a motive, but we're not quite sure what it was."

"Great. That makes fine sense. The jury will love it."

"Now, wait. We've got motive enough, but we can't get the whole story because the blasted girl won't talk. All she'll say is, 'I refuse to make a statement without advice of counsel.' Keeps repeating it like a parrot. Ask her if she wants a glass of water and she says, 'I refuse to make a statement without advice of counsel.'"

"We know Randall had four checks signed by Judith Garson, Joan's mother. We got that from his secretary. We also know Randall was showing them to Joan Garson just before you found his body. We don't know what the Judith Garson checks mean or why Randall had them. But Randall gets killed and the checks disappear. I ask you, is that a motive or isn't it?"

"How about a will?" I said.

"His secretary says he died intestate and the nearest relative is a nephew in Canada. That lets out the money motive."

"A lawyer without a will. That's a funny one."

"Randall was a funny guy," said Day. "Apparently never cared about anyone but himself, and didn't care who got his money after he died."

All else I could get from the Inspector was that the coroner's inquest would be held the following morning, and that I was elected one of the main witnesses. Pending the inquest Joan was being held

at Headquarters. I decided it was time to throw a monkey wrench.

"Joan Garson didn't do it," I said.

THE Inspector dislikes unexpected statements. He likes things cut and dried. His first impulse was to relapse into one of his rages, but he caught himself short and merely turned sour.

"Why?"

"When she left Randall's office she went straight to a hairdresser. I checked it myself. She was at Russard's from two-thirty till nearly four."

"That was after the murder."

"Think a minute," I said. "What would you do if you had committed a murder?"

"I wouldn't commit one."

"You'd head for the next state," I answered myself. "No woman would stick a knife in a man and then calmly go have her hair set. Joan Garson didn't even know Randall was dead till I told her."

"Murderers don't act rationally. I knew one who wiped out his family with an ax, then went to a Mickey Mouse."

"He was loony. This girl is sane. If she had killed Randall, she'd be miles from town now."

A rap sounded on the door and Hannegan entered.

"A lawyer named Duncan wants to have his body." He jerked his thumb at me.

Behind him Eddie Duncan interrupted. "I want to see my client also. Miss Joan Garson."

Day's face gradually turned red and his nose whitened until it bulged glaringly against its dark background. He pointed the white nose at me.

"So she's your client!" he roared. "Hannegan, get the D.A. on the phone!"

Hannegan scuttled from the office.

"I'll *habeas corpus* you!" Day growled. "Coming in here to worm out information for your murdering client. She'll be before a grand jury in the morning."

"Take it easy," I said. "Duncan hasn't got a writ for her. He just wants to talk to her. It's anyone's right to see a lawyer. You're not running a Nazi concentration camp."

He twitched his nose at me venomously.

"Of course if you want to rush things, Duncan can get a writ in a hurry," I suggested. "The D.A. will love your spoiling his evening by dragging him into court tonight."

The Inspector partially underwent another of his quick mood changes.

"Hannegan!"

Hannegan popped into the doorway.

"Can that call to the D.A.," Day ordered. "And let this shyster into Garson's cell." He turned smoldering eyes on me. "Get out of here! If you leave town, I'll have you hanged without trial. Get out!"

I ambled to the door. "Let me know if you turn up anything to help my client," I said, and stepped out quickly.

At the desk I exchanged my receipt for my pistol.

CHAPTER V

Army Judo



MY WATCH registered nine-thirty when I got out of a taxi in front of El Patio. At the top of broad steps I left my hat with a black-jowled pug who carefully looked me over before accepting it, and threaded my way

across the gaming room to the bar on its far side. Fingering a rye and water, I leaned my back against the bar and looked over the place. The casino occupied the whole center of the building. Dice tables, two roulette wheels and a blackjack game were entertaining a substantial number of customers at high costs. Arches on either side of the room respectively led to a table-ringed dance floor and to the dining room advertised as serving "The Best Food in the City."

On the far side of the room Fausta Moreni, a blond refugee from Rome, dealt blackjack to five suckers. Five years before, when I first met Fausta, she was freshly escaped from Fascist Italy and frightened and bewildered by America. She was nineteen then, and blond in the dark, brown-eyed way only Romans can be blond.

Her strange combination of naïvete and Latin voluptuousness had almost put me overboard. I carried her picture through seven campaigns, but during my three years overseas Fausta changed. She met the monied fringe of near respectables on the edge of the underworld, the big-time gamblers.

When I climbed back into civilian clothes, the first person I looked for was Fausta. I like my women a little helpless, and she had lost her naïvete. A girl who cleans the best at poker, is a wizard at blackjack, and ranks among the top paid dealers in the country is out of my class.

I stepped down and let the suckers who tried to beat her bank with half their minds and tried to make her with the other half have full play. Not that Fausta high-hatted me. She met me with open arms. But we had drifted too far in opposite directions, and neither knew how to backtrack.

Next to Louis Bagnell, the proprietor, Fausta knew the ins and outs of Club El Patio better than anyone else. Maybe it's callous to capitalize on dead romance, but I never let sentiment interfere with a murder investigation. I meant to pump her for everything she knew.

As though sensing my gaze, she looked up, saw me and smiled, somehow conveying surprise and delight across the distance. When the hand ended she rose and motioned a lounging man to take her deal. I made a place for her at the bar as she crossed the room.

"Manny!" she said, taking both my hands in her small brown ones. "You come to see me almost never any more. Is it not love you have for me?"

"It is not. Drink?"

"Coca cola."

"With rum?"

"Not during business. Plain."

I ordered her drink and another rye and water for myself.

"Where you keep yourself, Manny?" she asked. "Why you never come see me any more?"

"I've come to see you, haven't I?"

She narrowed her brown eyes suspiciously. "You here on some business. Always you work at business and never have time for play."

"I dropped in to see if you'd like supper at the Paris Club some night."

She let out a delighted little "Oh!" like a child offered candy. "I would sure. I ask Louie. He let me off eleven-thirty."

"Not tonight," I hedged. "I have some things to do. How about meeting me there at midnight tomorrow?"

She looked disappointed. "You no pick me up?"

"I'd better not." I paused. "I'm going

in to see Louie in a minute. After our talk I may not be popular around here."

"Pooh. You just lazy. Did I not love you, I say, 'Good-by to you, mister. I hard to get.' But I be there." She narrowed her eyes to mock slits. "You stand me up, I cut out your heart."

"Yes, ma'am."

I watched her weave through the crowd back to her table, downed the remainder of my drink and made my way through the dining room to Louis Bagnell's private office. When someone said, "Come in" to my knock, I turned the knob and entered.

Apparently I was breaking into a conference. Bagnell sat behind a desk facing the door, with one of his stooges on either side of him. Two more slouched on a divan in the corner. All four were typical hoods, bulky and dangerous-looking, but not too bright. The two on the couch I had never before seen, but I knew Vance Caramand at Bagnell's left, and at his right sat "Mouldy" Greene of my old outfit. Mouldy derived his nickname from having contracted eczema, *pubis pediculosis*, and athlete's foot simultaneously.

IN CONTRAST to the others Bagnell was a suave figure. Slim, slightly graying, and with clear features, he might have been a banker or business executive except for his gambler's eyes. Pale and expressionless, they looked up at me without curiosity.

"Yes?"

"I'm Moon."

"I know."

Mouldy Greene broke in. "I'll be hanged!"

"Probably," I said. "How are you, Mouldy?"

"The old topkick! I thought you lost a leg."

"I did."

He stared at my feet puzzledly and gave up.

"This guy," he announced to the room at large, "had me digging latrines all the way from Bizerte to Anzio."

"Interesting," said Bagnell. "What do you want, Moon?"

"This morning Lawrence Randall hired me," I said.

Bagnell's lips curled in a humorless smile. His eyes remained opaque.

"So he's sending messenger boys? Afraid if he came himself, I'd take

twenty-five thousand out of his hide?"

"Possibly."

We sized each other up silently, he trying to figure me out and I, not having the vaguest idea of where to go from here, operating on the principle that silence is often mistaken for knowledge.

"If you brought twenty-five thousand in cash, I'll talk business," Bagnell said finally. "If you didn't, go back and tell your employer to have it on my desk by midnight, or I'll come and get it."

"Mr. Randall doesn't think he ought to pay."

His fingers beat a quick march on the desk top. "So he doesn't think he ought to pay? He thinks his share from this place should be handed over regularly, but little side deals go all to him?" He leaned forward and the opaque eyes glowed coldly. "Tell him I said twelve o'clock."

I was getting much more than I expected. I allowed it to roll around in my mind until it dropped into the semblance of order. I guessed that Randall, as Bagnell's partner, or at least business associate in Club El Patio, had pulled off some big money side deal and refused to split. Probably he had wanted to hire me to strongarm Bagnell out of his insistence on a cut.

Either Bagnell was ignorant of Randall's death or he was staging a colorful act for my pleasure. From my inside pocket I took the envelope containing the El Toro butts I had found in the men's room at the University Building and emptied it on his desk.

"Know anyone who smokes that brand?"

Caramand, craning forward for a closer look, blurted, "I do."

Bagnell said, "Shut up," without taking his eyes from mine.

I scooped the butts back into their envelope and replaced it in my pocket.

"I found them in a men's room that looks right into Randall's back door."

Bagnell continued to watch me without speaking.

"I suppose you know Randall was murdered this afternoon?" I remarked conversationally.

The room had been quiet, but now it became a vault. Even breathing stopped.

"Throw him out," Bagnell commanded tonelessly.

The two men on the sofa and Vance Caramand rose.

"I'll sit this one out," Mouldy Greene said.

Caramand shifted his eyes to Mouldy, then back to me.

"You're out of your class, Vance," Mouldy said. "This guy was a topkick in the Rangers."

The two from the couch moved in on me synchronously. I let one get hold of either arm and waited. Vance Caramand took a step toward me.

"Shall I dust him one, Boss?"

"As you please," said Bagnell.

From the corner of my eye I was conscious of Mouldy Greene, his chair aslant against the wall, enjoying proceedings from his ringside seat. Caramand cocked his right fist, grinned, and took another step forward.

"The sarge calls this a gavot," I heard Mouldy's voice say.

LEANING into the support the other two furnished my arms, I planted the inner side of my aluminum foot under Caramand's chin with enough force to kick a field goal had his head been a football. Without waiting for him to fall, I used the down sweep to smash my heel against the shin of the man holding my right arm. When he yowled and let go, I pivoted and slammed a knee into the third's middle. He let go also.

Caramand had collapsed quietly to the floor. Sore-shin came back for more, arms outstretched for a bear hug. I grabbed his necktie, managed to wind my other fist around the tie of the third hood, who was half-doubled in pain, and jerked my hands together sharply. I stepped out of the way and their heads rang together like a bell and clapper.

"Army judo," Mouldy brightly explained to Bagnell. "Plus some stuff he picked up in barrooms. We called it the Moon syst—"

"Shut up," Bagnell broke in. He regarded the three unconscious bodies unemotionally. "I heard you were tough."

I toyed with the thought of bouncing him through a wall, and rejected it as waste of energy. Bagnell, watching my eyes, seemed to read the passing thought. He smiled an undaunted, mocking smile.

"How would you like steady employment?"

"I like working for myself," I said, and walked out.

As I neared Fausta's table she upended

her cards and called, "Nineteen." As I passed she murmured, "You be there," without looking up.

I winked and continued on to the door.

CHAPTER VI

Mathilda Zell



LVIN CHRISTOPHER and I were the only witnesses called before the coroner's jury, Joan, at Eddie Duncan's advice, refusing to testify on constitutional grounds. I felt mild irritation at this, knowing the reporters would embrace it as further evidence

of Joan's guilt. While the jury was out I asked Eddie what he thought he was doing.

"They think she's guilty anyway," he said. "Unless you turn up new evidence, nothing we do or say will keep her from the grand jury. And nothing we say there will keep her from being indicted. I'm not letting her open her mouth until she finally goes on trial."

The jury took ten minutes to arrive at the routine opinion that, "The deceased met death by homicide at the hands of person or persons unknown."

The district attorney had Joan scheduled to appear in police court at one o'clock that afternoon. He was definitely rushing things, and I suspected the cantankerous urging of Inspector Warren Day in the background.

I stopped Joan at the door as she was being escorted out.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine," she said.

Except for a faint darkening beneath the eyes, she showed no sign of the strain she must have been under.

"I hoped they wouldn't rush things so," I said. "That's why Eddie didn't pull a *habeas corpus* or try to post bond. We thought if we didn't prod them any, we'd have more time to work. Looks like we guessed wrong."

"That's all right."

"I haven't found much yet, but if it helps any, I know you're innocent."

She gave me a depressed but grateful smile and passed on through the door

back to her cell.

I took a taxi to the University Building. In Lawrence Randall's outer office I found Alvin sitting behind his desk shuffling papers, he, too, having come here direct from the inquest. He glanced up without friendliness. I sat on the edge of his desk and lit a cigar.

"Have one?" I offered.

"No, thanks."

I watched him thumb through check stubs and enter figures on a ledger sheet.

"Why are you working today? I supposed a lawyer's business just stopped when he died. If a grocer dies they put someone else in charge and go on selling apples. But a lawyer sells knowledge. When he's dead there's nothing left to sell."

"I'm checking Mr. Randall's accounts for the executor."

"Find anything interesting in the safe?"

"We haven't opened it," he said. "Mr. Randall never gave the combination to anyone. We're awaiting a court order to break it open."

"What appointments did Randall have yesterday?"

Alvin stopped working, leaned back in his chair, and grasped the edge of his desk with both hands. He opened his mouth as though preparing to deliver a dissertation, closed it again, and picked up a fresh stack of check stubs.

"Ask the police," he said.

Leaning over, I picked up a notebook inscribed, "Appointments" from the corner of his desk.

"Hey!" said Alvin. "Put that down!"

I looked at him steadily until he dropped his eyes.

"Stop fooling yourself," I said. "You are going to answer questions."

He tried to meet my eyes again, failed. "What do you want to know?" he asked sulkily.

Opening the book to the previous day's list I ran over the names and times and asked about each in turn. There were three appointments for the morning. The first concerned a litigation suit, the second was a woman seeking a divorce, and the third a salesman trying to sell an air conditioning unit for the office. I noted their names for future reference.

Three appointments were listed for afternoon also. I saw Joan Garson's name, my own, then:

Mathilda Zell, 4:00 p.m.

"Who's Mathilda Zell?" I asked.

"My fiancee."

"Congratulations," I said drily. "What was her appointment about?"

"I don't know."

REACHED across, bunched his shirt front together in my fist and jerked him half upright so that our faces were very near.

"You got me wrong," he said quickly. "I honestly don't know. Mattie doesn't, either. Mr. Randall phoned her himself and asked her to come in. He didn't tell either of us what he wanted."

I eased him back into his chair. He sat there looking flustered, and brushed at his shirt front in an attempt to smooth out the wrinkles.

"How long did you say you've worked here?" I said.

"Three years."

"And before that?"

"College."

"Miss Zell's appointment was at four o'clock, two hours after the murder. When did she get here?"

"She didn't. After the police left, I phoned her and told her not to come."

Mathilda Zell seemed my next logical lead. I pried her address from Alvin and took a taxi there. She stayed at the Park Plaza, an exclusive apartment hotel. I knew something of her from occasional rotogravure pictures and frequent society items in the local papers.

She was one of the town's richest women, lived alone, and went in heavily for sports. Newspaper photographs usually showed her in tennis shorts holding a racket, in a yachting costume, or on a horse. But her main activity was mountain climbing, and she was forever being written up for breaking the time record to the top of the highest peak in Rhodesia, or for being on her way to break a record somewhere else in the world. Her parents had been dead for years.

She proved to be about what I expected, a tall, tanned blonde with breezy good looks and a direct manner. I judged her age to be twenty-one or two.

"Alvin phoned you were coming," she said. "Collapse, and have a cold drink."

I sat on a semi-soft divan and looked about the tastefully furnished, but small apartment while she went into the kitchenette.

"I know it's small for the price," she called. "The manager keeps telling me I pay for exclusiveness. I asked for a larger, less exclusive apartment, but he only seemed offended."

She reappeared with two frosted glasses that looked like Tom Collinses. Handing me one, she arched herself in a chair opposite my sofa, her legs stretched straight in front of her like a man's.

"Here's a go," I said.

"Mud in your eye."

The drink proved to be ginless lemonade, but after the first shock I relaxed. She had the knack of making you feel comfortable. We passed small talk and were getting miles from the purpose of my call when she brought it up herself.

"Alvin says you're a kind of policeman investigating Mr. Randall's death."

"I'm a private operator. Randall wanted to hire me, but got himself killed before he could write my retainer check. Naturally I'm irked at the murderer, so I'm following up."

"But isn't it all solved?"

"You mean Joan Garson? I don't think she did it."

"I'm glad," she said. "I can't imagine Joan committing murder."

"You know her?"

"Oh, yes. We were in school together. Alvin was engaged to her once. I didn't know either of them well then, I was just a sophomore, while Joan and Alvin were seniors. That's miles apart in college. But I'm glad you don't think Joan did it. Are you here to find out if I did?"

"Hardly. I just want to know about your appointment with Randall."

"I'm afraid it won't help you much," she said. "About a week ago Mr. Randall phoned and said he had something of interest to tell me. Nine days ago, actually, because I had just come from the anti-gambling league meeting, so it was on a Thursday. He refused to say any more over the phone, but asked me to drop in at his office the following afternoon. The next morning he phoned and changed the appointment to yesterday. He said his information wasn't quite complete."

"Have you any idea what information he was talking about?"

"Not the slightest. I really wasn't too interested. Frankly, I didn't like Mr.

Randall. I was glad when Alvin decided to leave, him. Alvin has a job with Schimer and Burke starting next week, you know."

THAT was news to me. I shook my head.

"No, I didn't know," I said.

"They're a law firm. Much more reputable than Randall. He was mixed in some kind of gambling, you know. Of course Alvin had nothing to do with that part of his business, but I never liked his working for a gambler."

"You mentioned belonging to the anti-gambling league. I take it you disapprove of gambling."

"I hate it!" Her face darkened with such sudden feeling I was taken aback. "Alvin hates it as much as I, but he has to make a living. Of course his work concerned only the law part of Mr. Randall's business, but he disliked being associated with a gambler in any way. We were both glad he was leaving."

"Now we come to the usual routine question," I said. "Where were you at two o'clock yesterday?"

She uttered an alto laugh. "I have no alibi. I played tennis all morning, lunched alone at Del's Cafe and returned here about one o'clock. No one saw me come in. The elevator is self-operating. I showered and dressed, intending to leave for my appointment about three-thirty. I could easily have got out of here without being seen, gone to the University Building and back, and no one the wiser."

"Did you?"

"No. I didn't leave the apartment. Alvin phoned about three-fifteen, so I didn't go out at all until dinner-time."

I could think of nothing else to ask. I thanked her for the lemonade and left. . . .

The police court judge made short work of Joan's case. After a brief, matter-of-fact presentation by the district attorney, Alvin Christopher and I were called as witnesses. We repeated substantially what we had told the coroner's jury. Eddie Duncan did not cross-examine, nor did he present any defense.

"We couldn't change the judge's mind," he said, when I returned to my seat. "Why struggle?"

The court bound Joan over to the grand jury without bail. I got to speak to her a moment before her policeman

escort took her away. "I'm collecting lots of information," I told her. "But it doesn't lead anywhere. I'll try to get down and see you late this afternoon. I have a call to make first."

"I know you're doing your best," she said. "I want you to know I appreciate everything, no matter how it comes out." Her eyes moistened and seemed on the point of overflowing. I changed the subject.

"I didn't see your mother here."

"I asked her not to come."

She looked lonely, but proud, as she went down the courthouse steps between two uniformed policemen, her cheeks faintly pink at the popping of flash bulbs, but her head held high and her eyes straight ahead.

The call I had mentioned to Joan was at her own home. I had to break a line of reporters to get to the front door. More seemed to have congregated here than at the courthouse. Several knew me and shouted questions from the time I got out of the taxi until I reached the front door.

"Hey, Moon! How about a statement?"

"Why do you think she killed him, Mr. Moon?"

"You're on the inside, Moon. How's she going to plead?"

"Who you working for, Moon?"

I turned my back to the door and raised one hand to stop the clamor.

"Hold it, boys. I can't answer all your questions, but you can print this. I'm representing Miss Garson and I'm going to prove she didn't commit the murder! That's all you get."

CHAPTER VII

A Mother's Story



RINGING the bell, questions bounced off me again. I just kept shaking my head. I rang three times before a corner of the door curtain lifted and the face of Mrs. Garson peeped through. It immediately disappeared and the door opened a crack, with the chain still on.

"What do you want?" she asked indistinctly.

"Open up. I won't let any reporters in."

The door closed again and I could hear her fumbling with the chain. Then it reluctantly opened. Amid shouts at Mrs. Garson from the reporters, I slipped inside and pushed the door shut behind me. Joan's mother was dressed as expensively as usual, but her face was tired, and she wore no makeup.

"Isn't it terrible?" she said. "I can't move out of the house."

In the large front room where we had talked before, she asked me to sit down, and took a chair facing mine. She kept working her hands together, her poise of yesterday completely gone.

"Has Joan told you where I fit into this thing?" I asked.

"She hasn't told me anything. She just said not to worry and that her lawyer, that Duncan man, had told her not to talk to anyone. Surely Mr. Duncan didn't mean she couldn't talk to her own mother. How she got hold of him anyway, I don't know. He isn't our lawyer."

"I hired him. I'm investigating the case for your daughter. That's why I came to see you. I need answers to some questions."

"I'll do anything I can to help," she said.

"Fine. You can start by telling me what you were doing in the hall near Randall's office a few minutes after the murder."

She turned rigid and the color slowly disappeared from her face. Her hands stopped working and lay upright and still in her lap. Her recovery was slow, but complete.

"I wasn't there." Her voice was wary, but calm.

"Mrs. Garson, perhaps it hasn't penetrated that your daughter is accused of murder. The police think she's guilty, the papers think she's guilty, the grand jury is going to think she's guilty, and as things stand she's going to be convicted. They gas murderers in this state. If you want your daughter to end in the gas chamber, keep right on lying to me. I saw you in the hall right after the murder."

She paled again, but otherwise kept control of herself.

"It wouldn't help to tell you," she murmured. "Nothing can help."

Her eyes looked hopelessly straight into mine and I suddenly comprehended.

"You think Joan committed the mur-

der!" I said.

Her unchanged expression was an answer.

"Do you want your daughter to die?" I asked.

"Of course not!"

"What would you do for an outside chance of saving her?"

"Anything!"

"All right. Tell me the truth."

"It wouldn't help," she repeated stubbornly.

I got mad then. "I don't think your daughter killed Randall," I said. "If you cooperate, I may be able to prove she didn't. But if you keep sitting on your dead spine saying, 'It wouldn't help,' she'll die whether guilty or not. Now come across and come across fast!"

For a moment her eyes lighted. "You don't think she's guilty?"

"No, I don't."

The light in her eyes burned out and they turned dull again.

"I've tried to think of that. I've thought of how else it could have happened, but I always come back to Joan. If I tell what I know, it will only make things worse."

"Let me judge that. I'm not a policeman, and I don't have to pass on information that will hurt Joan."

She looked down at her hands, her brow puckered with indecision. I let her wrestle it out in her mind.

"All right," she said finally. "But before I tell you about yesterday, I had better go back to when my husband died. It's all part of the story."

She started to talk in a low, toneless voice, as though recounting a story she had heard about someone else in which she had not been concerned, nor was much interested. She told of her hus-

band's death and the dissipation of his fortune to avert scandal, of the checks she had signed as I.O.U.s, and the pressure Randall had put on her to steer friends to El Patio.

SHE half smiled at this point, without embarrassment, remembering her attempt on me. Generally it was the same story Joan had told, but I let her talk on as though I had never heard it before in order to see how much truth she was unfolding. She omitted nothing.

"When I learned Joan was going to see Mr. Randall, I was frantic," she went on. "I feared he would work some kind of hold over her. You can't visualize the sort of beast he was, Mr. Moon. He used to gloat over being able to make me do as he ordered. I didn't want Joan involved with him in any way, but I knew it useless to forbid her. Up to the minute she left to see him I couldn't think what to do. Then in desperation I called a taxi and tried to get there first, so I could beg him not to see her.

"I didn't want Joan to know I was there, so I went in the back way. But I was too late. Just as I turned into the little corridor which leads to the back door of Mr. Randall's office, the door opened and Joan came out. The nearest place I could hide was the men's room across the corridor entrance and I was so rattled I burst in without even thinking. A man stood there smoking a cigarette.

"I mumbled something about being sorry, that I thought it was a powder room. I'm not sure what I said, I was so embarrassed. He said nothing, but made no move to leave, and I couldn't leave either until Joan was out of sight.

[Turn page]

Now She Shops "Cash and Carry"

Without Painful Backache

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up

nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

We just stood looking at each other until I turned my back on him.

"The upper part of the door was glass, the kind you can see through one way, but not the other. I saw Joan turn the corner toward the elevators and then the man said, 'Pardon me,' and went by me out into the hall. He turned the opposite way Joan had, and disappeared through a fire door where the hall ended.

"I stayed there about five minutes more, trying to calm myself enough to walk to the elevator. I had just pushed the down button when someone came around the corner behind me. Now I realize it must have been you, but at the time I feared it might be the man from the men's room and was too embarrassed to look."

"You had a rough experience," I said, and couldn't stop my grin from spilling all over my face.

"But don't you see what it means?"

to run home and hide under the bed. Joan had acted exactly as though unaware a crime had been committed, which would get her nowhere with a jury, but before Mrs. Garson's testimony placed doubts in my mind, her actions had thoroughly convinced me of her innocence.

Assuming Mrs. Garson's statement true, I could see but two possibilities. Someone had got into Randall's office and out again without using either door, or Joan was guilty. I had no reason to believe Joan's mother had lied, unless she herself had done the killing. But even then it was hardly likely she would make up a story to convict her own daughter.

I decided the stone ledge below Randall's window required a second examination. . . .

JOAN'S cell in the women's section was clean and airy. She looked worn out, but summoned enough energy for a smile

Nick Burney must not only find the killer—but must also prove that there was a killing—in 42 KEYS TO MURDER, a novelet by Edward Churchill—next issue!

she said despairingly. "No one went in or out of that door after Joan left until you came through it! And according to the papers, no one went in the other way. She had to do it!"

The first real doubts of Joan's innocence were working about in my mind when I left the Garson home. If Mrs. Garson had told the truth, the possibilities virtually narrowed to the murderer being either Joan or me. I knew I was innocent, which left Joan.

But I still could not psychologically reconcile the act of calmly keeping a beauty appointment immediately after committing a murder. My feeling about it added nothing to her defense, but I could not visualize her as a killer. I have known criminals who, before being caught, seemed constitutionally incapable of crime. But even they followed a consistent pattern of behavior. If I believed Joan guilty, I had to believe her so cold-blooded that murder did not even disturb her usual routine.

Yet, if she had committed the crime, all evidence indicated she had thrust the knife in fury and on impulse of the moment. A murderer's logical reaction after a hot-blooded killing is to get away as fast and as far as possible, or at least

when the matron opened her barred door for me.

"How do you feel?" I said.

"All right." Her voice was listless.

Locking me in, the female guard moved ten paces away and stopped where she could keep us in sight.

"So far everything I turn up makes it look worse for you," I said. "Did you kill that guy?"

Her eyes, deep and tired, looked directly into mine without surprise.

"No. Honest I didn't."

"If you were a man, or even an ugly woman, I'd throw you to the wolves. But every time I turn up something that clinches the case tighter, I think nobody with legs like yours could kill. So I go on ferreting out more evidence. Why didn't you tell me you'd been engaged to Alvin Christopher?"

Her eyes widened. "What difference does that make?"

"None, except that you didn't tell me. I have to know everything about you to break this case."

"It was long ago, in college. We broke up during our senior year. Alvin was silly about it for a time. He dramatized himself as the wounded lover and started showing up at school dances drunk.

CHAPTER VIII

A Little Matter of Safe-Breaking

Months after we stopped going together he cut me at a dance and ranted about how I had ruined his life by making him a drunkard and gambler. He was drunk at the time. It was so silly and childish. Two weeks later he had forgotten all about me and was going with a blonde."

On my way out I stopped at Warren Day's office. He was dictating to a pert blonde, apparently a new employee, as I had never seen her before.

"Don't you believe in knocking?" he greeted me.

"Not when I call on old friends." I helped myself to a cigar and a soft chair. "Who's the dish?"

The blonde raised her nose and got up as though to leave.

"Sit down," Day said. "I'm not through." To me he said, "Make it snappy. I've got work."

"You have a file on Louie Bagnell?"

"Why?"

"How about a peek?"

"In the first place," Day started sanctimoniously, "we don't maintain files on people without criminal records."

I emitted a short horse laugh.

"In the second place," he roared, "you got the devil of a nerve asking to look at secret police files!"

"Watch your blood pressure," I said. "All I want is the inside dope on the Randall-Bagnell relationship."

"That case is closed."

"Let's open it again. Were Randall and Bagnell equal partners in El Patio?"

"Get out of here," the Inspector snarled. "And stay out of my hair."

I stood up. "Okay. But when I hand the real murderer to the *Dispatch* instead of you, don't gripe because you lose credit for solving the crime."

He made an impolite noise. I winked at the blonde just to see her nose tilt, and left. . . .

In the four hours before my date with Fausta I had work to do. From a neighborhood tavern I phoned a flop-house number and asked for Jackie Morgan. In a few minutes a cautious voice answered.

"Moon," I said. "You busy?"

"Not for you. Who you want slugged?"

"Nobody. It's your other talent I need. How soon can you be at Grand and Olive?"

"Twenty minutes."

"Fine. Bring your kit."



JACKIE MORGAN claimed to be the best picklock in the country. He may have been. I don't know them all. He also claimed to be tough, but he wasn't. His affection for me had its origin in a saloon brawl during which I had slammed

around a couple of people who were slamming him around, he, with his hundred and twenty pounds and pipestem arms being fairly easy to slam. It was not much, but he thought so and dropped everything else for me on the rare occasions I needed his help.

After seven o'clock the University Building was empty except for a watchman who slept in the basement. Jackie's technique with burglar alarms got us in without trouble. The really difficult part was climbing stairs. Starting the elevators would have brought the watchman from the basement at a dead run, and fourteen flights takes a lot of walking. When we reached Randall's office we sat on the floor in the dim hall with our backs against the wall until our breath returned.

The second key Jackie tried opened the office's main door. I waited until he blacked out the Venetian blinds before switching on the lights and leading the way to the inner office.

I pointed to the safe.

"Can you open that without breaking it?"

Jackie cocked his head to study it. "Fifteen minutes," he decided.

While he worked on the safe, I swiftly went through Randall's desk, but found nothing of interest. I tried Christopher's desk in the outer office, which consumed more time, but netted no more than Randall's. As I started back to check on Jackie's progress, the buzzer on Alvin's desk sounded and nearly made me leap from my shoes. I pushed down the intercom switch.

"Stop scaring my pants off," I said.

Jackie Morgan's voice came through clearly. "It's open."

The safe contained two hundred dollars in cash and a dozen file folders. Lay-

ing the folders on Randall's desk, I went through them one at a time. Half were files on legitimate, but confidential law cases. Five others contained nothing but undated checks in various amounts signed by prominent people. It seemed that Mrs. Garson was not the only socialite Randall had used as a procurer for El Patio.

The last folder held photostatic copies of two I.O.U.s for five thousand dollars each signed by Gerald McDonald. They were amazing I.O.U.s. They read:

I.O.U. for money lost at gambling, \$5,000.

That, the date and signature, was all.

I leaned back with my feet propped on Randall's desk and gazed at the ceiling, trying to reconstruct the story behind the photostats. Gerald McDonald, the son of a local banker, had just been elected City Excise Commissioner, the first job he had ever held.

For years Gerald had been a lad about town, not a bad boy, but not a good one either. He spent his time in night clubs, living on an allowance from his indulgent father, and seemingly content to play away his life. When his party had put him up for excise commissioner, he had been voted in partly on his father's reputation and partly because there was nothing against him. I was not surprised to learn he had gone in debt gambling.

Nonetheless I was puzzled. I tried visualizing either Randall or Bagnell handing out ten thousand dollars for two scraps of paper, but the picture came out blank. As a lawyer, Randall would have known gambling debts were uncollectable in court, yet these I.O.U.s went out of their way to show what the debt was for.

For fifteen minutes I shuffled thoughts around in my head. I was wondering why photostats, and what happened to the originals, when light broke. This was the solution to the money controversy between Randall and Bagnell!

I tried to reconstruct what might have happened. Never missing a blackmail opportunity, Randall would have waited until just before election time and threatened to make public the I.O.U.s. People are touchy about who collects taxes for their city and the I.O.U.s would have cooked McDonald's political goose. Probably Randall had approached the father rather than the son, knowing

that all revenue in the family stemmed from the senior McDonald. Gerald's father, seeing the only job his cherished son had ever come close to about to be snatched away, must have bought back the I.O.U.s at Randall's figure, and I guessed that figure to be fifty thousand dollars more than their face value.

If my theory was correct, this was the cause of friction between Bagnell and Randall. As a partner, Bagnell must have demanded half the profit and Randall refused to split. And on top of blackmail and cheating his partner, Randall had made photostatic copies before turning over the original I.O.U.s, probably with the intention of using the photostats for future blackmail.

THE deeper I delved into this case, the more it looked as though the murderer were a public benefactor. Nearly everyone Randall had come in contact with had a motive for murder. I wondered if it would not be more just to reward the killer than execute him.

Returning everything to the safe just as I found it, I had Jackie close it again. Then I shut off the lights, raised the center shade and window and leaned out into the moonlight. The night's dimness made the six-inch ledge below the windows appear even less secure than by daylight. To my left it ran to the corner of the building with no intervening windows above it.

I tried to visualize the fourteenth story's floor plan and decided that after turning the corner, the first window the coping would run under would be that of the men's room with the freak glass door. Immediately I thought of Carmand, took another look at the building's edge, and rejected the possibility. Even an acrobat could never have navigated that corner.

In the other direction the ledge ran beneath the windows of the reception room. Having been seated there myself when the crime was committed, I was certain no one had passed through that room, climbed out a window and balanced on the ledge unnoticed by either Alvin or me. I filed the problem.

Twenty minutes later we were back at Grand and Olive. I folded a twenty into Jackie's hand.

"Buy yourself a drink."

"Naw," he protested. "That wasn't nothing."

"If it weren't worth it," I said, "I wouldn't pay you. Who ever told you I give money away?"

He took it. . . .

I arrived at the Paris Club twelve minutes late, and in a spirit of atonement bought a gardenia for Fausta from the flower girl in the foyer. From the top of four steps leading to the dance floor, I stared out over the crowd in a vain attempt to locate Fausta. An alto squeal above the waltz music turned my eyes to a dim corner. Fausta violently waved a napkin in signal as I worked my way across the packed floor to where she waited at a table for two.

"You terrible late," she scolded.

"I stopped for flowers."

"You sweet," she said, pinning the gardenia to virtually nothing on her shoulder. Then her eyes narrowed. "You buy this in lobby. That not make you late."

I grinned. "Caught again. I had to see a man."

"Business again," she said disdainfully. "You dance with me, I forgive you."

"Sorry. I haven't yet taught my new leg. This floor is too crowded for initiation."

"Oh, I forgot again. You not able to tell by how you walk."

"You not able," I said. "But I able. Cocktail?"

"Martini."

Flagging a waiter, I ordered drinks, with supper to follow. Over our drinks I brought out the real reason for our date, unsuccessfully trying to be tactful about it.

"I'm working on the Randall murder, Fausta. And I'm stuck. How would you like to help?"

"So! Even our date is just business!"

"No, it isn't," I said quickly. "Do you think I'm that cold-natured?"

"Yes," she said resignedly. "It is not a heart you have, but a time clock. What you desire I do?"

"Just give me some information."

"What you want to know?"

"I'm not sure. The case is so fishy, I can't get a decent start. But I have a feeling that gambling at El Patio is somehow tangled in the murder. You knew Randall, and through your association with El Patio, probably knew most of the people he dealt with. If I tell you everything I've learned so far, maybe you'll be able to fill in the gaps."

"Fill gaps?"

"Yes. Tell me about deals of Randall's I haven't uncovered, relationships he had. Anything at all you may know about Randall or the people involved in the case which you think may be new to me."

"I try," she said dubiously.

THE waiter brought our supper. While Fausta ate, I talked and let mine grow cold. Starting with Alvin Christopher's phone call to my apartment, I told her everything that had happened, regardless of apparent relevance. I finished as the waiter brought coffee.

"You not eat anything," she said.

"I wasn't hungry. Can you add to my story?"

"Maybe. This Gerald McDonald I have see, but of him I know nothing except he gamble very much. Of Miss Zell and Alvin Christopher I know something you do not tell."

"What?"

"The father of Mathilda Zell is ruin at gambling by Lawrence Randall. He commit suicide for it."

This was news. "Where'd she get her money if her father went broke?"

"From an uncle who die. Her mother's brother."

"What about Christopher?"

"Three year ago he gamble quite heavy for two, three months at El Patio. Then he stop and never come back. I bet Miss Zell be very angry if she knew."

"He certainly wouldn't tell her," I said, remembering the look on Mathilda Zell's face when I mentioned gambling. "That's interesting, but hardly important. Lots of people have gambled at El Patio. I once lost fifty dollars there myself. Know anything else?"

"No, so I suppose you send me home."

I grinned at her. "Right. Young girls need sleep."

"You going to take me right to my door and kiss me goodnight," she declared sternly.

"Of course. Don't you think I'm human?"

"No. You are a big pain in my neck."

I called for the bill. . . .

During the ride back from Fausta's I lay back in the cab, closed my eyes and thought. Somewhere I must have overlooked some item, some exposed

thread on which the whole solution hinged. I don't believe in perfect crimes. There had to be something among the facts assembled which would give me a handhold if I could only recognize it. And once I found that hold, I could follow through the solution.

One by one I matched the statements made by people involved against each other in an attempt to find contradiction. When I paid off the taxi I was still nowhere.

As I climbed the steps to my apartment, I mentally matched what evidence I had collected through observation against the stories of everyone I had questioned. From the back of my mind a feeling that something failed to jibe began to push itself forward.

I paused with my key in the lock as an inconsistency in observation suddenly loomed large. In that moment I knew the answer, and a flood of jubilation took the edge off my alertness.

I didn't sense anyone in the room with me until after I pushed the light button. Then it was too late. Instead of light filling the room, it burst in my head in one mammoth flash, then grayed to blackness. . . .

The rhythmic beat of a surf sounded off in the distance. It kept coming closer, then fading in regular pulsations. I lay still, listening to the beat in puzzlement, and trying to decide where I was from the sound. There was no sea within a thousand miles of the city.

I opened one eye and the surf localized itself to the inside of my head. I closed it again, which reduced the pounding in my brain to a steady throb. A minute later I tried opening both eyes and, finding this felt no worse, cautiously sat up.

For a blinding moment pain surged back into my head, then subsided to a dull, pulsing ache.



AND
LET
THAT
BE A
LESSON

A Chet Lacey Yarn

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN
NEXT ISSUE!

CHAPTER IX

New Client



ON A couch in Louis Bagnell's office, I sat with my hands bound in front of me. Bagnell's expressionless eyes contemplated me from behind his desk. Vance Caramand sat at his right, his jaw twice its normal size. Mouldy Greene relaxed in a corner, his straight-backed chair aslant against the wall.

"You've had a nice nap," Bagnell said.

I looked at Mouldy Greene without answering.

"I didn't sap you," he said. "I don't even know what's going on."

"You probably wonder why you're here," said Bagnell.

I continued to remain silent and after a questioning pause he continued:

"My relationship with the police is amicable, but guarded. Club El Patio is tolerated, but a little unfavorable publicity might decide the police to close it. Naturally that would not please me. To get directly to the point, I don't like you prying into my affairs."

"Was it over the McDonald deal you had Caramand kill Randall?" I asked conversationally.

Bagnell's expression remained unchanged, but Caramand darkened and rose to his feet.

"Shall I belt him one, Boss?"

Bagnell, his cold gray eyes unmoving, remained silent. Seeming to interpret this as tacit consent, Vance started toward me, an anticipatory grimace quirk-ing his lips. I stood up. Bagnell's expression changed to curiosity.

"Here we go again," Mouldy Greene said.

Caramand swung a roundhouse right which barely missed when I cocked my head backward an inch. Before he could recover, I brought up my false limb in a perfect gavot which exploded under his jaw.

"What a punk!" Mouldy said in disgust.

Bagnell gazed down at the sleeping figure of his henchman, a glint of amusement behind the coldness of his eyes.

"Some day he'll be smart enough to tie your feet."

I started at him, intending to kick him through the wall, but stopped short when the muzzle of my own pistol appeared over the edge of his desk.

"Do have a seat," he suggested.

Returning to the couch, I relaxed with my back against the wall. The gun muzzle disappeared as swiftly as it had appeared.

"I'm a reasonable man," Bagnell said. "In spite of your remark a few minutes ago, I don't think you believe I had anything to do with Randall's murder. But your investigation could stir up enough unpleasant publicity to ruin me. One newspaper surmise that Randall's connection with El Patio has a bearing on his murder would start an editorial campaign against gambling which could run me out of business."

"Why do you think I'd stir up anything?" I asked.

"You might not purposely, but you ask questions. You tried to pump Inspector Day about me this afternoon."

"How'd you get that?" I asked, surprised. "Does Day keep you posted on events at Headquarters?"

"I have ways to learn things."

Vance Caramand twitched one leg, but continued to rest. I thought a moment. "The new blonde steno," I said suddenly.

Bagnell remained expressionless. "To return to the subject, I want to hire you to solve this case for me."

"Having me knocked over the head is a fine way to get me to work for you," I said sourly.

Bagnell let his lips form a rueful smile, without changing his eyes.

"That was an unfortunate mistake. I told Vance to bring you in. I meant peacefully, not by abduction, but he misunderstood. Having sapped you, he couldn't undo it, and remembering your tendency for violence, I thought it best you awaken with your hands tied. I'm sorry about the sapping and am willing to apologize."

"That makes my head feel much better." I got up and started at him with my hands outthrust. "Untie them."

He shifted in his chair and I knew the pistol was in his hands again, just below the desk edge.

"Put it away," I said. "I only sock people who pass at me."

He weighed me with his gambler's eyes, decided the odds were good, and slipped the gun into a drawer. I laid my hands on the desk and let him pick loose the knot. Then I held out one hand, palm up.

"The gun."

HIS eyes flickered, but he opened the drawer and produced my pistol. After checking the chamber, I slid the P-38 under my arm and returned to the couch. Lighting a cigar, I leaned back.

"Start talking," I said.

"I already have. I want to hire you to solve Randall's murder."

"Why?"

"Because I want it solved."

"I'm working on it now. Why should you pay me for something I'll do for nothing?"

"I want to be your client."

I thought that over for a minute. "I see. You want to make sure anything I turn up about you or El Patio is squelched?"

"Something like that."

I stood up. "No dice. See you around."

"You misunderstand me," Bagnell said. "I have nothing to cover, because I had nothing to do with the murder. I want the case solved because as long as it remains unsolved the danger of publicity hangs over El Patio. All I ask is that anything you discover not bearing on the murder go no farther than me."

"Suppose I discover El Patio has some bearing on it?"

"You won't."

I studied him for a long time, mentally measuring his bank roll.

"I'll take you on my conditions," I finally said. "The fee is five thousand dollars if I solve the case and nothing if I don't. I'll release to the police everything I know bearing directly on the case, regardless of who it affects. Anything not concerned with the case, I'll forget."

"Sold."

I sat down again. "That was the quickest five thousand I ever made. I have it solved."

Bagnell almost let himself look startled. It was the merest change of expression and was gone again in the blink of an eye. He didn't comment, but waited quietly.

"This is one of those cases that's not finished when it's solved," I continued.

"I know who committed the murder and how, but it's all in my head. I couldn't prove it in court and the police wouldn't believe me if I had told them."

"How long have you known?"

I looked at my watch. It said three-thirty.

"About two hours. The whole thing fell into place just as your stooge slugged me."

Vance Caramand groaned and rolled over on his back. One hand reached groggily for his chin. The movement put an idea in my head.

"Does your stooge there do everything you tell him?"

"Within the limits of his intelligence," Bagnell said drily.

"Suppose you told him to tell the truth to the police?"

"About what?"

"About what he was doing at the University Building when Randall was murdered."

"We'll forget that."

"We'll forget nothing," I said. "Suppose you told him?"

"He'd tell the police the truth."

"Then have him at my apartment about two this afternoon with instructions to answer truthfully anything I ask him in front of police."

"That's out," said Bagnell. "I don't want the police or anyone else to know about Vance being at the University Building."

"I'll keep you and El Patio out of it. Remember I'll be asking the questions, not the cops."

I could see him weighing the odds in his mind while examining my face.

"He'll be there," he said. . . .

IT WAS four-fifteen when I got to bed, and I slept till noon. By the time I had shaved, showered, dressed and eaten late breakfast, it was one o'clock. I phoned Inspector Warren Day.

"You have a stool in your office," I said.

"Yeah? Who?"

"Your new blonde."

The phone was silent for a minute. Then it said, "You're crazy."

"Okay. But Louie Bagnell knew about our conversation yesterday as soon as it was over."

The Inspector laughed. "Is that all?"

I began to get sore. "Isn't it enough?"

"Telling her brother a private dick in-

quired about him isn't letting out Department secrets. She's Bagnell's sister. And you're no secret around here. I don't care who talks about you."

I felt slow red creep up the back of my neck. All I could think of to say was, "Oh."

"The girl's all right. You're the one who's wrong—for talking in front of strangers."

"Okay. It's your laugh. That's not what I phoned about, anyway. I've cracked the Randall case."

"Yeah?" I sensed his interest quicken.

"But I can't prove it."

"You mean you have a theory," he said disgustedly. "So have I, and my theory's in jail."

"I mean I can't prove it without your help. If you'll bring Joan Garson and her mother to Randall's office about two-thirty, I'll hand you the real murderer."

One of our normal arguments ensued then. Twice he threatened to hang up. When I finally told him to go to the devil and that I'd turn my story over to the *Dispatch* instead of him, he went into his quick-change act and wheedled me back to good humor. In the end we agreed to meet at two-thirty, Day to bring Joan and her mother along.

Vance Caramand arrived at my rooms promptly at two, his jaw bloated as though he had mumps, and his eyes sullen. Before we left I phoned the University Building and got Alvin Christopher on the phone.

"Anyone else there?" I asked.

"Mattie. She's helping add figures."

"Fine. Stay there. I want to see you."

When we arrived at Randall's office, Warren Day slouched in the settee where I had waited on my first visit there. He glared sourly at me over his glasses. Joan Garson sat in a corner, flanked on one side by a watchful policeman and on the other by her mother. Mathilda Zell was arched in a straight-backed chair, her feet thrust out in front of her. Alvin Christopher was behind his desk as usual, and Hannegan leaned his back against the door jamb.

I introduced Vance as "Mr. Caramand," which drew an acid grin from the Inspector. The others murmured the usual polite formalities. Then I got right down to business.

"I asked the Inspector over in order to demonstrate to him what really hap-

pened the other day," I announced. "You've all read in the papers or heard in police court what *seemed* to have occurred, but what actually took place was quite different. This was a clever murder. As clever as a stage illusion. The murderer had a lot of luck, but successful illusions require luck.

"Before starting the demonstration," I said to Day, "I'll bring you up to date on some testimony I haven't mentioned before."

"You've been holding out, have you?" the Inspector challenged.

"Of course. If I told you everything I knew, you'd be as smart as me." I turned to Caramand. "Tell the Inspector where you were when Randall was killed."

"In the back hall men's room." He gestured vaguely in the direction of the inner office.

Mrs. Garson said, "Oh! That's the man!"

"What man?" Warren Day asked.

"We'll come to that later," I said. "Isn't it true, Vance, that you rode up here on the same elevator I did, that you went straight to the men's room and stayed there watching Randall's rear door until this young lady"—I pointed to Joan—"came out and went toward the elevators?"

"Yeah."

"Take Inspector Day back and show him the room we're talking about."

"I've seen it," Day said.

TURNING, I faced the Inspector.

"Caramand waited in the men's room because he wanted to see Randall alone, and he knew Randall wouldn't see him if he could avoid it. Everyone goes to the bathroom eventually, and Caramand knew if he waited long enough Randall was sure to walk in. When he did, Caramand intended to stick a gun on him and force him to write a check for twenty-five thousand dollars right there."

"What's that?" Day asked sharply.

"It's nothing. If he'd carried it out, it would have been extortion, but you can't charge a man for his thoughts. Why Caramand wanted the check has nothing to do with this case, and I've promised him we'd forget it if he testified. The important thing is that he was in a position to see that no one went in or out of Randall's back door

until Joan Garson came out. Right, Vance?"

"Right."

I looked over at Mrs. Garson. "It's time to tell your story," I said.

"You promised," she said shakily.

"I promised to keep confidential anything that would hurt Joan. Your story won't hurt her any more."

"For heaven's sake, Mother, if you know anything, tell it!" Joan said.

"You needn't explain your motive for being here that day," I said, in order to save her embarrassment. "Inspector Day is interested only in where you were and what you saw."

"How do you know what I'm interested in?" growled Day.

I ignored him. Go ahead, Mrs. Garson."

CHAPTER X

Exposed



HESITATING, Mrs. Garson looked at her daughter and, getting no help there, started to speak in a barely audible voice.

"I came down here to see Mr. Randall," she said, "but just as I turned into the little corridor leading to his back door, Joan came out of his office. I didn't want her to see me, so I hid in the men's room across the hall. Mr. Caramand was in there, also."

Red flowed into her cheeks and her voice became even more muffled.

"Joan turned the corner toward the elevator and Mr. Caramand went out through the fire door the opposite way. I stayed in the men's room about five minutes more, then walked back to the elevators."

"Why did you want to see Randall?" Day said.

"That has nothing to do with the murder," I said quickly.

"You're bringing up a lot of stuff you claim has nothing to do with the murder," he growled.

"Wait till I finish before you pick it to pieces. After I found the body, I checked the men's room, the fire well and the hall. No one was around. But

when I got to the elevators, Mrs. Garson was just getting on one. She must have turned the corner almost at the same instant I came out of Randall's back door. Put Caramand's, Mrs. Garson's, and my testimony together and you've got irrefutable evidence that nobody except Joan Garson went through that rear door either before or after the murder until I discovered the body."

"Yeah," the Inspector said thoughtfully. "But that clinches the case even tighter."

"Keep your shirt on. The only other ways to the room are the windows and the door from the reception office. I've examined those windows twice and am certain nothing but a bird could get in that way. If Joan didn't kill Randall, the murderer got in and out of his office by the front entrance."

"And walked right by you and Christopher," the Inspector said sarcastically.

"I told you this was a stage illusion," I said. "If you're ready, I'll show you how it worked."

"Go ahead."

"First we'll go over what seemed to happen," I said. "Only we'll leave the connecting doors open between the two offices, so that you can see what's going on in both."

I opened the stained wood door behind Alvin's desk, stepped across the short foyer and swung back the ground glass door to the inner office.

"You stay where you are," I directed Alvin. "I'll play the part of Randall. You're sitting where I was that day, Inspector, so pretend to be me."

"Heaven help me," said Day.

I motioned to Joan and we went into Randall's office together, her police guard suspiciously following. I sat behind Randall's desk and told Joan to take the extra chair.

"All set?" I called.

"Go ahead," said Alvin.

I pressed the button on Randall's desk top and heard the buzzer sound from the other room.

"Bring in the Garson file," I said into the intercom.

"Yes, sir," Alvin's voice came through.

I could see him pretend to take something from his desk drawer. He came through the two open doors and stood in front of my desk. I noticed that his upper lip was beaded with fine drops of sweat.

"Thanks," I said, still playing Randall. "That's all."

He turned and started back toward his own desk. As he passed through the second door I called:

"Stop right there!"

Alvin spun about and stared at me. I moved out into the reception room.

"How did my voice sound over the intercom?" I asked Day.

"All right. Why?"

"Could you understand what I said?"

"Certainly."

I slid aside the rear panel of the box on Alvin's desk and loosened the single tube until its prongs were barely seated in their proper holes.

"Say something into it now," I called to Joan.

Her voice, nearly incoherent, came over the intercom.

"Hello. Can you hear me?"

"Could you understand that?" I asked Day.

"Not a word. It sounded like static."

"That's how it was the other day. At this desk you could just understand it, but from where you're seated now I couldn't make out a word. If the murderer had left the tube loose, I would never have tumbled, but he made the mistake of tightening it again. I learned by accident the machine's tone was normally clear." I turned on Alvin. "It's all over, blondie."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"Come here," I said to Day.

I TOOK him into the short foyer between the two offices.

"When Alvin started back to his desk after delivering the file, he stopped here between the two doors, invisible both from the inner office and to me in the outer. All ground glass doors have a beveled edge of clear glass. It distorts, but Alvin could see through it well enough to tell when Joan left and Randall was alone. Then he went back in, probably got behind Randall with the excuse that he wanted a law book from the window ledge, got a headlock with one arm and reached across for the knife lying on the desk with the other."

"You're crazy!" Alvin said. "I talked to Mr. Randall over the interoffice system after I came out of here!"

I opened the closet door and found out that the six-volt dry cell was still

standing there on the shelf.

"Right after I discovered the body I examined this closet," I said. "No battery was here. But when I returned after talking to the elevator operators, this was standing on the shelf. Alvin took it from his desk drawer and placed it here while I was in the hall."

Carrying the battery into the reception room, I seated myself at Alvin's desk and opened the top drawer about six inches. I placed the cell in the drawer.

"You'll notice," I said to Day, "that this buzzer is fixed on the under side of the desk immediately over the battery."

I raised the dry cell so that its poles touched the corresponding terminals of the buzzer. A loud whir sounded.

"Pretty smart," said the Inspector.

Reaching under the desk, I felt along the wire leading to the intercom box until my fingers encountered fresh tape. I jerked it loose, baring about an inch of naked wire.

"Got a penny?"

Day felt in his pockets and produced a copper coin. I pressed the intercom lever, reached under the desk with my other hand and rubbed the coin sharply against the exposed wire. The speaker emitted a shrill, static noise as though someone excited were shouting incoherencies into it.

"There's Randall's voice as I last heard it," I said.

"I think I'll go home, if no one minds," Mathilda Zell said. . . .

Over cocktail glasses Fausta and Joan measured each other with polite animosity.

"You are so beautiful," said Fausta. "It is no wonder my Manville free you from jail for nothing."

Joan raised her eyebrows. "Your Manville?"

We sat at a corner table of El Patio's ballroom. I signaled the waiter for another round.

"It wasn't exactly for nothing," I said. "I got another client to pay expenses."

"I still can't understand why Alvin

picked me as catspaw," Joan said.

"It was partly accident," I told her. "He'd had the murder machinery set up for a long time, but had to wait for the ideal situation to arise. There had to be a client in Randall's office to take the blame, and another waiting to see Randall. If Randall had seen me first and had you wait, I would have been the sucker. But even though it was chance, he liked the idea of pinning his crime on you because he resented your once having jilted him. Also, your visit gave him the best opportunity he could expect. Probably he intended to get into the inner office while Randall talked to a client, on the excuse of wanting a law book from the window ledge. But Randall actually calling him in made his story sound much better. Then your mother's checks furnished the police with a motive to pin it on you."

"Why did he do it?"

"His confession explained the motive. Remember telling me about the time Alvin accused you of making a drunkard and gambler of him? His senior year in college he went in debt the same way your mother did, only not as much. He started work for Randall so that he could pay off the debt by salary deduction. Randall loved to get financial holds on people.

"Eventually Alvin paid the whole amount and decided to change jobs. But Randall got another hold over him. Alvin's fiancée so hated gambling that she would have dropped him immediately if she had known he ever gambled. Randall threatened to expose Alvin's college spree unless he agreed to stay in his employ. Alvin couldn't see losing a rich heiress as a wife, but he'd reached the end of his rope working for Randall. He solved his problem by murder."

Joan shivered. "And once I thought I loved him." She gazed pensively out at the dance floor. Then, with a toss of her head, she shook her mood. "Will you dance with me?"

"His leg is not yet taught to dance," Fausta said. "Only to kick."

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

THREE FINGERS OF DEATH

A Moody Hackett Novelet by ROGER FULLER

*A Complete
Novelet*



Osa stared at the body
and instinctively Bill, too,
looked down

A COLD NIGHT

By J. LANE

CHAPTER I

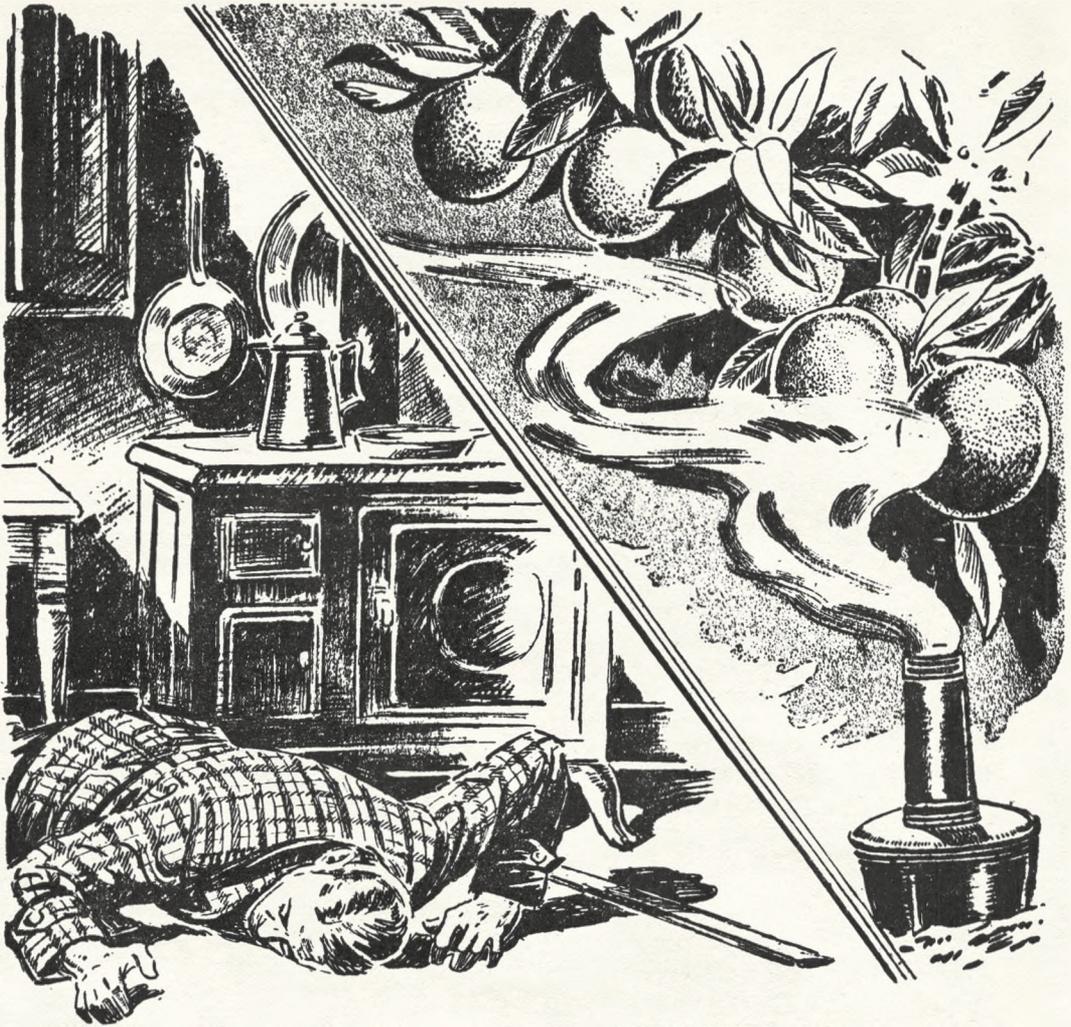
Trouble In The Bar

BILL TREAT was wearing a light brown overcoat and a very old felt hat. The coat was not much protection against the cold of the night, but the furious misery of his mood made him unaware of the temperature.

It was thirty minutes before midnight when he pushed into the Moravia Cafe. You could get either food or drinks here, either at the bar or at one of the tables.

Bill figured he was entitled to one drink, even if he was going on duty in thirty minutes. He went to the bar and ordered bourbon. In the bar mirror he could see the dozen or so people at the

Grains of Glass in a Dead Man's Thumb Point



FOR MURDER

LINKLATER

tables. He knew them all. Especially he knew Osa Dunne.

Osa was drinking coffee, with Charlie Flax. She was very carefully not looking at Bill.

Charlie, large and smugly handsome, was looking pleased with himself. He had rich wavy blond hair. Charlie will be bald in another ten years, Bill thought, with savage if childish hope.

Bill turned and stared into the bar mirror, looking at himself without seeing himself, being busy thinking about Osa. He might have been shocked if he had noticed how he looked. His youthful face, a rather long face with a quizzical mouth, was drawn, and his eyes were bloodshot.

But he was thinking of Osa; thinking of her being with Charlie Flax; think-

the Way for Bill Treat on a Trail of Mystery!

ing that something had happened between himself and Osa, and he didn't know what.

So he ordered another bourbon. He tossed it down.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned his head and glared at the middle-aged man with the broad grinning face. Hank Smalley, Osa's stepfather—Osa had kept her own name, Osa Dunne.

Bill didn't like Smalley; not at all. Smalley had always resented Osa's interest in him. He thought Smalley had something to do with his present trouble.

"Go away," Bill said thickly.

Smalley didn't go away. He was still grinning; he was a little drunk. He stuck a dirty thumb out so that it pointed back to where Osa was sitting with Charlie Flax.

"You ain't doing so good," he jeered.

SUDDENLY, Bill's resentment against Smalley blazed up furiously, blindly. He swung around. He was tall and towered over Smalley's stock figure. Smalley, though older, was a powerful man.

Bill poked a fist at his face. Smalley staggered back, but kept his feet, and anger clouded his face. Mistily, Bill moved toward Smalley, and Smalley was rushing at him.

Shouts in the cafe lifted into a roar.

But then someone got hold of Bill's arms. And others were holding Smalley back. Bill still felt hazy. He was not so much angry now, as sick. It was all pretty silly. He still resented Smalley, but he didn't want to be bothered trying to hit him.

Smalley was chattering angrily. A couple of men were soothing him, walking him away—out of the door.

Suddenly, Bill found that he was alone. He leaned against the bar. He tried not to look at Osa, with Charlie Flax. He ordered another bourbon. The bartender frowned, hesitated, then served the drink.

A hand came down gently on Bill's arm as he started to pick up the glass.

A round smooth face with large round gray eyes smiled up at Bill. "It's none of my business," said the man, "but don't you think you've had enough?"

Bill wanted to laugh. You never knew who might turn out to be a pal. Here was Silas Hocking, manager of the Central

Packinghouse, trying to be helpful.

Then he didn't want to laugh any more. He didn't like Hocking, either. He resented him. He brushed Hocking's hand away and downed his drink. Hocking walked away. Bill looked up. His eye caught the mirror. The mirror showed him Osa's face, white and strained.

Desperately, Bill decided to order another drink, but there, on the bar in front of him, was a cup of black coffee. He stared at it. Then he realized that Mr. Hocking was back, beside him, smiling at him sadly.

"You're on duty in a few minutes, my boy," Hocking said quietly. "Better swallow this, eh?"

Bill was annoyed. He didn't like Hocking's fat respectable face. And he didn't want to get sober at all. He nursed an impulse to push Hocking in his tight little mouth.

But Hocking was saying: "You know, they're depending on you!"

Bill thought about that. Yes, that was right. The old fool was right. They were depending on him. That was something that made sense to Bill Treat, carried weight with him.

He nodded gloomily, muttered thanks, and picked up the cup of coffee with both hands.

Hocking walked away, toward the door.

Bill sipped his coffee.

In the mirror, he saw Osa and Charlie Flax. They, too, were walking toward the door. Osa very deliberately didn't see Bill. Of course. Osa was also due to go on duty at midnight. They could depend on Osa, all right.

Presently Bill looked at the bar clock. A lot of things had happened in less than half an hour. He paid his bill and walked out. He felt the cold more bitterly now. The chill cleared his head. He crossed the street and trod up some wooden stairs. On the second floor he came to a door on which was lettered:

**SOUTH END PROTECTIVE
ASSOCIATION
Frost Patrol Service**

The door opened and Mr. Silas Hocking came out. Mr. Hocking smiled at Bill, encouragingly, and walked away. Bill walked into the office.

There were two rooms, the door between them open. In the first room was a switchboard, some files and a few

chairs. In the room beyond were the manager's desk and a small PBX.

Two girls were at the switchboard now. One of them was Osa. She didn't look at him.

IT WAS just midnight by the ancient oblong clock on the far wall.

Bill pushed into the next room. Paul Horton, the manager, looked up sharply. Horton's nose twitched, as if he could smell Bill, and didn't like the odor. Horton was a tall man, wiry, and his eyes were small, greenish, suspicious. Something the matter with Horton, Bill thought; the whites of his eyes were mottled and his skin blotchy.

"I take Three Hundred tonight, as usual?" Bill said.

Horton sniffed doubtfully. "Yes, Start at twelve-thirty."

He made a note on a card and turned back to his desk.

Bill went back to the other room and sat down. He could watch Osa from this chair. He couldn't help watching her. He couldn't help admiring the whiteness of her brow, the rich fullness of her lips, the clean wave of her dark brown hair.

And he couldn't help the dreary sinking of his heart.

Other frost patrol riders came in, drifted about. Bill paid no attention to them.

He had been in Moravia nine months now. He hadn't intended to stay, having just emerged from an army uniform. He had been intent on returning back east, to Duluth, his hometown, there to enter employment as a skilled mechanic.

But the brief casual visit to Moravia had lost its brevity. He had met Osa! He just couldn't leave!

He had wanted to make money—lots of money, right away—so that he would never have to leave Osa. And he had used up all his capital to open a retail business; automobile accessories and such like.

It hadn't worked out. He wasn't fitted for it. And anyhow a couple of other fellows had tried the same idea. The town couldn't support three such stores, and the housing shortage had made impossible the increase in population which might have made things right.

In six months Bill was through, and since then he hadn't done much. There

wasn't much for him to do in Moravia—but he couldn't bring himself to leave.

And then, unaccountably, in the last week or two Osa had grown strangely distant, had avoided him. He couldn't understand it.

Work such as he was doing tonight, the Frost Patrol, was just temporary. It brought in a few bucks but Bill knew that the real reason he did it was so that he could see Osa. And he had to see her, even when seeing her hurt like fury.

Abruptly, Paul Horton came in from the other room. He stared at Bill, doubtfully.

"It'll be time in five minutes, Bill," he said.

"Okay."

Horton turned to Osa. "I'll be back in about twenty minutes. Feel bad. Got to go home for some medicine. My wife's away, and I'll have to get it myself."

Bill frowningly watched Horton go out. Horton must feel pretty bad, otherwise he'd never leave the office on a night like this.

In five minutes Bill got up to go. He took a report card from the rack. Osa didn't look at him. The other girl, Shirley Blane, a pretty round-faced blond, turned her head and smiled at him. But not Osa.

CHAPTER II

Body In The Kitchen



IT WAS getting colder, Bill thought. Not much under freezing temperature, but cold for California orange country. Bill drove like mad, as usual. He knew his territory, could cover it in forty minutes. He stopped first at the Williams grove. He got out of

the car, pushed through three outer rows of orange trees and turned on his flash.

The big thermometer fastened against a board under a tree said that it was 28.

Bill made a note of it on his card, hurried back to the car and drove on.

It was cold work but just routine. Easy. He had nineteen thermometers to

read. Then he would be back at the office. After that, depending on the temperature trend, he might be sent out to make the rounds again. And perhaps a third time.

He had covered most of his route when he came to a thermometer which read 26. Up until now they had been either 28 or 29. This was 26. Bill muttered. He muttered louder when he recalled whose grove it was.

He remembered instructions: when you hit one that says 27 or lower, phone from the nearest point.

Well, the nearest point of call was the Central Packinghouse, about a quarter of a mile further on. Bill drove there fast, got out and pushed in. Not much light in the packinghouse. The office was over in a corner of the building. Bill shoved through the office door. It was light and warm in here, a gas heater going.

Sitting at a desk, checking papers, was the packinghouse manager, Silas Hocking.

Hocking glanced up and nodded at Bill, absently, then went on with his papers. Bill picked up the phone and called the Frost Patrol office. He hoped he would hear Osa's voice. He didn't. It was Shirley Blane.

Bill said: "Number Seventeen on Three Hundred is down to twenty-six." "Okay, Bill."

Shirley cut the connection quickly. That was the way they did things. No waste time. There was too much involved. Right away the girls would get busy on the phone, calling No. 17 first, and then all the other growers in that section.

And the growers would tumble out and start firing, get their smudge pots going.

As Bill hung up, Hocking said in an interested voice: "Number Seventeen? That's Hank Smalley's place, isn't it?" "Sure."

Bill mumbled it. The devil with Smalley. For all he cared, Smalley's valencia crop could turn into balls of ice.

Hocking, his bald head gleaming, bent over his desk again. Bill hurried out. He had only two more thermometers to read before returning to the office. The distance was short from here, and he was back in the office in ten minutes.

Shirley looked up at him and smiled.

Osa was much too busy to look at him. Bill went on into Horton's office and laid his card on the desk.

"You'll have to go back out to Hank Smalley's place," Horton said sourly. "The girls put in a call for him but couldn't raise him. You'll have to go tell him."

It was on the point of Bill's tongue to say to blazes with Smalley. But he didn't. After all, this was routine. If a grower was called on the phone and didn't answer, it was the rider's job to get him out, in person.

"Okay."

Within eight minutes Bill was driving into Smalley's private road, anxious to get it over. The house, a small one, was a couple of hundred yards in from the county road. The front of the house was dark, but there was a light at the back, in the kitchen.

Bill knew the house, had been in it several times.

He knocked on the back door. There was no response. He shouted. Silence greeted him. He pushed the door open, walked through an enclosed porch and into the kitchen. Hank Smalley was on the kitchen floor.

Smalley was dead.

JUST standing there, looking down at him, Bill knew that Smalley was dead. But in a moment he got down on one knee and made sure.

Smalley's head had been caved in. The thing that had done it was lying on the floor, a sturdy iron crowbar—a rusty one that looked as if it had been lying out of sight for a long time. It would be hard to check up on it, Bill reflected.

Plenty of blood in Smalley's thick dusty brown hair, not much on the floor.

Bill stood straight again. The kitchen was cold, no fire going. Bill was hot, feverish, and his hands were damp with moisture. He shuddered a little.

He'd have to phone. The instrument was back in the living room. He wandered back that way, thinking hard. The thing he thought about most was that silly fight he had had with Hank Smalley, only an hour or so before.

At the telephone, he hesitated. He hoped, this time, that Osa wouldn't answer the call. Osa, he thought, hadn't loved her step-father, but she had been loyal to him. When her mother had died, a year before, she had taken a

place in town, not wanting to live in the house with Smalley, but at times she would run out to the house and put things in order for him.

Yes, he hoped Osa wouldn't answer.

But she did.

"Osa—uh—better let me talk to Horton," Bill said.

She was silent a moment. Then she said: "There's something wrong with Father." She always called Smalley "Father." She added sharply: "What is it?"

Bill chewed on his lip. Well, she was asking for it, and anyhow she'd have to be told. "Smalley's dead."

She gasped. "Oh. What was it? A heart attack?"

"No. Someone killed him." It sounded brutal, coming out like that, but Bill couldn't think of any soft words. He said: "You'd better tell Horton. And put in a call for the sheriff's sub-station. I'll wait here."

He drifted back to the kitchen.

Smalley must have been on the point of leaving the house, Bill thought. He had on a heavy mackinaw, and his hat lay on the floor nearby. Frowning, Bill got down on his knees again. Smalley was lying on his face, almost. The pockets of his mackinaw were in plain sight. Bill felt them. Not much in them.

There was something wrong with the picture.

And Smalley's left hand was doubled up, not quite beneath him. Gently, Bill tugged the hand free. There was a watch on the wrist. It was broken, and it had stopped.

The big hand was bent a little, but it was fairly easy to read. It said almost exactly one o'clock.

One o'clock? Bill thought back. That was just about the time Bill himself had read Smalley's thermometer, out in the grove. Just about one o'clock. Within a minute or two.

Slowly, Bill got to his feet. He was sober enough now. Cold sober. There was still sweat on his brow but the blood in his veins seemed icy.

Someone had arranged this!

It seemed absurd, but there it was. Someone with a very foxy brain had fixed this to point the finger of suspicion at him, Bill Treat!

It seemed to Bill that he should be getting out of there—getting away from

something that threatened to manacle him, to destroy him. He had said he would stay until the sheriff's men got there, but—

A car was stopping outside the back door.

So Bill waited. The door opened. It was Osa Dunne. She stood in the doorway, the blackness of the night beyond crowding behind her. The dull light in her eyes told Bill nothing.

THEN she trod into the room, taking short and very firm little steps.

"It's just the way I found him," Bill said awkwardly.

Her voice, small but very clear. "Who do you think did this?" she asked.

"I don't know." Bill smiled grimly. "But I think I'm elected!"

Her eyes found his face then. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that someone worked this thing to make it look like I did it," Bill said savagely.

Osa swayed forward a little. Bill met her and held her arms. He did it to support her, to absorb the shock, but suddenly he found himself talking about something else.

"What's the matter between you and me?" he said urgently. "We used to be—well, close. I even thought we'd be married soon. Then something happened. What was it?"

She looked away from him and said wearily: "That has nothing to do with—this."

She inclined her head toward the body.

Bill frowned. Instinctively, he, too, looked down. And something riveted his attention; something about Smalley's right hand. He hadn't noticed that hand before, yet it was in plain sight.

He kneeled, quickly. There seemed to be faint streaks of blood on the ball of the thumb and on the side of the forefinger. The light was poor, and Bill said: "Where did he keep his flashlight?"

"Always in that drawer," Osa said, indicating a drawer in the kitchen cabinet.

Bill strode to the cabinet. He had noticed that Smalley didn't have the flashlight on him. It wasn't in his mackinaw pockets. He yanked open the drawer. There were a number of small articles, but no flashlight.

There was, however, a reading glass. Bill took it, squatted by the body again. He held the glass against Smalley's right hand.

The glass magnified well.

Bill could see a number of tiny glittering points of light on both the thumb and forefinger; imbedded in them.

Osa said curiously: "You've found something?"

"Maybe," said Bill. "I don't know."

He didn't really know. But he got an idea out of it. He listened intently. He could hear another car. The car was stopping outside, noisily. A moment later the door opened. Two large men came in.

Bill knew them, had seen them around. The bigger man was Captain Flint Ward, in charge of the sheriff's sub-station.

The other one, younger, not so tall but boulder-like in his solidity, was Dennison, Ward's side-kick.

Captain Ward's long-nosed scowling face looked freshly shaved. His uniform was neatly pressed. He had very likely been snatched away from a bridge party, Bill thought.

Ward peered at Osa, grunted at Bill, and then silently studied the corpse. Just going through an act, Bill suspected.

Ward would have to wait for the technical men from the main office before he'd really know anything, but he'd put on a show in the meantime.

One thing, though, was sure: Ward would hang on to Bill Treat. That way, if it turned out there was a case against Bill, Ward could claim credit for nabbing him.

Ward was taking a look at the iron crowbar. "Looks like it's been lying around outside for months. Could belong to anybody. Could've been used by anybody."

"Sure," said Bill. "Anybody."

Ward peered at him. "I understand you found Smalley."

"Yes."

"Okay. Stick around. Don't leave the place."

BILL flushed angrily. He managed to keep his mouth shut. Rather stealthily, he surveyed the kitchen. Then he backed into a far corner. Not much light here. He sat on a high kitchen stool. Behind him, and a little

to one side, was a door that led out to a side porch. The door was largely concealed by a tall china closet. Bill hoped Ward couldn't see it.

Ward was being very polite to Osa. "Your step-father, wasn't he?"

"Yes," Osa said through tight lips.

"Know anything about this?"

"I'm afraid not. I was working in town, in the Frost Patrol office. The first I knew of it was when Bill—Mr. Treat—phoned in."

Ward said abruptly: "Any idea who did this?"

"Oh, no. No!"

Ward stared at her sceptically. Then he nodded at Bill and said: "Treat there was on the frost patrol?"

"Yes."

"Do you have records at the office showing the time the patrol riders were out?"

"Oh, yes."

"And you could tell, in the office, just about where each rider was on his route at a particular time?"

"Within a few minutes, yes."

Ward looked pleased. "Treat was riding this district?"

"Yes. This is District Three Hundred. He—" she stopped quickly. "But you can ask Mr. Treat himself."

Ward grinned.

"Sure. But I like to hear you tell it. Now, what time—"

"I—I wish you'd excuse me," cut in Osa. "I don't feel well. I'd like to lie down."

Ward's face darkened in a scowl. Then the scowl faded and he said politely: "Why, sure." He turned to the other officer. "Dennison, take this lady into the living room."

"Sure."

Dennison took Osa's arm very willingly and walked her back through the kitchen. Osa looked at Bill briefly, but he couldn't tell what she was thinking. Bill sucked in his breath. This might work out all right. Dennison was vanishing into the next room, and Ward was kneeling beside the body, his back to Bill.

Noiselessly, Bill slipped off the stool and moved back. He was beyond the china closet. His hand was on the door knob. He turned it slowly, cautiously. He had the door open.

He slipped out, and gently closed the door.

CHAPTER III

Footprints In The Grove

THEY'D FIND out he was gone any minute, of course. He was out in the rear yard. He couldn't take his car, they'd certainly hear it, and follow fast, but he sped to the car and fumbled in the side pockets. He found his own flashlight and a small automatic.

Halfway down the private road, he swung into Smalley's orange grove. There is no better place than an orange grove for concealment. No lights. Even the feeble light from the skies could not penetrate the overhead foliage. Orange trees are leafy all year round. They bear fruit, too. Even now, in freezing weather, there was ripe fruit on the trees.

Some of the fruit, at least, would be ruined before the night was over. Bill thought about that, worriedly. Off in the distance he could see small darting flames from the smudge pots in other groves, and smell the choking smoke.

He kept on, feeling his way through interminable rows of trees. The cultivated soil crunched underfoot. The soil was hardened by the frost, but not much.

He came then to a spot not far from the large thermometer he had read at one o'clock. This was guesswork, mostly, but he had to have a starting point and this seemed most likely.

The thermometer, as in all the groves, was located close to the county road, just two or three rows in. This was to save the time of the frost patrol riders.

Bill could hear a car traveling fast through the night. Nothing else. He stood against a tree and his eyes searched the blackness about him. He saw nothing.

He was about to snap on his flashlight when something, a slight passing movement in the trees, or a faint sound nearby, he couldn't tell which, held him motionless. He felt the hair crawling on the back of his head. A sudden chill shot through him.

For a minute that seemed an hour, he was quiet, alert.

Then he shook himself, as if to clear his mind of a groundless fear. Resolutely, he turned on the flash.

Carefully, he searched the ground, foot by foot. Footsteps, he figured, would have flattened out the small ridges, without showing definite prints. He found them presently, the evidences of footsteps on crusted ground. They seemed to form a line, and he followed it.

The line ended in a small area under a tree. Here, obviously, much more had happened than just someone standing under a tree. Bill frowned down at the disturbed soil. Then, not very hopefully, he turned his flash up, played it on the fruit hanging above his head.

The lower oranges were within easy reach. He examined them closely, one by one. It seemed like a futile job. But then, in a few minutes, he grinned faintly, grimly.

There, just above his head, was an orange which had been punctured. He could see the small round hole!

Bill, exultantly, held the flash high, stared at that orange. He could, he thought, figure something definite from this. He was about to lower his flash again, and again came a faint sound, this time definitely behind him.

He started to turn, but too late. Something crashed with sharp force against the crown of his head, stunning him. It was as if a fiery spike was being driven down his neck. He was dropping, sagging, and he knew it. He couldn't see anything, couldn't help himself, but he knew the ground was cold as the back of his hand touched it. Then, for a little while, he didn't even know that.

It was just a little while later, Bill thought, as his eyes began to focus again. Two minutes? Five minutes? He couldn't be sure. He was on his feet again.

There was no sign of anything, anyone.

Yes, there was! Off to the right, not far, a flashlight had snapped on. Someone was holding it, steady. Then the light moved, was going out toward the road.

BILL hurried through the trees. A car stood against the edge of the road. Bill was close to it. He stopped within a few yards of a moving figure; a large young man.

He said abruptly: "Charlie Flax!"

The young man halted, swung about. Flax looked surprised, then faintly mocking, as if he were enjoying this.

"I didn't expect you to be running around without a guard," Flax said.

Bill scowled. "How about you? What are you doing here?"

Flax laughed. "What do you think? I had to take your place on the frost patrol. Horton called me—emergency."

"Oh." That should explain it, but Bill wasn't satisfied. "Where were you when Horton called you?"

"Home, in bed."

"How long had you been there?"

In the darkness, Bill could see Flax's contemptuous grin. "Since fifteen minutes after midnight. I was with Osa, remember? In the cafe, when you were there. I took her up to the office before midnight, then went straight home and to bed." Flax moved away, toward his car. "See you around."

Bill watched him, not moving. There was something he wanted to ask Charlie Flax, but not here. It should be somewhere in the presence of witnesses.

Flax's car shot away.

Bill went back to the spot under the tree with the punctured orange. He kicked around until he found his own flash.

Then, again, he examined the ground, very carefully.

And presently, scattered through the soil, he discovered tiny particles of glittering glass.

The sound of another car brought him to his feet. Flax may have stopped somewhere, he thought, and reported seeing him. He hurried toward the road.

The car clattered toward him. It was coming from town. Then he recognized it; the vague shape, the lurching motion. An old truck.

Bill dashed out to the road and shouted: "Felix!"

The car seemed to stick its nose in the ground in its anxiety to stop. It was just ahead of Bill, and he was staring up into the cab. The man behind the wheel sat straight. He had black hair and black eyes, and his face was big-boned, Indianlike. Bill knew Felix Dominquez. Felix had his own crew, working in the groves.

Bill said: "You heard what happened, Felix?"

"Sure," Felix said. He was smart,

Felix was, and alert. "I heard just now, so I drove out."

"I thought you handled Smalley's smudgepots for him?" Bill said.

"I did, but I had trouble with him yesterday. He didn't treat my boys right."

"Well, he's dead now."

"That's what I heard. So I didn't know what to do."

"I guess Osa—Miss Dunne—owns the grove now," Bill said. "I think you should get your boys and go to work on the firing. Might cost her plenty if nobody tends the pots."

"Sure," said Felix. "My boys are in town, at the poolhall. I'll go get 'em."

Bill swung up beside him. "I'll go in with you, if it's okay with you."

Felix merely nodded. He yanked the truck around in a sharp U-turn and headed it back toward town. This was the shortest route, of course,—the last part of the frost rider's route. Ten minutes should get them into town.

THE lights were still on in the office of the Central Packinghouse as they clattered past.

Suddenly Felix shouted over the din: "I came out to see Smalley awhile ago."

Bill jerked his head up, startled. "You mean you were out to see him earlier?"

"Sure."

"What time?"

"I left town about five or ten after midnight. I was sore at him, but I thought I'd dicker with him. I figured he'd lose too much if he didn't have a crew for the smudging."

"What happened?"

"I didn't see him. I got out as far as his place, and then I got to feeling sore at him again. At that time it wasn't cold enough for smudging anyway, so I turned around and drove back to town."

"Did you see anyone else?"

"No."

Bill smiled, and was silent. They were drawing into the quiet streets of Moravia. The car halted in front of lighted windows.

Bill said: "Thanks, Felix." He dropped off the truck and walked to the office of the Frost Patrol Service.

The girls at the switchboard stared at him, startled. Then Shirley Blane smiled in a worried way. Shirley was still his pal, apparently.

Bill said: "Charlie Flax get in yet, Shirley?"

"Yes. He's in with Mr. Norton." She motioned toward the office.

"Is Horton feeling okay?"

"I guess so. Why?"

"Well, he went out tonight before I did—about twelve twenty-five, I guess. Said he was going home for medicine. When did he get back here?"

Shirley wrinkled her brow. "I think he was gone about twenty minutes, maybe a little more."

Bill started towards Horton's office. He pushed the door open. Flax was sitting on a corner of Horton's desk. They were talking low. They looked up, sharply.

Bill said: "I want to ask you experts something."

"What about?" Horton said harshly.

"Thermometers," Bill said. "I don't know this orange grove racket like you, but I've picked up a little."

"Thermometers? You mean the big grove thermometers?"

"No. Not those big ones. I mean the very little ones, the ones they use to test the inside temperature of the fruit."

Charlie Flax was listening intently, warily, but not talking.

"Yes, there are such thermometers," Horton said. "You see, if the inside of the orange freezes, and then thaws out too rapidly, you get a dry orange, which is no good. So—"

"I know that much. But do many of the orange growers have such thermometers?"

"Not many. It doesn't help them much. It's more of a technical problem. A few have them."

Bill smiled. "Did Hank Smalley have one?"

"I don't know." Horton's brow furrowed, suspiciously. "I don't think so. No, I remember now he didn't. He was talking about trying to get one."

"And where would he get it?"

"Through the packinghouse, of course. They have a supply department for the growers."

With a wry grin, Bill faced Charlie Flax. "You should know about that, Flax. You work in the packinghouse office, don't you? You're Silas Hocking's assistant there, aren't you?"

Flax was being careful. His lips moved tentatively before he spoke. "Well, yes. There's been a shortage of those small thermometers. Since the war, you know

I don't know anything about Smalley having one."

"But are there any at the packinghouse?"

Flax breathed hard. "Yes. We just got in a few, only yesterday. Half a dozen. That's all we could get. First we've had for a long time."

"Just yesterday? Have any of 'em been passed out?"

"Not that I know of," Flax said cautiously.

"Well, you'd know about it, wouldn't you? You're the guy that keeps the supply records, aren't you?"

"Well, yes."

Bill peered thoughtfully at Flax. Then his gaze swerved to Horton. They were both vaguely uncomfortable, and definitely hostile.

Bill said abruptly: "How did you find things at home, Norton?"

"What do you mean?" Horton said stiffly.

"You went home for medicine, didn't you? And your place is close to Smalley's isn't it?" Bill's face was hard and tense now. "In fact, it's right back of Smalley's. And if I was going there and was in a hurry to get back, I think I'd get out of my car on the edge of Smalley's grove and cut across to your place on foot. Quicker, that way."

"Maybe it is," snapped Horton.

"Thank you," Bill said.

He turned toward the door just as it opened.

In the doorway was the robust figure of the deputy-sheriff, Dennison.

CHAPTER IV

Guilty Man



DENNISON'S face wore a pleased grin. He said to Bill: "I had a hunch you'd show up here. Ward was disappointed you left. He chuckled. Just found out something else, too."

"What?"

"You got drunk in the cafe just before going on duty."

"I wasn't drunk," Bill said stubbornly.

"That's not what the witnesses say. They tell me you staged a brawl with Smalley and that there was bad blood between you two. Murder motive."

Bill was glumly silent. He'd expected that trouble with Smalley to be brought up. It came as no surprise. But he didn't like Dennison being here at all. He started through the door.

Dennison made a quick pass at him, grabbed him by the shoulder. Bill swung about, shook off Dennison's hand. Dennison's grin twisted into a scowl, and his hand came up and flipped against Bill's face.

He is now, Bill thought, talking my personal language. Bill didn't do it with one blow. He had swerved so that he was facing Dennison, and Dennison was standing truculently, legs apart. Bill's fist drove straight into Dennison's face. Dennison crashed backwards, scattering Horton and Flax out of the way.

The corner of Horton's desk shuddered as Dennison's head struck it.

Bill hurried out through the other room and raced down the stairs. At the curb were three cars. One of them he recognized as Charlie Flax's. The keys were there. Bill got in and drove away.

Two cars were parked outside the Central Packinghouse when Bill reached there. One of them belonged to the manager, Silas Hocking. He knew the other car very well, too—it belonged to Osa Dunne.

Bill thought about that as he drove around the building; what was Osa doing here? He parked under a pepper tree in the rear. There was a back door, but Bill avoided that, knowing that the night watchman would be "watching" in a little cubbyhole just inside, lingering over a hot stove.

He walked around to the front entrance and quietly let himself in.

Noiselessly, he moved past the sorting belts toward the office. Bare boards underfoot responded brittlely to his wary steps. He reached the wall of the office, and he stood against it, near the door.

The wall was thin. He could hear voices; Osa's and Hocking's. Only occasional words came clear to him.

They were talking about him, Bill Treat—that much he could tell.

And presently Osa's voice rose fervently: "Bill didn't do it! I'm sure of it! No matter what else he's done, I know he wouldn't do a thing like that!"

Hocking's voice rose to match it: "You may be right, my dear. The evidence is all against him, but you may be right." His voice dropped again: "I don't know

what I can do to help him."

"But you'll do what you can?"

"I'll promise you that, yes."

Their voices were vague again. So Osa was appealing to Hocking to help him! Well, it was natural that she should go to Hocking for help, for he was a man of influence, and Osa had known him all her life.

And, while she didn't believe he, Bill Treat, had committed murder, she did believe something else of him—something that had caused her to draw away from him. That something, she believed, had nothing to do with the murder, but Bill wondered about it. He'd been wondering for some time.

There came the sound of feet moving toward the door. Bill flattened himself against the wall. The door creaked open. Through the crevice between the door and the jamb Bill could see Osa, her eyes bright with fear and entreaty.

HE COULD see Silas Hocking, rather short, heavy, his smooth face weighty around the jowls, the sheen of his bald pate a ghastly white in the light from the office.

Then Osa was hurrying past him. Hocking's eyes followed her anxiously as she moved toward the door. She opened the main door and stood there for a moment. Then she moved out into the blackness beyond.

The office door clicked shut.

Bill could hear Hocking, shuffling around inside. Hocking should be going home soon as there was no reason for him to stay up all night. If Charlie Flax, making the round of the thermometers again, should need to use the packinghouse telephone, he could easily let himself in.

It was quiet in the office. Hocking apparently had sat down at his desk. Bill's thoughts returned to Osa. He recalled that she had said that the trouble between her and Bill had nothing to do with the murder of Hank Smalley.

Was she right about that? Bill didn't think so.

Smalley himself, Bill believed, had been intent on separating them. That was because Bill had resented the way Smalley imposed on Osa, making unreasonable demands on her time and energy.

Bill stiffened suddenly. Hocking was moving toward the door. The door swung open. Hocking emerged, buttoning his overcoat. A tiny bend in the

wall helped to conceal Bill. Hocking closed the door gently, turned and walked briskly toward the outer door.

Then he was gone. Bill could hear his car snort away.

The packinghouse was very still, very cold. From a distance came the sound of iron scraping; that would be the watchman lifting the lid off the stove to spit into it.

Bill opened the office door.

Hocking had turned the lights out. Bill stood in the darkness and figured the angles. A light in the office could be seen from the county road, but he'd have to take a chance on it. He snapped on the wall switch.

It was a large oblong room. At one side was Hocking's massive desk. At the other end stood a typewriter desk adjoined to a small bookkeeper's desk, and this, Bill knew, was where Charlie Flax worked. Along the far wall was a large supply cabinet, and near it some letter files.

The letter files!

Bill stared at them. They had become, just lately, of interest to him. He felt attracted to them, perhaps because of a vague notion gradually assuming tangible form, that had been batting around in his sub-conscious.

Slowly, he pulled out the top file. He pushed it back, drew out the second. He pushed that back and drew out the third, and then went back to the second, quicky.

The label on one of the folders said:

DULUTH.

That was Bill's home town. That's what attracted him. And under the name of the city, in smaller lettering, was: *Lingley Fruit Distr. Co.*

Bill pulled out the folder, leafed through the letters. He fastened on one dated Jan. 11, less than two weeks ago. It was a routine letter, full of information about citrus sales on the Duluth market, a regular commission merchant's market letter.

But, under the letter, was a postscript in ink:

Mailed your enclosure today—Joe.

Blood pounded into Bill's head, drummed against his ears. *Mailed your enclosure today!*

With a gesture of disgust, he replaced the letter and slammed the drawer shut.

He strode to Charlie Flax's desk,

yanked open drawers until he found a large pair of scissors. He hurried then to the supply cabinet. The thing had three doors, all locked. With the scissors, Bill forced them open.

ALMOST at once he found what he was looking for. A small box, well-padded. He opened it. Inside were some very small glass thermometers. He counted them.

There were five. Not a half dozen, not six, Five!

Bill gazed at them, not touching them.

That was that. One was gone. Bill replaced the lid on the box, closed the cabinet doors. Now he had something. But how to handle it? He was a little uncertain. He crossed to Flax's desk again, sat in a chair. He stared at the wall.

A tiny squeak startled him. He swiveled his head. The office door was open.

Silas Hocking stepped in quietly, smiling at Bill, mildly reproving.

"I'm surprised," he said. "Are you here to see me?"

Bill cleared his throat. "Well, not exactly."

Hocking waved a plump hand. "Well, never mind." He pursed his lips, studying Bill. "Osa was here to see me not long ago. She's worried about you."

"Is she?"

"Oh, yes. She's afraid you won't be able to get clear of this murder. I promised to help." Hocking tapped his fingertips together. "I feel a trifle guilty about it, but I like Osa. We—Osa and I—more or less agreed that you should make a break for it—leave town. If you stay in hiding, it may blow over."

Bill said uneasily: "And how am I going to make a break for it?"

Hocking smiled broadly. "You can steal my car!"

Bill sighed. "No," he said. "I don't want to steal your car. I don't want to leave town."

"But you must," Hocking said softly.

The gun in his fat but strangely nimble fingers was a flat-flanked automatic, and its nose was aimed at Bill's chest.

Bill sat very still. He said gloomily: "I should never have let you get the jump on me."

"So you knew I did it?"

"Yes."

"I was afraid of that." Hocking wagged his head. "When I left here a little while ago, I drove around the building and saw

Charlie's car. It puzzled me. I came back in and here you were, very busy!"

Bill said: "I guess you wanted to fix it so that Osa would marry Charlie Flax. It must have been money."

"Indeed it was money, my boy. Charlie, of course, is indebted to me. Also I have a little something on him. He got a trifle careless with the accounts."

"Sure. You figured that, if Smalley was dead, Osa would come into his property, and if Charlie was her husband—"

"Precisely. Orange property sells readily these days, and at a high figure. Only the other day Hank turned down an offer of seventy thousand dollars for his grove."

Bill nodded grimly. "And you were at the bottom of something that made Osa sore at me, or suspicious of me. There's a guy in Duluth you do business with. You wrote a letter and put it in a sealed envelope addressed to Osa?"

"Not to Osa. That would have been too obvious. To Hank Smalley, so he could show it to her."

"Okay. And the letter, from my home town, supposed to be from someone who knew me well, dished up some dirty lie about me. Must have been something pretty bad or Osa would have faced me with it."

"It was," agreed Hocking, piously. "It was about another woman—and a baby."

Bill groaned. Yes, he thought, a thing like that would alienate Osa. She would not be able to bring herself to charge Bill with it. Sooner or later, however, being fair, she would say something, give him a chance to deny it, but not right away.

"So you had to get rid of Smalley," Bill said.

"It was necessary. He knew about the letter. And anyhow it was safer that way. Then, Hank might have taken a notion to sell the grove for cash, and then spend the cash before Osa could come into it. That wouldn't have suited me at all." Hocking peered at Bill earnestly. "You seem to have suspected me almost at once."

Bill said: "It was this way—"

"Oh, not just yet, please." Without taking his eyes off Bill, Hocking spread a large handkerchief on the desk. "I want to know, of course, but later. Just stand up."

Bill stood. Hocking circled him. "Ah, so you brought a gun. Very good." He removed the gun from Bill's pocket, placed it tenderly on the handkerchief

and wrapped it. "Now we'll go away in my car. You'll take the wheel. I'll sit beside you, my boy."

CHAPTER V

Killer's Error



UT IN Hocking's car, Bill took the wheel and said wearily: "Where to, you rat?"

"Turn into that side road up there. We're not likely to meet anyone that way. Just keep going, slow."

Hocking sat, comfortably, turned about, back against the car

door, facing Bill, his gun trained along his knee.

He had dropped Bill's gun gently on the back seat.

"You were saying?" prompted Hocking.

Bill said: "Before I went on duty at midnight I stopped at the cafe for a drink. I had more than one. You stopped me from getting tight. Why? You'd never been friendly to me before. So I figured maybe it was because you could not afford to have me get drunk, because then I couldn't have gone on duty, and you would have lost your fall guy."

"Quite so."

"And when I went up to the office at midnight, you were just leaving. Why were you there? It could be you had just checked with Horton so that you knew I'd start out at twelve-thirty, which would get me to Smalley's place about one, and all you had to do was break Smalley's watch with the hands set so as to fix the time of murder."

"Precisely," said Hocking.

Bill let his hands rest slackly on the ice-cold wheel. Hocking had picked a good road for solitude. Off to the left was a vast stretch of orange groves, smudge pots flickering and smoke idly drifting, but here the road ran through waste land, forlorn, deserted. Their direction was roughly toward Moravia.

Bill went on: "Hank Smalley had been pestering you for one of those small fruit thermometers. You got a half dozen in yesterday. You took one out, unknown to Charlie Flax. You saw Smalley in the cafe. You probably had that thermometer in your pocket at the time, but

you didn't tell him. You just told him that you'd get one for him and give it to him if he met you at the edge of the grove a few minutes after midnight.

"So Smalley was waiting for you there. You stopped your car, got out and gave Smalley the thermometer. He went back in, two or three rows, and punched an orange with it. You sneaked up behind him with a crowbar. Just as he pulled the thermometer out of the orange, you let him have it!"

"You know that?"

"Yes. Because there are tiny splinters of glass in Smalley's thumb and forefinger, and also more in the soil under the tree. In the act of dying, he crushed the thermometer."

"Yes, that's a source of danger," Hocking said thoughtfully. "I'll have to do something about it."

"It'll be your word against Flax's," Bill said. "And the chances are he'll have an alibi."

Hocking shrugged.

Bill said: "At first you had planned to leave Smalley there under the tree, for me to find on my rounds. But you were up in the office just before midnight, talking to Horton. You learned that Horton expected to go home for medicine very soon. His place is just back of Smalley's. It was possible that he would run into Smalley's body—and that wouldn't do because it would be *before* I could get there."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Hocking, in a pleased tone.

"So you did the next best thing. You lugged the body to your car, drove around to the house and put it in the kitchen. You knew I'd find it later."

"It was a nuisance," Hocking said regretfully.

"And there was something else. Felix Dominguez, the crew foreman, happened to drive out there. You heard him, saw him as he passed by, and figured you'd have to hurry in case he stuck around. In your panic, you over-looked Smalley's flashlight."

"The flashlight," Hocking said, "came in handy later."

"You mean when you conked me with it. Yes. But it was the flashlight that tipped me off that Smalley was killed outside, not in the house. He was lying in the kitchen, dressed for going out, but there was no flashlight with him. And he certainly wouldn't go out without a flashlight."

HOCKING beamed at him. "Your calculations are excellent, my boy."

"Well, you had to go back for that flashlight. You were there, in the grove, when I went to take a look. You bashed me with it. Why?"

Hocking said: "A mistake. A moment of recklessness, of savagery. The sight of you, checking up on me, drove me mad. I crept up on you intent on smashing your head in. Just as I struck, I remembered that I still needed you as a murder suspect. The thought broke the force of the blow and saved your life—for the moment."

The car was still moving slowly. Bill peered ahead. Hocking, unmoved, watched Bill ceaselessly, his trigger finger alert.

The lights of the town were ahead, and a little south. "Don't you still need me as a murder suspect?" Bill said huskily.

"No," Hocking said gently. "Not now. As things are, with you already under suspicion, you'll be more useful dead. And please stop just this side of the railroad tracks."

Bill stopped the car as directed, some twenty yards from the tracks, its nose pointed at them head-on. It was a dark and neglected spot, Bill reflected. The nearest building was a quarter of a mile away.

Hocking said: "I live a few blocks up the street. I'll say that I had just reached the tracks here, on my way home, and had stopped to let a train go by before crossing. Then—"

"What train?"

"There's one due to go through soon now. To make it look right, we'll wait for it. And I'll say I was sitting here, waiting, when you appeared and tried to force me out of my car at the point of a gun."

Bill sighed through his teeth. He could see the set-up, all right, but he didn't dare move, didn't dare make one small threatening gesture. That gun in Hocking's hand, just two feet away, held him helpless.

He said bitterly: "So I tried to swipe your car for a get-away, and you had to let me have it! Is that the story?"

"Yes." Hocking chuckled. "It's wonderful, how nicely things work out. The train is due at two forty-seven. And at three o'clock Osa will be at my house."

"Osa?" Bill said huskily.

"We're to continue our talk as to how best to help you. However, by then the

problem will have been solved."

They sat silent then. Soon the distant night gave out a faint whirring sound. The sound gathered power, became a clatter, and then a roar.

The headlights of the train, rounding the bend not far away, glared bright.

And still Hocking sat motionless, his eyes on Bill, giving him no chance.

The engine roared up, past. The garish lights of the train flickered fast.

His lips pressed tensely against his teeth, Bill suddenly jammed his foot down. The car shuddered, then leaped forward, at the racing train.

It was just an instant or two. Then Bill's foot weighed frantically on the brake.

The car seemed to rear into the air, and then settled down, as if exhausted. It was within inches of the train. Bill gasped, his breath shattered by sharp contact with the steering wheel. Presently he turned to look at Silas Hocking. He frowned at the smashed windshield, at the blood from Hocking's head. Hocking, totally unprepared, had turned his head in terror toward the train, and it

had crashed face-first into the windshield.

"I guess you'll stay put for awhile," Bill muttered.

The doctor and the police, Bill thought. He was still half stunned. He got out of the car, started swaying down the street toward the nearest lights. But a car, coming toward him, stopped.

"Bill!" said a voice. "Oh, Bill!"

Osa's face was white and strained and humble. Bill said nothing.

"Bill," pleaded Osa. "I want to tell you something—before you go away."

Bill wasn't going, but he didn't say so.

"I—I don't believe you killed father," Osa said. "And there was something else I was told about you, something I don't like to talk about. I don't believe that either! Not now." She waited for Bill to say something, but he was silent. She turned her head and said: "Well, good-by, Bill. I—I've got to go see someone now."

Bill opened the door and slipped in beside her. He smiled grimly. "You won't be seeing anybody from now on, baby—except with me."

Next Issue: KNOWLEDGE OF CRIME, Novelet by WYATT BLASSINGAME

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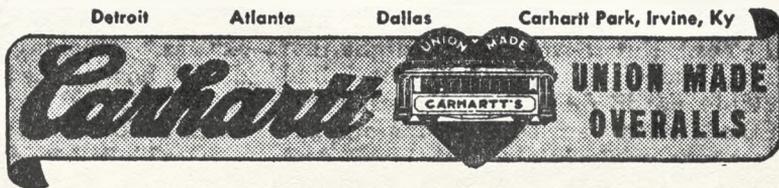
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STALLING ALL CARS!

By JOE ARCHIBALD

When Willie Klump takes Gertie Mudgett for a spin in his Gnash-8, two mobsters go along – just for the ride!

IT WAS five o'clock in the afternoon and William J. Klump, president of the Hawkeye Detective Agency, Inc., laid aside a comic book and contemplated its lurid cover for awhile. "I sure wish that all the crime was not in books," he sighed. "If I could draw, it would sure pay. Well, I better lock up and go and meet Gert, and she better have scratch with her and not just in her fingernails."

Gertrude Mudgett was already in front of the Blue Goose on Fifty-First Street when Willie arrived. She wore a short cinnamon-colored fur coat and spiffy nylons and a hat that Willie always laughed at when her back was turned. She also wore a very pained expression.

"If you ain't a mess, Willie!" she sniffed. "A refugee just out of a concentrated camp couldn't look worst."



"Pipe down, babe!" snarled the short bulky man, thrusting the business end of a gun at her nose

What have you been usin' that serge suit for, pluggin' up busted winder panes?"

"What did the wolf do when he waited for Red Ridin' Hood, huh?" Willie asked. "He didn't look like one when she got there. If I'm after crooks should I look like a detective?"

"You couldn't if you tried," Gertie said.

Over blue plate specials, Willie and his mouse tried to get together regarding entertainment for the evening.

"There's a swell pitcher at Looie's Lex, Gert," the private detective offered. "'A Fool In The Sun.'"

"I feel like somethin' more excitin', Willie. Like a boxin' or wrastlin' match," Gertie said.

"I should've known," Willie sighed.

"Look, there is a wrastlin' match at St. Nick's," Gertie said. "And I know where I can git passes as I know the permoter, Oolie O'Rourke. Leave me git to a phone."

Gertie was back in less than two minutes. "I was lucky, Willie. I caught him in an' he'll be in his office for another hour. Sure, we can have Annie Oakleys, Oolie says. Everythin' is knowin' the right people. The main bout should be a honey. Mountain Boy Bozosky versa The Canarsie Unknown."

"They are always fakes," Willie sniffed. "I'll take vanilla."

HOWEVER, Willie's mind was made up for him when the waitress brought him ice cream. "I did not order that," he said.

"I ain't deaf, Bub," the blonde said. "I'll leave it up to the girl frien'."

"Sure he ordered vanilla," Gertie said. "Put it down, sister."

"It was only a figment of speech!" Willie yelped. "I said rather than take wras'lers I would take vanilla. I want some deep dish pie."

"Look, I ain't runnin' my feet off to humor the likes of you, Buster," the blonde snapped.

"The name is Klump."

"Leave us end this right now," Gertie said. "I will not get thrown out this time 'fore I've had my dinner. Eat that ice cream, Willie, and shut up!"

"That's tellin' him, Honey."

"And you keep outa this," Gertie yipped. "It is none of your business, see?"

"Oh, yeah? Why, you ole bag!"

"Stop!" Willie howled. "Let's begin over!"

Five minutes later Willie Klump and Gertrude Mudgett, having been requested to leave the Blue Goose, walked down Lexington.

"Next time we go to the automat as them nickel slots don't talk back," Willie said. "I only said—"

"Well, it didn't cost us nothin'," Gertie snickered. "We had everythin' but dessert and we can eat a choc'lit bar at the wraslin' match. We got to stop on East Forty-Third to pick up our tickets. How is business, Willie?"

"It should be in the movies, Gert, as then all I would have to do was walk out of my penthouse or a gin mill and stumble right over a cadaver covered with clues. What mullarkey!"

"I keep tellin' you you should put on a bigger front, Willie Klump."

"I can hardly button my vest as it is," Willie said. "You want I should walk like a pengrin such as Satchelfoot Kelly is? It is just the breaks I git."

Gertie paused to take off a slipper and massage a toe. "One of these days somebody'll invite me to ride in a cab, Willie Klump," she said unsweetly.

"That will be nice," the president of the Hawkeye said. "Wait until I win the Gnash Eight the Bronx Elks are rafflin' off. I got one chancet on it."

"It would be like you to lose the ticket," Gertie said. "Huh, you got one chancet in one million. Well, here is where Oolie has his office."

It was a tacky building. Oolie O'Rourke's office was on the third floor. They went into the elevator and a drowsy little Senegambian seemed hurt when they did not walk up.

"Most always this time of night, folkses walk up or down," he hinted.

"Third floor," Gertie snapped. "You want to keep this job, don't you?"

"Tha's a good question, lady," the lift jockey admitted, and took them up.

The door to O'Rourke, Inc., was swinging open a little and Gertie walked in.

"Oh, Ool-lie!"

"Huh?" Willie said. "It is like a morgue here. Maybe he stepped out for a san'wich," and then Gertrude Mudgett let out a piercing scream that nearly punctured both of Willie's eardrums. He jumped into the back office and saw more than just the worn linoleum on

the floor. He imagined it was Oolie O'Rourke.

"Willie, it is a murder!" Gertie gulped.

"If it is not, it is a reasonable factsmile," the president of the Hawk-eye Detective Agency said. "And all to myself. Don't touch nothin', Gert. Huh, his wallet on the floor and as empty as a politician's promise. Bashed on the noggin." Willie drew a hanky from the breast pocket of his blue coat and mopped his brow. "I better call the cops." After doing so he thought he would be within his rights to case the joint somewhat. The first thing he spotted near the empty poke was a ticket for a Gnash-8.

"I will lose that yet," Willie said ruefully. "I better paste it in a scrapbook and not put it back in that pocket ag'in. I—you know what, Gertie? We are suspects!"

"Then let's get out of here, Willie!"

"Too late. Somebody's comin'. That screech you made could of been heard at Lake Success," Willie sighed.

It was a cop. Behind him was the scared-looking elevator operator. "We come up here to pick up a couple passes for the wrestlin' match t'night," Willie said quickly, then flashed a badge. "It is a coincidents but I happen to be a detective. A bus driver's holiday, ha ha!"

"You stay here—you and the dame!" the cop said.

Willie said to the dusky flunkey, "Who was the last gee you brought up in the elevator 'fore us who got off this floor?"

"A big gemman with a beard," the lift custodian said. "Bigges' man ah ever did see. Must of gone out by the staih. Like I said, mos' folkses walk up and down this time of night."

"Describe him more," Willie snapped. "Take all this down, Gert."

"Well, le's see—er—there he is, boss!" The dusky boy's eyes rolled around in his noggin as he pointed to a big placard that leaned against the late Oolie's desk. There were two half-tones of citizens on it and one wore a mask. The one with the beard was labeled:

MOUNTAIN BOY BOZOSKY

"The wrestler," Willie said. "He killed Oolie, Gertie. Maybe with just

a bare fist. It is a big lump goin' down on Oolie's pate."

The cop said, "You got to think of a better one, pals. Oolie refused you free ducats and you pasted him. His dome hit the corner of the desk. Curtains."

"He was robbed," Willie pointed out. "You can search me."

"I'm only a harness bull, pal. I'll let the smart boys do that when they git here. Seems like they're here now."

IN A few minutes the place was clogged with representatives of the law, including the corpse diagnostician, one Satchelfoot Kelly, and a D.A. who had been looking for a ride uptown anyway. The beat walker told Satchelfoot his version. Kelly grinned wolfishly at Willie.

"So you'd knock off a citizen before spendin' a couple of fish, huh? You had to drag Gert into it, you lemonhead?"

"Look, Satchelfoot," Willie sniffed. "Send for Mountain Boy Bozosky, will you? He was here 'fore us. He's the last one who saw him alive."

"Kelly," a man said. "We found this envelope on the remains. Got a name on it. Gertie Mudgett."

"It is our tickets, Willie. Oolie had 'em all ready for us," Gertie yipped.

"Awright, Satchelfoot," Willie said. "Le's see how sillier you can git."

Kelly took it out on the harness bull. "Beat it 'fore I bust you over the skull with your own billy-club. And stop tryin' t' be no Sam Spade. So I made a natural mistake, Willie. I—"

"You sure did. They all come natural to you, clambrain," Willie yelled. "Go git Mountain Boy."

"If they do, we can't never use these tickets, Willie," Gertrude Mudgett complained. "He was in the main go."

"That is our luck, ain't it?" Willie said, pawing at his face.

It so happened that Mountain Boy was but two blocks away from Oolie O'Rourke's office having a beer when he heard that Oolie was defunct and that his office was bulging with flatfeet. The grunt and groaner hurried over there and saved the cops a scavenger hunt.

"Me, I'm Mountain Boy Bozosky!" he roared as he forced his way in. "I know what you cops are t'inkin'!"

"A mental telegrapher," Satchelfoot sniffed. "Makes it look good you

comin' here without us havin' to drag you, Junior."

"Yeah?" Mountain Boy bellowed, his heavy chin mattress swaying like an oriole's nest. "Well, I see the spot I'm in. I was here to see Oolie, sure, the dirty double-crosser. I went in the tank for a bum two weeks ago and he never give me the exter two C's. So I come and took it. I didn't bop him. I jus' got a strangle hold on him and took his wallet and paid myself off. Then I went down the stairs. Ast the elevator boy. Never mind as he was asleep in the chair."

Satchelfoot Kelly gestured with derision. "The big bazoo admits robbin' Oolie O'Rourke. Never hurted him a bit. Just look at this big moose and tell me would he know his own stren'th. If he grazed an ordinary citizen's noggin with an elbow in passing he would leave a fractured skull behind. He was the last one here before Willie and his doll. I am takin' him down an' bookin' him."

"Look," Mountain Boy gulped. "I have to wrastle the Unknown. I signed—"

"Oolie can't sue you if you don't," Willie observed. "Mos' likely it was fixed anyways. I would confess to manslaughter, Mountain Boy, 'fore Satchelfoot makes it first degree burns. It looks like we can go to the movies after all, Gertie."

The D.A. got up from beside the cadaver. "This will clinch our case, Kelly. O'Rourke got himself a few hairs off the dog that bit him. The lab will prove they come off the wrestler's beard."

The mortal remains of Oolie O'Rourke were carted off to a friendly mortician's, and the office quickly emptied of cops. Gertie and Willie, slightly atomized, lingered for awhile. Willie was irked.

"What a pushover! But they'll call Satchelfoot a credit to the finest. He couldn't find twins in Siam. And this Oolie turns out to be a citizen who fixes fights and things. He should have been liquidated, huh! I wash my hands of it all, Gertie, and I got a good mind t' go to work."

"The worst of it is you haven't," Gertie sighed. "Let's go to the movies, Willie."

OUT in the hall they met the little Senegambian caressing a rabbit's foot and he was still a little pale. "Boss,

ah jus' remembered," he said to Willie. "I took a gemman up in the elevator after I did the one with the beard. Ah think I did."

"But did he have a beard?" Willie asked.

The boy shook his head.

"Oh, come on, Willie," Gertie sniffed.

Late the next day William Klump sat in his office reading an evening journal and he saw where the D. A. was trying to pin a murder rap on Mountain Boy. A citizen weighing only about ten pounds less than a garbage truck, and having little chunks of putty in place of ears, and who despised Mountain Boy very thoroughly, came to the gendarmerie of his own free will and with malice aforethought, and told the D.A. that he and another grunt and groan specialist had heard Mountain Boy make the statement to the effect that if Oolie O'Rourke did not soon pay him the fee for a fix he would personally beat Oolie's brains out and take it off his no-good carcass.

"He has more chance of gettin' fried right now than most smelts," Willie told himself, and turned to the sports page to see what manner of obit had been accorded Oolie by the scribes. One particularly facetious columnist said that Broadway would miss Oolie and forgive him for most of his transgressions which had to do mostly with trying to protect himself and his pals when a bunch of scratch was riding on an athlete or bunch of athletes, whether they had four legs or two. Yes, Oolie could have been listed as a gambler else why had he been briefed more than just a trifle by a D.A. following that pro football game between the Boston Chiefs and the Brooklyn Bearcats that smelled of gorgonzola?

"However," the writer pointed out, "Oolie had one redeeming quality which was not getting jewelry out of hock. He loved the game of baseball and considered it a cardinal sin even to get in on a baseball pool, and any man he knew to have wagered even subway fare on any phase of the national pastime was, as far as he was concerned, lower than the first citizen on a totem pole."

"Huh!" Willie sniffed. "That I would like to believe. A likely story."

He tossed the newspaper aside and picked up a circular letter and feasted his eyes on the print that extolled the

virtues of the Gnash-8. Extra large red letters formed words that yelled at Willie:

YOU ARE THE TYPE OF MAN WHO WOULD APPRECIATE THIS CAR OF DISTINCTION!

"They are psychic," Willie said. "They are tellin' me? Huh, I should employ such methods in my business and write a circulatin' letter. Let's see.

DO YOU LOVE YOUR WIFE AND VICE VERSA OR DO YOU NEED A PRIVATE DETECTIVE?

Why don't that sound right?"

The phone rang and Willie picked the gadget up and said quick, "I'm sorry as it was an over slight on my part. I'll send the check in by tomor—huh? The Round The Clock Detective Bureau? Yes, this is the Hawkeye Det—"

"Yeah, Klump. Mr. Putney speakin'. Thought you'd like to help us out. We got a client here with a small job we ain't got time to handle what with all the big stuff that's come in. A guy beat his rent bill. Yeah, skipped. You want I should send her over?"

"Well, I got to think it over, Mr. Putty," Willie said. "Like you, there is such a rush with me—"

"She'll be right over," the citizen said, and hung up.

"Wise guy," Willie snapped. "Ha!"

The female crashed Willie's sanctum just twenty minutes later, took a seat, and immediately questioned the legitimacy of a certain character named Leo Blintz who would rob a poor widow of eighty fish.

"Give me his description, ma'am," Willie sighed. "Anyways he was born, don't forget. The fee, of course, is twenty percent for all the work I'll put in for such a small sum."

"It'll all be yourn, Mr. Klump," the landlady bit out. "Providin' you leave me git my hands on him. Flew the coop this mornin' with both suitcases. Here's my name and address."

"It's a deal," Willie said. "Er, my restrainin' fee is five dollars."

THE old doll put the advance on Willie's desk and took her leave. He picked up a slip of paper and read: Mrs. Clytie Shimm, 633 East Twenty-Ninth Street.

"If I only had that Gnash-Eight I

could chaste Blintz down in half the time. Wonder when the drawin' is." He picked up the five and then thought of something. "Why, she didn' tell me what he looked like! Have to call her later. Oh-h-h, how are things in Dannemor-r-r-ra? Are them big stone walls just as hig-g-g-g-gh? Are the cells—"

The door opened and Satchelfoot Kelly came in. Willie made a sour face. "An' I just had the place fumigated. What you want?"

"Me and the D.A. have about got that wra's'ler tagged for the rotisserie," Kelly snapped. "But we admit we got to have a little more than circumstances for evidence. Look, you was there when the cops arrived and did you pick up anythin' you forgot to give the D.A. on purpose or otherwise? It's been done by you before, Willie!"

"Look, all we got was the assailant's fingerprints, Satchelfoot. His watch with initials on it, and his social security card," Willie sniffed. "Knowin' that wa'n't enough for the likes of you to go on, me and Gertie jus' threw 'em away. I wisht you would call for an appointment in the future."

"You was singin' when I got here whicht means you are too happy over somethin', Willie," Satchelfoot yelped. "If I ever find out you ever secreted evidence, you're through."

"Go away, you bother me," Willie said. "There is just one thing in Mountain Boy's favor whicht could help him with a jury. You made the arrest."

"Some day I will murder you, Willie."

"And I bet you won't never find yourself lookin' for the slayer. Call me up sometime an' maybe I'll give you a ride in my new Gnash-Eight."

"So you got a ticket on that, hah?" Satchelfoot sneered. "If you win it, I'll eat one of the hub caps." He walked out, slamming the door after him.

"He's gettin' to be an erotic," Willie said. He gave Mrs. Shimm a chance to get home, then looked up her number and dialed it.

"We forgot somethin, ha-ha," Willie told her. "What does Blintz look like?"

"About six feet tall, Klump. Fishy eyes like a haddock's and close together. Batwing ears and a busted bridge to his nose," Mrs. Shimm said. "Always wears striped suits—and should if you git what I mean, Mr. Klump."

"Rogers," Willie said. "I'm on his trail right now."

William Klump, for the next three days, called real estate offices, hotels, and rooming houses to no avail. Meanwhile the D. A. stuck a first rap on Mountain Boy Bozosky and claimed he would make it stick. And then Mrs. Shimm called Willie on the phone one morning and said to come and see her right away. When he arrived at the rooming house, the landlady was in quite a tizzy.

"What do you think, Klump? A man called up and ast for Leo Blintz. Just as I was to hang up, one of my roomers come in who was friendly with Blintz so I says for him to take the call and let me know what it was all about."

"Did it work?" Willie asked.

"Look, it was a man from the Elks up in the Bronx, Klump. He says he is anxious to git hold of Blintz as he won the Gnash-Eight what was raffled off," Mrs. Shimm says. "What breaks I git. I could have attached it, Klump."

Willie's legs wobbled and there was quite a lump in the pit of his stomach. "Y-You think that friend of his knew where he went?"

"He claimed he didn't, but who can you believe nowadays, Klump?"

"Yeah." An air castle with fenders and a steering wheel blew up inside Willie's noggin'.

"I hope the loogan lost the ticket," Mrs. Shimm snapped. "Wonder how long they wait until the jalopy is claimed fore they draw another number?"

"I would rather not talk about it," Willie said. "If you get a lead on him, let me know."

"Who is the detective?" the landlady yelled. "If I could cure hives would I send for a doctor?"

"You will be hearing from me," William Klump said weakly and left the rooming house.

NOW just one week later the phone rang in Willie's office and he hoped it was not Mrs. Shimm. It wasn't. "Mr. Klump?" a cheery voice said. "I'm Eger-ton Tripp, chairman of raffling off an automobile for the Bronx Elks. Oh, you lucky man, you!"

"Huh?"

"Do you hold number eight-nine-seven-seven, Mr. Klump? It says here you do. Now we couldn't locate the person who won on the first drawing so we

had to do it over again. You lucky man!"

"Wait," Willie said, shaking like a 1909 jalopy on a corduroy bridge. "Wait until I look. The ticket is right here in my pocket—wait, Mr. Strip." Willie pulled his hanky out of his breast pocket and two tickets fell out. He picked them both up. "Huh, I must of forgot I bought two." Sure enough, one of them was numbered 8977. "Hello, you are right. When do I pick up the car, huh?"

"Better do it right away, Mr. Klump. It is standing right out in front now and all gassed and oiled," Mr. Tripp said. "Oh, you lucky man!"

"You can say that again," Willie yelled, and reached for his hat. Just an hour later he was sitting at the wheel of a beautiful Gnash-Eight and a cameraman from the *Bronx Home News* was snapping his picture. Finally, Mr. Tripp said:

"All right, Mr. Klump. Please drive it away. You don't know how sick I am lookin' at it."

"Drive it away?" Willie gulped, then remembered he had never learned to drive. "Is there a phone handy?" he asked. "I forgot my license, ha!"

He called up Gertie Mudgett and told her the news and he heard the sound of Gertie's torso hitting the floor. In a few minutes he called her once more.

"I am not kiddin', Gert. Come up here as you got to drive it home for me."

"Willie, you darlin'!" Gertie yelled. "I'll grab a cab."

Sometime later, Willie and Gert drew up in front of Willie's rooming house with the Gnash-Eight. Two fenders resembled truffles. The front bumper was drooping like a hangnail, and there were three summonses for violating all rules of traffic in Willie's pocket.

"I thought you could drive," Willie gulped.

"I had two lessons, and shut up!" Gertie said. "Look at us here fightin' when we own a Gnash-Eight, Willie. Oh, you lucky thing, you! When will we drive into the country?"

"We done enough damage to the city," Willie sighed, but he was happy. He envisioned Satchelfoot Kelly gnawing at a hub cap. "Le's go out towards Conneticut Saturday night, huh? I better see this gits to a garage so's the fenders can be smoothed out."

"I always said you would go places, Willie."

Gertrude Mudgett took three more lessons from the Shift For Yourself Auto School, and with the help of two crisp leaves of lettuce, got herself a license. On Saturday night Willie and Gertie headed for the suburbs and nearly bagged four pedestrians before they had gone six blocks. Gertie got off the beam in the Bronx and made a U-turn in the middle of the street, causing a merger between a laundry truck and a fruit stand. An hour later after promising to appear in court on a certain day, they were on their way again. Willie asked if Gertie did not think she should postpone the debut.

"Are you incineratin' I can't drive a car?" Gertie snapped. "Well, don't!"

"Le's find a quiet country road somewheres," Willie compromised.

It was getting dark when they found one near the Connecticut line. They were purring along nicely when they suddenly got the warning from behind to give up some of the road.

"This ain't wide enough for two of us, Willie," Gertie gulped. "They can blow that horn till Guadalcanal freezes over. I got the right of way."

"Yeah," Willie said.

THE car behind kept honking and then it sneaked past the Gnash-Eight and took all the paint off Willie's fenders and about a hundred yards further on it swung across the road and stopped.

"So they want to make somethin' of it, Willie," Gertie yelled. "I am right in the mood." She braked to a stop less than three feet from an old sedan and two citizens got out of same and seemed anxious to meet her.

"Don't start nothin', Gert," Willie said. "This was a pleasure trip, I think."

"Awright," Gertie threw at the tallest of the characters. "Maybe you own all the real estate, huh? Git that heap of pigiron off the road."

"Pipe down, babe," the short bulky ape snarled, and thrust the business end of a roscoe within an inch of Gertie's make-up. "You dare let out a peep an' you'll hear the echo of this bang-bang in the sweet by and by."

The rough citizen in the camel hair coat took care of Willie. He also held something in his right hand and not a tootsie roll. His features gave Willie the shakes, especially the nose without much of a bridge.

"Step out into the road, punk, 'fore I can't resist temptation."

"A stickup, Willie!" Gertie squealed.

"Nah," the gee covering Willie said. "Just takin' what belongs to me."

Willie kept checking. Eyes like a haddock—ears fanning out—striped suit. Before his addled brains could get a hold on his tongue, Willie gulped out:

"Leo Blintz!"

The other dishonest taxpayer let loose an exclamation that was not very nice. "Leo, he knows you!"

"I told you they would've nabbed me, Eddie," Blintz snarled. "This Klump is a private dick."

"Then you did drop that—"

"Shut up, Eddie. I'm grabbin' this boiler I won on the level," Blintz said.

"I don't happen to be home when they call me so they draw another ticket and this funny lookin' bazoo wins. So is it a stickup, Klump?"

"You can't get away with it," Gertie Mudgett yelled. "All we got to do when we get back to—"

Leo Blintz laughed very nastily and the boy named Eddie seemed quite amused himself.

"When you git back, ha!" Leo leered. "That is rich! If you talk, them undertakers'll start runnin'. Yeah, there is more than just a jalopy to worry about."

"What does he mean, Willie?" Gertie choked out.

"I haven't the heart to tell even you," Willie sighed. "What I think he means, couldn't possibly be true. It couldn't happen, not even to me."

"Listen, Sister," Blintz said. "Let me tell. I buy a chancet on a Gnash-Eight an' afterward somethin' happens. The cops pick up a ticket in a certain place I shouldn't of been. They got the number. If I'd claimed the jalopy I would of been nabbed and tossed into the klink. This boy friend of yours knows what the cops got on me else how did he know my name and have my pan figured out?"

"Mrs. Shimm," Willie said. "She hired me to find you to get back her rent is all."

"Wha-a-a-t?" Blintz yipped, and then grinned. "Well, what do you know?"

"Look, Leo," Eddie said. "Le's git through wit' this. Some people might come along."

"So you don't know nothin' about a ticket for a raffle numbered seven-nine-seven-three, Klump?" Leo asked.

"How should I?" Willie choked out,

wondering what he was trying to remember. "Leave my girl go, huh?"

Blintz sniffed. "Her? Don't make me laugh. Eddie, git the sedan goin' and put it alongside the road. I'll ride in the back with the love birdies in the Gnash and you trail us to the place where X marks the spot. You know too much, Klump. Yeah, too bad!"

GERTIE sent a pleading glance at Klump.

"We are goin' to get murdered, Willie," she forced out. "Do you just mean to stand there and let it happen?"

"It is better than bein' horizontal," Willie said. "And I am not Mandrake, the Magician. Maybe they will change their minds."

"You drop them guns and I'll fight you both with my bare hands," Gertie challenged.

"If they do they are cr—what am I sayin'?" Willie said. "I don't suppose it is no use appealin' to their better natures."

"We mislaid 'em somewheres, Klump," Leo Blintz growled. "Awright, you and the babe climb into the Gnash. Pretty job, huh? I ought to bust you one for messin' up my fenders, though."

Gertie climbed into the Gnash-Eight and Willie dropped into the seat beside her and Leo Blintz took a seat in back, his Betsy on the alert.

"When you git some luck, Willie, it is poison," Gertie complained. "Look what it got us into?"

"Start this heap up, sister, and shut up!" the rough boy with the howitzer said. "You two will be found at the foot of a hill in the wreck of the hot car we trailed you with. Then me and Eddie drive toward Hudson's Bay."

"You ain't human, bat-ears!" Gertie yipped and stepped the boiler up to thirty per. Behind the Gnash-Eight came the other criminal in the crumbly sedan, not more than fifty yards behind.

"Flattery won't git you nowheres, babe," Blintz chuckled, leaning forward in the rear seat. "Tell that landlady I'll send her a check, Klump."

Willie tried to think of something, but only the inside of a morgue and a spray of flowers would stick to his mind. He took a gander at the speedometer and it said forty-five. Gertie Mudgett had her lower lip thrust out until she was fast becoming a Ubangi and Willie grabbed at a straw of hope. When Gertie looked

like that it was generally every strong man for himself.

"Slow down, babe," Blintz said when the needle hit fifty. "It is only to your funeral you're goin'."

It amazed Willie that Gertie Mudgett, even in the face of disaster, was so quiet. Up ahead a reflector sign said:

STOP. THROUGH TRAFFIC.

Gertie poured on more coal.

"Slow down, blubberhead!" Leo Blintz howled.

"Okay!" Gertrude screeched, and jammed on the brakes. "Anythin' to oblige, punk!" Willie made contact with the windshield and Leo Blintz was catapulted off the back seat like a character shot from a circus cannon. He swan-dived over the front seat and on top of Willie and then there was a crash behind as Leo's partner in lawlessness was not able to stop the old sedan in time. Natives for nearly a mile around heard the noise of the rhubarb.

Willie was not sure how long he had been out. When he came out of the stupor he heard a voice that certainly belonged to no angel.

"Willie," Gertie gulped. "You dead?"

"I couldn't—feel worst than if I was, Gertie. What hap—where's the crooks?" Willie heard the distant shriek of a siren as he brushed glass out of his hair and felt himself being dragged out of the jalopy.

"I got Blintz all laid out side of the road, Willie. The other dirty crook is spread out like a rug on the hood of that sedan an' he's half-scalded by radiator water. The Gnash-Eight can stop on a dime, Willie."

"And give you back a nickel change, huh?" Willie choked out and the top of his head kept lifting off and he had to keep pressing both hands against it. Then the prowl car arrived and two state gendarmes hopped out. Leo Blintz sat up, his eyes looking into the next world.

"Stretcher bearer! St—did we make the beachhead, Sarge?"

"Well, whoever isn't still delirious, start talkin'!" a cop said. "Who belongs to that gun there?"

WILLIE flashed a badge. "I am William Klump, private detective. The citizen there with the bat-ears is Leo Blintz and he murdered Oolie O'Rourke.

The one draped over the green sedan's front stoop is his excessory. They chased me and my dame and tried to steal our Gnash and then kill the both of us."

"Oolie O'Rourke?" a cop said. "I heard about that—but they got the guilty man."

"Mountain Boy Bozosky is innocent," Willie sniffed. "You got a firs' aid kit? All we got to do is call up a Mr. Twipp or somebody at the Elks in the Bronx and ast did he throw the stubs away on the auto raffle. There should be a name and address on stub number—what you say it was, Blintz?"

"Huh?" the dishonest character said. "Oh, yeah—my army serial number, seven-nine-seven-three. When do we git to sail back to the States, Captain? Who are you? Where am I?"

"Look," one cop said to the other cop. "We better take 'em in and let 'em start all over ag'in when they're sane."

Willie Klump took a hanky from his breast pocket to dab at the bump on his noggin. A piece of paper with printing on it fluttered to the grass and Gertie Mudgett snatched it and took a long gander at it.

"Number seven-nine-seven-three, Willie. I thought the lucky number you drew was diff'runt."

"Wha-a-a-t?" Willie yelped. "Why, I see it now. That ticket I picked up in Oolie's office was not mine all the time. It was Blintz's. And he thought the cops found it and he didn't dare to claim the Gnash. Then the Elks drew another number! Gertie, this couldn't never happen!"

"It shouldn't to a dog with hyperphobia," Gertie sighed. "You think the D.A. will believe it?"

"If he does, he won't never be reelect-ed," a state trooper snapped. "Awright, le's all go to the police station in Greenwich."

Two hours later the New York gendarmes came out to transfer the criminals to the right jurisdiction. Satchelfoot Kelly was with them. Leo Blintz, after Willie Klump had finished his amazing story, let his hair down and confessed.

"Yeah, the lemonhead is right. Eddie

here tipped me about my number bein' called. Then afterwards we see Klump's pitcher in the *Bronx Home News* sittin' in the car should of been mine. So out I go to grab the boiler to knock off him an' the babe."

"Why did you bump off Oolie O'Rourke?" Kelly asked.

"Aw, I heard he'd git in on any kind of a fix," Blintz said. "I had a couple-gees on the Flatbush Bombers ball team willin' to toss a game to the House of Davids which would have netted me ten grand. Then I find out O'Rourke would murder his gran'mother if she ever put a bet on a baseball game even. The lug calls me awful names and says he will right away notify the cops. I let him have it wit' a staplin' machine. Then I scam."

"You see, Satchelfoot," Willie said. "Mountain Boy visited Oolie just before and Oolie had no time to pick up his empty wallet an' things before this fiend entered. That raffle ticket, seven-nine-seven-three—"

"Stop!" Kelly groaned. "If I ever have to listen to that all over again, I'll blow my stack! In fact I think I will. All the time he has the ticket and Blintz thinks the cops have. Bah!"

"Oh, stranger things have happened," Willie sniffed.

"Name one," a state cop snapped.

"Well, there was—ha, I'll have to have time to think of one," Willie said.

Gertrude Mudgett came in. "I called the garage, Willie. They want twenty-five dollars for towin'. It will cost three hundred to repair it."

"And we have paid seventy-five bucks for fines and still have two summonses to answer," Willie sighed. "We will have to sell the jalopy to get in the clear. The Elks did this to me, Gertie. I'm glad it wasn't raffled off by the Moose."

"I think I'll be goin'," Satchelfoot Kelly mumbled, and walked away.

"That ain't the door, Kelly," a Connecticut cop yelled. "It's a winder an' it's two stories down to the concrete!"

"Who ast you?" Satchelfoot wanted to know.

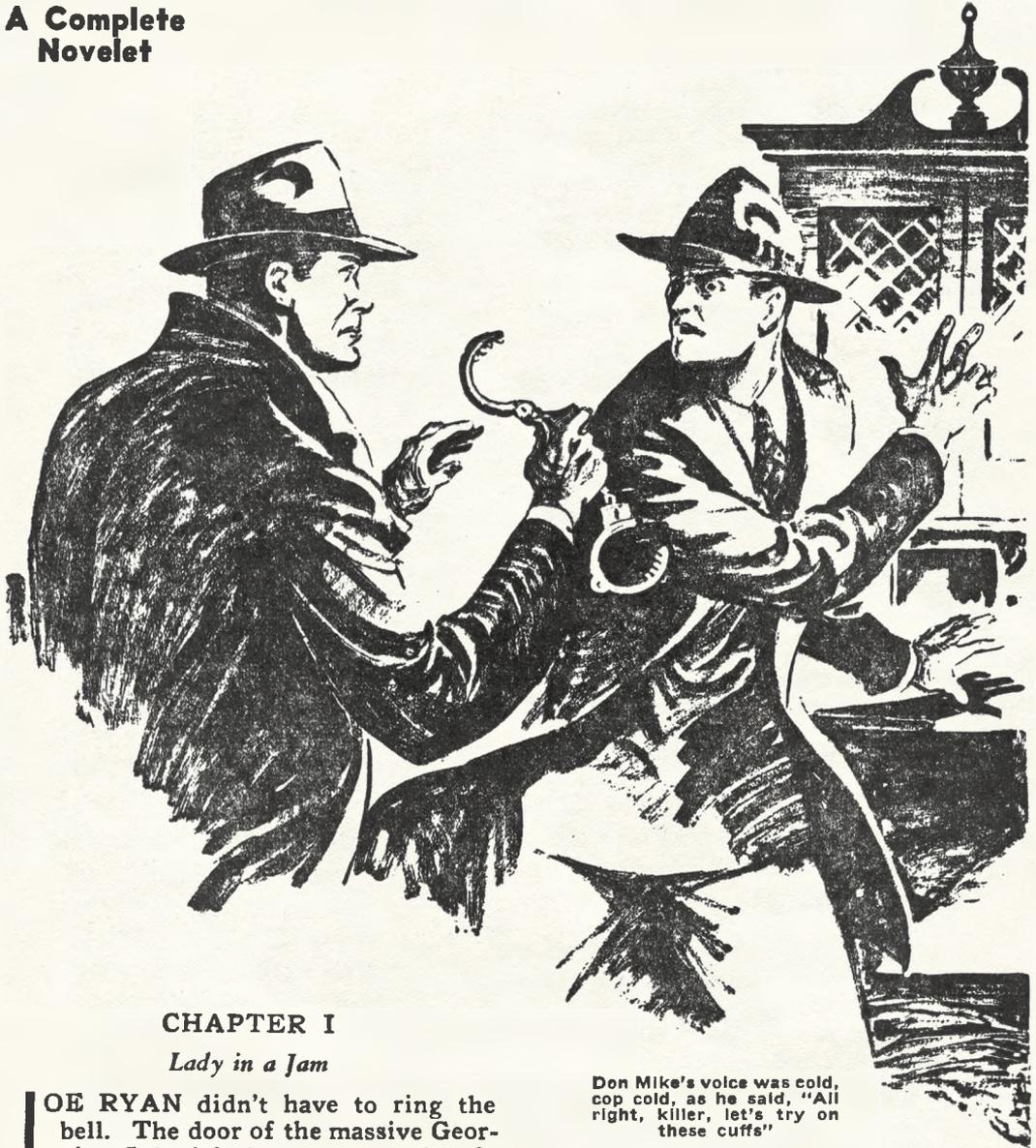
NEXT ISSUE

PHOTO FINISH FOR A DAME

Another Hilarious Willie Klump Story

By JOE ARCHIBALD

**A Complete
Novelet**



CHAPTER I

Lady in a Jam

JOE RYAN didn't have to ring the bell. The door of the massive Georgian-Colonial house was already open, and Loreen was standing there waiting for him.

"Joe!" she said. Her voice was taut, pitched too high. It had the same tension, the same borderline hysteria, that he'd noticed twenty minutes ago when she had phoned him and begged him to come to her. "Joe, I thought you'd never get here! I—I was afraid you were going to let me down!"

In the night's thick darkness her face

Don Mike's voice was cold, cop cold, as he said, "All right, killer, let's try on these cuffs"

was an oval blur. Ryan could only guess at the fear in her clear gray eyes, the suppressed panic twisting her red lips into a distorted grimace. Instinctively, though, he sensed these things he couldn't see. Something menaced Loreen, something ugly and terrifying. It wasn't like her to lose control so completely, he thought. This wasn't the Loreen he'd known in the old, carefree days when they were kids.

I'LL TAKE THAT

Joe Ryan was dependable and had a big heart—so big that he let himself get trapped into a grim murder charge when mysterious crime and intrigue stalked!



"I dressed and drove over as fast as I could," he said quietly. "I was asleep when you called. It's past midnight, you know." He touched her cold hand. "What is it, hon? What's wrong?"

"Joe, do you remember you told me, once, if I ever needed you or got in trouble, you would help me?"

"Of course I remember." How could he possibly forget? He had said it to her that night four years ago, the night she'd broken the news to him that she was going to marry somebody else. "And I meant it. I still mean it. Now tell me what's happened."

"It's—it's Waxie," she whispered. "He's dead." Then she led Ryan into a sunken library and showed him her mur-

RAP

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

dered husband's body.

But long before they gained the library, Ryan saw the bruises on Loreen's face. He saw them as soon as she took him through the reception hall, where there were lights; saw the blue swelling on her jaw, the purplish place on her forehead, the finger-marks marring her white throat. Anger raced into him, then, like a tide of molten metal. "Somebody hit you!"

"Yes . . . Waxie." She went ahead of him, down two shallow steps and into the sunken room, and she pointed to the dead man. "He—he was beating me. With his fists. And so—I shot him. I killed him. Joe, do you hear me? *I killed him!*"

"Keep your voice down," he said curtly.

"But don't you understand? I shot him."

"I understand all right. You don't have to scream it." He was purposely brusque, knowing it was the only way to keep her from going to pieces. He mustn't let her break now, he told himself. Her nerves, obviously, were raw, twanging, ready to snap. He couldn't have that. Not yet. Not until he'd had a chance to talk to her and think things out and determine what was to be done.

HE GRABBED her shoulders and shook her. She seemed pathetically slender and fragile, and her burnished-copper hair was a touseled halo. "I said keep your voice down," he repeated. "First thing you know you'll have all the servants in here."

"It's their night out. Nobody's in the house except us. You, and me, and Waxie . . ." She looked at the body on the floor.

"There's your kid to consider."

"Lanny . . . is asleep." There seemed to be a catch in her throat when she spoke of her three-year-old son. "He won't hear anything. Oh, Joe, Joe, what am I going to do?"

"Nothing, yet." Ryan went over and examined the corpse. If he had any hope that a spark of life still existed in Waxie Vellanti, the hope died very swiftly—as swiftly as Waxie himself had died: in the wink of an eye, with a bullet through the brain.

Ryan's heavy, craggy face furrowed with thought as he looked at the dead man. Odd, how a girl like Loreen could have fallen for a guy like Vellanti, a

sleek, greasy man with patent leather hair and the complexion of a tallow candle. Handsome? Romantic? Women had seemed to think so. Loreen had thought so. But she'd found out how wrong she had been, Ryan reflected sourly.

He straightened up. "You did a good job on him, hon."

"Joe, please!"

"What did you do with the gun?"

Wordlessly she pointed to an upholstered chair. There was the usual down-filled cushion, and on the cushion a caliber .25 belly gun; a purse automatic with chased plastic grips. Ryan leaned down, sniffed it without touching it. "Not a very loud noise from this kind. But enough punch, at close range."

"Joe, what am I going to do?" She was a little calmer now, he noticed with satisfaction. "Shall I . . . call the police?"

"Definitely. You should have done it before you phoned me."

"But—but you said I could always depend on you, if I needed help."

That made twice in five minutes she had reminded him of it. A wry smile quirked Ryan's lips downward at the corners, crookedly. "I'm going to help you, hon. You'll have the best mouth-piece that money can hire. Not that it's necessary, really. Any shyster with a diploma and a shingle could defend this one.

"Vellanti was knocking you around and you protected yourself. No jury on earth would convict a woman for that. Especially a woman as beautiful as you. We'll snap pictures of your bruises for evidence and you'll be acquitted on the first ballot."

"You mean I—I'll have to go on trial?"

"Just a formality."

"But I can't. I can't, I tell you! I couldn't stand it. No, I tell you, no!"

"I don't see how you can avoid it, hon."

"There's got to be a way. I can't have Lanny growing up knowing his mother was tried for murdering his father!"

"Not murder," Ryan said. "Justifiable homicide. Manslaughter in self-defense."

"No. No, it's impossible. I won't. I can't!"

"You'll have to, Loreen. You don't expect anybody to take the rap for you, do you?"

Her eyes widened. "Joe, that's it! I knew you'd think of something. I knew

you wouldn't let this—this hideous thing happen." She came toward him. "I can testify for you. I wouldn't mind that. I wouldn't mind standing up in court as long as I wasn't the one on trial. You're so clever, Joe! But you shouldn't have teased me. You shouldn't have made me think you were turning me in. That wasn't very kind of you, Joe. Not when you love me so much."

"Now wait a minute," he said uneasily.

"You do love me, don't you. Joe?"

"Well, I—"

"Say it. Say it, darling."

He stared at her, puzzled, unsure of what she was trying to do to him. "Yes," he said slowly. "I love you." He always had and he knew he always would. When he'd lost her to Waxie Vellanti it had been like losing part of whatever it was that made him breathe, a part of his heart, a part of his life. Now she came close to him, fragrant, feminine, needing him. And Waxie was dead. She didn't belong to Waxie any more. She didn't belong to anybody.

YET somehow she wasn't the same. Ryan searched her eyes, seeking something he didn't want to find, suspecting guile and sensing deception. Her expression told him nothing, either in confirmation or denial. He had only the knowledge that she was a woman badly in trouble, desperate, trapped, pleading with him to shoulder the burden of her jeopardy.

"It would be so easy, Joe!" she whispered, frantically, urgently. "You could say you dropped in for a visit and saw Waxie attacking me, beating me . . . and you tried to protect me from him, and he came at you and you had to shoot him. In a way, it would be exactly the same kind of self-defense plea you're asking me to make.

"Only it would be you making it, not me. And the jury would free you the same as it would me. Quicker, maybe, because you'd killed for chivalry. Don't you see, darling? I'm a mother. I've got a little boy. It would ruin me to be tried for murder. My name, my reputation . . . But you—you haven't got that to think about."

"Because I have no reputation to begin with, is that what you mean?" He made a sardonic mouth. "I'm just a professional gambler. People expect a guy like me to be a killer."

"I didn't say that, Joe. I only meant . . . that is . . ." Embarrassment reddened her face, emphasizing the swollen bruises. "I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"Skip it, hon, skip it. My skin is thick. And it's true, I am a gambler; I run a string of high class dice spots here and in Nevada. By the same token, Waxie was a gambler too, remember. He controlled all the handbooks and the numbers rackets in this neck of the woods."

"I don't see what that has to do with the—the favor I'm asking of you."

Ryan frowned. "It has plenty to do with it. One gambler shooting another—you can guess what the cops will think."

"Does it matter what they think? If I go on the stand and testify you killed Waxie to protect me—" She wrapped her arms about him, hugged herself against him. "Please, Joe. Please. And if anything goes wrong, I'll see to it you don't get hurt. If the trial goes against you I'll confess the real truth. Please!"

He disengaged her, gently. "Okay. Maybe I'm a sap, but okay."

"Oh, Joe! Joe, darling!"

He walked across the sunken room, picked up a phone and twirled its dial without haste. There was a long wait, and then he hung up. "Neal doesn't answer. I guess he's out."

"Neal?"

"Steve Neal. My silent partner, the guy that put up the dough to finance my crap joints. You know him. At least you've met him."

"Yes. Yes, I—I remember him now."

"I want you to promise you'll get in touch with him as soon as you can. Tell him to get me a lawyer, fast. Understand?"

"Yes, Joe. Yes, of course." She was breathless, eager; almost over-eager, it seemed to Ryan, so that again he sensed danger and deception. But it was too late to back out now; he had given his word, promised to frame himself. It was screwy; it was an impossible situation. Crazy, or so much in love with Loreen that it amounted to the same thing.

He dialed the phone again. Presently he said, "Don Mike O'Bregon, please. Hello. Don Mike? Joe Ryan here. Better come out and get me, pal. I just killed Waxie Vellanti in his library."

Then, as he rang off, he saw Loreen grab the gun off the over-stuffed chair

and point it at him. "Thanks," she said through her teeth. "Thanks for confessing. Now don't make any wrong move. You just talked yourself into the gas chamber."

CHAPTER II

The Law of Flight



SICKNESS was in Joe Ryan's eyes, a leaden weight bearing down inside him. When Don Mike O'Bregon showed up a little later the dreamlike unreality of the setup was all the more nightmarish because of Don Mike's grim unfriendliness.

For Ryan, that unfriendliness was the crowning disillusionment. He and Don Mike had grown up on the same street together, attended the same grade school, graduated from the same junior college. As youths their first puppy-love romance had been with Loreen; as men they had both lost her to Waxie Vellanti. Now Loreen had cleverly mouse-trapped Joe Ryan into a murder rap, and Don Mike O'Bregon's voice was cold, cop-cold, as he said, "All right, killer, suppose we try these cuffs on you."

"Wait a minute," Ryan protested. "Look, Don Mike, this is all wrong, all haywire. I didn't—"

O'Bregon glanced briefly toward Vellanti's body. "Waxie's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Murdered."

"Yes, but—"

"And when you phoned me you said you had killed him."

"I lied. I got shilled into—"

"And I find Loreen covering you with a gun. That's enough for me. Let's have your hands. We can talk afterward."

"No. We'll hash it out right now. We—"

"Don't make me slug you, Ryan."

It was insane, hearing that kind of talk from Don Mike. It was another piece of the nightmare pattern, another part of the senseless, crazy mosaic. Ryan stared at O'Bregon as if he were a total stranger; as if really seeing him for the first time. He was tall and rawboned and he had the red hair of the Irish, but his com-

plexion was swarthy and his eyes dark, and he moved with the cat-quick grace you sometimes find in men of mingled Mexican-Spanish-Indian blood.

A queer mixture, Don Mike O'Bregon, fast to fight but just as fast to forgive. Loyalty to his friends was the code he lived by; but if you were a murderer you were no longer his friend. The rules of his job had been fully drilled into him during his climb from uniformed patrolman to top dick on the D. A.'s investigating staff, and those rules had made him remote, impersonal, on the defensive against emotion.

The badge he wore made him a machine, an automaton. Or so it seemed to Ryan.

"Don't you want the truth, Don Mike?"

"The truth is obvious," O'Bregon said. "Professional rivalry between gambling czars. You rubbed him out so you could muscle in on his grifts, I suppose."

"That's not so. I'm satisfied with my dice layouts. I've never wanted any part of numbers or handbooks. When I phoned you and said I'd killed Waxie it was because I was trying to shield Loreen. He had beaten her, and she shot him, and—"

Fast as a cat's paw striking, Don Mike's hand lashed out; hit Ryan on the mouth. It was more a slap with the back of the knuckles than an actual punch, but Ryan felt his lips begin to bleed inside.

"I'll remember that, Don Mike," he said quietly.

O'Bregon smiled. His teeth were very white against his swarthy complexion. "You had better remember it. I'll remind you again if you tell any more lies about Loreen." He turned to her. "Just how did this whole thing happen, my sweet?"

My sweet. That was what he had always called her in the days when they were all kids together, Joe Ryan recalled. So Don Mike was still in love with her. Which meant he would be easy to fool. She could twist him around her fingers the same as she'd twisted Ryan himself. Nice, he thought bitterly. Very nice indeed. I have as much chance as a fish in a barrel.

Loreen looked mistily at the red-haired O'Bregon. "I—I don't like to talk about it, Don Mike. It was—horrible."

RYAN, now that his eyes had been opened, could see the deceit in that; the acting, the sham, the phony nervousness. For a woman who had just murdered a man and persuaded another man to take the fall for it, she was doing all right.

She had just the right tremolo in her tone, just the right approach.

And Don Mike was eating it up, of course. "I'm sorry, but you must talk about it. Don't be afraid."

She touched the bruises on her face. "I was upstairs. I heard loud voices down here. Waxie's voice and another that I thought I recognized—"

"Ryan's?"

"Yes. He was shouting at Waxie, telling him to sell out or he would be k-killed."

Joe Ryan said, "She's framing me. Even better than I framed myself."

"I warned you," Don Mike answered, and his hand lashed out as it had done a moment before, flicking, hard-knuckled, drawing new trickles of blood. "Now shut up."

Ryan grinned redly and watched Loreen. She wasn't looking his way; she kept her eyes steadily on Don Mike. She also kept up her flow of lies. "I sneaked downstairs just as Joe pulled a gun. Waxie was frightened. Terrified. He got down on his knees and begged for his life."

"And Ryan shot him while he begged, eh? In cold blood."

"Yes," she said. "Through the head. Right before my eyes."

Don Mike's Irish-Indian face was a mask carved in bronze, a primitive mask whose lines and planes and highlights were utterly savage. "Then what happened, my sweet?"

"I came into the room. I showed myself. I let Joe know that I had seen him commit murder."

"And?"

"He threatened me. He said he would kill me, too, if I squealed on him. Then he—he offered me a deal. He asked me to tell the police that Waxie had been beating me."

"Was it true?"

"No. Joe just wanted me to say that. He wanted me to say he'd come in and shot Waxie to save me."

Don Mike studied her. "You are bruised, Loreen."

"Joe did that to me."

Ryan said, "She lies. I never touched her."

"Quiet, heel," Don Mike growled. Then, to Loreen: "Why did Ryan hit you, my sweet?"

"Because I refused his proposition. He used his fists on me." She sobbed theatrically. "I was afraid he'd kill me, so I pretended to agree. I said I would testify that he had shot Waxie to protect me. Then he phoned you—and while he was doing it, I got the gun and covered him and k-kept him covered until you came. That's all of it, Don Mike. That's the whole story."

Joe Ryan drew a deep breath. "Not quite, Loreen. There's something they call the dermal nitrate reaction, the paraffin test to prove whether or not a person has shot a firearm. I'm willing to take that test any time, because I know it will show negative and clear me. Are you as willing?"

"Yes, of course." She extended her slender hands. "I've never fired a gun in my life. Tonight or any other time."

This puzzled Ryan. She seemed so positive, so sure of herself. And it didn't sound like bluff. Yet she had admitted to him, when he had first arrived, that she'd shot her husband. There was a discrepancy here, a jigsaw piece that didn't match.

He didn't get much time to think about it, though. Don Mike's dark eyes were burning at him, and Don Mike's voice was a purring command. "Let's go, Ryan."

"Go? What do you mean? First you've got to call Homicide, get a tech squad out here, make tests. That gun, for instance. You'll find no fingerprints of mine on it, because I didn't touch it. If you think this frame will stick to me, once I've said my say with the guys from headquarters—"

"Don't talk to me about fingerprints on the gun. Yours would be smudged anyhow, when Loreen picked it up to cover you."

"She handled it before that. When she killed Waxie."

O'Bregon brought up a fist, then lowered it. "I'm not going to soil my hands on you again." He drew his heavy service .38 from a shoulder holster. "I said let's go."

"Without calling downtown?"

"Don't tell me my business." He prodded Ryan toward the reception hall,

and called back over his shoulder to Loreen, "Wait for me, my sweet. I won't be long."

Ryan didn't understand that, either. There were many things he didn't understand, tonight. The only thing he could be sure of was that he could trust nobody. Loreen, gulling him and betraying him, had proved that. And now Don Mike had turned from friendship to enmity.

HOW complete this enmity had become was indicated when O'Bregon conducted his prisoner out to the front grounds of the Vellanti estate. Here, in the somber darkness, they halted. Don Mike pulled a flashlight from his pocket, flicked it on, swept the bright conical beam across rolling lawn and formal garden.

The finger of light moved quickly in a flat semicircle, touching a sun dial's pedestal here, a lily pond there, a field stone retaining wall beyond. Past that retaining wall, Ryan remembered, the ground dropped off sharply to street level. He wondered why Don Mike wanted light on these unimportant details. The whole procedure seemed useless, childish, trivial.

Don Mike snapped off the pocket torch. "Ever hear of what the Spanish and Mexicans call *ley fuga*, Ryan?"

"No. And I'm not interested in language lessons. Listen, chum, you're making a mistake by arresting me. Loreen lied to you. She killed Waxie because he was beating her. Then she phoned me. When I got here she asked me to take the rap for her. She—"

"It's too late, Ryan."

"Too late for what? I'm entitled to tell my side of it. Maybe you won't believe me, but—"

"I don't," Don Mike said. "I wouldn't believe you under oath; not if you say Loreen is a murderess."

"She is, though."

"You're only driving more nails in your casket," Don Mike said quietly. "Not that I'd have cared a damn about you killing Waxie; I had no love for him. He married Loreen, the only girl I ever wanted. I'm not sorry he's dead. If you had been man enough to confess shooting him, I think I would have shaken your hand. I might even have considered letting you escape. But when you try to pin it on Loreen, you forfeit

your right to freedom. And because you struck her with your fists, you have forfeited your right to live."

"You're not a trial judge. It's not for you to say whether I'm to live or die. That's up to the law," Ryan growled.

Don Mike's white teeth flashed against the dark. "The law. So you want the law. Well, the law you'll have; the law I just spoke of. *Ley fuga*. The law of the fugitive."

Ryan got it, then. His mouth went dry. "Hey, now wait! If you mean what I think you mean—"

"The law of the fugitive," Don Mike repeated dreamily. "A very convenient thing, though not often practiced north of the Border. Even when it is, they don't talk about it. *Ley fuga*. The prisoner gets his break, makes his gamble. He is permitted to run. When he has gone just far enough, the police shoot him down."

"Don Mike, you can't do this."

"Start running, Ryan."

"You're not a Mexican. You're not a Spaniard. You're American. An American cop."

"And you're a gambler. A professional gambler. All right, put your chips down on your lucky number—if you've got a lucky number. Start running."

"So you want to be judge, jury and executioner, eh, Don Mike?"

"Run, Ryan."

Joe Ryan ran. And presently Don Mike's gun blasted at him.

CHAPTER III

This Is the Law



THE darkness gave him a tenuous chance, a thin thread of hope. As long as Don Mike didn't use his flashlight Ryan wasn't quite a clay pigeon. At least he could dart sidewise, zig-zagging over the terraced lawn like a harried jackrabbit. He felt cheap, degraded,

running for his life this way. Humiliation blended with anger and filled him to the throat, choking him. If he lived, he promised himself, somebody was going to pay for all this. Somebody was going to pay the hard way.

If he lived.

A slug whined past him, not close, but seeking. Don Mike was triggering slowly, spacing his shots. Each one was a flat, nasty spank against the velvet night; each bullet a lawless token of another kind of law than was ever written in the statute books. *Ley fuga*. Law of the fugitive. Run, Ryan. Run, jack-rabbit. See if you can outrace a .38 pill.

Cursing, Ryan ran.

Like a fullback carrying the ball through a broken-field opening on the gridiron, he raced crazily from side to side, stepping high, pounding his soles on the soft turf. Another bullet sighed after him, closer this time, so close it almost plucked a thread from the sleeve of his coat.

Don Mike's marksmanship was getting better. Maybe Don Mike's eyes were growing accustomed to the dark. Then the blue-white ray of the flashlight danced into being. That cut down the odds. Don Mike had apparently decided he'd given Ryan enough handicap start.

Ryan crouched low to make himself a small target and plunged onward, slanting, heading for the retaining wall. He reached his goal and leaped for it, hurling himself headlong the last couple of yards. Arms outstretched and stiff, fingers clawing, he jumped at the wall and seized its coping. He pulled himself up, up, and over.

Don Mike's .38 sent a yellow ribbon of flame across the night, and far beyond the ribbon a slug took the heel off Joe Ryan's left shoe. The impact sent hot needles into his foot; an inch higher and he would have been crippled. He went over the wall and landed in soft dry earth along the roadside. On his stomach he started crawling.

There were bushes; thin protection but better than no shield at all. Hunkering there, winded, he found a small round rock the size of a fist. He picked it up as he saw the flashlight ray come over the wall.

Don Mike dropped down, still hunting him. Near, now.

Ryan threw the rock, and his aim was good. He hit the bright white eye of the flash, and glass tinkled. The light winked, went out. You could hear Don Mike's startled oath, and then the spank of his gun, the blaze from its muzzle as

he fired toward where he thought the rock had come from.

Scrambling, Ryan leaped up the wall and chinned himself there; by main strength hauled his weight to the top and plopped down inside the Vellanti grounds again. He did it without much sound. Don Mike was making some noise, too, as he prowled along the outside of the retaining wall. A smart dick, Don Mike O'Bregon, but this time not quite smart enough to realize his quarry had doubled back into the estate. Ryan had an edge, now. Not much of an edge. Thin. Precarious. But worth a bet.

He sped toward the Georgian-Colonial house.

THAT, he thought, was the last place where Don Mike would look for him. He ran onward, and found the front door open. He hurtled over the threshold and inside, pelted through the reception hall; then down the shallow steps to the sunken library where Waxie Vellanti's corpse was. Where Waxie Vellanti's widow was, too.

Loreen cringed. "Joe!"

He snatched the little murder automatic with the plastic grips. She had covered him with it, waiting for Don Mike to come. Now it was Ryan's turn. He looked at her, bleakly.

"Joe! Don't k-kill me. Joe, I—"

"I don't intend to. I should, but I won't."

"Joe, I—I didn't mean—I couldn't help—I can't tell you. If I do, Lanny—Joe, I don't dare." The words tumbled from her lips, incoherent, meaningless, disconnected.

He said, "Save it. Save your lies for Don Mike. I'm pulling my freight. Once I'm out of here you can't pin anything on me. You won't have any proof. You won't have anything but your unsupported word—and Don Mike's belief in your fairy tales. That won't carry you far."

"Joe—if you only knew! If I could just tell you."

"Maybe you can persuade Don Mike to fill my shoes," he told her. "Maybe he'll be your fall guy. Me, I'm through being a patsy." He went out, then; ran through the darkness to his coupe, piled in, viciously kicked the starter.

Twenty speeding minutes later he pulled up in front of the expensive apartment hotel where Steve Neal lived; and

five minutes after that he was in Neal's penthouse, letting Neal look into the muzzle of the gun that had ended Waxie Vellanti's life.

In a night of illogical incongruities, it was no crazier than what had gone before. Steve Neal was Ryan's backer, his gambling-house partner, the one man he could trust; but in the past couple of hours Joe Ryan had expunged the word trust from his vocabulary. Cynical, embittered, he confronted Neal with unconcealed doubt and used the automatic to illustrate that doubt.

"I'm red hot, Steve," he announced without preliminary. "The cops are after me—or will be, soon. I'm wanted for killing Waxie Vellanti and I need help. And I'm warning you in advance, if you get a notion to blow the whistle on me I'll probably resent it in a way you won't enjoy. With bullets."

Neal was a small, compact man, sinewy and sun-tanned, youthful of face and movement in spite of his snow-white hair. "Have you gone out of your mind?" he stared at Ryan. "Put that gun down. This is me you're talking to. Me, Steve Neal, remember? Blow the whistle on you, indeed. You must be nuts."

"Not nuts. Just careful. Darned careful from now on." But Ryan pocketed the automatic as he said it. His tension relaxed; he even smiled a small, sheepish smile. "Sorry, Steve. No offense. I could use a drink," he added. "I could use a lot of drinks."

Neal got Scotch from a cellarette, poured two shots, gave one to Ryan. "Down the hatch." They drank. "Now tell me about the Waxie kill. How did you come to knock him off?"

"I didn't."

"Then why is the law after you?"

RYAN helped himself to more Scotch. "His wife shilled me into a bum rap. I used to be in love with her, and she used that. Then she slipped me the double cross." He told Neal the whole story in chronological sequence.

"But there's more to it than appears on the surface," he finished. "The very fact that she was so willing to take the paraffin test indicates her hands are clean. In other words, she lied to me when she said she'd bumped Waxie."

"Meaning she was covering for somebody else, some third party you don't

know about?"

"I think so." Ryan answered moodily. "It's the only explanation that seems to fit the facts. She's fronting for the real murderer, and tried to make me take the fall."

"Could it be Don Mike O'Bregon? From what you tell me, he was pretty blasted anxious to blow you down without benefit of trial."

Neal looked thoughtful. "And he's in love with Loreen, too. Maybe the two of them cooked this up to get rid of Waxie and make her a widow so they could get married. And you were a handy sucker. Rubbing you out would close the case. She could testify she witnessed you shooting her husband, and you'd be too dead to deny it. So then Don Mike would say he killed you when you tried to escape. A man with a badge can get away with plenty."

"He won't get away with this," Ryan said.

Neal nodded. "It'll be harder for him, now that you've managed to duck. At least you're alive to fight the charges, perhaps refute and disprove them; which is more than you could have done if he'd plugged you. Even so, you're still in a jackpot. It will be your word against Loreen's and Don Mike's; and he'll have the dragnet out for you, that's for sure. Maybe with orders to shoot on sight."

"That's what I've got to look out for. It's why I came to you for help, Steve. I need a hideout for a while; some place where I won't be found in a hurry, but close enough to give me a base of operations."

"What operations?"

Ryan's lips peeled back from strong yellow teeth. "If Don Mike killed Waxie I'm going to find a way of pinning it on him."

"And if Loreen killed him?"

"Then I'll send her up—if I can." Ryan took a third shot of Scotch. "What about that cabin of yours at Oak Lake, Steve? That would be just right. It's only twenty miles out, and nobody knows you and I have any connection, business or personal. I could lie low there, use the phone, contact some private dicks—"

"Sorry," Neal cut in. "I loaned it to some friends of mine; they move in tomorrow." He frowned, then snapped his fingers. "Eddie Currier!"

"Currier? What about him?"

"You said you'd be needing a private dick. He's your man. And he's your hideout." Neal moved toward his telephone.

Ryan said, "Wait, Steve. I've heard of this Currier. He's got a bad reputation."

"So he's unethical. So what? That's just the kind of guy you want. He'll do practically anything for money. He'll handle your leg work for you and keep you under cover at the same time." Neal dialed the phone.

"Currier? This is Steve Neal. I'm sending you a friend of mine. He's in a jam with the police and needs somebody like you to get him out. Whatever it costs, I'll guarantee it. To the hilt, yes. The sky's the limit. Right. He's on his way." Neal hung up, scribbled an address on a card. Here you are, Joe. It's all set."

Ryan hesitated. Then: "Okay. And thanks."

HE didn't hesitate, though, once he was outdoors. His thoughts were clear, his plans carefully considered. He took a taxi to Currier's bungalow, not risking the use of his own car in case there had already been a pickup order broadcast on the police waves, listing its license numbers. And he had the cab drop him a block from his destination, as an added safeguard. Then, finally, he cautiously reconnoitered the neighborhood to make sure no cops were staked out, before he rang Currier's doorbell.

The private dick was an inordinately fat man, short, bald and round as a butter ball. "So you're the guy Steve Neal phoned me about?"

"Yes. Joe Ryan is the name."

"Come in, son, come in." They went into a littered and disorderly living room that smelled of gin and stale cigar smoke. "Now what's the caper?"

Ryan gave it to him fast and straight. He ended with, "What I want is Loreen's telephone wire tapped. Don Mike O'Bregon's, too. I want listeners twenty-four hours a day, in case they call each other and let anything drop. I also want Loreen's house bugged. I want dictaphones in every room. Better do that to Don Mike's flat as well. Every scrap of conversation is to be recorded."

"Can do," Currier said briskly. "It'll be expensive as blazes—but can do." He cocked his head. "How about putting tails on this O'Bregon and the woman?"

Shadow them in case they meet some place secretly. We might pick something up that way."

Ryan nodded. "Good idea."

"And here's something else," the fat man suggested. "Thus far you've been going on the theory that the dame and O'Bregon are in cahoots. Suppose you're wrong; suppose she's got some other sweetheart in the deal with her."

"If you have her tailed, that should show up—if there's any truth to it."

"Sure, son. But how's for putting out some independent lines? You know—some feelers around town, to see if there's any gossip; any rumors linking her to other guys. We might turn up some names in unexpected places. And then there's the chance that Waxie had a lot of enemies not connected with his home life. Guys he may have gypped through his bookmaking or numbers rackets. Seems to me you need a couple operatives working those angles, too."

Ryan grinned sardonically. "You want to milk this for all it's worth, don't you? The more men you put on it, the more you'll collect."

"Well, after all," Currier sulked. "You want results. A few extra bucks shouldn't stand in your way when it's your neck you're trying to save."

"Okay, okay. Do whatever you think should be done. I—" Suddenly Ryan's voice choked off as a thunderous knocking sounded on the bungalow's front door. "What's that?" he whispered.

From the porch came an authoritative, "Open up in there, Currier. We know you've got Joe Ryan with you, and we want him. This is the law."

CHAPTER IV

A Series of Snake Eyes



OR a single instant Ryan's heart seemed to squeeze dry. Then a red haze filmed his eyes, and fury shook him like a fist. "You dirty stinking creep!" he rasped at the fat man. "You knew I was coming here, and you sold me out. You tipped the cops in advance!" He took a step toward Currier. "Getting yourself in solid down at head-

quarters by turning Judas on me. I'd heard you were unethical. I should have known."

"Open up in there!" the voice on the porch shouted.

Currier made a wild grab toward his hip pocket. He never drew the gun, though. Joe Ryan was on him before he could complete the move, and Ryan's fingers closed around the fat man's throat. "No you don't." The throttling fingers tightened.

The fat man's eyes walled back, showing dirty whites. Purple mottled his flabby cheeks. He sagged.

Ryan hit him with a chopping right hook, to make sure he was unconscious, and lowered him to the floor; swiftly searched each of the private detective's pockets until he found what he wanted: a ring of keys. Then, on long loping strides, he sprang toward a rear door which gave access to the kitchen. Beyond this there was a service porch, and a small yard back of it. At the end of the yard a small frame building stood; a garage. The cops hadn't got around to covering that.

They would, though, in another minute or two, when their loud banging on the front door brought no result. Ryan knew the slenderness of his margin, and ignored the long-shot odds. He raced for the garage, found it open, saw a cumbersome black sedan inside. It looked fat and slow, like its owner, Currier. But it was the difference between immediate capture and possible escape.

Ryan wedged himself under the wheel, fitted the right key into the ignition, twisted it and mashed down on the starter. Coughing, sputtering, the motor caught and warmed. Ryan slapped into reverse gear, twisted around to stare through the back window and let out his clutch.

It wasn't simple, backing down an unfamiliar driveway in darkness. A fender scraped paint off the side of the bungalow. Around on the front porch, somebody yelled angrily. "It's a get-away! Cover that drive!"

Too late. Ryan poured gas to the engine and the sedan hurtled across the sidewalk, bounced to the street. A gun yammered. There was suddenly a neat round hole in the glass window at Ryan's left. Hunkering over the wheel, he braked and geared into forward first.

He put his throttle to the floorboards.

Rear treads screaming for traction, the heavy car lurched and took off. There were more shots. Ryan could hear the tearing of metal as they chunked into the rear luggage deck. He went from low to second almost without depressing the clutch pedal. He souped it up to fifty before he shifted again. Then he rolled.

The sedan had guts. It had a lot more speed than you'd think, looking at it. Currier must have kept it tuned like a hot rod, Ryan decided. Some guys are that way about automobiles. Cranks. Perfectionists. Ryan grinned to himself, without mirth. At least he could thank the fat man for that much.

He roared around an intersection, the car careening far over as it skidded into and out of the turn. Far behind, a siren lifted its soprano voice to a petulant shriek. That would be the cops as they got under way, starting pursuit. Ryan swung right, then left and right again, ignoring stop signs, grateful that there was little traffic at this late hour. The siren's vixen cry became gradually a whisper.

FOR a while, then, he simply drove, heading nowhere; he wanted only to put distance between himself and that yowling radio prowler. And, driving, he cursed all the people who had betrayed him. Loreen, and Don Mike, and even that venal slob of a private snoop, Eddie Currier. It seemed as if all the world had banded against Joe Ryan. Even Steve Neal had refused him the sanctuary of his wooded lodge at Oak Lake.

What was it Neal had said? "I loaned it to some friends of mine. They move in tomorrow."

Tomorrow. But until then, the place would be unoccupied, Ryan considered. He steered toward the county highway, abruptly determined upon a course of action. He would use the cabin until morning, then leave quietly and unseen. At least it would be a hiding place, no matter how temporary; a spot to duck into while all the police in town fine-combed the city proper.

And the lodge had a phone. He could use that to contact another private dick, one more trustworthy than Currier. Surely he'd be able to locate somebody willing to do a job for him, willing to

do the investigating he had asked of the fat man. Twenty miles to Oak Lake. Nineteen. Ryan pressed more speed out of the sedan. Seventeen miles. Fifteen. Ten.

He came to the turn-off. There was an archway, with a sign in rustic lettering: "NOT A PUBLIC THOROUGHFARE. FOR PROPERTY OWNERS AND GUESTS ONLY." Ryan drove through the arch, slowly, attracting no attention. The thickly spaced oaks and dense ferny undergrowth had a clean smell, a late-night pungency heightened by a vagrant breeze from the lake proper.

The sedan's headlights cut twin gashes of brilliance through crowding shadows, highlighting the dips and ruts of the dirt road with its carpeting of twigs and leaves and grass.

Presently Ryan switched off the headlights and drove by sense of direction; he had been here before, many times, and he needed no light to guide him to Steve Neal's place. It was in a circular clearing near the lakefront, built of peeled logs and mortar and hand-hewn beams, with a shake roof as steep as an Alpine chalet's. He coasted toward it, and then, abruptly, slammed a startled foot down on the brake pedal.

The lodge was dead ahead. But there was a yellow glow at the downstairs windows. Somebody was in the cabin, moving around.

Impotent rage, the anger of frustration, welled up in Joe Ryan. Consistently his luck was bad. Every time he got the dice tonight he threw snake-eyes. Bitterly he slipped out of the car and approached the lodge, wondering why its occupants had taken tenancy a day early. He peered through one of the lighted windows; saw a svelte brunette woman trying to comfort a small boy who obviously had been crying.

The woman didn't look very domestic. She wore too much rouge, too much lipstick, and she was dressed more for a night club than a lake resort in the woods. Still, she seemed to be doing a fairly competent job with the kid. She was feeding him a glass of milk and alternating that with bribes of candy. Three shirt-sleeved men sat across the room playing cribbage.

Unlike the woman, they were commonplace. Three men on a holiday in a borrowed cabin, and a woman wearing

garish makeup feeding milk to a child.

RYAN turned away. Now more than ever, he realized how utterly the cards were stacked against him. From the start, he had been bucking a marked deck, and his paltry deuces and treys were still being trumped by unremitting circumstance. He went back to Eddie Currier's car, knowing what he had to do; knowing there was only one thing he could do.

It wasn't going to be easy, he told himself as he started for the archway and the paved road beyond. Uncertainty gnawed at him. For once in his life he was unsure of himself, unsure of his ability to go through with what he had in mind. That was the risk he had to take. He had spent his lifetime taking chances, one way or another, and now he faced the biggest gamble of all.

He wondered if the taste of vengeance would be sweet enough to pay for putting his neck in a noose. He wondered what it would be like to lose this final wager, with death holding the stakes. All his future lay in the remote possibility that he could get the drop on Don Mike O'Bregon before Don Mike could go for his gun. That was quite a trick—if you could do it.

And there was Loreen, too. She was part of the picture, a vital and necessary part. Capturing her would be tough going, especially if O'Bregon was around. Yet it was essential that they be picked up together. After that, the fireworks.

Ryan sent the sedan roaring toward town, hoping against forlorn hope that he would find Don Mike still in the Vellanti mansion with Loreen—and that the homicide tech squad would have performed its functions and gone away. You couldn't fight the whole police force. It was bad enough to try to conquer a cop like Don Mike.

The miles hummed under Ryan's whirling tires, and at last the Vellanti estate came into view, pretentious behind its field stone retaining wall. Ryan parked outside the grounds, stole across the terraced lawn and the formal gardens. He gained the house, stealthily moved around to its north side. He saw only one car under the portecochere and recognized it as O'Bregon's. Maybe luck was turning his way, Joe Ryan thought.

He found a vine-covered trellis on the side of the house; tested it to make sure it would bear his weight without collapsing. It held. He climbed.

There was an open window on the second floor, and he scrambled over its sill and inside. A sour smile puckered his lips. Burglarious entry, he reflected. Add that to murder and resisting arrest and escape from the police. He was piling up the charges he would have to face if they caught him. He was jamming himself tighter with every step he took.

The room was a nursery, silent, deserted. He made sure of that before he went through the hall and hunted a back staircase. Then he tiptoed downward, through kitchen and servants' quarters and a butler's pantry.

There was nobody in the sunken library when he came to it. A brown stain on the rug was the only evidence that Waxie Vellanti had been sprawled here with a hole in his head. They had removed the corpse; the wrecking crew and newspaper reporters had come and gone. From a little room off the library came soft sobbing sounds. Feminine, the sobs were; and a low, gentle masculine voice riding under them.

Ryan looked through the doorway and saw Loreen in Don Mike's arms, weeping as he tried quietly to comfort her.

Drawing the .25 automatic he had taken from Loreen an hour ago, Ryan stepped into the room. "Okay, both of you," he said. "This is the payoff."

CHAPTER V

Gun-Justice at Oak Lake



LOREEN'S bruised face went putty-gray. Her knees buckled under her. She fainted.

This wasn't the way Ryan had envisioned it. He had expected her to be afraid, but he hadn't anticipated her complete collapse. It complicated a situation already too complex

for comfort.

At least, though, it distracted Don Mike O'Bregon. He tried to keep Loreen from falling; and in that minute, Ryan jumped him. It was almost too

easy. "Freeze, Don Mike. I want your gun." He found it, took it.

Don Mike's dark eyes were smoky. "You're a killer. But I hardly thought you'd be a fool as well, Ryan."

"You think I'm a fool because I came back here?"

"You wrote your death warrant. I'm promising you that."

Ryan shrugged. "We'll see. Pick Loreen up."

"What?"

"Pick her up. Carry her."

"Carry her where?"

"Out to your car. Hurry."

"And if I refuse?"

"It would only delay things a little," Ryan said levelly. "It would make me have to knock you unconscious. Then I'd drag you to your car, and Loreen with you."

DON MIKE stooped slowly, got his arms under the girl and lifted her. "Whatever insane thing you're pulling, Ryan, you won't get by with it for long."

"Walk. Take her outdoors."

"Why don't you be sensible? Your number is up. City, state and county cops are on the alert for you. If you know what's good for you, you'll surrender to me and stop this hair-brained—"

"Shut up," Ryan said tautly. "Take Loreen out to your car. We haven't much time."

"Time? For what?"

"The ride we're going to take."

Don Mike's pace was as measured as his speech. "So that's it. You're going to kill us so we can't give evidence against you. It won't work, Ryan. I've already made my report, and Loreen's testimony is on record."

"You've jumped to a lot of conclusions tonight," Ryan answered. "All of them wrong." They were at the car now. "Loreen goes up in front with you. You drive. And remember I'm here on the back seat, covering you."

As Don Mike took the wheel, the girl beside him stirred and regained consciousness. She moaned softly. "Wh-what . . . where . . ."

"Take it easy, my sweet," Don Mike said. His optimism wasn't too convincing as he added, "You've nothing to worry about."

"She's got plenty to worry about," Ryan said from the tonneau as the car

got under way.

Loreen gasped, squirmed around, peered at him in the darkness. "Joe! What—what's happening? What are you going to d-do?"

"That depends on you," he told her. Then, to O'Bregon, "Head for Oak Lake. You know the way."

"Oak Lake? Why?" the red-haired man sounded uneasy. "Good gosh, man, you can't hope to get away with a double murder there. Don't you realize there are people in all those cabins who'll hear your gunshots and—"

"You sound scared," Ryan's tone was taunting.

"All right, I am scared. For Loreen, not for myself. Look, Ryan, I'll make a trade with you. Let her go and I'll take whatever you dish out."

"No. She's the main part of this. She's the one who framed me. Aren't you, hon?"

"Joe, I—I didn't want to. I couldn't—I—"

"You couldn't help it. Is that what you're trying to say?" Ryan leaned forward. "You were forced, because of Lanny."

She drew a choked breath. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"When I broke into your house just now I came through the nursery," he said enigmatically. He knew she would understand.

Don Mike demanded, "What is this double talk?"

"Are you sure you don't know?" Joe Ryan asked quietly.

"I don't get any part of it."

Ryan's laugh was brittle. "Just keep driving. Faster." He fell silent, then; silent and watchful as the miles sped past. Up front, Loreen edged closer to Don Mike as if seeking comfort from him, as if instinctively wanting to be very near him. Ryan noticed it, and discovered that he had lost his capacity for jealousy or regret. A sort of fatalism came to him, an acceptance of things as they were. Presently he said, "You turn in here."

Don Mike drove under the Oak Lake archway. "Now what?"

"Cut your lights and your motor. Coast the rest of the way."

"And then?"

"Park. This will do, right here. Now, out. You too, Loreen."

Don Mike slid across the front seat,

got out behind her, slipped an arm around her waist and faced Ryan as he came from the sedan's tonneau. "This is murder, Ryan."

"What was it when you pulled your *ley fuga* routine on me, and shot at me as I ran?" Ryan asked evenly.

The red-haired man shifted uncomfortably. "Too bad I missed," he said. "You probably won't even give us that much chance."

"You fool!" Ryan curled his lip. "You still think I'm a killer, don't you? Well, you're wrong. I'm not. Now move ahead of me, both of you. And no noise. See that lodge ahead, where the lights are in the windows? We're going to look through those windows and then I'm going to ask Loreen one question."

Reluctantly, and obviously bewildered, Don Mike and the girl obeyed Ryan's command. They came to the cabin, peered in. Across the room, those same three men were still playing cribbage. There was no sign, though, of the over-rouged brunette and the kid she'd been feeding milk to.

But there was another room, another window. Looking in, Ryan saw the woman and the child. He beckoned to Loreen.

She stared. "Lanny—my baby—oh, Joe—Joe—how did you—"

"Quiet!" he said. Then he grabbed Don Mike. "Here's your gun. Go in the front and go in shooting. I'll take this way." Drawing that other automatic, the one which had killed Waxie Vellanti, Ryan smashed himself at the side window of the cabin's living room; hit the glass with his catapulting weight.

And as he crashed inside, he saw the murderer who had tried to frame him. He saw his partner, Steve Neal.

NEAL came out of the kitchen almost at the exact instant that Ryan shattered the window and landed in the lodge. But Ryan's attention was focused, not on Neal, but on the three men at the cribbage board. They looked like bond salesmen or bank tellers, but he knew they were gunsels—Neal's hired torpedoes. He saw them go for their automatics.

He fired.

That shot was like a signal. The room was abruptly full of roaring thunder, stabbing lances of flame, the acrid reek of burned cordite. One gunman fell

sprawling, his kneecap fractured and a shoulder smeared with crimson. Bullets spat at Joe Ryan as he triggered again. A second torpedo pitched forward on his face, quivered, tried to get up, then lay very quietly.

Ryan felt a hot stinging needle of pain in his left thigh. He was hit, but he had no time to reckon how badly. He lurched, wincing under the slug's impact; and that lurch saved him from a volley of lead pumped at him by Neal.

The white-haired, wiry little financier had a Luger, and fire burgeoned from its winking snout like a spray of bright yellowish blossoms. The remaining two hoods were backing up their employer's play with yammering guns; Ryan tried to wing them, missed and toppled sidewise as a slug hammered across his ribs and drove breath from his lungs. It was like being struck by an axe. He was paralyzed. He fell, and the strength flowed out of him.

The gunsels closed in for the kill. But even as they moved toward him, the front door exploded open and Don Mike O'Bregon lunged over the threshold with his .38 booming like the drums of doom.

Through a haze of pain, Ryan saw one torpedo fling up his arms and slam backward against the wall as if pinned there by some unseen sword. Then the man slid floorward, slowly. His shirt tore at the back, snagged on a projecting nail. Flesh tore with the shirt, but the gunman probably didn't feel it. Not with a .38 bullet through his heart.

The remaining torpedo threw away his automatic; held out both hands in abject surrender to Don Mike. And Don Mike didn't realize that Steve Neal was drawing a bead on him.

But Ryan saw it. He tried to yell a warning, and failed; there was no air in his lungs, no sound in his throat. His fingers were twitching spasmodically in his desperate effort to control them, to lift the little .25 automatic. Somehow his striving bore fruit. He raised the weapon—and shot that Luger out of Neal's fist.

The wiry, white-haired man screeched hideously; stared at his splintered hand and screamed again. Then Loreen came into the cabin; and for a while after that, things were a foggy blur to Ryan. When he forced himself out of it, Loreen had her child cradled in her arms, the

over-rouged brunette woman was handcuffed to the gunsel who'd surrendered, and Steve Neal cowered in a corner, beaten, keening over his crippled hand.

Joe Ryan staggered upright. There was a searing agony slugging at his ribs, and blood from his thigh made his trouser leg sodden. Ignoring his hurts, he stalked toward Neal.

"Well, murderer, this is it."

"Don't—don't kill me!"

Ryan's eyes were contemptuous. "You wanted the whole works," he said. "You wanted my share of our gambling houses, as well as your own. And you wanted to take over Waxie Vellanti's grifts in addition—his handbooks, his numbers rackets. By killing him and framing me to take the fall, you figured to get rid of us both so you could step in and take over."

"My hand—bleeding—"

"Bumping Waxie was easy. That was just muscle. But the frame part needed outside help," Ryan went on, inexorably. "To make it fit me, you needed perjured testimony from somebody the cops would believe. Loreen was the one you picked; Waxie's wife. And to make her do it, you kidnaped her little boy."

"Get—a doctor—" Neal dangled his red-dripping fingers.

RYAN ignored that. "Having shot Waxie and snatched the kid and sent him here to the lodge with your stooges, you made Loreen call me to her house. You must have rehearsed her on what she was to tell me; and you probably beat her to make sure she got it straight."

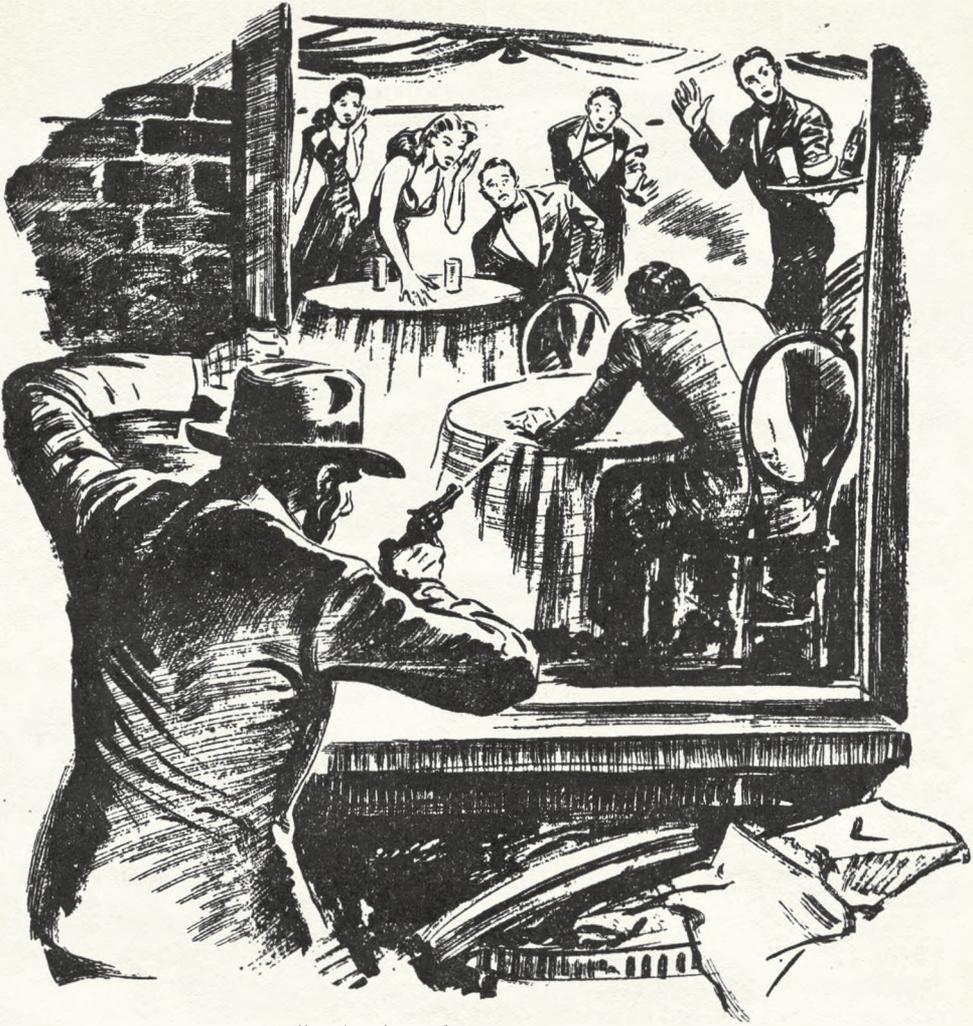
"He did, Joe!" Loreen said from across the room. "Then he hid behind some draperies to—make sure I tricked you into confessing to the police. He was there all the time, when I pulled a gun on you."

Ryan glowered at his white-haired, white-faced partner. "Now I see why you didn't answer your phone when I tried to ring you up about getting me a lawyer. You weren't in your penthouse at all."

"Please—I need a doctor—"

"But you must have skipped home pretty soon, because you were there when I arrived. Then you sent me to that private dick, Currier, and the cops came after me. At first I thought he had stooled on me. But later I remembered,

(Concluded on Page 96)



Willie aimed carefully and squeezed trigger

OLD DOC

By GEORGE METCALF JOHNSON

Willie Stone had everything all set — including an alibi!

OLD Doc's kindly, troubled glance was fixed on the sullen young face. Shifty eyes, refusing to meet his, flickered off, as restless as the darting tongue of a snake.

"Looks like this is the pay-off, Willie," Old Doc said. "Here's where I better let the police take over."

"Aw, Doc, don't call the cops," Willie Stone whined. "Give me another chance."

"Another? How many chances must you have?" Old Doc's voice trailed off into silence. Willie Stone lighted a cigarette, swearing inaudibly under his breath. "I brought you into the world," Old Doc went on, "and I sat at your mother's side when she left it. Her last thoughts were of you. 'Look after my boy—my Willie, please, Doctor Ormsby,' she begged. 'He's not really bad; only a mite wild—and weak.

He needs help, Doctor. After I'm gone there'll be nobody, unless you do it.'

"Don't worry, Mrs. Stone,' I said. 'I'll take care of Willie.' She smiled up at me, and died.

"I've done my best to keep that promise. I found you jobs you weren't man enough to hold. I've given you money. Time and again I've gotten you out of trouble. The sad part of it is, Willie, that you're just no good. Not even the army could make a decent, respectable citizen out of you. And now what happens? You break into my office! You try to rob me—the only true friend you've had since your mother passed away. That's hard to take."

Willie Stone, slouched in his chair, stirred uneasily. "It was a rotten way to treat you, Doc. I know that. But I was on a spot, see. I had to have some cash. A guy was putting the heat on me. He said pay up—or else."

Old Doc felt very old, weary, disillusioned. The problem of Willie Stone somehow seemed remote. He knew he should go into it. Stray rumors had come to him, linking his protégé with one Mope Martin, an underworld character reputedly tied in with the numbers racket. Was it Martin who had some hold on Willie? He'd have to find out about that. Another time, perhaps; not now. With difficulty Old Doc kept his mind from wandering. It was late.

"How much, Willie?"

"A grand. Say, Doc, if you'll—"

FOR a moment or two Old Doc stared at Willie from beneath frowning brows.

"Against my own better judgment I'm going to let you have it, Willie, on condition you sign a paper admitting you're a thief. I'll help you make one more fresh start. I won't use the confession as long as you behave, but a single false step and I'll enter a complaint with the police, turning over the paper as evidence. That would mean prison sure. Do you realize that?"

"Yeah, Doc. It's okay. I'll go straight from now on."

"I've heard that story before. I hope you make it stick this time." Old Doc began writing on one of his prescription blanks:

I hereby confess that at 1:30 on the morning of July 8, 1947, I was

caught by Dr. J. C. Ormsby in the act of stealing from his office.

"Put your name down," he commanded. "You understand what this involves—a confession to breaking and entering?"

Willie's furtive eyes took in the brief statement. "Old fool must be in a fog," he thought. "Today's the seventh. What the devil." Aloud he said, "I get it, Doc." He scrawled his signature.

Old Doc added the word *witness*, and after it his own name. The paper he carefully tucked away in his billfold. "I hate to hold a club over you, Willie, but it's for your own good. I'm afraid I've been too easy-going in the past."

"You've been swell to me, Doc, better than I deserve. Now about that grand—could I have it in cash?" Willie knew that Old Doc often had large sums of money on hand. It was this knowledge which led to the frustrated attempt.

Willie was feeling pretty cocky as he left Old Doc's. To be sure he had been badly frightened by Mope Martin's ultimatum—"pay up inside two days—or else." When Mope used that "or else" line, he meant it. And Mope was bad news.

But now Willie's panic had evaporated, due to the healthy glow generated by Doc Ormsby's donation. He was in the chips. He had capital. And why not take full advantage of the situation? There was plenty time to collect himself a few potatoes before rushing to pay off Mope. And plenty opportunities for a guy who knew his way around and had what it took to back his judgment. It was Willie's quaint notion that he knew his way around.

He pondered ways and means. Slug Vertucci's crap game would be going full swing, for now was no more than the shank of the evening. Things didn't usually warm up at Slug's until well after midnight. Willie picked them up and laid them down.

To state that the mob around Mr. Vertucci's crap lay-out welcomed Willie Stone with open arms would be rather wide of the truth. His arrival was not greeted with loud cheers.

"Look what the cat dragged in," one of the gamblers observed sourly.

Mr. Vertucci himself was even more brutally frank. "Beat it, bum!" he snarled, breathing a choice blend of gar-

lic, salami, and beer over two rose-tinted cubes.

"I got the stuff," Willie hastily said, and flashed his roll.

"Okay, that's different." Mollified, Mr. Vertucci turned to the business at hand, and deftly made his point.

He let the pot ride. Willie managed to horn in to the extent of a hundred dollars. Mr. Vertucci, it soon developed, was hotter than a two-dollar gat, for he rolled a natural on his first pass. Again he let it ride. Willie, to protect his investment, put in two hundred this time, and saw it vanish when Mr. Vertucci, invoking Big Dick, scored with ridiculous ease.

By now the pot had been built up to two thousand.

"I'm shootin' the two G's, gents," Slug intoned, rattling the dice briskly in a massive palm. "Fade me!"

Willie scowled in concentration. The guy was shot in the pants with luck, but he'd over-reached himself. He was due to crack right now. Willie knew it. He had a hunch. And no sense backing a hunch with peanuts.

"I'll take seven hundred of it," he said loudly, to the vast astonishment of the crap players, none of whom had ever known Willie Stone to have that kind of money.

WITH a minimum of wasted time and confusion the required sum was subscribed. Willie waited, hardly daring to breathe, while Slug warmed up the dice and then bounced them off the board at the far end of the table. They stopped spinning at six and one—and Willie Stone was cleaner than the family wash on Monday afternoon. He hadn't kept Doc's grand in his possession long enough to become accustomed to the feel of it.

"Look, Slug," he babbled desperately. "I'm flat. Stake me to a yard, will you?"

Mr. Vertucci profanely challenged Willie Stone to name one valid reason why he, Slug, should stake him, Willie, to a yard or any fraction thereof.

"This here is an open game," he concluded. "You got potatoes, you can play ball. No potatoes, no dice."

And that seemed to be that.

Willie tried to pry a modest loan out of other members of the party, but with no success. His heart wasn't in it, anyway, for Willie knew without being told

that the effort was useless. No one ever staked him. No one, that is, except Old Doc. And Doc wouldn't repeat in a hurry. Disconsolately Willie wandered forth into the night, cursing his luck.

The deathly fear of Mope Martin returned with crushing force. What could he do now? No use trying to stall Mope along any longer. He'd played that angle for all it was worth. Maybe the best thing to do was take a powder—get out of town and stay out. Trouble with that was a guy needed money to be on the lam.

Willie had a room in a cheap flop-house. He went there for want of a better place, but didn't sleep too well. If only he had the nerve to rub Mope Martin out! But there was one thing Willie feared even more than Mope Martin—the electric chair.

Next day things were worse rather than better. An errand boy of Mope's met Willie, as if casually. "Don't forget, punk," he warned. "Mope's expecting you."

"Sure, I know." Willie bluffed a confidence he was far from feeling. "I'll be seeing him."

As the hours drifted inexorably by, Willie gradually gave way to utter panic. He was caught in a hot spot. There was nothing he could do—nothing—unless—Old Doc had plenty more cash salted down in his office. And just because Doc had caught him the night before was no sign he'd catch him again. And this time he'd be more careful. This time he had to make it good.

Willie waited until midnight. Getting in was a cinch. Then he stopped abruptly, hairs on the back of his neck stiffening. A cold, unpleasant prickling crawled up and down his spine. What was that noise upstairs? Again he heard it. The mournful, wavering howl of a small dog. Doc's little fox terrier, Mike. Why would Mike be howling like that? Doc couldn't sleep through such a noise. But Doc had to be home. He never went out on night calls any more. Not since young Doc Holden came back from the army. Could Doc be sick—or something?

Willie came to a sudden decision. He'd go up to Doc's bedroom. It would be safe enough. If Doc was sick he could say he'd been going by and heard the dog, stopped in to see if Doc was okay. Boldly Willie started up the stairs.

Mike heard him, and began a furious barking.

"It's all right, Mike," Willie said. Mike recognized his voice. The barks changed to whines. Willie opened the door. "What's the matter, Mike?"

Mike tried to tell him, by running over towards his master's bed. Willie found the light switch. Old Doc lay motionless. Swiftly Willie crossed the room. He felt of the body. It was still warm, but there was not the faintest flicker of a heart-beat.

"Aw, the old Geezer's dead!"

Willie's brain worked at lightning speed. There might be something in this for him—if he were smart enough to figure it out. For instance, he could recover that confession Doc had forced him to sign. But hold everything! Maybe he didn't want to play it that way. Maybe he'd be smarter to let other people find the confession. Doc's being in a fog the previous night had handed him a made-to-order alibi for 1:30 tonight. He could knock off Mope and laugh at the police. That paper was his guarantee against burning in the electric chair. And with Old Doc dead the law probably wouldn't concern itself too deeply with the fact that he'd been caught in an attempted robbery. But he'd have to work fast, and he'd need a rod.

QUIETLY Willie put out the light, and left the bedroom. He didn't close the door, but wiped the knob just in case. If Mike had full run of the house he wouldn't make so much fuss. Anyway no one would be likely to hear him. There was a .32 Colt in a drawer of Doc's desk. Willie counted on that gun. He wouldn't have time to dig one up anywhere else.

The desk was locked, but Willie jimmied it open without any trouble. That was part of the game. Wasn't it tonight that Doc was supposed to have found him in a burglary? The rod was there, and loaded, as Willie learned from a quick examination. He also located a large manila envelope, plump with paper money, which went into his coat pocket. It was exactly two minutes before one when he let himself out to the street. At one-thirty he would blast Mope Martin and no copper could hang the job on him.

Mope would be in the Club Paradise,

sitting at his special table, waiting for his current heart-throb to finish her spot in the floor show. The babe went on shortly after half-past.

Mope's table was about twenty feet from a window which opened on an alley leading around to the rear of the club. Willie had a perfect picture of the whole set-up, one he had often longed to take advantage of. Now he had his chance. Mope's back was always to the window. All Willie had to do was pump two or three slugs into it, and make his getaway through the alley.

The club was a mile from Doc's. Plenty of time. He just had to be sure nobody saw him. Willie didn't hurry. No point getting there much before the dead-line. *Dead-line*, huh! Willie chuckled grimly. That was a laugh. Mope Martin's dead-line.

A distant clock was striking the half-hour as Willie slipped stealthily into the alley. From the Club Paradise came a confused mingling of varied sounds—voices, laughter, the clatter of dishes, the blare of a hot trumpet. Willie located his window, protected only by a fine-meshed metal screen. Through it he could see very well. Quite well enough.

Everything had worked out on schedule. Mope was in the usual place, waiting to give his babe a great big hand. This was too easy, like shooting a sitting duck.

Willie drew Doc's gun from his hip pocket, leveled it at the back of Mope Martin, and gently squeezed the trigger. He saw Mope slump forward on the table, but sent two more slugs after the first just to make sure. Then Willie went away from there fast, following a carefully planned line of retreat.

This strategy nearly went on the rocks when an unknown individual darted from the rear entrance as Willie flashed by, and made a vicious attempt to trip him. But Willie hurdled that difficulty, and vanished into the dark.

Doc's gun was hot enough now to burn a hole in his pocket. For it to be located in his possession would be fatal. He had to get rid of it, and soon, so Willie dropped the Colt in the first sewer catch basin he passed. The dump where he flopped was dark and silent. No one saw him go to his room. He slept much better than the night before.

A pounding at the door roused Willie

next morning. This would be the cops, but what the devil? His nose was clean.

"Wha'd'ya want?" he mumbled.

"Open up!"

"Okay, okay. Don't bust a lung."

Leisurely Willie started for the door, pausing to collect and light a cigarette on the way. Just as he had expected, two plainclothes men.

"Get some clothes on, Willie," one of them said. "This is it."

"Why can't you flat-feet leave a guy alone?" Willie protested bitterly. "I ain't done nothing."

"Only bump off Mope Martin at the Club Paradise last night."

"Wha'd'ya know! So Mope got his, huh! But I wasn't the Boy Scout that did it."

"Don't kid anybody, punk. We've been going over your past with a fine tooth comb. Mope was putting the screws on you for a grand you owed him. You had the moolya night before last. We figure Doc Ormsby gave it to you, because no one else would. But you dropped it in a crap game at Slug Vertucci's. Then you couldn't pay Mope. So you had to plug him or be taken for a one-way ride. And you were spotted at the Paradise scrambling away just after the shooting."

WILLIE'S voice rose in excited denial. "Says who? I ain't been near that joint for a month. Hold on! What time was Mope croaked?"

The two dicks looked questioningly at each other. One shrugged his shoulders. "That's no military secret, I guess, Willie. It was within a minute or two of one-thirty."

"Okay. So that clears me. At one-thirty last night I was with Doc Ormsby in his office. And Doc will back me up."

"Yeah? If Doc said you were there I'd believe him, and so would everybody. He's the only friend of yours anyone would believe, even on a stack of Bibles. But he can't alibi you, Willie. Old Doc died in his sleep some time in the night. The woman who comes by the day to take care of his place found him dead this morning."

"Gosh!" Willie muttered. "Poor Old Doc! He sure was one good egg. But even dead, Old Doc can alibi me. There's a paper in his billfold to prove I was there at one-thirty last night."

Willie failed to add that the paper

also proved him to be a heel of the first water. Don't cross bridges until you come to them, was his motto.

Willie's supreme confidence was quite convincing.

"You might be right," one of the detectives admitted. "I wouldn't know. But it's easy to check. Drag on a pair of pants. We'll go over to Old Doc's for a look at his billfold. If this paper don't show up I'd say you're practically squatting in the hot seat right now."

* * * * *

It was the pain which had awakened Old Doc; sharp, rending stabs of excruciating agony. He recognized the symptoms.

Old Doc lay still. This was the end. Yet he had seen too many people die to be afraid of death himself. To him death would come as a welcome friend, promising release—a chance to rest, to lay down a burden grown too heavy for his failing strength.

But out of the swirling mists of pain a voice seemed to be calling. Relentlessly it beat at Old Doc's inner consciousness, tormenting him. He felt a stir of vague resentment. Could not an old man be permitted to die in peace? Was there something he must do before he died? Something forgotten? Old Doc tried to think.

Suddenly he remembered. The confession signed by Willie Stone. He couldn't die leaving that for people to find—not after his solemn promise to Willie's mother.

Old Doc sat up. The pain increased, became intolerable. Grimly he fought against it—against the weakness that pressed down on him like a crushing weight. He dragged himself towards his rumpled pants, flung over a chair when he undressed. One hand clutched at his chest, as if to hold captive there the faint spark which threatened to escape too soon.

After an eternity Old Doc gained his goal. Fumbling fingers unbuttoned the hip pocket, withdrew the billfold, and extracted the slip of paper. He touched a lighted match to one corner, watched the blaze flare up, subside to embers. The black residue he crumpled to dust.

Then, his mind at ease, Old Doc began the weary journey back to bed and his last, long sleep.

BULLETS FOR FREE

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

Chet Lacey simply had to take on the case when his old flame, Vera Manners, suddenly had her husband's corpse on her hands!

IT HAD been a tough night. Therefore when the phone rang and my radium dial night table clock told me it was six bells in the wee small hours, I rolled over and tried to go back to sleep. No dice. There's something about phone bells and telegrams I can't pass up. So finally I grabbed the instrument and answered.

"Chet Lacey?" said a sweet voice at the other end of the wire then went right on, "Chet, darling, this is Vera. Vera Manners. Please come out here right away. You must! Please Chet!"

At this, the old Lacey brain pushed the sleep fog to one side. Vera Manners? Six long years since Vera and I had rung tavern door bells, and had fun. She was Vera Baker then, and very, very special, I might tell you.

"Why the hurry, Vera?" I managed.

"Come out here right away, Chet," she said. "I've absolutely got to see you at once."

"Hold it, sweetness," I chided. "Jeff Manners, your husband. And a very swell guy. Remember?"

"Chet, shut up! It's about Jeff that I want to see you. Chet, if you only half meant the things you used to say to me, come here right away! You know the address?"

"Mapleside, out past Washington," I said promptly.

"That's right," she cut in. "And please hurry!"

A click told me she'd hung up, so I grimaced at my reflection in the mirror and started to dress. Vera had been quite a wonderful gal some six years ago.

It was about a twenty-minute drive

to Mapleside just past Washington, and on the way out there I thought about Vera Baker, about six years ago, and gave it a careful once over. She had been blonde, cute, curved and a bundle of TNT all fused up and ready to go. We'd had a lot of fun together until, one night, I introduced Jeff Manners to Vera. It was one of those at-first-sight things. Vera had absolutely everything a woman should have, plus

extras. And Jeff had three million bucks in his own name, with more coming along, when some relatives of his would take up lodgings under a tombstone. So, as that song goes, I was the best man in the end.

WELL, that had been okay by me. Soon Vera and Jeff settled down to spending all those dollars, and I had kept on with trying to make a few more now and then. I hadn't seen either of them for a couple of years, but I'd read about them frequently in the newspapers. The last bit I had said that Mr. and Mrs. Jeff Manners were not so very much that way



CHET LACEY

Advancing a few steps,
I dropped down on one
knee beside the body



about each other any more but I hadn't paid much attention to the report.

Anyway, there I was, on my way to see Vera. Frankly, a couple of times I almost turned back. Ten to one it was a lovers' quarrel with too much gin and scotch for a chaser. And Vera was bringing up the old flame to toss in Jeff's face.

Well, when I drove up in front of the Manners' mansion, I noticed that all ground floor lights were on. Also, there were some upstairs lights gleaming, too. So once again a little bird whispered for me to go. A big party was going on and

the phone call was a gag.

But when Vera answered my ring, right away I knew that no gag had been pulled on the Lacey. She was white as a sheet and more beautiful than ever. When she saw me she gulped, grabbed my hand, yanked me inside, and collapsed on my shoulder.

"Oh, Chet, thank God you've come!"

I let her stay put for a while. Then I pushed her out in front of me, and looked her over. She was just about all in.

"Easy, beautiful," I said gently. "Come up for air. Take a lot of it, honey. Then

tell old man Lacey all about it."

She got hold of herself, smiled at me through the tears, but didn't say a thing. Instead she took me by the hand and led me down the hall and left into the living room. When we were a few steps inside the living room she let go my hand. I mean, I guess she did. Frankly, at that moment she could have cut my hand off at the wrist and I wouldn't have noticed.

My eyes, and both of them, were fastened on the body on the floor just in front of a long couch that flanked the right side of the fireplace. The body in life had belonged to Jeff Manners. He was dead, now. His right temple was just a glistening red mass that trickled down over his right ear and congealed slightly. His right hand lay palm up, and a couple of inches from his stiff fingertips was a thirty-eight pistol.

Well, in my business you get used to everything except seeing old friends, such as Jeff Manners stretched out cold and dead on a living room rug. To be honest, that living room went around a couple of times while I struggled with myself. Then I advanced a few steps, dropped to one knee by his side and one look was all I needed to tell me all I needed to know. The entire perimeter of that glistening red blotch was pitted with burned powder.

For the want of something better to say, I'll just state that I stood up like a man coming out of a bad dream and looked at Vera. She looked at me, shook her head, and tried to speak. But the words just wouldn't come. I was able to do a little better.

"Why?" I finally asked. And my voice had never sounded to me that way before.

"No, he didn't, Chet," Vera said. And her voice was like pebbles mixing with other pebbles. "He had been drinking. He accused me of all kinds of frightful things. Said he was going—was going kill me. Oh, Chet! *Chet!*"

That ended things for a moment. I jumped and grabbed her just as she started to fall flat on her face. I eased her over and into a chair—one that faced away from Jeff on the floor.

"Think it over good, honey," I said gently. "And then give it to me slowly."

SHE motioned for me to stay close, but it was a time for me to think straight, and I always do that sort of thing best on my feet with nobody within reach.

"I had a splitting headache and went to bed early," she said. "About an hour ago Jeff called for me to come down. Well, I did. I saw at once that he had been drinking heavily. Of course, that wasn't unusual. He started right in accusing me of all kinds of crazy things. He was raving. It was terrible, Chet."

"And then?" I said. "Go on, Beautiful."

"I tried to get him to go to bed," Vera said. "But that just made him madder. He struck me, and then he grabbed that gun out of the table drawer there, and said he was going to kill me. I—I don't remember what happened next, but I guess I tried to grab for the gun. We struggled, and it went off. Jeff fell to the floor and I fainted. When I came to I couldn't think of anything but to call you. Chet! Oh, what shall I do? I've killed Jeff. My husband. I've killed him!"

On the last her voice went up to the top of the scale. I did what I've done a dozen times before under similar circumstances. I grabbed her and shook her hard.

She snapped out of it, made as though to come for me claws out, and then went limp and all raggedy.

"I killed him, Chet!" she whispered. "I killed Jeff, my husband!"

I didn't say a thing. I was struggling to control myself. She'd killed Jeff Manners, one of the swellest persons the dear Lord ever let live on this earth. We had been friends since way back in grammar school days. That his father owned half the town had never meant a thing to Jeff. He was regular through and through. We'd been the battery on the grammar school team, and on the high school team, too. Jeff heaving them, and me receiving.

The records will show you that he was the greatest southpaw ever to lob a ball for Yale. And if you ask me, which I don't care, had it not been for his old man's millions that were eventually passed down to Jeff, he could have become the top southpaw in either the American or National League.

But Old Man Manners had said, no, and Jeff not only loved but respected his father. So he had stepped from Yale into the business. Nope. Right at the very bottom, and a vice presidency when he made the grade. Which he did, and fast, too.

With an effort I shook off the memories that hurt, and looked at Vera.

"Why did you call me?" I asked. "There's only one thing I can do, Vera."

She looked at me blank eyed for a moment, then nodded.

"I know, Chet, I know. But, I was so frightened! So . . . I just suddenly thought of your name, and knew I had to have you out here. I called Travers Patterson, too. But he wasn't in, so I left a message for him to come over as soon as he did get in."

"Travers Patterson?" I echoed because I was too busy thinking of other things to concentrate on the name.

"Jeff's attorney, and mine, too," Vera said. Then with a catch in her voice, "I'll go to jail, won't I? So after calling you I thought I should call Travers. Oh, Chet! This is just like a horrible nightmare, isn't it?"

As she got off the last she buried her face in her hands. And if you've ever heard a woman sob from way down deep, then you know exactly what I listened to. I wanted to go over and comfort her, but I guess I was still hypnotized by the sight of Jeff's dead body there on the floor. I looked down at him, and maybe I whispered things inside of me that I'm not going to repeat here and now. Then I stepped over to Vera and put a hand on top of her head. Yes, sort of awkward like.

"Easy, honey, easy," I said. "Where's the phone? I don't see any in this room. And by the way, that army of servants you used to have. Nobody around?"

"Thursday," she said without lifting her head. "Day off for all of them. Jeff and I usually dined out. The phone's in the hall to your left."

I stepped away and went out into the hall. I opened the first door to my left but it was a closet. I looked for a moment, closed it and opened the next door. It was an all glass affair, and the phone was inside. I called our local police headquarters, and was connected with Sol Bierman, chief of Homicide, and for the record the best friend I ever had, and the darnedest thorn in my side. No man living had taken Lacey down as many pegs as Sol Bierman.

AFTER the call I went back into the living room. Vera had her face still buried in her hands and was weeping silently. I could tell by the heaving of

her shoulders. Very shapely shoulders, but at the moment I didn't notice them particularly because I couldn't keep my eyes off Jeff on the floor. It just didn't seem real. It just didn't make sense. In a crazy abstract sort of way I almost expected Jeff to scramble up on his feet, and give the laugh to both of us. But, Jeff Manners would never scramble up onto those feet of his in this world.

Then suddenly the silvery note of the front door bell snapped me out of my reverie. Vera looked at me, blinked away the tears and managed a brave smile.

"That must be Travers," she said. "You called the police, didn't you? They couldn't possibly get here this quick."

I didn't say anything. I walked out into the hall and answered the front door. It was Travers Patterson. His mouth was open to say something, but when he saw me he sort of gulped a couple of times.

"You're Chester Lacey, aren't you?" he said. "Vera left a message at my home."

"Come in, Patterson," I said, and stepped back. "Vera's in the living room. Go on in."

He seemed to hesitate, and looked at me hard. Then shaking the rain from his snap brim he came in past me, and went on into the living room. I made it a point to be about five seconds behind him. I found him stiff as a fence post, his hat dropped to the floor, and his eyes bugged out a mile.

"Vera and Jeff had a scrap," I said, standing right behind him. "She says he'd had a couple too many. He decided to shoot her. She wrestled with him, and the gun went off. It was one of those things. I've called the police. They're on the way, now."

When I had finished saying that I walked around and past him and sat down in a chair. He still stood rooted, as though he'd been belted between the eyes with a ball bat. Then he shook himself out of it and walked quickly over to Vera. His two hands found her shoulders and remained there.

"Oh, my dear, my poor dear!" he said. "Now, don't you worry. It was no fault of yours, I'm sure. I know how Jeff could be at times. Well, never mind, my dear. I'm here, and I'll do everything for you."

She didn't look up at him. She still kept her face buried in her hands. But,

her voice made this old calloused heart of mine sort of twist and quiver.

"Then bring back Jeff. Please! Please, bring back Jeff!"

Patterson looked appealingly at me, but I simply shrugged and made the appropriate gesture with one hand. He shook his head, then picked up his hat and sank down in the nearest chair, completely unmindful of his dripping top-coat.

"I can't believe it!" he suddenly burst out. "I simply can't believe it. It just isn't true!"

I didn't make any comment. Probably it wouldn't have made any difference if I had because at that moment the silvery note of the front doorbell sounded again. I answered, and it was Sol Bierman, and his crew of boys from Homicide. Sol stepped in shaking off the rain drops, and gave me the fishy eye.

"A real nice quiet night, and then you had to call, Chester," he grunted. "Won't you ever learn to stay away from dead people?"

"Shut up!" I clipped, as something boiled up in me. "He was one of the best friends I ever had. Right on a par with you, Sol."

A whole conglomeration of expressions raced across Bierman's face. Then he reached out a hand and touched mine lightly. "Sorry, Chet," he said quietly. "I am also a heel on occasion. Come along boys."

I stepped back and let Bierman, Doc Sperry, and three or four others file in. When I pointed they walked straight down the hall and turned left into the living room. I didn't tag along. Instead, I went to that hall closet I'd opened by mistake, and opened it again. I spent a minute or more looking inside, and then I closed the door and went on down and into the living room. By then Sol, stony-faced, was listening to Vera tell what she had to tell. It was exactly the same story she had told me.

WHEN she had finished I expected Travers Patterson to leap to his feet and shoot off a lot of legal stuff about Vera not being technically guilty under the law, but, I got fooled. Patterson didn't open his mouth. He just sat there in his chair looking like a deep sea diver coming up for air that he needed plenty bad.

"And, just why are you here, Chester?"

The question was from Bierman, of course. And when Sol calls me, Chester, it means that friendship is out, and if I've been pulling a fast one and he can nail me, he sure will do it. But, for once I wasn't pulling a fast one. I told him exactly how and why I happened to be there. He listened with all the interest of a cigar store Indian, and then went into a huddle with his boys. They did all the stuff they usually do when they are called out to meet a corpse. It took maybe twenty minutes. Then Sol gave them the nod that they could take Jeff away and came over to where Vera, Travers Patterson, and I, more or less sat together in a huddle.

He ignored Patterson and me, and looked at Vera.

"Would you care to tell me the nature of your husband's accusations, Mrs. Manners?" he said with a sympathetic smile. "I mean, did he name anybody in particular?"

Watching Vera I saw her flinch, saw that telltale flash in her eyes that I had known so well six years ago. In short, watch your step, actions, and language, brother, the fuse is lit! Just for a second I recognized the old keep-off signs.

"He named every man friend I've ever had, I think," Vera answered him in a dull voice. "He—he was very drunk. And when he was like that, Jeff imagined all sorts of crazy, impossible things."

"Perhaps some of the servants heard him?" Bierman murmured.

Vera shook her head and told him what she had told me. Sol looked terribly disappointed for an instant. But only for an instant.

"You two had dined alone, and you retired early," he said in a tired voice. "Your husband sat in this room drinking, and . . . and imagining things. He called for you to come down, and said what you have told us. That is your story, Mrs. Manners?"

Still watching Vera I saw those old storm warning flags unfurl again. But she hauled them down, and bent her head.

"I killed him," she said in an almost inaudible whisper. "If I hadn't been so surprised, so shocked when he took that gun out of the drawer, I might have been able to calm him. Oh, I don't care, now. Arrest me. Put me in the electric chair. I deserve it. I killed Jeff. I killed my

husband! Stop questioning me! I'm a murderess, don't you understand?"

By the time Vera had finished, her voice was way up on the roof and, like I had done, Travers Patterson grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her plenty. It was enough. She calmed down quick. Sol Bierman looked at me, and I just looked blank eyed back at him. He sighed, and looked at Patterson.

"To save time, and a lot of red tape, Mr. Patterson," he said, "I'm charging Mrs. Manners to your custody. You will be notified when to produce her at the coroner's inquest. Good night, Mrs. Manners. I'm terribly sorry. Coming, Chester?"

Smooth. Very smooth. And for a second I almost shook my head and told Sol that I guessed I'd stick around awhile. But on second thought I decided against it. I had had all I wanted of the Manners' mansion for one night. Also, even though it was near five in the morning I had things to do. So, I murmured sympathetic words to Vera, who accepted them with tears and other things in her eyes. Later I said good night to Patterson, and followed Bierman outside. He walked with me to my car, and waited until I was behind the wheel.

"You wouldn't have any ideas, Chester?" he said casually.

"None, Sol!" I said harshly. "And right now I want to go some place and be sick as a dog!"

Bierman opened his mouth as though to speak, but seemed to think better of it.

"Do that, Chester," he said soothingly. "And keep in touch with me."

"Sure, sure!" I snarled, let in the clutch, and spun a half ton of bluestone back at his police car parked just in back of mine.

I DROVE back to town fast, and when I got there I stopped at the nearest all night restaurant that had a phone and a phone book. I looked up a lot of numbers but I didn't call one. Instead, I went calling in person. Between then and eight o'clock, when I finally got back to my apartment, I got more cussing out from people than you'll probably get in your whole lifetime. However, I got hold of a couple of items I wanted to collect, so the cussing out I got was so

much water off a duck's back.

At nine-thirty I was in my office sorting out the morning's mail. By nine-thirty-five I had sorted the whole lot into the wastepaper basket. And by nine-thirty-six I had my elbows on the desk, my chin on top of my crossed hands, and I was thinking some of the most unpleasant thoughts I'd ever thought in my life. Or ever hope to think, as far as that goes.

For maybe twenty minutes I held that pose. And for every one of the sixty seconds of those twenty minutes my right hand itched to reach out and grab the phone. But something wouldn't let me do it. Well, it was because of a million things, if you must know the truth. And every one of those million things had to do with a most inviting curve! Anyway, at the end of the twenty minutes I snapped out of it. I picked myself up and went down the elevator and over to a breakfast joint. I ordered myself everything they had on the super-special . . . and all I put inside of me was just a cup of coffee. I went back to my office, and had another long session with me.

Yeah, the forces were pulling against each other in the Lacey. Should he let it ride? Or should he let it ride? I battled over that one, and I battled over that one. One part of me said: "So what? Is it any skin off your nose? What's the difference?" And the other part of me came right back with, "You got a conscience, bud, or haven't you?"

I finally picked up the phone and dialed Vera's house. A reedy voiced maid answered the call and told me Mrs. Manners could not be disturbed. I told Reedy Voice who I was again, and to put Vera on, or else I'd climb right down the phone wire after her. Reedy Voice blew up, and blew down, and put Vera on.

"Oh, Chet, darling!" came Vera's voice finally, "Hilda didn't get the name. I'm so sorry! What do you want, Chet?"

"Have you got word about the coroner's inquest, yet?" I asked.

"Why no, Chet," she replied. "At least Travers hasn't called me, yet."

"Fine," I came right back on top of her words. "Look, Vera, I want to talk to you. No, not what you're thinking. About other things. Look, honey, remember the Blue Dove?"

There was a period of silence during

which maybe you could have swatted a fly. Then Vera's voice. Let's call it nostalgically gooey.

"Why, of course, Chet!" came her voice. "Do you think I've forgotten everything?"

"Good girl," I said. "Meet me there at noon. I'll phone and reserve a table. I want to talk to you. Yeah, about Jeff. But meet me there at noon, huh? Maybe like old times—maybe?"

For a few seconds there was absolute silence at the other end of the line, and my heart slid way down into my boots, and was all set to shove my toe nails out of place when Vera spoke.

"All right, Chet," she said. "If you wish. But . . . But what do you want to tell me about Jeff?"

"A big surprise, honey," I said. "A very *big* surprise! So don't pull the old six years ago stuff and be late. What I have to tell you won't keep. Noon at the Blue Dove, honey. Be there."

I hung up before she could give me any argument, if she was so inclined. Which I am sure she was not. Anyway, just to put you straight, the Blue Dove is a very nice joint about eight miles out of town that will cater to your needs any time, day or night. A very, very nice place. And with a super-duper rose garden restaurant that is but definitely right out of this world—to swipe a bit of the bobbie-soxer lingo.

Well, I happened to know—very well—Toni DeBenigno who owns and runs the joint, so a quick phone call to him got me put aside a very special table way back in the corner of the garden under a lot of trees, and three sides surrounded by flowering shrubs. Believe me, if you ever want that sweet, slick chick to go for you big, just get Toni DeBenigno to give you that table. From there on in, pal, it's a cinch!

ANYWAY, I spent the rest of the morning clearing up a few odds and ends at the office. Then I went down and got my car and headed for the Blue Dove way. I reached there about a quarter of twelve. Three other couples were already there. I guess they were eating, but I didn't look long enough to make sure. I kidded with Toni for a few minutes, then told him to bring two of his specials to my table, and walked out to it and seated the Lacey. At twelve sharp, no Vera. At twelve fifteen in she came

like somebody trying to make the last train, and the gates closing.

Well, she gushed a bit. And I smiled and made the usual cracks you make when your girl is fifteen minutes late. And then she buried her sweet mouth in Toni's special. When she came up for air her eyes were serious, and also very penetrating.

"I shouldn't be out here, darling," she said. "Not with Jeff still at the morgue. Well, you know. But, you said you wanted to talk to me about Jeff. What is it, darling?"

Well, I was so choked up with one thing and another that I couldn't speak. I finished my drink, and nodded to Toni for two more of the same. Finally I made myself bring my eyes around to Vera.

"You are a very crude liar, Vera honey," I said deliberately.

She took it with a smile, then a sudden start, and much blinking of those long lashes.

"What?"

"To repeat, quote," I said just as deliberately, "you are a very crude liar. Unquote."

"What?"

It was like having a debate with a parrot! I let it ride for a moment and studied the virgin green foliage that practically surrounded us. Then I snapped my eyes back to Vera's wide, expectant ones. I leaned forward a bit over the table.

"Jeff didn't shoot himself in a tussle with you, Vera," I said. "Jeff was murdered!"

"What?"

It was like a scratchy record, only with the volume turned up. I took another look at the virgin greenness about us and then relaxed back in my chair. I reached a hand into my pocket for my pack of butts, and left it there. I suddenly didn't feel like a smoke. I looked at Vera, and my steady gaze made her look right back at me.

"Jeff was murdered," I said very slowly. "But, what gets me is, that after six years married to him you didn't know all about him. I guess, though, you're just not bright, Vera."

A lot of the blood had left her face, and with that gone the heavy make-up made her look terrible. She caught hold of herself after a couple of seconds, assumed a righteous air, and made as

though to rise.

"Are you mad, Chet?" she gasped. "What on earth are you talking about? Or is it these cocktails?"

I felt wonderful. I felt as if I wanted to reach over and knock her pretty nose clear around to her pretty ear. As a matter of fact, I felt so wonderful that it was a few seconds before I could get my tongue in order. Then I let her have it. Both barrels!

"Jeff was my friend, Vera," I said. "One of the finest friends I ever had or ever hope to have. There's one thing I'll always remember about Jeff. Know what it is, Vera?"

I could be wrong but I think she started to tremble. I think also she started casting her eye hither and yon. Maybe any directions except toward mine.

"Chet," she finally got around to it. "What do you mean? What are you talking about? What will you always remember about Jeff?"

I guess it's the ham actor in me. Anyway, I made her wait a good ten seconds.

"Just this, Vera," I said. "Jeff was *left handed*. But, he was shot in the *right* temple. And the gun—which no doubt bears his finger prints—was found close to his *right* hand, Vera. So no matter how much he tussled with you, Jeff couldn't possibly have shot himself in the right temple!"

I STOPPED there and took a long pull of my drink. Brother, I needed it. Because, maybe I was wrong. No! Not about Jeff. I mean, maybe I was wrong about a couple of other things. And, in short, I was just whistling as I walked by the cemetery.

"You're mad!" Vera suddenly burst forth. "You're insane! You're—I'm leaving here, now!"

"Okay!" I cut in. "But wait for me to add *this*, honey. You said you had supper alone with Jeff. And that you retired early. Is that true?"

Her eyes flashed those storm signals, and then they went away.

"Of course it is!" she bit off. "Do you think I'd lie?"

"Yes, I do!" I snapped, as things began to come up inside of me. "And you did! Vera, when I went to phone the cops I opened the wrong door. I opened the front hall closet door. And what

did I see? I saw your raincoat *wet with rain*. And do you want to know something else? I checked all the out of the way night spots after Bierman and I left your house. And you know what? At two of them I learned that you had been there. With whom? You guess, Vera!"

She was trembling like a leaf in a tough gale. And the very last drops of blood had left her face. Gosh, what terrible sights women are who haven't real blood to go with their make-up! Vera clutched the edge of the table with both hands, and her fingers looked like they were made out of cigarette ash. I glanced toward a spot in the virgin green foliage about us and then snapped my eyes back to Vera.

"You know who he was, Vera," I said evenly. "A very good looking guy by the name of Travers Patterson. You and Patterson have been that way for I don't know how long, Vera. And I care less. But tell me, which of you thought up the brilliant idea when you came home and found Jeff passed out on the couch? No, skip it. But it was your idea to call me in, wasn't it? Sure, because you were certain Sucker Lacey would believe your story. And *that* would help plenty in making the police believe it, too. And Patterson did the come-back act just to make sure things were going along as planned. But he had already made his big mistake. Now, if he had only shot Jeff in the left temple, it would have been better."

"Stop it, stop it! I can't stand any more!"

It was right then, to my right, I saw foliage move that shouldn't move. Did I jump up and investigate? I did not, brother! My hand was on my gun in my pocket, so I just lifted it a little and shot a hole in the cloth. And another one in the middle of Travers Patterson's chest. He was starting to fall as he pulled his trigger. So his slug went into the leg of our table. Anyway, he was dead by the time he bounced on the flagstones.

For a moment all life seemed to go right out of Vera Manners. Then she took one look at Patterson very stiff, and getting colder, and hurled herself across the table at me. And did she scream! From the time she started her table dive until I managed to grab her flailing hands, she spilled out the facts

that she had always hated Jeff since the day of their marriage, that Patterson was the only man she ever loved, that Jeff had passed out while they were secretly night clubbing, and that Patterson had got the brilliant killing idea when they had come home. Also, it was Vera's part to come up with her fancy story. And I was a— But maybe you have delicate ears!

Anyway, Vera yelped all that, and for once Lacey wasn't able to hang onto his tongue, and yelped right back at her.

I was just running out of breath telling Vera all that, when suddenly there in front of me was Sol Bierman. I gaped and got mad.

"Tailed me, huh?" I snarled.

"Shut up, Chester!" he said. "Tailing you I would detail to the hired help, preferably a rookie who needs experience. No, I've been keeping an eye on Mrs. Manners. So when she came here to meet you, why shouldn't I be interested?"

I didn't have the chance to say anything. Vera had opened up again. On both of us this time. The words that lady knew! And to think that just six years ago, Vera and I had been pals.

Well, Sol had left a couple of his boys out front, so he called them in and

had them take Vera downtown to be booked. She got a long stretch, too, by the way, in spite of the Manners' millions behind her. The juries in our town are tough, as they should be!

Anyway, that left me to drive Sol Bierman back to town, as he'd turned the police car over to his boys, and Vera. And all the way back he just stared at the beautiful stars and chuckled to himself. Eventually, I couldn't take any more. "Okay, wise acre!" I cried. "What's funny? Supposing the guy had got his slug in first?"

"No such luck," Sol cracked right back at me. "But I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking what a dope Lacey is! For once he cracks something and nobody has a dime to slip him. No, that's wrong. You've saved the State plenty. Let me present you with this dime for your services, Mr. Lacey."

The lug even fished one out of his pocket and held it out to me. I whanged his hand and the dime went out the car window.

"You wouldn't understand, long ears!" I snarled. "But sometimes it's a pleasure to do it for free!"

"But, maybe I do, Chester, sweetheart," Bierman came right back at me. "Yeah, maybe I do!"

I'LL TAKE THAT RAP

(Concluded from page 82)

you hadn't told Currier my name. And yet when the police knocked on his door they said they were after Joe Ryan. That meant the tip-off couldn't have come from Currier. And there was only one other person who could have been responsible. You, Neal."

The older man was sweating. "You're letting me die—you're letting me bleed to death!"

"I hope you suffer a long time," Ryan answered. "As much as I suffered when the law was after me. It wasn't until I came here to your lodge and looked in the window and saw Loreen's kid that the truth dawned on me. You intended to hold him until she testified me to the lethal chamber, didn't you? Only I couldn't be sure the child really was Lanny; I hadn't seen him but three or four times since he was born. That's why I had to bring Loreen here, to identify him. And Don Mike, to help me clean things up."

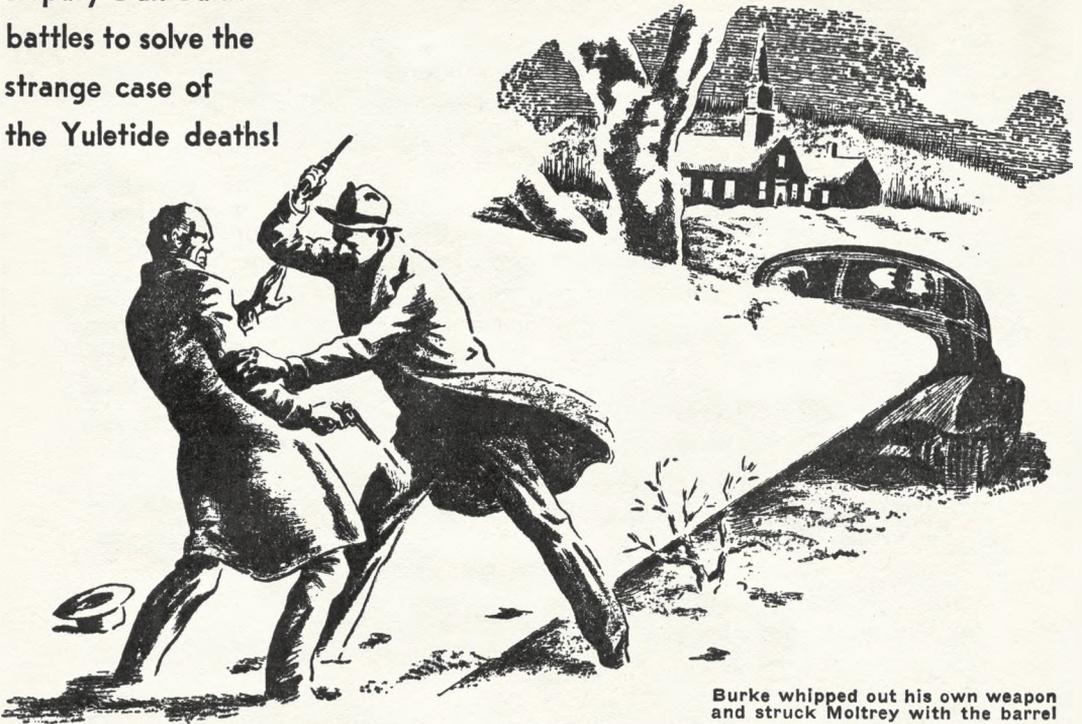
Neal sank to his knees. "A doctor—Joe, get a doctor!"

"Okay. Sure. I'll even try to save enough blood to give you a transfusion—so you'll live long enough to be executed." Then Ryan turned to Don Mike O'Bregon. "It's all yours, pal. You take it from here." He grinned crookedly. "But watch yourself after I get patched up."

Don Mike looked puzzled. "Watch myself, Joe?"

"Yes. Keep away from dark streets at night. *Ley fuga* can work both ways, my friend. And I'm a vindictive guy." Ryan walked out of the lodge, smiling a sardonic smile, knowing that Don Mike and Loreen would always wonder if he had meant his veiled threat. Let them wonder, he reflected dourly. Let them worry. It was just the kind of wedding present you'd expect from a guy like Joe Ryan. He felt good, all of a sudden. He felt very good indeed.

Deputy Dan Burke
battles to solve the
strange case of
the Yuletide deaths!



Burke whipped out his own weapon
and struck Moltrey with the barrel

SANTA THUMBS A RIDE

By JOHNSTON McCULLY

THE motor of the car was humming nicely, and Deputy Sheriff Dan Burke hummed a song in harmony as he drove cautiously along the country road, which had a couple of inches of fine snow on it.

He was nearing the little hamlet of Smith Corners, and five miles beyond that was Ashdale, the county seat. Burke had been investigating a traffic accident in which a driver had smashed his heavy truck into a small sedan, killing one occupant and injuring two. A sad thing to happen at any time, Burke thought, and doubly sad on Christmas Eve.

Now, Burke was in a hurry to get to the sheriff's office in Ashdale and report and then hurry to his married sister's home and help her celebrate Christmas Eve with her two kids. He had been telling them for a couple of weeks how Santa Claus would slip down the chimney during the night and leave presents. Dan Burke himself, who adored his

fatherless nephew and niece, had purchased the presents and hidden them in a closet.

He tooted the car carefully around the curve, watching for a quick skid, and glanced ahead. A bright moon was up already. It was almost time for people to gather at the little church in Smith Corners for the usual Christmas Eve celebration around a decorated and present-laden tree. And then he saw Santa Claus.

Subdivision promoters on the outskirts of Ashdale had strung electric lights along the road for some distance past Smith Corners, and a bus line picked up passengers beneath the lights. Santa Claus, Burke saw, was standing beneath one of the lights at a bus stop, standing out in the highway a short distance, and was jerking his thumb toward the distant church.

"Santa Claus turned hitch-hiker," Burke muttered, laughing softly.

He began braking the car, and finally it rolled to a stop within a few feet of the figure, dressed in a red costume trimmed in white, with a false face and white whiskers, a red and white cap and white mittens. On his feet, he wore shiny black boots—quite the traditional Santa Claus.

"Where's your reindeer?" Burke asked, as he opened the door of the car. "How come you're stuck out here?"

The rumble of a laugh came from behind the mask. "Missed the bus," Santa Claus said. "Can you give me a lift as far as the Smith Corners church?"

"Pile in," Burke invited. "When you're not being called Santa Claus, what's your name?"

"Oh! Thought you might know me, Mr. Burke."

"Not in that get-up."

"I'm Eli Jackson."

Burke knew Eli Jackson. He was a wealthy and somewhat eccentric man who had a country place a short distance back from the highway on a side road.

"They got me to play Santa Claus this year," the man in costume explained. "Last year, the kids guessed who Santa was. This year I'll fool 'em."

"How? Kids are pretty smart," Burke reminded him.

"Look at my mask and cap and the muffler at the back of my neck. Not a bit of my hair showing. Whiskers longer and covering my chin and throat. I even worked and practiced to change my voice so it won't be recognized. Then I got this costume in the city, and it makes me look like a man who weighs at least three hundred."

"Hope you give the kids a good time, Mr. Jackson," Burke told him. "I'm hurrying home to help my sister's two kids celebrate. But you'll be early if I drop you at the church now. Folks are just gathering, and the program hasn't started yet. You're not supposed to show up until it's time to take the presents off the tree, are you?"

"Oh, I'm not going all the way to the church now," Santa Claus replied. "Let me off at the old barn a couple of hundred yards this side. When I play Santa Claus, I go the limit. Know what I've done? I've hitched a team to a sleigh, and have a bag of presents in it. I made things to put on the heads of the team to make the horse look like reindeer. I'll drive up in front of the church at the

right time with bells jingling. Herb Canby will be waiting to drive the outfit away as soon as I unload myself and the bag of stuff."

"You're sure making it realistic," Burke replied.

HE knew the place the man sitting beside him meant, an abandoned old barn back a distance from the highway. The man beside him was talking again.

"The team and the sleigh will be waiting for me. Got a man handling that end. I'll get a signal from the church. They'll swing a red lantern when it's time for me to drive up."

"Here we are!" Burke announced, stopping the car. "Good thing the snow isn't deep, or you'd have to wade to the barn. Hey—I don't see any tracks of a sleigh and horses! Maybe your man is late."

"He probably came down the side road."

"Oh! You're sure keeping everything a secret. Hope to run across you again Mr. Jackson, and hear how you put on the show."

"And I hope you show your sister's youngsters a good time."

Santa Claus opened the door and got out of the car, lifted a hand in thankful salute for the ride, and began walking over the soft snow toward the abandoned barn. Dan Burke chuckled and went on toward distant Ashdale, putting on a little speed.

But he slowed as he began meeting vehicles headed for the little church at Smith Corners. A country store, a blacksmith shop and a few cottages, in addition to the church, made up the hamlet. This was a district of small farms operated by vegetable growers.

Burke went through the village and on and into Ashdale, the county seat, where the stores were still open for last-minute shoppers and colored lights and wreaths of evergreen decorated the main thoroughfare. Burke drove directly to the sheriff's office, to find Sheriff Jim Shane, a gray-haired official who had been in office for many years, comfortable as he sat with his chair tilted back, his feet on a corner of the desk and a smoking pipe in his mouth.

"Howdy, Dan!" the sheriff greeted him. "You got back late."

"It was a bad smash," Burke replied, as he went to his own desk to scribble a

report of the accident. "Couldn't be helped. Heavy truck skidded and hit the sedan. Driver of the truck was sober, and there's nothing on which to hang a negligence charge."

"Make your report short, Dan, then hustle over home to your sister's place and make her kids happy," Sheriff Shane instructed him. "I'll hold the fort here."

"It's Christmas Eve, and if you want to get away I'll come back later."

"Don't mind me, Dan. I'll enjoy Christmas Eve sitting here and thinking of the past. That's good enough for an old widower like me. Might take a nip out of my desk bottle now and then. Some old crony may drop in."

Dan Burke wrote his report, called "Merry Christmas" to the sheriff, and hurried out to the car. He drove to his sister's small cottage and went in, sniffing at the hot supper she had ready for him. The two youngsters stormed around him wide eyed, demanding news of Santa Claus.

"There's something funny," Burke told them. "I met Santa Claus on the road as I came home. He hitch-hiked a ride with me. Looked just like his pictures. I reckon he had his reindeer hitched somewhere and was going to get 'em."

Thinking Dan Burke was indulging in white lies for the children's sake, their mother smiled at him. Dan washed up and sat down to eat his supper. As he finished eating, the telephone bell jangled, and Burke's sister answered it.

"It's the sheriff wants you, Dan," she called.

Burke hurried to the telephone. "Burke talking!" he said into the transmitter.

"Shane! Hate to spoil your evening, Dan, but you'd better hurry over here. Just got a phone call from Smith Corners. Santa Claus has been murdered."

IN the sheriff's car they traveled at a dangerous speed, considering the snow on the ground.

"One of the vegetable growers, Herb Canby, phoned me," the sheriff explained. "Said Eli Jackson was to have been Santa Claus at the church."

"I know," Burke interrupted. "He thumbed a ride with me on my way home. Said he'd missed the bus. Had on his Santa Claus costume and mask.

Got off at the old abandoned barn. Told me he had a sleigh and horses waiting there, with things on the horses' heads to make 'em look like reindeer."

"Wait a second!" the sheriff broke in. "Steady, Burke. There's something wrong."

"How you mean?"

"It was Eli Jackson, you said?"

"Didn't see his face. He had his mask and wig and cap fixed so the kids wouldn't recognize him. Told me who he was."

"You picked him up on the highway?"

"Sure! He thumbed a ride. Said he had missed the bus. He lives alone at his place with Mrs. Emma Wimple going in every day and doing the house-keeping—"

"I know," the sheriff broke in again. "Dan, something's wrong. Herb Canby was excited when he phoned me, but he gave a pretty straight yarn. Said Santa Claus didn't show up when he was signaled to come to the church and do his stuff. Canby jumped into the little truck he drives and went after Eli Jackson while somebody kept the crowd, especially the kids, interested. He stopped near that barn and yelled, but nobody answered."

"That's strange," Burke commented.

"So he drove on to Eli Jackson's house. Thought maybe Jackson had gone to sleep in front of the fire or something else had delayed him. Mrs. Wimple, the housekeeper, was at the church. She'd been helping the women fix it up since mid-afternoon. Left a cold supper for Jackson."

"What did Herb Canby find?" Burke asked.

"Knocked at Jackson's door and got no reply, he told me. Door was unlocked, so he went in. Eli Jackson was on the floor of the living room, sprawled there dead. Kitchen knife sticking in his breast. Canby didn't touch anything, he said. He called Doc Sam Fadman and then called someone at the church."

"That all?"

"All except that Canby, according to his yarn over the phone, called somebody else and told 'em Jackson had been taken sick and Doc Fadman had hurried to the place, and for somebody to make the announcement that Santa Claus couldn't get there and to give out the presents. Canby had sense enough not to shock everybody and maybe start a

panic. What a Christmas Eve."

"But—listen, Jim!" Burke begged Shane. "I picked him up in his Santa Claus clothes and dropped him near that barn. He said a man would be waiting there with the team."

"Canby mentioned that plan. When he yelled near the barn, he said, and didn't get an answer, he thought the man with the team had made a mistake and driven to Jackson's house. Ed Thompson, who works for Henry Moltrey, was the man supposed to be handling the team."

"But I dropped Eli Jackson in his Santa Claus costume near the old barn as I was driving to Ashdale. So how could he be dead in his own house?"

"You didn't see your passenger's face, Dan. You drove somebody in a Santa Claus suit—"

"If he wasn't Eli Jackson, who was he?"

"Probably the murderer," Sheriff Shane replied.

Shane put on more speed, turned off the highway and into the side road, went through a gate and stopped in front of the Jackson house. Doctor Fadman's car was outside, and the doctor met them at the door. White-faced Herb Canby, a tall, spindly, middle-aged man, was with him.

The sheriff and Burke strode inside and the door was closed behind them. Eli Jackson's body was still on the floor, with the hilt of a knife showing where the blade had been thrust through the victim's heart. There were no signs of a struggle except that the cover had been pulled off a small stand table, carrying with it a book, a newspaper and a small vase.

"Take over, Dan," the old sheriff ordered Burke. "Me, I'm an old-fashioned action man. You're better at the brain stuff."

BURKE turned to Doctor Fadman. "How long has he been dead, Doc?" he asked.

"I'd say since about four this afternoon, and it's past nine now."

"Wonder who saw him last?"

"I may be able to tell you about that," Dr. Fadman replied. "I was talking at the church to Mrs. Emma Wimple, Jackson's housekeeper, and Mrs. Henry Moltrey. Mrs. Moltrey was saying she had come here to get Mrs. Wimple about

three, for the two ladies were on the committee to go to the church and finish the decorations. Mrs. Wimple had prepared a cold supper for Eli Jackson. The two were laughing about his boyish antics and his delight in playing Santa Claus."

"If that's true, he could have been killed anytime after three," Burke reckoned. "Doc, you got that electric lantern in your car?"

"Yes. Always carry it on account of having night calls out in the country. I'll get it."

While the doctor was gone to get the lantern, Burke knelt beside the body of the slain man. The weapon, he saw, was an ordinary butcher knife such as may have been in the kitchen. It had been driven into the body with terrific force.

Burke went into the kitchen. The supper Mrs. Wimple had prepared for Eli Jackson was on a tray on the kitchen table, covered with a couple of napkins, and had not been touched. The wood-burning kitchen cook stove had long since devoured the fuel in its fire-box and was cold. That showed that Jackson had not replenished the fire, as he would have done had he intended to make coffee to go with his cold supper.

Doc Fadman returned with the electric lantern, and Burke led the way outside, with the others following. He directed the lantern's beam at tracks in the thin snow. Between the front porch and the gate, he could make out his own and the sheriff's and those of two women as well as a couple of the men. They accounted for Herb Canby and the doctor, and Mrs. Wimple and Mrs. Moltrey.

They went around to the rear of the house. Tracks were plain between the barn and the kitchen door—the tracks of a man's boots which revealed that he had walked tiptoe. In the barn, a couple of bits of white trimming caught on nails showed where the murderer probably had put on the Santa Claus costume after killing Jackson.

"Ordinary boot toe tracks," Burke said. "Any one of a hundred men in the locality could have them. Nothing distinctive about 'em."

Using the electric lantern, they followed the tracks from the barn to the side road and down it to the highway, to the spot where Dan Burke had picked up the hitch-hiking Santa Claus.

"Whoever he was he was mighty cool

about it," Burke decided. "He must have killed Eli Jackson no later than four in the afternoon. Must have hidden in the barn until dark, then put on the costume and walked to the highway to catch a ride."

"There are a couple of things to be considered," Sheriff Shane mentioned. "Who did the killing, and why?"

"More than that," Burke added. "If Jackson didn't show up at the barn to get his team and sleigh from Ed Thompson and drive to the church when he was signaled to do so, what became of Ed Thompson and the team? Wouldn't Ed Thompson have made some move if Jackson hadn't shown up on schedule?"

"Let's get to that old barn!" the sheriff said.

They got into the cars and drove the short distance at top speed despite the skidding. Burke stopped them at the broken down fence, flashed the electric lantern and led them afoot, looking for tracks. The tracks were so plain that the bright moon revealed them without the aid of the lantern.

"Going straight from where I stopped my car to let him out to the barn door," Burke said. "No other tracks on this side."

"If Ed Thompson drove the sleigh from Henry Moltrey's where he works he'd come in behind the barn," the sheriff hinted.

They reached the old barn and walked around to the rear. More than tracks were there—a team was tied to a post, a team hitched to a sleigh in which was a huge bag of toys, fruit, nuts and candy.

"Here's Santa Claus' rig," Burke said. "But where's Ed Thompson?"

THEY called, and got no reply. Burke opened the back door of the barn and flashed his light inside. There they saw Ed Thompson sprawled on his face on the floor, dead.

Dr. Fadman made a swift investigation. "Smashed on the head," he reported. "Here's the iron bar with which he was smashed. Blood and hair on it."

"So the bogus Santa Claus made his second killing here," Burke said. "But why kill Ed Thompson?"

"Maybe Thompson recognized him in spite of the mask, and the bogus Santa Claus had to kill him to close his mouth,"

[Turn page]

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the sheriff suggested.

"If that's true, the killer is somebody who lives around here," Burke said. "Looks like he was somebody who knew Jackson was alone this afternoon, and knew his plans about playing Santa Claus. The bogus Santa Claus came here to shuck his costume and go on in his own attire, thinking he couldn't be traced."

"If he knew all the plans, would he have come here?" Doctor Fadman asked. "He could have got out of the costume in that grove of trees near the church."

Burke flashed the light around again. Its beam revealed a tumbled mass of red and white on the opposite side of the barn. They hurried there, and found the Santa Claus costume.

"Anybody know of any bad enemies Eli Jackson had?" the sheriff asked. "I didn't know the man very well. He'd lived in that place for about six years, but didn't come to town much except to buy supplies. Wasn't very neighborly."

"I called on him a few times professionally," the doctor reported. "He was the country gentleman type. Liked to prow around over his place and make improvements. He was a great reader, too. Bought a lot of magazines and books. Seemed to be well educated."

"How about enemies?" the sheriff persisted.

"I wasn't real friendly with him," Herb Canby admitted. "We had some trouble in town a few months ago."

"About what?" Burke asked.

"My twenty-acre vegetable farm, as all of you know, adjoins the Jackson place on the south. He was land crazy. Had an idea of building up a big estate. Wanted to buy my place, and offered twice its worth. He got mad when I told him I'd spent years building up my place, and that it was my home and I didn't want to sell. We almost had blows about it."

"I remember. I happened to see that brawl," the sheriff said. "You wouldn't have waited several months to kill him over a few hot words. Anyhow, you're not the killing type."

"Given enough provocation, or a situation to bring on temporary insanity through rage, and anybody is the killing type," Burke corrected. "The murderer may have killed Jackson during a quarrel, came here and killed Ed Thompson

if he was recognized, and then shucked the Santa Claus costume and gone his way. Anyhow, that's my idea."

"I'll drive to the church and get hold of four men," the sheriff said. "We'll put two on guard here and two at the Jackson house until the coroner gets out here."

They trooped outside. Down in the grove of trees near the little church was a wink of amber flame, another. Two bullets whistled over the heads of the group and thudded into the old planks of the barn's siding.

"Back!" Burke warned.

As the others scurried aside for cover, Burke dropped, jerked a weapon out of his shoulder holster and winged three swift shots at the grove of trees from which the firing had come.

He saw a dark figure, bent almost double, run from the grove and speed toward the rear of the church. Burke fired again, and missed.

Springing to his feet, Burke sprinted over the snow toward the grove. The fleeing figure had gone around the corner of the church, from which was coming the sound of singing. It was the doxology. Church was letting out.

Burke sprinted on and got to the front of the building as the doors were opened and laughing children with beaming faces began coming out accompanied by parents who were shouting Christmas good wishes to one another.

BURKE, panting from his run, stood at one side of the door. As the audience emerged, he touched several persons on the arm and beckoned them aside. Mrs. Wimple, Jackson's housekeeper, was one. Mrs. Henry Moltrey and her husband were others.

"There has been a accident to Eli Jackson," Burke whispered to them. "Dr. Fadman is in charge of things—"

"Oh, I must get there at once!" Mrs. Wimple said.

"Please don't go," Burke begged. "Go to your brother's place, where you live. And you needn't come to the Jackson place in the morning unless you're sent for."

"What's the trouble?" Mrs. Moltrey asked.

"Somebody attacked Mr. Jackson and hurt him badly. Some thief, probably. We haven't decided yet."

"How terrible!" Mrs. Wimple said. "Is Mr. Jackson hurt badly?"

Burke lowered his voice more. "He's dead—murdered," he replied. "Please don't spread the news here. He was stabbed with a kitchen knife."

"Who'd do such a thing? Mr. Jackson was a good, kind man," his housekeeper declared.

"Except he was mean and stubborn about business matters," Henry Moltrey put in.

"Henry, you shouldn't say such a thing!" his wife protested. "And just because he wouldn't sell you that ten-acre strip you wanted."

"So you had a row with him about property, too?" Burke asked Moltrey, easily. "Herb Canby was telling me he had a spat with him."

"That was different," Henry Moltrey said. "Jackson wanted to buy Canby's farm to add to his own land. I was trying to buy from Jackson, that ten acres along the edge of my property. I need it for corn. Jackson wasn't using it. Planned to make a fool park of some sort. We need corn more'n parks."

Burke touched his arm. "And that's not all, Moltrey," he whispered. "We found your hired man, Ed Thompson, dead in the abandoned barn over there. He'd been killed with an iron bar. The Santa Claus rig was tied behind the barn."

"Ed? Who'd kill Ed, and why?" Moltrey asked. "Why, this—I can't understand it."

The sheriff came up in his car, hurried to Burke and pulled him aside. "Get a line on the man who shot at us?" he asked.

"He got to the church and joined the crowd," Burke replied.

"I'll get four men to act as guards till the coroner gets here. You go ahead handling the case."

"I just had an idea," Burke told him. "Strikes me as funny that the man who killed Jackson didn't just hide until dark and then slip away. He ran a risk putting on the Santa Claus costume, going to the highway and signaling a car and hitch-hiking his way to the old barn. Why should he do that?"

"I can't figure that one out," the sheriff admitted. "You got any ideas?"

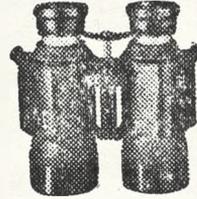
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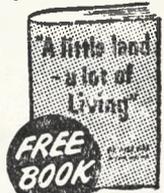
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somebody that Eli Jackson, as he posed as being, had gone to the barn to get the rig and play Santa Claus. But why do that? However, in that costume, he could have got close to Ed Thompson and struck him down, if Thompson thought he was Jackson. Suppose the murderer knew all the Christmas Eve plans and made his own accordingly? Suppose he wanted to kill Jackson for some reason, and then kill Thompson because he knew too much? In the costume, he could walk right up to Thompson, couldn't he?"

"But the chance he took—showing himself as Santa Claus, thumbing a ride from you—"

"I have a suspicion, Jim, that if I'd acted like I suspected anything was wrong, he'd have plugged me," Burke told the sheriff. "Probably with the gun he used in the grove when he shot at us."

"And why did he shoot at us and expose himself?" Shane wanted to know. "Why didn't he just stay quiet?"

"I'd say he's in a highly nervous state over his crimes, a man who never did anything like that before. I didn't know Ed Thompson very well—"

"I did," the sheriff broke in. "He was a sneak and liar as a boy. Furtive cuss all his life. Petty thief if ever there was one. If he had anything on a man, he'd blackmail the daylight out of him—that's what I used to tell myself about him. Before you came to Ashdale, I suspected him of a dozen thefts, but never could get evidence. I'll get my four men now."

The sheriff hurried toward the church door to pick out the men he wanted. Burke turned back to the group waiting for him.

"Mrs. Moltrey, do you drive a car?" he asked.

She laughed a little. "I'm a better driver than Henry," she boasted.

"Please take the car, then, and drive Mrs. Wimple to her brother's place, and then go on home. I want Mr. Moltrey to come with me."

"What you want me to do?" Moltrey asked. "I've got to get my sleep. Plenty of chores to do in the morning, even if it is Christmas."

"We need a few men to help with things," Burke replied. "Men who won't get jittery, like the younger ones. Got no objection to helping the sheriff, have

you? After all, one of the victims was your hired man."

"It's not my fault if Ed Thompson got himself killed," Moltrey protested. "He was always getting mixed up in some kind of trouble. But I'll go along with you and do what I can."

BURKE glanced at him, seeing him plainly in the light from the lamp burning over the church door. Henry Moltrey was almost fifty, the type of man soured on life because he had not prospered according to his hopes. He envied and hated anybody more successful than himself.

Burke knew he was always in debt, always raising bank loans on his property to buy more land, stinting his wife and stingy with a daughter who had married and was in poor circumstances.

The women hurried away to get into the car. Those who had emerged from the church, seeing Sheriff Shane and Burke, had sensed that something was wrong, and were commencing to ask questions which Burke parried deftly.

"We'll walk across to the old barn," Burke told Moltrey. "Sheriff Shane will pick us up there and take us to the Jackson house. He's getting men for guards until the coroner can come out."

"I'm not going to pay for Ed Thompson's funeral," Moltrey declared. "I gave him regular wages. He's got a brother in the city, I understand."

"I'm not concerned about that," Burke told him. "Did you hear the shooting as they were starting to sing the doxology?"

"Shooting? Thought you said Ed was killed with an iron bar?"

"He was. I meant the shooting out in the grove behind the church. Somebody shot at us when we were down by the barn. I don't know why. Gave himself away. I saw him run around the side of the church. Time I got here, he was in the crowd. By the way, Moltrey, how come you were at church? I've understood you're not very religious."

"Oh, you know women!" Moltrey replied. "My wife was making a fuss about me not going tonight. Said it wasn't a sermon, but a Christmas Eve party for the children, and all that. She went early in the afternoon to help the women, and I drifted over after the party got started."

[Turn page]



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"Walk all the way?" Burke asked.

"Sure. It's not very far. My wife had the car. She went to Jackson's place to pick up Mrs. Wimple. They were both on the committee."

"So I know," Burke said. They were nearing the old barn. The sheriff had got there with the four men in his car. The doctor and Herb Canby were waiting. The car's headlights lit up the rear of the barn, the space in front of it, the team and sleigh.

"That Herb Canby—he had trouble with Jackson once," Moltrey whispered. "Land trouble. Jackson was a hard one in business."

"You ever have any business dealings with him, outside wanting to buy that ten acres?" Burke asked.

"Borrowed a little money from him a couple of times. He has a small mortgage on some of my property now—did before he was killed, I mean. Due in about ten days."

"Ready to meet it?"

"Oh, sure! Scraped to do it," Moltrey replied. "Got it tucked away in cash. I can pay it into the bank, I reckon, and settle the mortgage, even if he is dead."

"Sure!" Burke agreed. "You can fix that up easily enough. You know, Moltrey, that murderer made several mistakes tonight."

"Mistakes? How?" Moltrey asked.

THEY had reached the edge of the streak of light that came from the car's headlights, and Burke stopped him, as if to conclude their conversation before joining the others.

"Bad mistakes," Burke declared. "Not used to committing crimes like that, I suppose. I think I know exactly what he did."

"You do?"

"Yes. I haven't told the sheriff yet all that I've found out. Wanted to get everything settled before I bothered him. He leaves all the detective work to me—too lazy to do it himself, I think."

"What did the murderer do?" Moltrey asked.

"Well, he was somebody who knew Jackson pretty well, and Jackson's house. Must have known about all the arrangements for Christmas Eve, too. He got into Jackson's barn after Mrs. Wimple

and your wife left his house, then tiptoed to the kitchen door and got into the house himself."

"Tiptoed?"

"Yes—tracks in the snow. He picked up a kitchen knife and went on into the front room. Probably had an argument with Jackson, or maybe stabbed him without any argument. May have been a scuffle. Stand table cover pulled off."

"That so?"

"Yes. Jackson's desk, in the corner of the room, looked natural when I glanced at it, except for one thing. One pigeon-hole in the desk had the papers out and scattered on the end of the desk, like the killer had looked for some paper and found it and left the rest."

"Somebody he'd had business trouble with, probably."

"Might have been somebody," Burke suggested, "who'd given Jackson a mortgage he couldn't pay in time. Might have quarreled with Jackson when he

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wouldn't renew the mortgage, killed him and gone through the desk to get the mortgage paper and destroy it."

"I had the money ready to pay mine," Moltrey stated.

"So you said. Anyhow, the killer went to the barn, taking the Santa Claus costume with him. Stayed in the barn till dark. Put on the costume and went to the highway and started to thumb a ride. I picked him up."

"You?" Moltrey exclaimed.

"Right! Thought he was Eli Jackson. He said he was. I let him out right opposite this old barn. He told me about the sleigh and all."

"Why would he take a chance like that?"

"Maybe because Ed Thompson was waiting there for Jackson with the sleigh. Thompson probably knew things. The killer was afraid Thompson would blackmail him after the killing became known. Ed Thompson was that kind. Wearing the costume, he could walk right up to Thompson, who'd think he was Jackson, and smash Thompson on the head."

"But, after that?" Moltrey questioned.

BURKE explained in detail. "He got out of the costume and left the barn, hurried to the church and went in to watch the show. But he was nervous about what might happen. Wanted to know what was going on. So he left the church and went to the grove and saw men around the barn. He knew Jackson's body must have been found at the house and Thompson's here. Fired his gun—that was a mistake. Drew attention to himself. Probably had some queer idea of scaring the men at the barn away."

"Say! If he had a gun, why did he stab Jackson and kill Thompson with an iron bar?"

"Had sense enough to know that the gun would have made too much noise. Shots may have been heard. Probably had the gun to use if he got in a tight corner."

"Those mistakes you said he made?" Moltrey asked.

"Oh, yes! Firing that gun as he did, the wind would have blown powder back against his clothes and made him smell of it, especially if he went into a warm

church right afterward. One mistake."

"Any others?" Moltrey asked.

"Yep! In the Jackson barn, he dropped part of a package of fine-cut chewing tobacco, probably because he was nervous. A brand not many men hereabouts use. We can check with the grocers on who uses it."

"Mighty careless," Moltrey said.

"I think so. Probably not used to killing. When he rode with me in the car, he was tense, and talked too much. I got the tone of his voice. In this old barn, when he chucked the Santa Claus costume, he was nervous and in a hurry.

"Probably jerked it off roughly. Tore some of the white trimming, that cotton stuff. Got some of the whiskers of the false beard caught in a button of his shirt, too. Behind this barn is a kind of yellow clay not found anywhere else around here. Must have got some on his shoes, especially under the heel. I know who he is."

Moltrey jerked around to face him. "You do?"

"Yep! I remembered his voice, I said. Moltrey, you've got a bit of that white cotton fluff caught in your collar, and hairs from the false whiskers in a button of your shirt. We can examine your shoes later. How much money did you steal from Eli Jackson's desk to have ready to pay the mortgage? Don't go for your gun, Moltrey!"

But Moltrey did. Burke yelled and whipped out his own weapon and struck Moltrey with the barrel as Moltrey fired. Burke's blow made Moltrey miss the shot.

The sheriff and the others yelled and came running. They found Burke wrestling with Moltrey, from whose hand he had torn the gun.

"Here's your murderer, sheriff," Burke announced.

Moltrey was like a madman.

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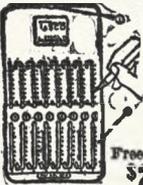
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Sheriff Jim Shane bent down and snapped handcuffs.

"You won't take me in!" Henry Mol-trey cried. "I knew it was all up when Burke began talking the way he did. I'd been eatin' cinnamon drops I got off the Christmas tree. But it wasn't a cinnamon drop I swallowed a minute ago. It was—anyhow, you won't take me to jail."

His body twisted convulsively and he fell to the ground. Doc Fadman called for the electric lantern and made a hasty examination.

"No, sheriff, you won't take him to jail," Doc Fadman said. "But you can send him to an undertaking establishment."

"How did you pin it on him, Dan?" the sheriff asked Burke.

"A little thing here and there—and a lot of bluff," Burke replied. "Knowing his own guilt, worrying about being found out, a man like that, not used to crime, will generally betray himself, if you give him enough to think about. He was land crazy, too."

"I'll drive to Ashdale and send the coroner out," Dr. Fadman said.

"Take Burke with you," the sheriff directed. "He'll want to fill the stockings of his sister's kids. Burke, you can write out your report tomorrow morning, then take the day off. I'll be at the office, if anything breaks."

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(Continued from page 10)

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PHOTO FINISH FOR A DAME

by

Joe Archibald

Sound the tocsin—ring the bells—blow the whistles and let the sirens scream! Yes—siree—Willie Klump will be back in the above tale, set forth in good old Archibald's inimitable manner. It's a scream a second, folks.

Mrs. Herford Fusty and her son Bartholomew, walk into the Hawkeye Detective Agency. It seems there's a snazzy blonde chasing Bartholomew, so Mrs. F. wants Willie to cause said female to desist. This Willie proceeds to do, even beginning with a subway kiosk. Only when gentlemen chase dames to stop them from being chased by other dames, they are liable to be chased by dames themselves—do we make ourselves clear? We thought not!

Anyway, Willie is chased by a dame—you've guessed it, folks! It is none other than Gertie Mudgett and what is Willie chasing a blonde for and where did he get the money and how about a drink?

The scene shifts to the Picadillo cocktail lounge, where somebody snaps a picture with a candid camera. Then there's a fight and Gertie loses her shoe. Later, Willie bumps into a murder and that's where Satchelfoot Kelly shows up. Oh no—you don't get rid of him so easily. Or Gertie either, for that matter. It's a wow of a comedy yarn!

There'll be our usual bill-of-fare of short stories in addition to those headliners. As neat, compact and interesting an issue as we have ever printed! Look forward to it.

LETTERS FROM READERS

FROM the breezy plains of midwestern Canada comes a word of praise and a note of criticism, all in one well-written missive:

Just a short note of appreciation for the delightful magazine you publish. I get it regularly and although I am an old woman, well over seventy, I thoroughly enjoy your stories.

The only thing I don't care for is, that in your issue of last July, five out of six splendid stories were written in the FIRST person. One gets a little tired of the continual "I did so-and-so"—"I"—"I"—all right in one or two

stories, but 5 is too many. I hope to live a long time yet, and enjoy the magazine. I wish it were published oftener.
—Mrs. Agnes Franklin, Winnipeg, Man., Can.

Thank you very much, Mrs. Franklin—your point is very well taken. The large percentage of first-person stories in that issue was purely coincidental, but we shall certainly watch out and try to prevent this happening again. Thank you for calling the matter to our attention.

Here's a gentleman wants to know what has happened to one of our long lost authors:

I've enjoyed your magazine for a number of years but dropped off reading for a while. Now that I have resumed, I would like to know what has become of the Dr. Zeng novels written by Walt Bruce. I liked these stories very much and miss them although your stories are still swell.

—Edward Rohlin, Richmond Hill, N. Y.

We're glad you enjoyed the Dr. Zang stories. Walt Bruce completed this series for us some time ago. He'll probably be glad to know of your interest. Thanks very kindly for your letter.

Here's just a brief billet-doux from one of the Twin Cities:

I certainly think you have been doing a swell job with your POPULAR DETECTIVE magazine. I like all your authors because very seldom do I see a story in your magazine that is not good. For pastime and complete mental relaxation, your publication is tops.

—Percyval K. Winchester, St. Paul, Minn.

Much obliged, old-timer, we'll try always to be worthy of your praise. Incidentally, friends, the above message was written on a postcard. It only goes to show you how much you can get on that convenient correspondence form Uncle Sam puts out through his postoffice. How about trying your hand? Whether you carry a hammer or blow a horn, your communication will be welcome.

So join the merry throng, folks. Send all letters and postcards to The Editor, POPULAR DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Many thanks to everyone and happy reading to you all!

—THE EDITOR.

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